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GREG CALBI ON REMASTERING THE BEATLES

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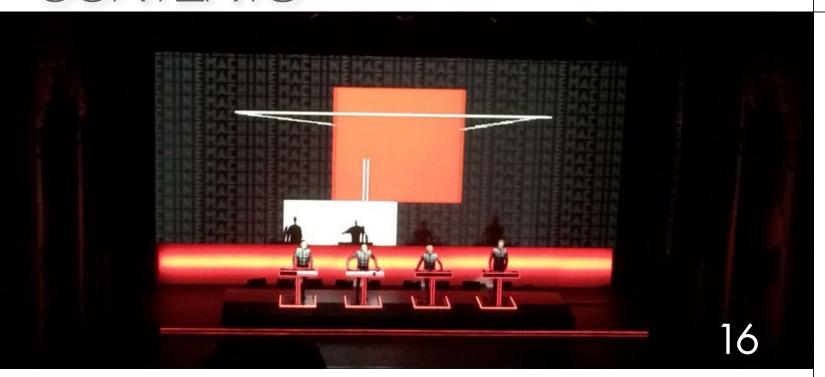
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PUBLISHER'S LETTER



he initial concept behind TONE-Audio was to make a magazine that combined music and hi-fi gear in a more meaningful, more fun way than what the traditional audio press has been doing for the last 40 years. As Jerry Seinfeld often said on his sitcom, "not that there's anything wrong with that," because whenever you enter into a specialized pursuit of anything, obsession is not far behind. And, seriously, I understand that obsession, that passion—that madness.

Yet, the conundrum that plagues many of the manufacturers in our industry is how to recruit new people to the world of high-performance audio, so we can all keep our jobs! But while much of the audio press is full of gloom and doom with its predictions of where our industry will be in the next 40 or 50 years, I can't get behind that mainly because I probably won't be here in 50 years and, if I am, I know I definitely won't have critical hearing anymore. I'm guessing that at 95, I'll probably just be happy to have regular bowel movements. That's probably TMI, but we're all friends here after nine years, right?

A recent article by Geoffrey Morrison (www.cnet.com/news/music-multitasking-howbackground-listening-enhances-life) illustrates his sentiment that perhaps we don't all have to

be so mental about all of this. Morrison makes an excellent point here that we can enjoy music whether it is playing in the foreground, background, or middle ground—and I couldn't agree with him more.

I'm usually listening to music from the minute I get up in the morning until I go to bed at night, and I cycle between highly conscious critical listening, casual background listening, and everything in between. And I don't enjoy music any less when it's playing through my \$110 iPod instead of the \$110,000 dCS Vivaldi stack. Granted, I do get a more engaging experience on my reference system, but a less-than-stellar system doesn't stop me from enjoying my favorite music.

High-performance audio, just like high performance automobiles, will always be a niche product. So rather than start a movement to evangelize people, I say just let it unfold organically, as it did in the pre-Internet days. A series of recent discussion with some of my friends' kids and their friends revealed something very interesting (those out to "save the stereo" take note:) They don't want to be audiophiles—they think audiophiles are boring nerdtrons who listen to dreadful music and obsess about stuff that doesn't matter. Hmmmm.

In the end, I continue to believe that highend audio will be just fine. Like everything else at the periphery of performance, there will always be people on a quest to maximize performance, whether building it or buying it. For now, I have to stick with the prime directive and not interfere with your personal culture. You'll get there on your own time. I just hope we've helped make your journey a bit easier.



TONE TOON



"My husband has already taken over the den with hifi and now he's threatened to invade the bedroom, too."

TONEAudio

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SNAPSHOT

Jack White

August 30th, 2009
Photo by Jerome Brunet

Jack White of The Dead Weather live at the 2nd annual Outside Lands Music & Arts festival in San Francisco.

"Rock icon Jack White recently set a new Guinness World Record for the fastest recorded, pressed and released 45 single at his label's shop Third Man Records in three hours and fifty-five minutes. Although best known as the vocalist, guitarist and pianist of the White Stripes, White's band The Dead Weather featured him predominately behind the drum kit, an instrument he starting playing at age six."

—Jerome Brunet

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

Limited edition prints are available.



Kraftwer

DISNEY CONCERT HALL LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA MARCH 20, 2014

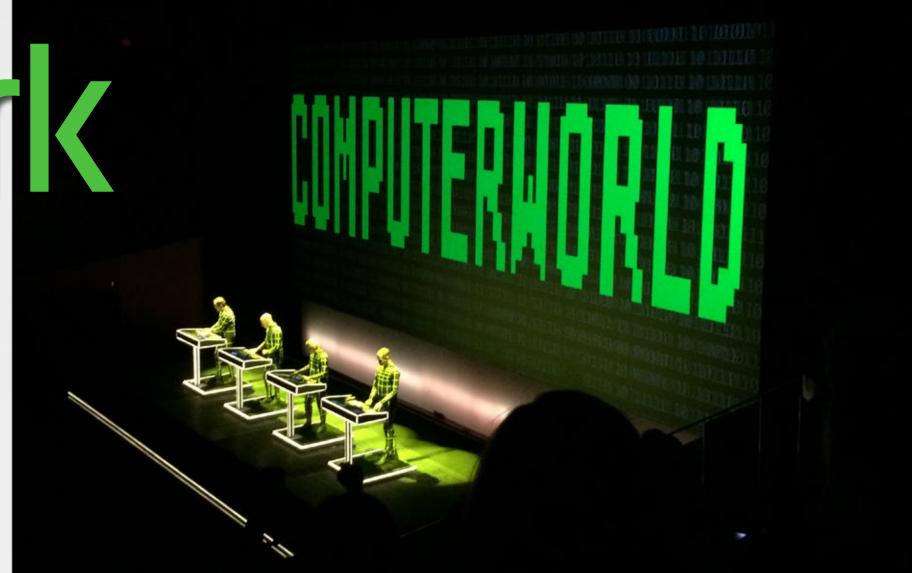
By Jeff Dorgay

With all the precision of the PDK transmission in a Porsche 911 Carrera, Kraftwerk took the stage at precisely 10:00pm to perform the classic album *Computerworld* as part of its three-day tenure at the *tres*-hip Disney Concert Hall in downtown Los Angeles. Each night, the legendary electronica pioneers gave two concerts, each highlighting a different album.

Upon entering the hall, fans were handed a pair of 3D glasses in a stark, black holder. Considering *Computerworld* only has a playing time of 37:44, audience members shared a similar sentiment: Would the show only consist of the album on the ticket?

Today, Kraftwerk consists of original members Henning Schmitz, Fritz Hilpert, and Ralf Hutter. Falk Grieffengagen replaces Florian Schneider, who left the band in 2008. All four musicians played synthesizers and dressed in black body wear that resembled motion-capture suits with a *TRON*-like graphic motif, crafted to work with the evening's three-dimensional presentation.

The bold shape of the Frank Gehry-designed auditorium made for an engaging acoustic experience, combining an ideal volume level with an ambiance that felt as if the show was mixed in surround sound. Kraftwerk's signature synth riffs and sound effects bounced around in psychedelic fashion. This came in stark contrast to the all-black stage with four starkly lit keyboard podiums. A massive screen sat behind the quartet.



Photos: Star Roth

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After three songs from Computerworld, the foursome made their intentions known, deviating off the path by adding the title track from *Tour de* France to the agenda. As the performance unfolded, it became like a greatest-hits show, with Computerworld woven into the mix. The band primarily stayed close to the original themes of the original tracks. Kraftwerk's excitement was tough to contain, with the members progressively loosening up and jumping around. But not too much. While Kraftwerk did not take extensive license with the material, the auditorium and volume presented its music in an engaging way you can't get from a home stereo. Hearing and feeling the deepest synth bass notes along with the huge sound field made these tunes even more spectacular.

Visually, the big screen was used to excellent effect, featuring what seemed almost like 8-bit, 70s-style graphics much like the cover of the Autobahn album. The presentation featured bits and pieces from Kraftwerk's entire catalog, as well as a number of driving scenes, featuring Mercedes, Porsches, and early VWs driving down a road to a cheering crowd. Other graphics were big, bold, and dimensional, much like monsters in a scary 3D movie. Such objects seemed as if fans could reach right out and touch them.

Almost 90 minutes later, each member took a bow and walked off stage, the sound diminishing as each left, with Hutter last to exit, everything fading to black.



ack when I was selling
Technics SL1200s and
Shure V-15 cartridges
by the truck load, on
the brink of becoming
an major obsessive
audiophile, our shop
received the latest
and greatest from

Ortofon-their MC20 moving coil cartridge and the accompanying MCA-76 head amplifier. If memory serves me correctly, the cartridge was about 300 bucks and the MCA-76 about twice that. Big bucks to step up from that Shure indeed. I was driving a bright green Saab 99 that I barely had that much invested in, but I had to have it.

The Ortofon cartridge was a major step up in analog playback, and having just discovered *Stereophile* and *The Absolute Sound*, I was crazed with an expanded vocabulary that included words like "soundstage" and "transparency..." Yes, I was hooked on analog madness in a major way. Of course, after about two weeks of listening to these new toys, the Technics was no longer good enough and an Oracle Delphi Mk. 2 would take its place, but that's another story for another day.

Today, the MC20 continues as the MC20 Super, reviewed here, but the MCA-76 is long discontinued, however it is readily available on the secondary market. And a new old stock MC20 can be purchased for about \$100-\$200, but vary widely in quality. The same goes for the MCA-76; these can be had for as little as \$100 (what I paid for this example) up to as high as \$600. Six big ones is probably a trifle optimistic, considering that the thirty plus year old electrolytic capacitors in the power supply really need to be replaced by now and how insane you want to get will that could easily add a few hundred more to the eventual price.

FEATURE

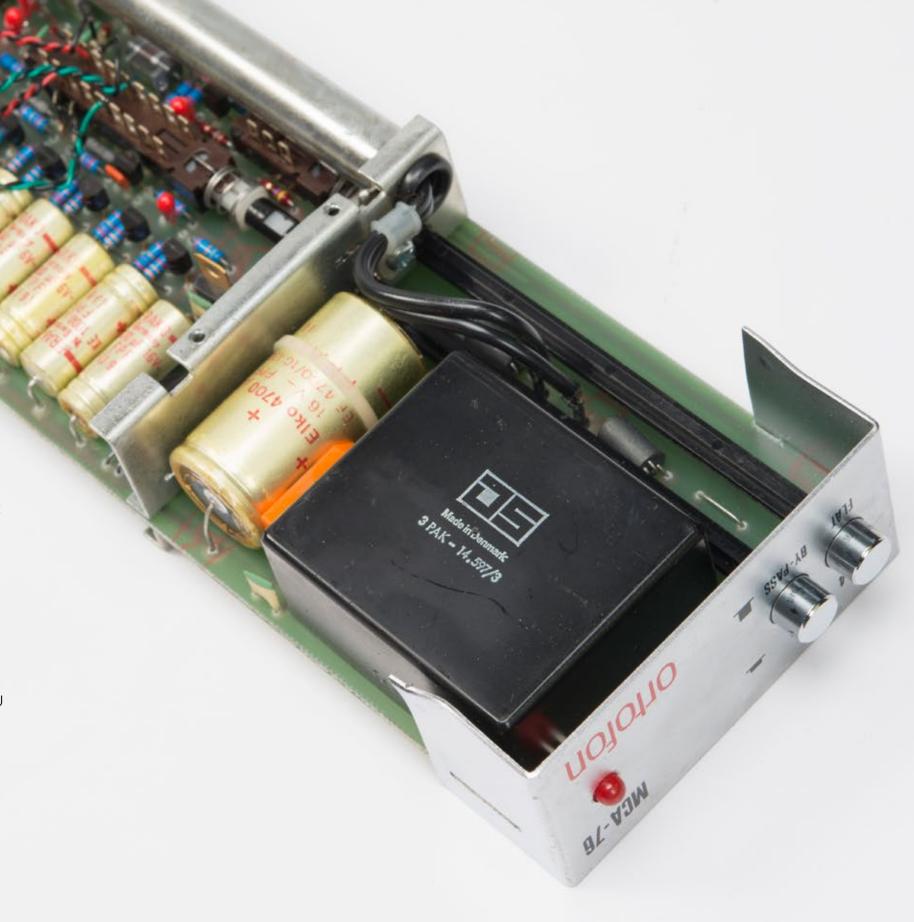
Staffer Jerold O'Brien who has a penchant for vintage gear is already champing at the bit to give the MCA-76 an overhaul, add film capacitors, better RCA jacks and a healthy dose of Cardas wire to this vintage jewel, so we may revisit this on the Analogaholic section of our website.

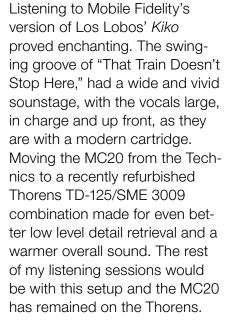
To be as true to my memories as possible, a Technics SL-1200 was borrowed from O'Brien and I still had a pristine example of the MC20 from our review of the MC20 Super. Once set up at the necessary 1.7gram tracking force, listening could begin in earnest. This cartridge produces a miniscule output of .07 (mk1) to .09mv

(mk2), so
the MCA76 has a correspondingly high
gain to match, making it
a less than optimum partner
for many of todays MC cartridges in the .4-.6mv range without
overload. There are no adjustments for gain or loading with the
MCA-76; audiophiles did not have
the plethora of MC cartridges that
they enjoy today.

With analog, it's always worth giving even the wackiest combination a go, even if the specs suggest otherwise and the MCA-76 was not a bad dance partner with the Dynavector Karat 17D3, (.3mv), even though it has a DC resistance of 38 ohms, where the MC20 is only 3. Ortofon's SPU Classic GM E cartridge spans the gap between new and old, with a DC resistance of 6 ohms and an output of only .2mv–an excellent combination.

But enough stalling, how did our visit down memory lane with the MC20 go? Quite well, actually. (continued)





Even with the old power supply capacitors, the MCA-76 renders a fairly quiet background, though not as inky black as you'd expect from something like a Lehmann Black Cube. For now, the jury is out until we upgrade the caps.

Do you need one? Probably not, unless you can get a major deal and just feel like taking that test drive again, but if you are a careful shopper that can probably be arranged. The only real exception to this rule would be to pair it up with an SPU on the cheap until you find the \$\$ for a better MC phonostage. These two have a synergy that can not be denied.

Either way, it's always a great time taking a look at legendary gear that changed our perceptions of what analog is capable of, and the solid engineering behind these two pieces from Ortofon continue to this day.





NEW RELEASES



The Afghan WhigsDo to the Beast
180g 45RPM 2LP or CD

ou know me by now" softly repeats Greg
Dulli in the midst of the Afghan Whigs' new
noir showpiece "Lost In the Woods," his
tone taunting, threatening, haunting, reminding. Seeing the statement comes from
one of the most charismatic and polarizing
singers of the past two decades—a proud
frontman whose vices and outspokenness
continually inspire hyperbolic descriptions
that ignore the subtlety and complexities
of his persona—it does indeed seem audiences should be familiar with his moves,
to the extent he's expected to live up to a
mythologized Lothario status onstage and

on record.

But nothing in Dulli's world is ever so simple or clear-cut. He's never adhered to expectations and, with Do to the Beast the Afghan Whigs' first new record in 16 years—as evidence, isn't about to start. From major names such as Pixies to The Who, to novelty acts like Cibo Matto, the practice of once-disbanded groups launching Second Acts is as ordinary as a Starbucks opening on the corner. Yet with rare exception, career reboots usually result in disappointment once the allure of nostalgia fades away. Inspired to reunite after bassist John Curley joined Dulli at several solo shows in 2011, the Afghan Whigs mounted a critically acclaimed tour in 2012 that found the riveting live act in even better form than it displayed during its initial tenure during the 1990s. For closure,

the band capped off the successful run with a New Years Eve show in its hometown of Cincinnati.

Three months later, however, the group's plans changed when it received an unexpected invite to play a special South By Southwest show with soul singer Usher. Original guitarist Rich McCollum opted out, but after the event, Dulli and Curley elected to begin recording again, aided by musicians and collaborators involved with Dulli's other bands (Twilight Singers, Gutter Twins). Because of the Afghan Whigs' stainless reputation, the decision arrives fraught with risk. Save for 1988's selfissued Big Top Halloween—a record the band quickly disowned—the band released five very-good-to-great albums, including 1993's Gentlemen, an inimitable work that stands not only among the decade's best efforts but as one of the most emotionally eviscerating and savagely primal break-up documents ever recorded. Resurrecting the Afghan Whigs' name arrives loaded with considerable pressure to maintain such excellence and own up to expectation.

While 16 years represents an eternity between records, on *Do to the Beast*, several sonic and thematic holdovers serve as guideposts that link the band's past to its present. Dulli remains unpredictable—shifty in temperament, elusive in motivation, concealed by clever metaphor and the element of surprise. *(continued)*

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The band's distinctive soulful sound pulses throughout a majority of songs, with percussive backbeats steering the direction and grooves plucked from the depths of old R&B 45s prowling in the background. Betrayal, retribution, pain, loss, and deception run rampant. The dicey themes beget menacing environments in which Dulli often roams as a mercenary, unshackled from responsibility or guilt.

The absence of culpability marks a pointed shift from the band's earlier works that, however steeped in vitriol and blame, seldom witnessed Dulli entirely divorced from consequences and responsibility. Here, when at his most confrontational, the singer operates in complete control: a man bent on exacting vengeance on his own terms, and approaching subjects with a cool demeanor meant to prolong suffering, incinerate any suggestion of forgiveness, and instill deep-seated fear. At times, he saunters in and surveys situations much like a hardened Walter White in the later stages of "Breaking Bad," his former personality extinct and transformed into that of the merciless, seemingly immortal, and largely invisible Heisenberg.

On the revenge fantasy "These Sticks," Dulli pulls strings with cunning fearlessness and unforgiving intent, stalking his prey amidst tribaldrum thunder and explosive crescendos. He sets the trap, lays out the bait, and ensnares the victim in similar nonplussed fashion on the simmering "Matamoros," during which pronounced funk and Middle Eastern gypsy accents give way to an airdropped hook and stinging outro that finds Dulli salivating as he admits, "I'm so excited you decided to come over/ And beg."

Having kicked cigarette smoking in 2008, Dulli sings with more finesse, delicacy, dynamics, and soulfulness in his voice than in years past. On the tantalizing "Algiers," as unique a song the Afghan Whigs have recorded, a classic girl-group beat collides with a spaghetti-western melody and acoustic flamenco rhythm. Above it all, Dulli croons in a true falsetto, the dreamy highs and romantic smoothness contrasting with a whip-cracking guitar solo indicative of the tune's implied bloodlust, sin, and temptation. His singing goes off-leash in a different manner during "Parked Outside," a pushand-shove grudge match

brewed with sexual friction, R&B swagger, and cathartic hard rock.

For all the musical re-

semblances to the Afghan

Whigs' established sound,

Do to the Beast unsurprisingly contains as many departures from it. As a whole, the album is guided more by mood and texture than guitars. Atmospherics and ambience provide the foundation to a number of compositions. Dulli's embrace of electronic and exotic strains in his other projects bleeds over here, as do increasingly dense arrangements and mixes. More than a dozen guests, including a memorable turn by soul singer Van Hunt, contribute. Packed with instrumentation and overdubs-sometimes to the point of overload the record shares more in common with 1996's extravagant Black Love than the leaner Gentlemen and 1998's sweaty, celebratory 1965. The Afghan Whigs even reference the latter on "Royal Cream" via a mean, tempo-altering guitar riff straight from "My Enemy."

A scholar of music history, Dulli pays homage to multiple influences with faint cues throughout, ranging



from the Stevie Wonder-like Wurlitzer on "Lost In the Woods" to the "wet" James Brown-fueled drum sounds heard on multiple tracks. Dulli's lifelong interest in film scores also surfaces on a few songs found on the album's back end that feel like slightly incomplete vignettes and more akin to ruminative solo work than Afghan Whigs music. The counterpoint balance achieved by McCollum's

steady guitar playing is missed on occasion.

Still, such minor shortcomings become trivial when measuring the levels of songwriting consistency, quality control, and group chemistry attained on *Do to the Beast.* Free of easy nostalgia and open to bold ideas, the artistically vital effort puts the Afghan Whigs in rare company with contemporaries that never made a mediocre or disappointing record. More

importantly, it signals a spirited creative evolution that even extends to Dulli's outlook.

Yes, he still thrives in the roles of sinister playboy and tormented lover. But in subverting these positions on "It Kills" and strongly hinting of redemption during "I'm Fire," he and the Afghan Whigs point towards something more rewarding than revenge served hot or cold—that of lasting emotional transformation. —**Bob Gendron**

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Cloud Nothings Here and Nowhere Else Carpark/Mom & Pop, LP or CD

ime and again on Cloud Nothings' Here and Nowhere Else, the fourth fulllength from the snarling Cleveland trio, singer/guitarist Dylan Baldi fumbles to find the right words, singing: "I feel there's nothing left to say"; "I don't know what you're trying to say"; "You don't really seem to care/And I don't even talk about it." While the frontman might have issues communicating verbally, the music never fails to get his point across, the three bandmates unleashing a barrage of songs that alternately shriek, simmer, sneer, and explode.

It marks an evolution that started with Cloud Nothings' 2012 breakout, Attack on Memory, an album that reintroduced Baldi's onetime bedroom solo project as a full-on group affair. Even the 2013 departure of guitarist Joe Boyer hasn't slowed the band's momentum. If anything, the crew sounds tighter and less prone to exploration, akin to a government that chose to halt expenditures on deep-space ventures in order to reinvest in building infrastructure from the ground up. So, gone are the pianos that occasionally surface on Attack on Memory. They're replaced by slash-and-burn guitars, thundering drums, and a relentless, restless sense of urgency.

Drummer Jayson Gerycz, in particular, is a constant revelation, hammering at his kit with the same brute efficiency as Liam Neeson hacking his way through a gang of Armenian kidnappers in Taken. If there's any justice in the world, the former will quickly supersede John Adams as Cleveland's most famous drummer. Alternately, Baldi sounds like he spent the time away absorbing the rawer elements of Nirvana's In Utero. There are moments, particularly on the skinned-and-flayed "Just See Fear," where the singer barely sounds human.

At times, these vocal elements hold the group back. While Baldi has never been a great singer—his hoarse rasp is roughly as thin and haggard as Christian Bale's character in The Machinist—the band's increasing vitality merely shines a brighter spotlight on his vocal shortcomings. (continued)



©Photo by by Shervin Lainez

Fortunately, he makes up for any such deficiencies with his guitar work, lacing "I'm Not Part of Me" with melodically barbed riffs and closing out the seven-minute-plus "Pattern Walks" with an instrumental barrage that conjures images of a prison riot.

Producer John Congleton, best known for his orchestral work with comparatively widescreen acts like Okkervil River, St. Vincent, and the Walkmen, resists the urge to adorn the band's sound with all manner of bells and whistles (and pianos and string sections and horns and...). His wise decision heightens the scrappy tension in scorched-

earth burners like "No Thoughts" and pummeling "Now Here In."

Throughout, Baldi utilizes this primal backdrop to exercise his id, turning out instinctual songs that alternate between emotional detachment ("I can feel your pain/And I feel alright about it") and a desire to be entirely present in the moment ("I'm learning how to be here and nowhere else"). He never quite reconciles these extremes, but the tension provides ample fuel for the players, which channel his youthful confusion into eight absolutely visceral tunes. Play this album loud.

-Andy Downing

THE FIFTY



1961 - 2011



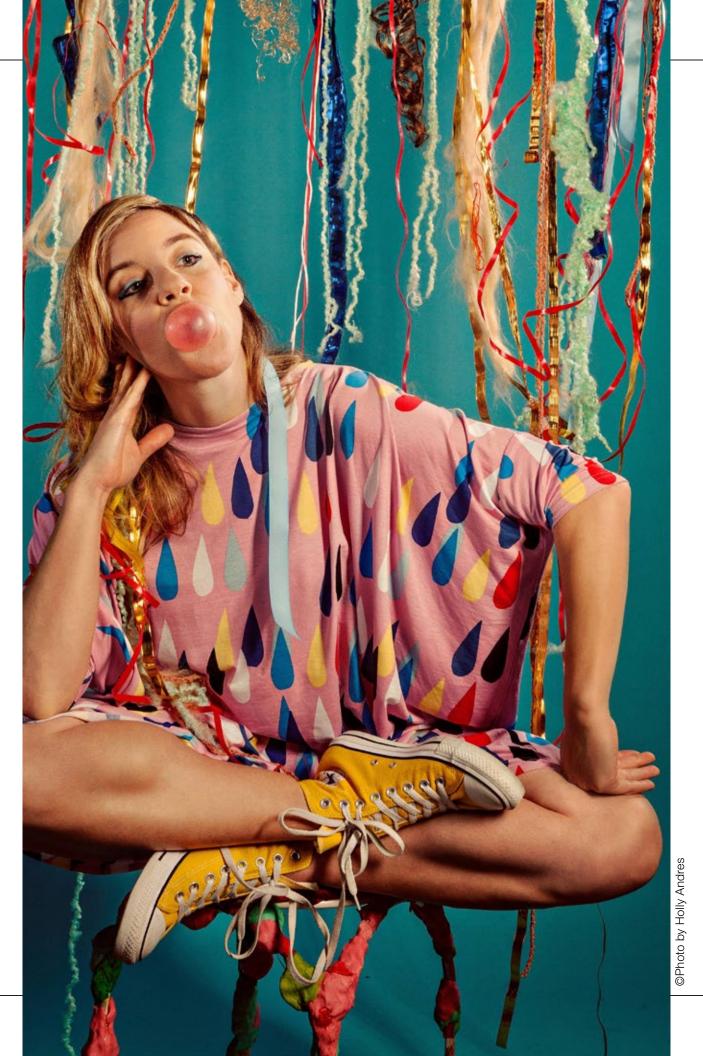
MUSIC



Tune-Yards Nikki Nack 4AD. LP or CD

ew artists put on a show like Merrill Garbus. A puppeteerturned-one-woman-band, the architect of Tune-Yards is a marvel of human innovation onstage, where songs are sampled and remixed before a listener's eyes. A thump-thump-thump on the drums gets mashed and manipulated with a few acoustic notes and short vocal melody to ultimately result in something akin to a world-beat orchestra.

It's an ambitious undertaking, and over the years, Tune-Yards has gradually grown into a small band. On Nikki Nack, Garbus' third album under the Tune-Yards name, she works again with bassist and frequent collaborator Nate Brenner. But this time, she also turns to some A-list help—namely, producers such as Malay (John Legend) and John Hill (Rihanna). Nikki Nack still has a ramshackle, beat-focused feel in parts, but if Garbus as Tune-Yards once felt like a Burning Man magician, the new record boasts a polished army of digital flourishes and diversions to give the project a more accessible gloss.



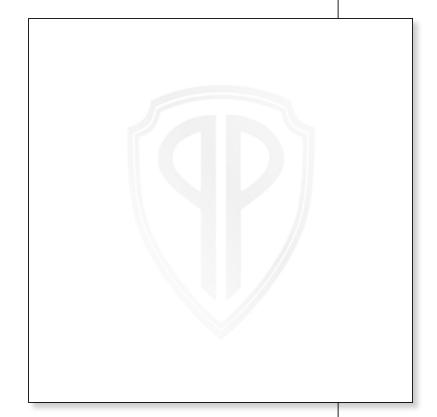
There's rarely a loss of attention-grabbing details. "Find A New Way" opens the album with candy-coated keyboards, heavily processed rhythms, and a choir of Garbus' vocals that sound as if they're bouncing off imaginary walls. You'll also hear a harpsichord—or maybe not, as the digital and organic often come in and out of focus. "Water Fountain" creates a melody out of the sound of tapping on empty glass bottles. A vibrating static gradually swells throughout, giving the impression the song fades in and out of dimensions. "Real Thing" begins with a sweet dip into mid-80s R&B (think Sisters With Voices) but that direction doesn't hold, as Garbus soon becomes an orator leading an African drum circle.

Tapping a similar soulful vibe, "Hey Life" leans on layer after layer of colorful keyboards to temper Garbus' sometimes spoken-word approach. "Look Around" is a piano-based nursery rhyme, where the groove spins with a bit of vinyl static. It's psychedelic, but in the way, say, a 70s TV show may attempt psychedelic effects. Each sound and image gradually inflates in intensity until a kaleidoscope array of effects envelope the whole.

If the flood of sounds and ideas doesn't exhaust you, there's plenty to admire, and the politically aware lyrics give the effort a bit of a heft. Again, however, even this trait comes with some fine print: It's possible to be turned off by some of the earnestness (or use of phrases such as "nikki nack"). "I come from the land of slaves/Let's go Redskins! Let's go Braves!," Garbus sings on "Real Thing," the line more befitting of a protest march than a pop song. At other times, Garbus is surprisingly effective. "Water Fountain," for instance, may be political activism at its most cutesy— there's a correlation between eating well and having "nice" poop—but it's a tale of haves and have-not's done with all the wacky colorfulness of a children's book.

So, while no listener can probably sit through an amateur radio play such as "Why Do We Dine on the Tots?" more than once, it's always clear that Garbus means well. "Your music's in your pocket with a power you can't even imagine it will bring," she sings early on the album. Only the most pure of cynics that deny someone the belief music equals magic would disagree. -Todd Martens

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Perfect Pussy

Say Yes to Love
Captured Tracks, LP or CD

ome musicians have back stories that sound designed for the big screen. This is most literally true of Syracuse-based Perfect Pussy, which first got together when a movie filmed in the quintet's hometown included a scene that called for a punk band.

That flick—the John Cusack-directed *Adult World*—doesn't come close to matching the intensity and sheer visceral thrill of the group's full-length-inname-only debut, *Say Yes to Love*, which clocks in at a lean 23 minutes. Instead, these eight tracks, most of which tap out before the two-minute mark, sound as though they could have been inspired by a bit of *A Clockwork Orange*'s ultra-violence.

Frontwoman Meredith Graves, for one, doesn't sing so much as she shrieks. Her vocals are so distorted, it's generally impossible to pick up precisely what she's going on about. In this regard, songs are less about her words (a handful of discernible fragments suggest the recording booth doubled as a confessional) and more about the out-and-out physicality of the performances. *(continued)*

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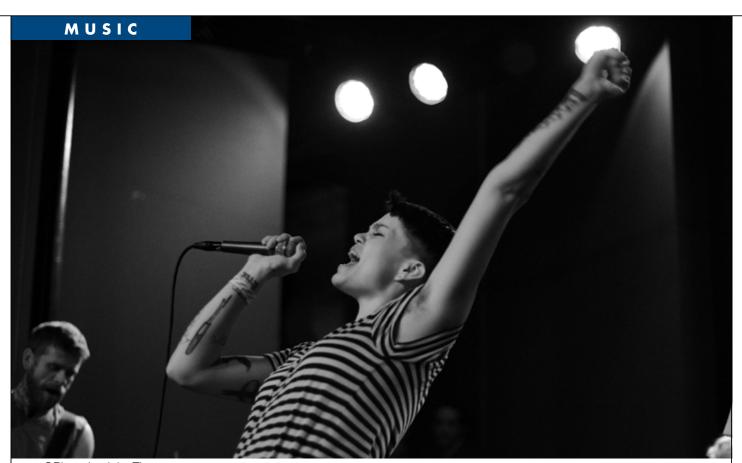
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And what performances they are. Bandmates Garrett Koloski (drums), Ray McAndrew (guitar), Greg Ambler (bass), and Shaun Sutkus (keyboards) join forces with Graves and throw themselves headlong into the music like a marauding gang of wildlings on HBO's "Game of Thrones," lashing out not just at the world around them, but often at one another.

Witness "Driver," where Graves and her mates trade paint, repeatedly scraping together even as the momentum pulls everyone forward. "Big Stars" is similarly caustic, the singer hurling her words like concrete chunks while the players lay down a rickety backdrop so corrosive it would likely cause the listener chemical burns if it stretched even seconds beyond its 2:21 runtime. "Interference Fits," in contrast, builds to a noiserock finale worthy of its title—the sound of five bandmates simultaneously seizing.

While the music never flinches, the snippets of lyrics that bubble to the surface can be far more unsteady. "We may never know," Graves growls

on "Work." "Big Stars" finds the frontwoman confessing, "I know we're scared." On a handful of moments, the singer's ferocity falls right in line with that of her mates. "And I want to fuck myself," she snarls on the rumbling "Dig." "And I want to eat myself!" Considering Graves' conviction, I'm not sure anyone would try to stop her.

Say Yes only falters as it nears its close, the full-on aggression of the first 15 minutes giving way to "Advance Upon the Reel," a tune that opens by throwing haymakers before devolving into nearly three minutes of joyless tape hiss. It's followed by "VII," a disjointed, ambient noise-scape that comes on like the score to one of Trent Reznor's nightmares.

Still, it's hard to fault the members of Perfect Pussy for not being able to maintain their breakneck pace, and it's a testament to the quality of the music that the band's head-turner of a name seems like the least interesting thing about it.

-Andy Downing



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MUSIC



Archie Powell & the Exports

Back In Black

Team Cool, LP or CD

rchie Powell doesn't have an easy go with relationships on he and the Exports' terrific *Back In Black*. Candid, funny, and disarmingly personal, the Milwaukee quintet's third album serves a vital compendium of frustrations, repressions, infatuations, and decisions associated with dating in the 21st century. Darker, heavier, and noisier than the group's preceding efforts, it juxtaposes unforced wit and black humor with catchy powerpop hooks and sticky, lick-the-beater melodies.

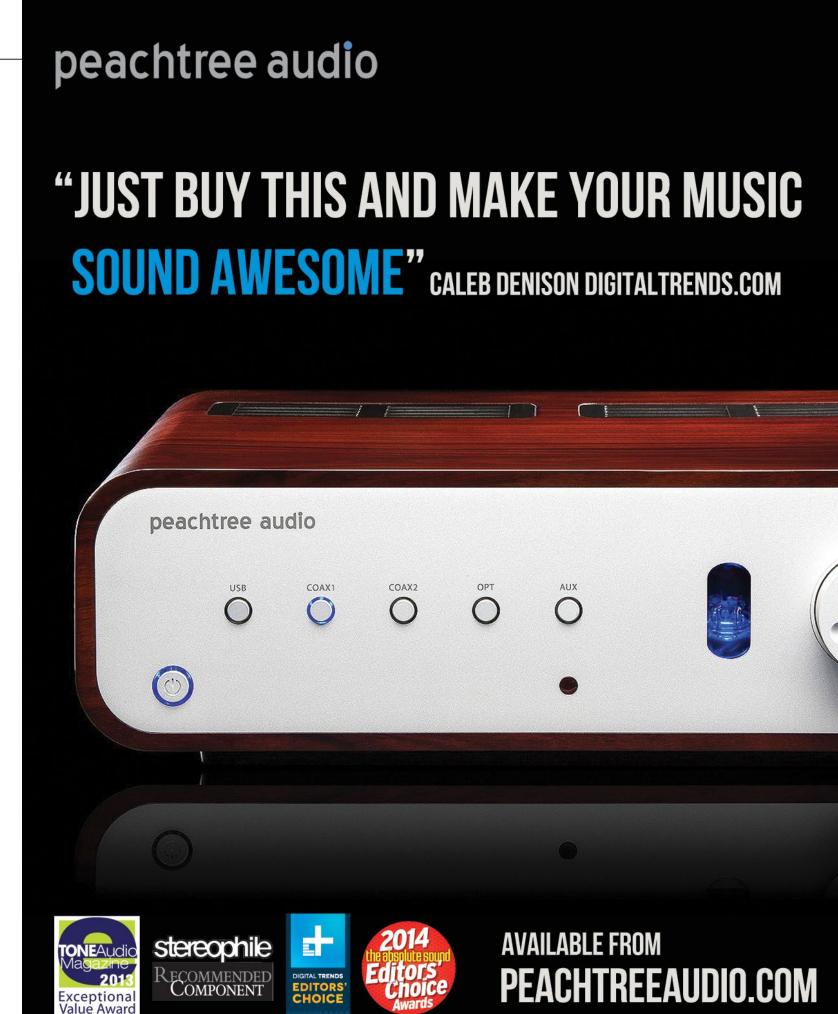
While self-deprecation and obsession have long occupied a special place in rock n' roll, Powell's intimacy and earnestness with such characteristics—and their depraved offshoots—grant the songs relatable familiarity and believability often missing from heartbreak- and longing-themed works.

Akin to fellow Midwestern singer/songwriter lke Reilly and a younger Rivers Cuomo, Powell isn't afraid to embarrass himself via private disclosures or risk being seen as a stalker due to frank confessions related to sex, and generally, him not having it.

A casual dude that looks like he'd be comfortable popping the top off a Budweiser and handing it to you on a beerstained couch. Powell is worlds removed from the self-obsessed rock star, egotripping pop diva, and material-obsessed hip-hop persona whose music distorts reality with unattainable fantasy. He and his cohorts are also refreshingly free of hipster trappings—well, save, possibly, for the beards. They avoid suggestions of indie elitism or insider pretension; at no point does artsy temptation trump good, old-fashioned guitar-drums-bass explosiveness. Back In Black may not create a new language for romantic exasperation and sexual tension, but it freshens and twists existing vocabularies in clever ways.

Throughout, Powell gives the impression of someone who spends more than his share of time scouring the likes of OKCupid. Match, and local bars for the perfect girl. It's a character type anyone in their 20s, 30s, and 40s knows well. He misreads signs, pines after wrong women, and can't break free of fixations. Many of his first dates devolve into sad, weird affairs. On occasion, he's managed to land a few follow-up dates. but never gets the prize, and often, settles for imagining desired-for outcomes while dealing with letdowns and breakups. The recurrent cycle prompts him to question himself, repress anger, drink heavily, resort to desperate of measures, and, due to his yearning, do it all over again.

Powell's frazzled mental state comes into focus seconds into the album. "I wish someone could make this masturbation obsolete/But baby if it's not you/I guess I'd rather tug," he cries on the high-strung, high-velocity "Everything's Fucked." (continued)





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Before the song crashes headfirst over the finish line, he's spurned on the phone, convinced he'll never move past his *objet d'affection*, and wishes her memory would be assassinated by a bullet. His fortunes don't improve.

On the low-key "Electrocute My Heart," Powell sways to dream-pop treble notes and springy percussion, the sensuality attached to his sad-eyed-puppy-dog pleas ceding to bizarre relief when, during the climax, he seizes, burns, and fries from the shock treatment he requests from his sought-after mate. "Holes" is similarly detrimental to his physical being, his bandmates riding cheerleading beats and inthe-red glam riffs to a conclusion that witnesses Powell go from optimistic to urgent. The irresistible "I'm Gonna Lose It" spills over with chiming chords, a strolling pace, backing wordless doo-wop vocals, and a litany of sweetly voiced confessional zingers. "But now I'll never press you/And tell you jokes/

Or send you texts," Powell laments, slipping into precarious territory while craving sex so badly he can't help but proclaim his lust: "Let alone undress you/And bite your tongue/Or touch your breast."

Throwing himself into the song until his reddening throat gets scraped raw, Powell also loses control on "Mambo No. 9," a 94-second blast of guerilla punk played at scorched-earth tempos and to-hell-with-everything abandon. The Exports' inner *Doolittle*era Pixies also surfaces on the grinding "Lean," where caustic dancefloor grooves and rah-rah beats eventually surrender to Powell's disturbed screams and a sympathetic hook that comes on like a surprise haymaker punch.

By all indications, Powell needs rehab—or at least a good therapist—before *Back In Black* hits the halfway mark. He never appears to obtain either option, but on the distortion-laden "Jump off a Bridge," his deadpan delivery projects a

healthy ire at love interests that on deceptively spry tracks such as "Tattoo On My Brain" cause him to require medical attention. Powell also gains the upper hand on the minimalist ballad "Rodeo Crush," his echoing words eviscerating an ex while a solitary piano and atmospheric strings float in the background.

The balance of musical chillouts and blowouts all lead up to "Everything's Cool," a closing kissoff track on which saloon piano lines and Powell's calm demeanor function as assurances that the turmoil is behind him and he's ready to move on, hatchet buried. It's the only time on the record Powell seemingly doesn't want us to believe him. Like everyone else that's been through the dating ringer, dealt with crazed exes, and amassed emotional baggage, he understands we can see right through his protective sardonic veil.

-Bob Gendron



imee Mann and Ted Leo, longstanding pillars of indie-pop songcraft, drop nugget after nugget of indispensable and straightforward truths throughout their debut album as The Both.

"Don't blame the world or a girl for what keeps you estranged," the two sing at one point. "Try to answer a bomb with a calm undertone," Mann assuages at another. And when everything seems to be going to all heck, the two remind us we're all in this together. "You know, we're all in debt now," they sing as the album fades to black.

Theirs may not be words that will change a life, but on song after song, Mann and Leo comfort with dependability, offering the sort of sage approach of a big brother that knows a thing or two about life. It's what a good trusty pop song should do, and it's one of the many reasons Mann and Leo's pairing as The Both is such a listenable affair.

As solo artists, both take different routes to a memorable hook. Mann's is more melancholic, and Leo's is more high energy and loose. Together, these 11 songs never quite approach Leo's pop-punk roots or Mann's reflective balladry. But the middle ground is never less than snappy and makes the most of a guitar-drums-keyboard setup.



The Both *The Both*SuperEgo Records, LP or CD

"No Sir" is nearly four minutes of twilight shading, as harmonies sync-up and shadow one another while skidding guitars and late-arriving handclaps give the tune a determined uplift. "Volunteers of America" puts a spotlight on the thankless and tireless with a buzzy, fast-moving bass and cheery keys that adorn the arrangement akin to a teacher affixing glittery stickers on an ace assignment.

Toying with listener expectations, "The Prisoner" strips away instruments when one expects an explosion and returns them in the form of clenched-teeth guitar work. "Hummingbird" and "You Can't Help Me Now" slow the pace via an unfussy albeit fanciful approach, the back-and-forth vocals brimming with melodic embellishments that answer every expression of doubt with a hook. —*Todd Martens*

44 TONEAUDIO NO.63 May 2014 45

or close to 50 years, Brazilian singer-songwriter Caetano Veloso has taken a wideopen view of the world's popular music alongside his own country's traditions and combined them all with an imaginative—and critical poetic spirit. Back in the 1960s, as part of the Tropicalia movement, he blended samba and bossa nova with cuttingedge rock n' roll together with his ironic commentary on Brazil's dictatorship and gender identities. After exile and return (and forays into more straightup pop), Veloso re-emerged as a national hero in the 1990s and released such richly orchestrated discs as Livro.

But Veloso's best work usually comes when he delivers a wealth of ideas through a stripped-down small group. His 1972 album *Transa* is a sparse, haunting, and, at times, lovely picture of life in forced expatriation. Veloso recently returned to this format, leading a four-piece rock band on 2006's Cê and does again here on Abraçaço, which means, appropriately enough, "wide embrace." While this recording appeared overseas two years ago, it is just now seeing a United States release.



Caetano Veloso *Abraçaço* Nonesuch, CD

Back in the 1960s, Veloso knew how to choose collaborators that could challenge him while also enhancing his own vision. This foresight hasn't disappeared. A younger generation of creative Brazilians contribute to $C\hat{e}$ and Abraçaço, with guitarist Pedro Sá and Veloso's equally imaginative son, Moreno Veloso, producing. (The younger Veloso played more on the previous disc; here, he just lends bass and percussion parts to "Gayana.") With bassist Ricardo Dias Gomes and drummer Marcelo Callado returning, the working group dynamic has grown stronger.

Such flexibility is especially crucial given all of the sudden twists in tone and contrasting idiomatic layers that run throughout *Abraçaço*. On "A Bossa Nova É Foda," the group rocks with nationalistic pride, even if the track's tone diverges from the quiet music it celebrates (its title translates as "Bossa Nova Is the Fucking Shit"). *(continued)*





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But the big guitar attack can also suddenly cut off, and at just the right moment, for Veloso's characteristically soft vocals on "Um Abraçaço." Controlling the barrage adds tension and accents underneath his delivery on "Estou Triste." The group also mixes progressive electronic dance music with romantic nostalgia on "Funk Melodico."

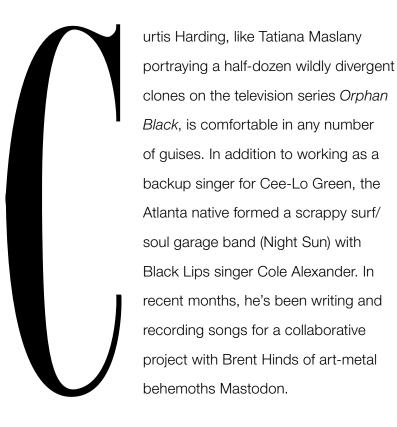
Veloso's band clearly sounds like it shares his affinity for Brazilian musical history. The collective just brings something new to it all. The samba strings and percussion on "O Império Da Lei" emphasize what an expressive singer Veloso still is, even when his lyrics are about revenge. "Parabéns" serves as an irrepressibly upbeat tune that seems to convey the maracatu rhythm from the country's northeast.

Veloso wrote, or co-composed, ten of the 11 tracks on *Abraçaço*. His longtime friend Rogerio Duarte penned the dark, closing love song "Gayana." Like always, Veloso's songs are poetic discourses that combine romance, politics, and history, all of which have different levels of meaning. At any volume, he still demands to be heard. —*Aaron Cohen*

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Curtis Harding
Soul Power
Burger Records, LP or CD



On Harding's solo debut, Soul Power, the multifaceted musician (and son of gospel singer Dorothy Harding) delves into classic 60s and 70s soul befitting the album's title. While the music borrows liberally from the past, the lyrics tend to cast an eye forward. "I'm focused on my future," Harding sings on opening "Next Time," a silky number buoyed by wobbly organ and woozy, just-roused horns. Then, on the rougher-around-the-edges "Surf," a scruffy garage-rock number most reminiscent of his collaborations with Alexander, he sings, "The future's coming soon."

Even so, the soul man's church-steeped past bleeds through repeatedly, surfacing in everything from his delivery (the spirit-tortured falsetto he flashes on the otherwise chilled "Freedom") to the lyrical content. On the slow-rolling "Beautiful People" he calls the masses to prayer, while "Keep on Shining" builds around a line from the gospel standard "This Little Light of Mine." Rather than searching the heavens for redemption, however, Harding repeatedly finds it in his fellow man (or, more accurately, woman).

"I can finally see the light," he sings on "Keep on Shining." "It's the light in your eyes that fills this space." Meanwhile, "Heaven's on the Other Side," a toe-tapping tune awash in nimble funk guitar and celebratory brass, locates something akin to salvation in the sweaty bump-and-grind of a packed night club.



©Photo by Hedi Slimane

Harding also displays a fondness for automobile allusions that could have some questioning whether the native Southerner has been spending significant time in the Motor City. Nonetheless, it's a safe bet neither V6-revving tune ("Drive My Car" and "The Drive") has a thing to do with the highway. "You're moving too fast, baby," he sings on the latter even as the music continues to accelerate. "I'm hitting the brakes."

It's little surprise when the singer urges caution. Rather than a Lothario-in-the-making, Harding most often comes across like a troubled soul in search of

deeper human connection. It's an urge he expresses most explicitly on the someone-please-hug-me slow-burner "I Need a Friend" even as the bluesy "Cruel World" offers the most compelling evidence of his need for companionship.

Here, Harding sings of various tortures he could subject himself to and best ("I could walk through the desert without no rain," etc.) before adding, "If I didn't have you I wouldn't last long." It's to the singer's credit that these admissions of weakness emerge as strengths on this grower of a debut.

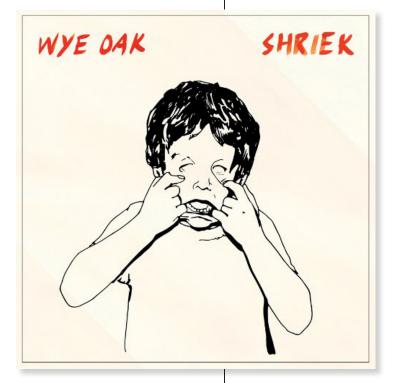
-Andy Downing

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Wye Oak Shriek Merge, LP or CD

he following may not seem like an endorsement, but it could take about 10 or 12 hours to fully appreciate Shriek. For those that have been following along to the indie-pop musings of the Baltimore duo of Jenn Wasner and Andy Stack, the headline here is that Album No. 4 more or less does away with the guitar. Any organic instruments populating the record are tweaked so they sound synthetic.

The good news is that the act's forlorn, reflective nature has never been dependent on any one instrument. In fact, Wye Oak only seems to have become more intimate—and the choirready vocals of Wasner only more poignant given the newfound clarity surrounding them. Just expect it to take a few listens to unwrap, as the pair's intricacies aren't built for short attention spans.

MUSIC

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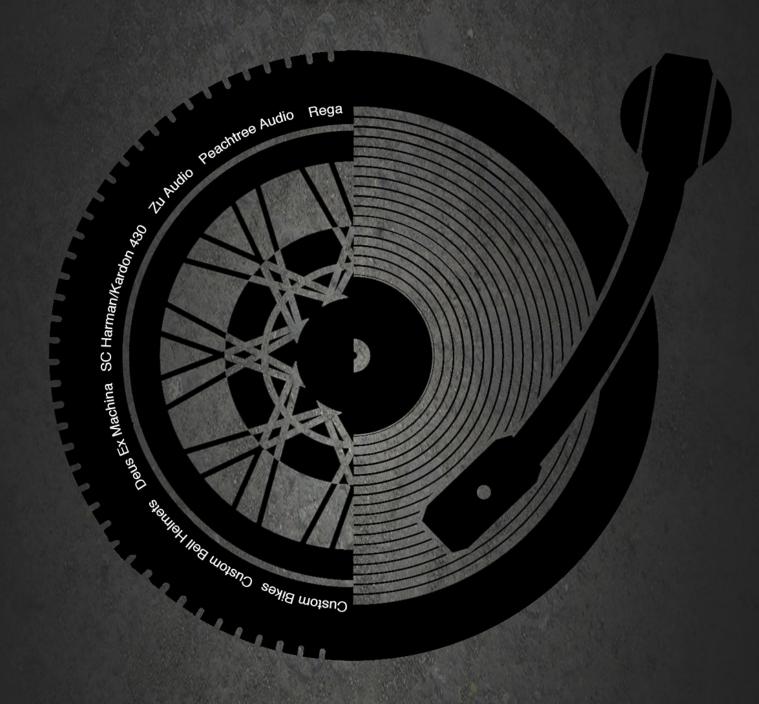
There is, perhaps, a sort of plainness to Wasner's upper-register calmness. Yet if she's the girl next door, she's the one sitting in a window and staring endlessly and deeply into the horizon. If only for a moment, you want to know just what she sees out there. We may not know who, for instance, is "undeserving of the light" on "The Tower," but the ping-pong rhythms and electronics, which sound a little like stringed instruments, all bounce in such a way that they appear to dare Wasner to show more emotion.

By contrast, the title track is more ornate, with nature-like sounds and circular keyboard pitter-patter creating hypnotizing effects. On "Glory," rhythms sound like pulsating air pipes while the late-song breakdown subscribes to an otherworldly beat-boxing trait. The true accomplishment on Shriek is just how human it all sounds, even as the arrangements aim to sing the band off into a dream.

"I hope we'll meet and still you will speak to me," Wasner sings on, "Despicable Animal," on which Stack lays down a muted R&B hi-hat beat while Wasner alternates between a flowery chorus and fuzz-laden, fangs-out verses. Turns out all those laptops have a little bluesy soul in them after all. —*Todd Martens*

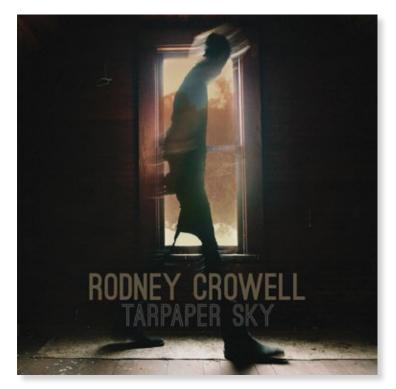
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MUSIC



Rodney Crowell
Tarpaper Sky
New West, LP or CD

ashville gets a bad rap for low points like the 1990s hat-act stampede and its current focus on brocountry overkill. But it's important to remember that Music City is also home to many of the world's finest singer-songwriters and musicians.

Take Rodney Crowell. He's a member of the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame, and disparate artists such as Van Morrison, Tim McGraw, Etta James, and Bob Seger have covered his tunes.



A writer of songs and prose as well as a prolific recording artist, the 63-year-old Crowell remains busier than ever. He recently teamed with best-selling memoirist Mary Karr for the album Kin. He's also fresh off a Grammy win for *Old Yellow Moon*, his collaboration with Emmylou Harris.

Crowell's new solo outing *Tarpaper Sky* is a backward-looking release in the best sense of the term. For the album, he assembled most of the session players that performed on *Diamonds & Dirt*, his 1988 set that yielded a record-breaking five number-one country singles. Passing on studio perfectionism, Crowell and crew cut *Tarpaper Sky* live in one room.

Among the assembled are drummer Eddie Bayers, bassist Michael Rhodes and guitarist Steuart Smith, both of whom boast impressive resumes. But this album isn't the sound of a solo star backed by a well-oiled machine. The band members play Crowell's tunes like they're slipping into a beloved, familiar, and well-worn leather jacket. On sprightly country-rockers ("The Long Journey Home"), Cajun dance tunes ("Fever on the Bayou"), homages to first-generation rock n' roll ("Frankie Please"), and tender ballads ("God I'm Missing You"), the arrangements brim with warmth.

Singing in a grainy tenor, Crowell is a smart, honest lyricist—alternately vulnerable and cheeky. He's also a fine storyteller, whether sharing family tales of love and faith ("Grandma Loved That Old Man," "Jesus Talk to Mama") or the remembrance of his friendship with songwriting legend Guy Clark ("The Flyboy & the Kid") amidst music that sounds like a cousin of Bob Dylan's "Forever Young." Crowell sings his finely honed couplets with such offhand ease, it takes a moment for the unique sentiments to sink in, proffering: "May your nights be filled with laughter and your days with honest work/May you wake up smelling roses when you're face down in the dirt."

He may no longer be at the top of the charts, but artistically, he's at the top of his game.

-Chrissie Dickinson

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





Jessica Lea Mayfield
Make My Head Sing...
ATO. LP Or CD

f Kiss is stripped from the conversation, much of the attention surrounding this year's crop of Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductees focused around Nirvana and Linda Ronstadt. The latter recently enshrined pop temples have likely always been points of influence on the young career of Ohioan Jessica Lea Mayfield, but never more so than on *Make My Head Sing...*, her third album and first without any credited assists from Black Keys member Dan Auerbach.

The 10 tracks here seek to see what happens when a little country crooning collides with torrents of grungeera guitar raving. The result, more often than not, is that the high-pitched, reverberating-off-the-concrete guitars knock Mayfield's folksiness right out of her. The battle isn't necessarily a wash—tracks like "Anything You Want" and "Oblivious" put hard-nosed, colorfully tattooed emotion front and center.

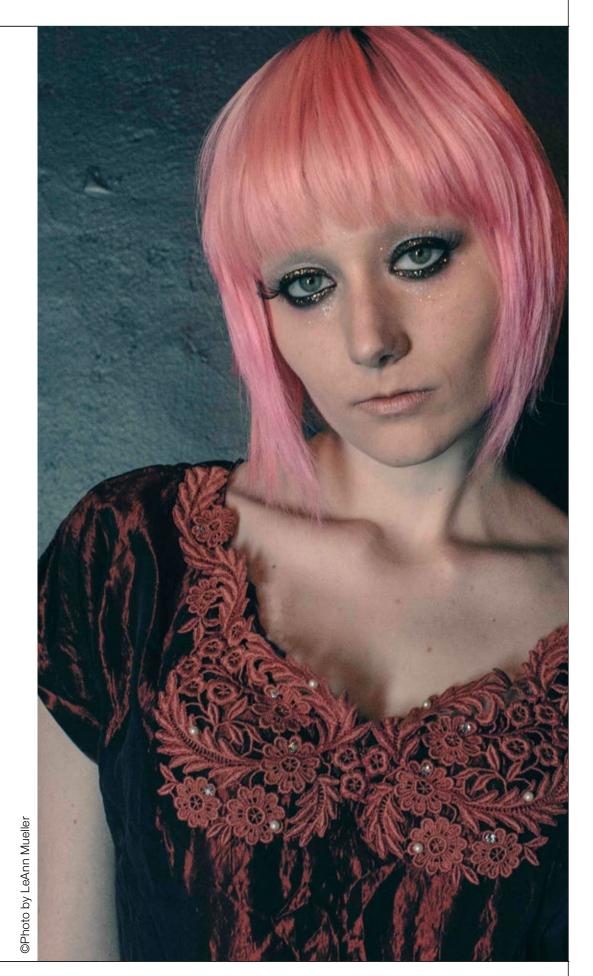
MUSIC

"I could kill with the power in my mind," Mayfield sweetly coos to open the album, as if she's some guitar-wielding superhero or supervillian. Pick your high-concept extreme: This tough/soft contrast may be an old rock n' roll standby, yet it remains a comfortably powerful one at that. Most of the time, at least. Gone is the bluesy kookiness that marks Mayfield's 2011 debut Tell Me, and when she lets herself get drowned in shoegazey washboard guitars ("Pure Stuff"), it's not the smartest of trades.

Mayfield makes a significant impact when she aims to a balance her inner Cobain with some of rootsy charm, be it via the sinister, Southern rock-stamped stomp of "I Wanna Love You" (a line Mayfield delivers more as a threat) or the hippie harmonies on the retro garage-pop ditty "Standing the Sun." "Party Drugs" wallows in sparseness, the cockily tongue-in-cheek ballad assessing the live-fast, die-young lifestyle. Mayfield's note-bending guitars on "Do I Have the Time" concoct a rather pretty take on sexual abandon.

"I never wanted to be that crazy mess," she sings on "No Fun," just before a "Come As You Are"-like explosion. No, it's not necessarily crazy or messy, but *Make My Head Sing...* imparts Mayfield with a few exciting new tools for a still-promising career.

-Todd Martens



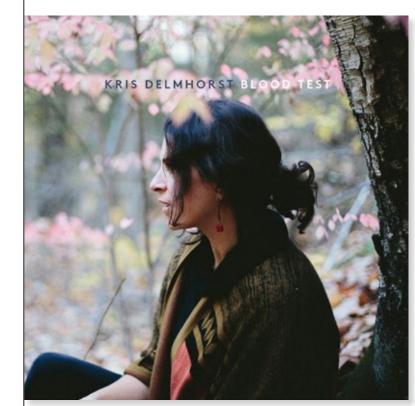


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Kris Delmhorst

Blood Test

Signature Sounds, CD

n the modern folk spectrum of exceptional female singersongwriters, Kris Delmhorst would fit nicely on a bill between Dar Williams and Krista Detor. Smart, mature, and given to sincere reflection, she's a classy artist whose cerebral tendencies never detract from her innate warmth.

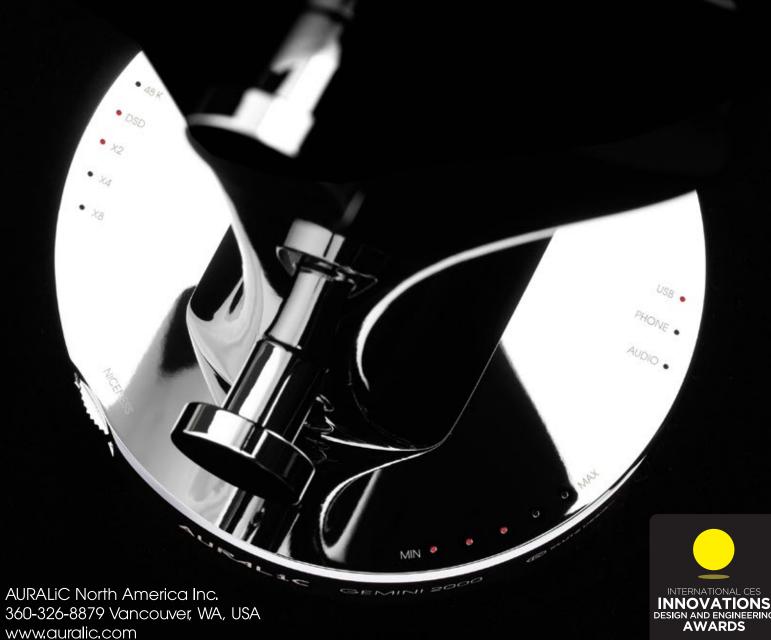
"Remember how it used to be?," Delmhorst sings in a burnished alto on "Blood Test," the title cut of her new release. She waxes nostalgic for a time when there was "Nothing on the radio/Nothing on TV/Just us and all those hours."

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A Brooklyn native that has long been a stalwart of the Boston folk scene, Delmhorst mines the past for some material. At times, there is wistful reminiscing in her songs, a trait that also extends to her overall sound. She brings to mind a modern-day Carole King on the poignant balladry, while her stripped-down classic-rock redux makes her sound like Sheryl Crow's kid sister.

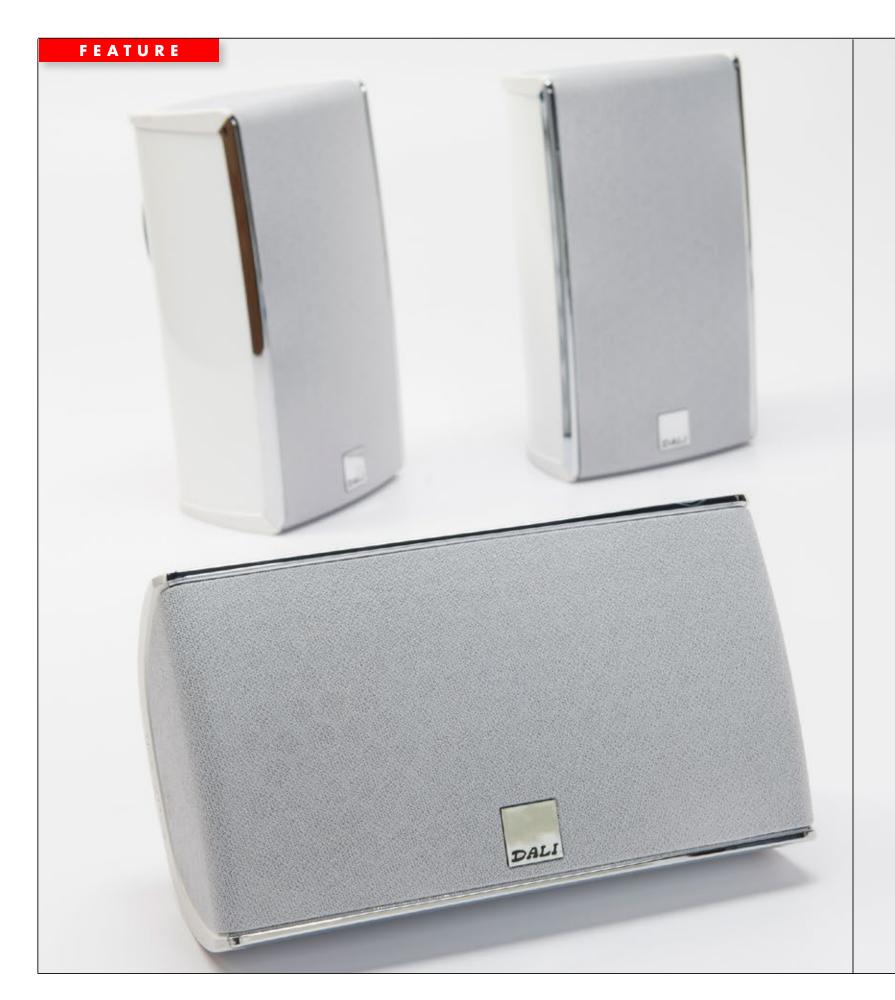
Co-produced by Anders Parker, the arrangements feel as intimate and inviting as a mellow cup of coffee in a friend's kitchen on a cold winter day. Delmhorst is a versatile singer that easily ranges across the breadth of this material. She gets mistyeyed on the tender numbers "My Ohio" and "Hushabye." She belts out the jangly power pop of "Bright Green World." "92nd St." starts with a plaintive voice and muted guitar before blossoming into a crunchy piece of folk psychedelia. Delmhorst is also in her element when it comes to the

blues. She strikes a sensual, slinky vibe on "Saw It All" and achieves near gale-force power on the driving "We Deliver."

While she crafts lovely phrases, her lyrics are more mood pieces refracted through a poetic lens than straightforward stories. Watery signifiers of the East Coast get tucked into her songs via numerous references to the ocean, the seas, the shore, the harbor, a seawall, and waves. The aquatic bent reaches its apotheosis on "Lighthouse." Musically and lyrically it's a gentle piece of yacht rock.

"Put your eye on the horizon,"
Delmhorst sings. "At the edge of the blue/There's a shining in the darkness/
Gonna guide you safely through." As she does with many songs on *Blood Test*,
Delmhorst poetically addresses the storms of life. Sometimes she sounds rueful, at other times hopeful. But what always underpins these songs is the resilient tone of a survivor. —*Chrissie Dickinson*





s the starship *Enterprise* explodes while I'm watching *Star Trek: Inception*, it's clear that these miniscule satellite speakers from Dali deliver big sound.

Working in concert with the tiny Fazon Sub 1, which utilizes a 6.5-inch long-throw driver, the speakers provide an equally solid bass response, as illustrated by the cannon shots in AC/DC's "For Those About to Rock (We Salute You)."

performance and aesthetics when

integrating great sound into your living room is always a challenge. Danish manufacturer Dali does a better job than most at combining a modern, understated look with exceptional performance. In the case of the Mikro 2s, the company manages to deliver such performance in a small package that easily fits anywhere.

With an enclosure built of machined aluminum—like the Fazon F5 speaker we reviewed in issue 43—the Mikro 2s feature a slightly curved shape that looks equally at home on a stand mount, on your desktop, or mounted directly to the wall. I use them in a 5.1-channel system powered by the Anthem MRX 510 multichannel receiver that has become my reference workhorse, with 125 watts per channel. Dali also makes the Fazon Mikro Vokal, which is identical to the Mikro 2 but oriented for horizontal use as a center-channel speaker. The Mikro 2s have an MSRP of \$650 per pair; the Vokal is \$325; and the Sub 1 is \$595—which makes for a very reasonably priced multichannel setup. All the units are available in gloss white (as pictured) or gloss black. *(continued)*



Easily Mounted

Thanks to the integral bracket and supplied wall mount, *TONE* staffer Rob Johnson and I were able to mount the five Mikros in my living room with ease. To angle the rear speakers, we improvised by making wall mounts from a 4-inch long piece of PVC that we painted white, cut in half, and glued to the wall with Liquid Nails. The end result is a very subtle install.

Those wanting stands for the Mikros can purchase accessory stands from Dali, which may better suit your needs if you don't have speaker cables running through your walls. The stands (\$199 per pair) are also available in black or white.

Should you be in tighter quarters, the Mikros can also serve as a kick-ass desktop 2.1 or 5.1 system, enveloping you in sound in a way that headphones cannot. In my small (7-by-10-foot) home office, a pair of the Mikros and the sub underneath my desk delivers prodigious sound surrounding my 30-inch Apple Cinema Display.

Bottom line: These exquisitely crafted speakers work well anywhere, especially if you're limited on space but want big sound.

Natural Sound

Dali speakers all share a natural voice, and the Mikros continue this tradition. A two-way design with a 4-inch wood-pulp woofer and 1-inch soft dome tweeter, the Mikro 2s have a somewhat low sensitivity of 84 dB, but this does not prove problematic in any situation I am able to create. The 125 watts per channel of the MRX 510 is easily able to drive these speakers to their maximum output of 104 dB, which is louder than I need in all but extreme conditions. (continued)

FEATURE

While Dali states that the speakers' low-frequency response is 90 Hz, placing the Mikro 2s on the wall and fairly close to the room corners takes advantage of room gain, giving the impression of much more powerful bass response than the specs indicate. Using the same strategy with the Sub 1 and setting the crossover at about 80 Hz turns out to be perfect in my listening room. Those craving more LF output might want to consider adding a second Sub 1 in an adjacent corner, though I would resist the urge to get a lone larger

subwoofer, as it may not integrate as seamlessly as the Sub 1 does.

Setting the Sub 1 up by ear takes very little time and even a rank beginner should be able to achieve excellent sub/sat integration. The ARC 1M room correction of the MRX 510 takes this to another level, and really helps the Dali speakers disappear completely in the room, both visually and sonically. The speakers are so unobtrusive that almost none of my recent guests even notice them—a major triumph in aesthetics. (continued)







Dynamic Range

tracking through the new copies of the Beatles' U.S. albums recently remastered by Greg Calbi, proves equally compelling. The Mikro 2s' ability to disappear only heightens the ping-pong, ultra-stereo quality of these recordings.

Through these little speakers, Elvis Costello's vocals in "I Never Fall In Love Again," (from

Through these little speakers, Elvis Costello's vocals in "I'll Never Fall In Love Again," (from the Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me soundtrack) is positively dreamy, capturing the mid-1960s Burt Bacharach feel perfectly, with Costello's unique vocal styling fully intact. Tegan and Sara's "I Know, I Know, I Know" is equally enjoyable, with both vocalists able to happily coexist in the sound-stage yet with each of their voices being easily discernable.

I run the gamut of rock and jazz favorites, and nothing throws the diminutive Danes a curve they can't navigate. (continued)



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The only place these speakers come up a bit short is when the program material switches to heavy electronica. You won't be able to play your favorite Skrillex or Chemical Brothers tracks at full throttle—one can only expect a 6.5-inch woofer (from any manufacturer) to go so far. But everywhere else, when keeping sound levels prudent, the Fazon Mikro 2s always satisfy.

The available bass from the Sub 1 goes down solidly to about 35 Hz and, while this is not the ultimate in extension, it is well defined. Personally, I'd rather have detail in a small subwoofer than just boom, and this is another area where Dali excels. It's easy to follow the bass groove in Thomas Dolby's "Hot Sauce," which exhibits plenty of weight. The acoustic bass line in Stanley Clarke's *In the Jazz* Garden is full of overtones, perfectly capturing the speed at which this legendary player moves up and down the neck of his acoustic instrument.

Beauty, Value and **Performance**

The Dali Mikro 2 system offers all three of these virtues in equal measure. There will always be the audiophile who wants a traditional floorstanding or stand-mounted speaker, but for those wanting their music system to less obtrusively integrate into their surroundings, I suggest the Dali Mikro 2 system. This small system's service to musical truth makes for a convincing home-theater experience. You will not be disappointed.

Fazon Mikro 2 speakers \$650 per pair

Fazon Mikro Vokal center-channel speaker \$325

Fazon Sub 1 subwoofer \$595

MANUFACTURER

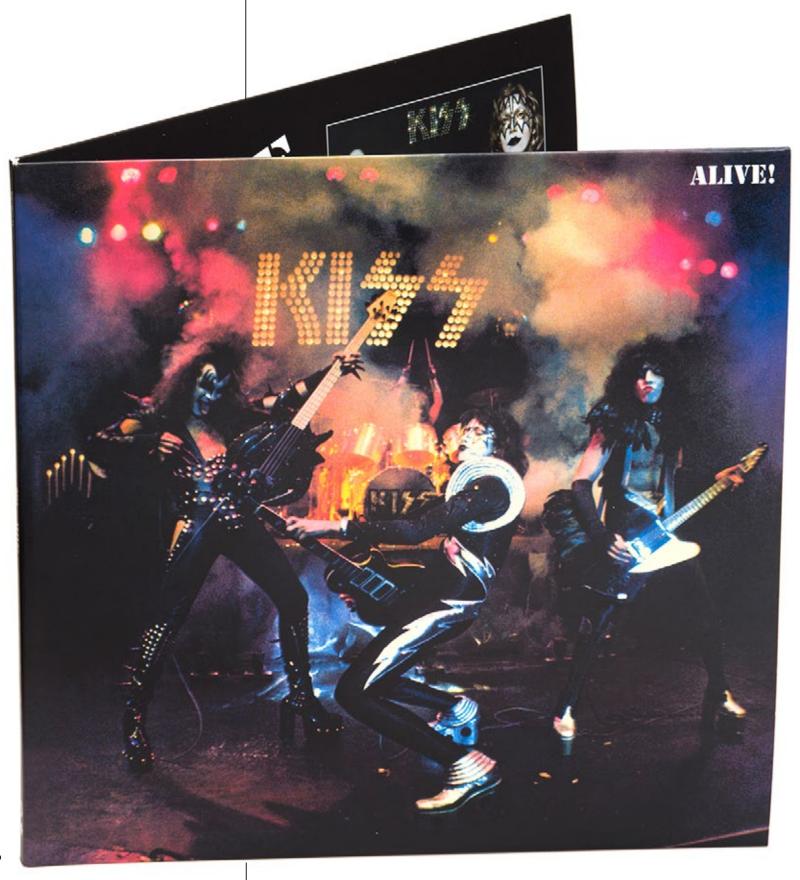
Dali

CONTACT

www.dali-speakers.com



AUDIOPHILE PRESSINGS



KISS

ne of the things I've always admired about Gene Simmons is that he's straightforward about being in the game for the money. Record labels aren't always quite so forthright about reissues and such. But this is pure blasphemy. Sorry folks, I've been there from the beginning, and I have every pressing of *Alive!* around, and this one is a dud. A \$50 dud no less, pressed at the vaunted QRP plant.

Granted, Alive! has never been a sonic masterpiece, but the Japanese CD collection from a few years back does this classic major justice, revealing what little dynamics do exist. There's also some halfway decent separation between lead guitarist Ace Frehley and rhythm guitar Paul Stanley's playing, with a bit of soundstaging, to boot.

Pulling out the original Casablanca pressing to do a direct comparison, even the original, which you can usually find (albeit often well-worn) for a few bucks at used record stores, blows this remaster away in every sense of the word.

So to the very small subset of audiophiles that happen to love Kiss: If you want the best, you won't get it here. – **Jeff Dorgay**

Kiss

Alive! Universal, 180g 2LP MUSIC

AZTEC CAMERA



Aztec Camera High Land, Hard Rain Domino, 180g LP

mong guilty pleasure albums from the 1980s, Aztec Camera's debut High Land, Hard Rain maintains a surprisingly regular appearance on my turntable. Over the years, my copy of the 1983 LP from Sire Records sustained a fair amount of needle time and admittedly, isn't the pristine pressing it used to be. When listening, I took the lyrical advice of Aztec Camera's song "We Could Send Letters" by closing my eyes and waited until things got better. Finally, patience persevered! Domino Recordings obtained the original analog masters to create a 30th anniversary reissue on 180-gram vinyl.

Compared with the original LP, the album art appears identical, except for the not-so-surprising omission of the tagline "also available on cassette." The new pressing replicates the track listing of the original LP. For those seeking bonus songs, be sure to check out the digital download enabled via the vinyl purchase or pick up the CD.

Most importantly, the sonics get a significant upgrade. Domino made a concerted effort to give the album the respect and longoverdue update it deserves. Roddy Frame's vocals boast inherent passion, and the reverb is more apparent. The perceived room around the vocalist also seems larger. Acoustic guitars, the driving force of the album, retain their energetic and upfront placement, and are flanked by deep, tight, and supportive bass. No, cymbals and tambourines don't have all the subtle ring and decay I hoped to hear, but are on par with earlier releases. Perhaps the original recordings didn't allow much more detail to be retrieved without the introduction of unwanted artifacts.

For High Land, Hard Rain fans, this reissue is a must. If you are not yet a fan of Aztec Camera, the pressing provides a great opportunity to start. -Rob Johnson

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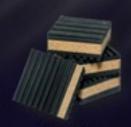
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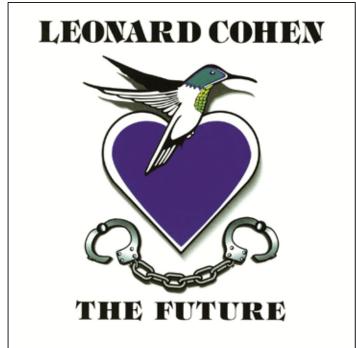
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Disappointments exist, however. Like those on the CD, instruments still can sound repressed. While drums, piano, and guitar offer a reasonable level of realism on "Always," the same instruments lack detail and presence on other fare. On the title track, for instance, cymbal strikes offer little impact, ring, and decay. The tambourine's sparkle outshines them. Strings are also hitand-miss. On the instrumental "Tacoma Trailer," both piano and strings illustrate a step-up in sonics when compared the CD. However, it's still not transparent enough to be mistaken for live sound.

Perhaps the source material has inherent limitations, and there's little else to dig out of it. Or perhaps vocal quality remained the absolute top priority for the reissue, even if it meant some tradeoffs were necessary. Truth be told, the captivating vocals initially sold me on the album, so the latter scenario is an acceptable compromise. While the overall experience leaves me wanting more, having The Future available on a good vinyl pressing makes up for the deficiencies. -Rob Johnson

LEONARD COHEN



Leonard Cohen

The Future Columbia/Music On Vinyl, 180g LP

eonard Cohen's *The Future* first hit my audio radar as a result of the Natural Born Killers soundtrack. "Waiting for the Miracle" first captured my attention, but it didn't take long for the rest of the songs to develop a tight grip on my senses. Cohen's deep and commanding vocals, accentuating his contemplative and sometimes haunting lyrics, draw forth an unexpected range of emotion.



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ne sure way to start a war is to mention cable on any audiophile discussion forum. Yes, there are many who are convinced that cables are all crapola, conjured by sorcerers who want to separate you from your hard-earned money, offering nothing in return. At the same time, others live and die by their cable, often plugging in wire products costing multiple times their components' due in search of a certain sound.

However, like most things, a little moderation goes a long way, and a perfect example is the Mini Eclipse 7 speaker cables from Wireworld to do just that. At \$500 a pair, they will not break the bank, and to let the cat out of the bag, they will allow more music to pass on even a modest system.

Reviewer bias revealed, I've always had a fondness for Wireworld products and even back when I was working for *The Absolute Sound*, I had great results with their speaker cables. Owner David Salz doesn't wear a fez or a gold lamé jacket; he's an engineer with a methodical approach to everything he does, and his goal has always been to produce cable "that doesn't damage the sound." The new Mini Eclipse 7 not only succeeds brilliantly, it does so at a reasonable cost.

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NA

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FEATURE

The Minis come nicely packaged in a black textured case and are available in standard lengths, either terminated with banana plugs or silver-plated spades, in the case of our review sample. These cables are extremely easy to use, nowhere near as stiff as my old Equinox Ills, and not as monstrous in diameter as many of today's premium cables, so those not wanting garden hoses on the floor should be able to work with them.

Blinding me with science

The Minis use a series of flat 14-gauge OCC copper strands in a quad conductor DNA Helix design to minimize the electromagnetic loss present in a signal cable. Combined with Wireworld's Composilex dielectric material is indeed a very high-performance speaker cable. Like a number of other manufacturers, Wireworld pays close attention to the grain structure and signal directionality in their bare cable, orienting it for the best sound.

Non-believers in the crowd, take note: I have heard this effect demonstrated successfully more than once, and when at another cable manufacturer's facility, was able to identify the difference correctly 10 out of 10 times, so this is real. It's not major, but it is there, and paying attention to the fine details is what makes your system sound its best.

Just to be sure, the Minis were given 100 hours of break in time, via our vintage system consisting of a Sansui 771 receiver and a pair of JBL L26 speakers. Even at this level, fresh out of the box, the Minis were a major improvement over the standard Radio Shack wire that was in place in this very inexpensive system. Instantly, the bass response tightened up, especially in the upper mid-bass region, and the overall graininess of this old gear was substantially diminished.

Systems large and small

After logging a few hours on the Minis, they spent a fair amount of time in a modest system consisting of a Rega Brio-R integrated amplifier and a pair of Vandersteen model 1Ci speakers (reviewed last issue) with digital music streamed from a Meridian MS200. This particular system happens to use Home Depot 12-gauge extension cords as speaker cables, to good effect for a budget system.

Again, the sonic signature—or in this case, lack of one—is immediately apparent. The violins at the beginning of Anja Garbarek's "Her Room" from the *Smiling and Waving* album have a natural tone, and the soundstage, filled with natural and artificial sound effects, is definitely more open. Regardless of recording, the overall soundstage presented by this system is bigger, allowing the speakers to easily give the illusion of disappearing.



86 TONEAUDIO NO.63

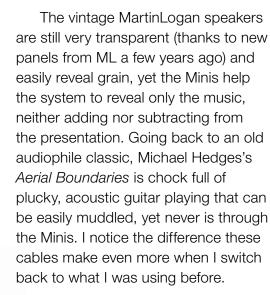
The one.



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Convinces the cable skeptic

These days \$500 for a pair of premium speaker cables is a reasonable, but not major, investment; however the Wireworld Mini Eclipse 7 speaker cables proved a valid upgrade, even in a system only worth about \$1,000.

As with any system, to reap the maximum benefit from any cable, make sure to optimize speaker placement and component setup before investing in anyone's wire, so that you can more easily hear the difference. And no, a \$500 pair of speaker cables won't make your \$600 integrated amp sound like a pair of Pass Labs Class A monoblocks—that's not being fair.

However, if you would like to take your current system to the next level, I highly suggest auditioning a pair of these at your local Wireworld dealer. You'll be impressed. I'm impressed enough to buy the review pair for my Devialet system and to give these one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2014. ●

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ude, now you will always know where you parked your car—and that's just one of the features of the Automatic, a handy little module that plugs into your car's OBD-II port and syncs with an app on your phone. (It works with iOS and Android.) While some might see this as more of a Big Brother–like intrusion—because who knows who they are selling your data to—a few weeks with the Automatic proves to be kind of fun.

For well less than the cost of a first-stamper Beatles album, you can find out more than you might want to know about your daily driving habits. Those leaning towards the OCD side will have a field day trying to improve upon their daily driving score.



Our publisher turned off all of the Automatic's audible alerts for driving and braking too hard on his Fiat Abarth, because the alerts being on almost continuously was draining the battery on his iPhone. Yep, the Automatic doesn't like when you lift the inside rear wheel going around corners. Perhaps it needs a companion "driving coach" app to give you g-force and acceleration numbers. Just saying. At least it keeps three phone numbers stored in memory to call in case you put your precious into the wall while tire testing at Laguna Seca.

However, if you'd like to become a more fuel-conscious driver, you should be able to wring a few more miles per gallon out of your car by paying attention to the Automatic's Smart Driving Assistant. Doing so (and *not* pressing the "Sport" button) actually yielded 4.3 extra miles per gallon overall, albeit at the expense of major fun. Damn that hard braking warning anyway!

The Automatic also syncs with your phone's GPS so that a mechanic can be found should your car malfunction. The Automatic even deciphers onboard error codes, so you won't walk into the shop completely unarmed. (continued)



Our publisher says his Abarth doesn't have any errors, so he wasn't able to verify how well this functionality works. Perhaps a long-term test of the Abarth is in order. Unlike the Fiats he drove in the '80s, our publisher's current ride has gone without incident in the first 18 months of ownership.

Setup and installation of the Automatic are a snap. Once your OBD-II port is located, you insert the Automatic firmly, start the car and follow the prompts. Unfortunately, there is no documentation with the Automatic—nary a quick start guide. The website for the Automatic is not terribly intuitive either, so this is a device for the power user; the manufacturer just assumes that you know to download the app, install it and roll. A decent quick start guide, even as a downloadable PDF, would be a nice addition. For those with multi-car fleets, you will need a separate Automatic for each car, though multiple users can access each car's data.

Do you need one? Probably not, but if you're a major car geek, it's a fun little gizmo to add to your wired world.





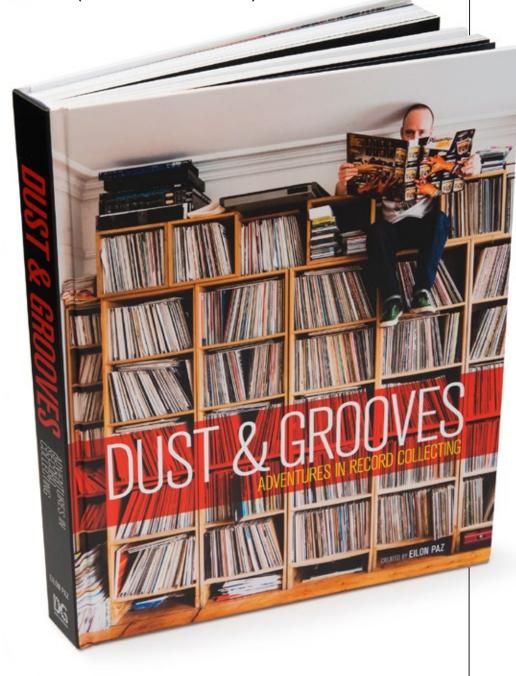
TONE STYLE

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hotographer has spent a

hotographer Eilon Paz has spent a number of years documenting some major record collectors in this 416 page tribute to analog pressings. Exquisitely designed, printed and photographed, it's a wonderful book that you should not only put on your table with pride, but actually read the damn thing all the way through.

Dust and Grooves is compelling on a number of levels, but most of all, (at least for this writer) there are no audiophiles here with mega sound systems and a handful of female vocal records. These are serious record collectors and music lovers. Best of all, everyone in Paz' photos look very happy, unlike most of the grumpy bearded dudes you see at hifi shows huddled in the corner listening to Patricia Barber.

It's cool to see so much diversity in the collectors, both male and female, from all over the world, thoroughly enjoying every aspect of vinyl. These are the true believers that have kept vinyl alive, here's to seeing a second book!

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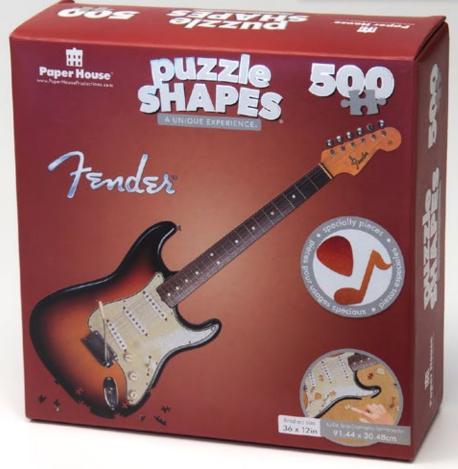
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hether you're a Strat owner or not, this puzzle is a great conversation starter, and it's certainly more fun than assembling a puzzle of a floral scene. It's a perfect gift for the music lover who has everything and a large coffee table to put it on: The completed puzzle is about 3 feet long, which isn't quite life size. It's more like that little green mini-Strat that Nigel has in his room full of guitars.







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his miniature wireless speaker cube comes in four colors (white, black, red and blue) and it uses a rechargeable 10-hour battery, so you can pack it up and take it on your next excursion. Two small speakers and a "subwoofer" produce surprisingly room-filling bass, especially if put it on a countertop near the corner of a room to take advantage of corner loading.

In 10 seconds, you'll have the Phoenix 2 paired with your mobile device laptop. Should that prove too daunting (or you're just really old school), you can plug directly in to the Phoenix 2 via its USB or 1/8-inch mini jack—which means that you could, in theory, pair it with that nifty new VPI Nomad turntable...the mind wanders.

Best of all the Phoenix 2 has a 1,000 day warranty, great technical support and a fantastic user guide, so if you can read, you'll be rocking out in a minute or two.





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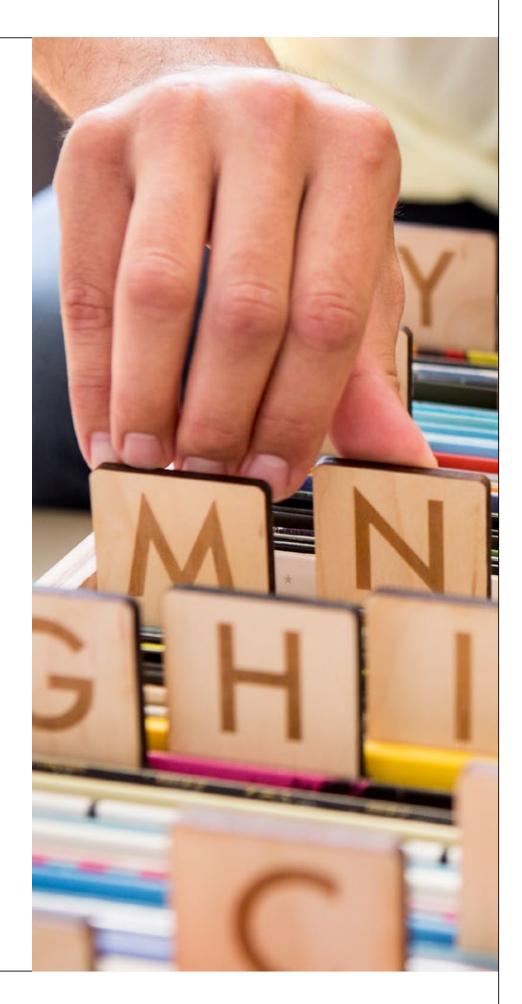
TONE STYLE

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udiophile, organizer and designer extraordiare Kate Koeppel wanted to incorporate her talents on a product that started out as a gift for her partner. "He has a large vinyl collection and I learned about all things audio via his passion for music. I made the first set as a birthday gift for him."

Turned out their friends dug the dividers too, as more and more asked for a set of their own, Koeppel decided to make it a business venture in tandem with her design studio in San Francisco. "I've had a lot of fun creating the collateral that goes along with the product, it's a very personal project."



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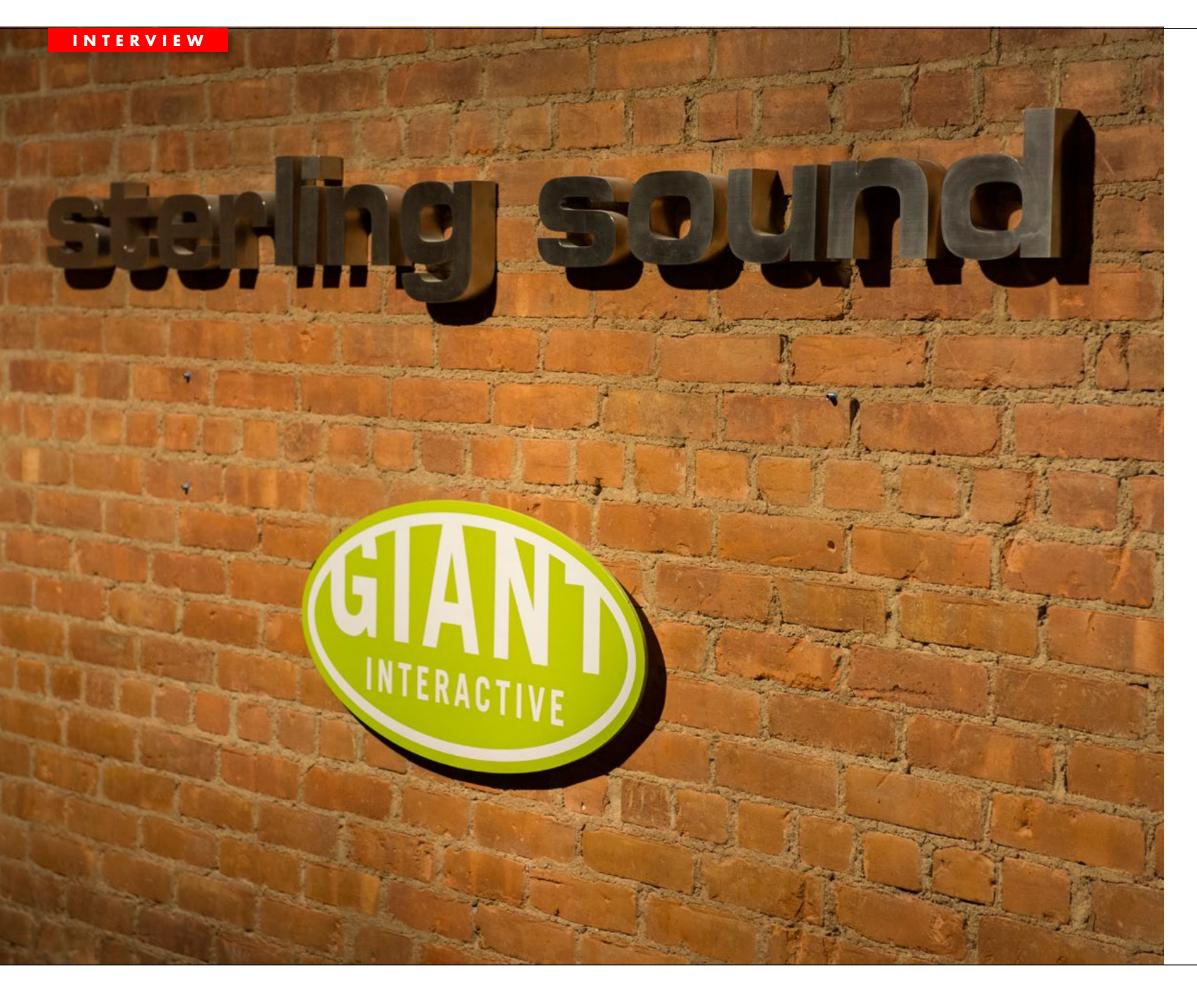
Though she didn't initially anticipate the amount of physical labor involved in this undertaking, what started as a side project has started taking over her life. When we discuss the pricing, she laughs, "there's a lot of hand to eye coordination involved here."

Koepel feels that the dividers extend your experience when listening to music and mentions that a lot of her customers have been buying multiple sets (perhaps those organizing by subcategory...) resulting in high demand. For the more modest collectors, the six panel set is aimed at the entry level vinyl enthusiast. And she's learning a lot more about the different subcategories of audiophile as a result.

The dividers really give your record collection more of a human element, combining the laser engraving and the fresh wood smell. Many customers from all over the world have sent Koepel before and after pictures, and she's enjoyed seeing how the product has affected their lives.

When I ask Koepel if there are plans for more products from her atelier, she confirms that this is only the beginning. "I keep learning a lot more about wood. And sanders."





A Discussion with Greg Calbi

The difference is in the details

By Jeff Dorgay

n the world of the mastering engineer, every detail, no matter how small, makes a difference in the sound of the recording. In many ways, the mastering engineer is the gatekeeper to the final performance. Greg Calbi, who is one of the world's most sought-after mastering engineers, has been at Sterling Sound for over 30 years and he's worked on hundreds of top titles, including Bowie's *Young Americans*, Springsteen's *Born To Run* and Paul Simon's *Graceland*, just to name a few. And he's kept current, having recently worked on David Byrne's and Brian Eno's *Everything That Happens Will Happen Today*, as well as the recent St. Vincent album.

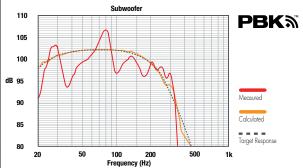
In his own words, the mastering engineer "is the bridge between the consumer's ear and what happens in the recording studio. I take the files from the recording studio and, without altering the content, I refine the finished product, whether that means making it softer, more dynamic, or more beautiful. Hopefully what jumps out of the speakers when I'm done is the best that the recorded piece can be."

SUB 2: THE WORLD'S **MOST POWERFUL SUBWOOFER**



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He goes on to discuss the difference between optimizing music files for any given medium, which lends a consistency and flow to the album, and the conceptual part of mastering: the creative decisions that draw from his years of experience. Likening his part of the record-making process to that of an art director in an ad agency, Calbi feels responsible for communicating the wishes of his clients. Modern electronic tools have changed the process, says Calbri, who points out that nowadays a great recording can come from a laptop, a full-blown recording studio, or anything in between, but his involvement remains the same regardless and just as passionate.

Recently, following his work on Capitol Records' remasters of the U.S. Beatles albums, we caught up with Calbi in New York City. Already at work on a new project for Keith Richards, Calbi always has both feet (or should I say both ears) in the game—but he was kind enough to speak with us. A full video of our interview will be up on the WireWorld website as soon as it passes final editing, so stay tuned for that announcement. Here are some of the highlights of what Calbi shared with us during our recent conversation:

TA: So, we've discussed mastering in depth. What about the difference between mastering and remastering? Do any audio forums question your creative decisions?

GC (laughs): I have to stay away from all of that.

TA: A lot of people think that remastering just means "make it louder."

GC: The current Beatles project is the perfect example of how you want to take something and enhance it—without changing it, without changing the essential character. The equipment used to digitize the Beatles catalog on the first round of CDs back in the mid '80s was not as good as it is today. (continued)

The reason that some of the newer discs are louder is because the equipment is better and capable of a wider range than the discs back then. We don't simply make things louder.

TA: How much time do you take to wrap your head around a remastering project?

GC: I often spend a few hours going back and listening to various versions of original vinyl, and the tape when it's available, but it really comes down to the budget. With the Dylan box, I had the luxury of the time to listen to multiple versions. But on some of these recordings, we just don't have the original tapes. You spend a lot of time trying to discover what the possibilities are. Sometimes you are more disappointed than you think.

TA: So here's the million-dollar question: For the U.S. Beatles project, did you use the high-resolution tracks that were used in 2009 for the last set of Beatles remasters, or did you make some subtle changes?

GC: They aren't that far off. The Beatles board had approved the 2009 remasters with the English sequence. They said if we could enhance the files without really changing them, we had their permission to go on. This was where the WireWorld cable in my mastering console came in handy: It saved me by passing a pure signal through cleanly with no coloration, allowing me to make subtle changes, shaving a bit here and a bit there. But it was important. The bass was not particularly big on the early albums, so a bit of bass had to be added, a little bit of patina—making it the same but better.



INTERVIEW

TA: So, what about earlier LP pressings of the Beatles, and for that matter other recordings?

GC: I often tell people that if they have a clean early original stamper copy of these records from the '70s and '80s that it's never going to sound better, because the tape was fresh. After a while, the tapes do lose a bit of life and energy. We try to overcome that in the mastering process, but it can't always be saved.

TA: And what about mastering for vinyl? How does that change the picture?

GC: Vinyl poses a tremendous challenge these days, because it requires an additional budget step, adding thousands of dollars to the budget. We're living in an era of diminished music sales, where mastering for vinyl correctly will actually double the cost of finishing the record, and not everyone can afford that.

TA: How far does your involvement go in the actual end result of the record? Do you ever go in and change the order of the tracks, etc., etc.?

GC: No, no, I never do that on my own, but there are times when I do make suggestions. For some of the newer bands I've worked with, it's their first time in the mastering studio, so they can look to me for opinions on what I think the single might be or if I hear any glaring errors—that kind of thing. There are so many new people that it's a deluge of creativity. *(continued)*



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TA: That's a good and bad thing, yes?

GC: It's good for creativity but often bad for sonics. But when people come here and see what we can do with our chain of electronics and expertise, they pretty quickly realize they are in the right spot.

TA: A lot of it is about trust then?

GC: The psychological part of this process is so deep that what you say and what you don't say sets the tone early on in the relationship.

[I mention the handwritten note that Calbi received from John Lennon, when working on Walls and Bridges, in which Lennon tells Calbi that he trusts him.]

TA: Wouldn't you say that's the ultimate compliment you can get from an artist?

GC: It's the best there is, but it comes with great responsibility. You always have to realize what's at stake for the artist and respect that. (continued)

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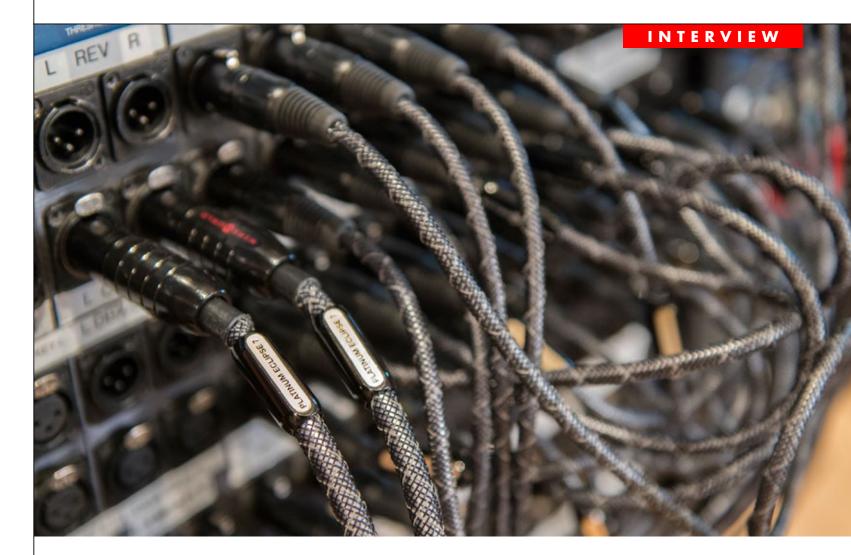
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TA: Let's talk about cables for a minute. I noticed that you have a full suite of WireWorld cables in your bay here. I take it you're convinced that good cables do have a positive effect on the final sound?

GC: I've been using WireWorld cables for at least 10 years now. They replaced the Mogami cables we were using. I kept comparing things, but I was so impressed with the clarity and fullness of the WireWorld cables that they became my go-to. I'm totally blown away by the current products.

TA: So the technology does serve the music in the end? GC: I learned years ago after following what Doug Sax was doing at the Mastering Lab that the signal path was critical. Now I can use the patch bay creatively and it makes all the difference in the world.

TA: Are you much of a high-end audio guy at home?

GC: No, I've got a very basic system at home. That said, I love music and I listen to music constantly, but mentally I can't go there at home. I can't listen to music this critically when I go home, so I just listen to music for pleasure. It's a different part of your brain that goes into this job.

TA: Do you have any musical guilty pleasures?

GC: I like Abba and AC/DC. There isn't any kind of music I really don't like, but I do draw the line at Barry Manilow. No offense, I've heard he's a wonderful quy! ●

sterling-sound.com/engineers/ greg-calbi



The first product to bear the initials of VPI's second generation, Mat Weisfeld, the new Cyclone is not the company's flagship record cleaning machine, but it proves a major step up from their workhorse, the model 16.5 (an RCM that many of us have known and loved for years).

Those familiar with the 16.5 will immediately notice the Cyclone's folded steel case which will not stain, warp, or fatigue like the wood often did when owners went too heavy on the cleaning fluid.

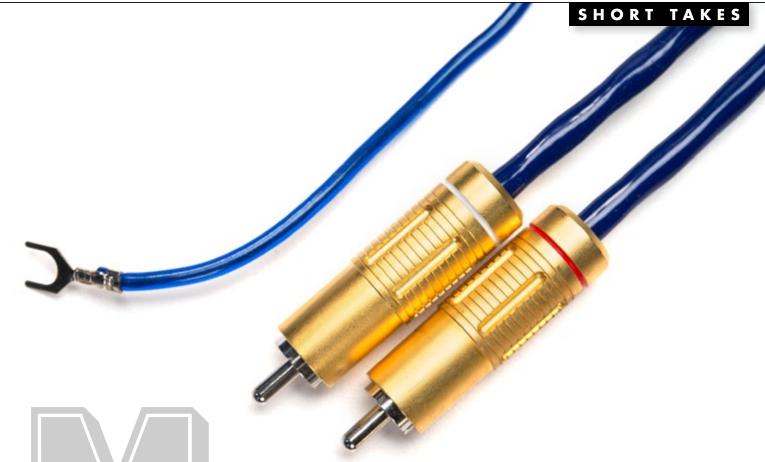
In addition to the new, improved casework, three things set the Cyclone apart from the \$649 16.5: double the suction power, a 20dB reduction in noise, and bi-directional operation. Anyone using a 16.5 knows that it's a noisy machine, and an impromptu noise measurement between Jerold O'Brien's 16.5 and the new Cyclone via iPhone app reveals a 19.2dB drop with the new machine, so we'll spot VPI the difference. Most importantly, VPI has redesigned the lid to fit flush now, so your chance of snapping one of the plastic cleaning rods is now zero.

Should your record purchases lean towards the grungy side of the bin (and we're not talking Mudhoney here) bi-directional cleaning really helps to get those bargain discs sounding pristine again. As a longtime VPI owner, I suggest having a separate cleaning tube to make the first pass with your favorite heavy duty cleaner. Once the heavy grime is removed, clean in one direction with a good cleaning solution, and the other direction with distilled/deionized water–you'll be amazed.

With so many mega dollar RCMs on the market, think of the VPI MW-1 as a new VW TDI Jetta: it offers much of the performance and reliability as a Mercedes Benz costing twice as much, but it's delivered in a more Spartan manner. There is no other RCM that delivers a higher price/performance ratio than the VPI MW-1. If you have even a semi-serious vinyl collection, this should be your next analog upgrade.

116 **TONE**AUDIO NO.63





Many associate the Ortofon name with its legacy of phono cartridges, but the company's product line includes a multiple of analog accessories, including headshells, tonearms, and high-end cables. The 6NX TSW-1010 tonearm cable, like Ortofon's cartridges, is extremely well built.

The cable's transparent blue casing showcases the shielding beneath, which surrounds seven conductor cores made of very pure copper. The main cable body is 5/8 inches thick and it is surprisingly flexible; the segments leading to RCA plugs are about 1/4 inch thick, and the grounding wire is much thinner. The whole cable is 1.2 meters long.

I'm surprised to see the forked grounding termination simply crimped onto its wire, given the rest of the cable's build quality, but the connection is solid. Also, despite the gold-plated RCA covers, the plugs connecting to

phonostage binding posts are not gold plated. Regardless, these design choices result in a nice-sounding cable.

While I listen to several albums on vinyl—with an SME 10 turntable and Dynavector 17D3 cartridge—a few consistent characteristics emerge. This cable offers a big sound, meaning that it supports a huge soundstage, with both width and height. Vocals sound very upfront, both as part of the perceived stage and in terms of their relation to the drivers.

Bass is deep but a touch reticent in the mix. This cable delivers a lot of detail without the sound becoming strident or sibilant. It brings the listener to the front of the auditorium. Those desiring a more laid-back and organic presentation might find this cable a bit much, but for those seeking a more upfront sonic delivery, the Ortofon could be just the ticket.

1 18 TONE AUDIO NO.63



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Meridian Audio has made numerous advances in digital audio, and they almost became the driving force behind the PONO project. But all is not lost; following the form factor of their MS200 portable access point for their Digital Music Server (formerly the Sooloos system), Meridian's new Director, or DirectDAC, brings a fully functioning 24/192 DAC to a form factor only slightly larger than a Taco Bell burrito. And it sounds much better, thanks to Meridian's aphodizing filter technology, a direct descendant from what they use in their flagship 800 series components.

Accepting a TOSLINK optical input, SPDIF (via 1/8" jack) or USB, the Director is very versatile and should handle most sources. Oddly enough, there is no Speakerlink connector to interface with my Control 15, but the DirectDAC works swimmingly in tandem with the MS200 to provide an additional zone for my bedroom music system. Of course, the whole thing can then be controlled by iPhone or iPad.

For \$699, the sound quality is superb, and the DirectDAC is easily on par with, if not a little better (i.e. smoother, more analog like) than, the onboard DAC in Meridian's Media Core 200, the more affordable hard drive based server point to the Digital Music Server system. Setup couldn't be easier. Plug your favorite digital device in, connect the wall wart and push the power button on the front. Pale blue LEDs keep you posted on input and sampling rate.

The Meridian Digital Music System made shuffling through well-known tracks elementary. It didn't take long to surmise that this compact DAC is a leader in its price category. Though not a good reference for tonal purity, listening to Mr. Scruff's Keep It Unreal is a dense recording with deep bass that reveals a lot about a component's ability to extract detail from a less than stellar recording. The Direct DAC passed this test handily, leading me to some of the recent 24/192 downloads of the Blue Note catalog from HD Tracks. Again, the Direct DAC proves its mettle when asked to reproduce acoustic instruments in a relatively small space. No surprise, considering how much Meridian founder Bob Stuart listens to acoustic music.

Having owned the 808 disc player for some time, the Direct DAC brings plenty of that DNA to the table. It's hard to believe that 700 bucks buys this level of performance in the year 2014, and it's encapsulated in such a sleek package, too. The Meridian Direct DAC is highly worthy of an Exceptional Value Award for 2014, and we suggest an audition at your Meridian dealer or online retailer. ●

122 TONE AUDIO NO.63



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JAZZ & BLUES



Jenny Scheinman *The Littlest Prisoner*Sony Masterworks, CD

enny Scheinman's boundless imagination as a storyteller should come as no surprise, even if it has been hidden underneath everything else she's accomplished. The violinist began garnering applause from jazz critics about a dozen years ago when her inventive melodic lines enhanced a wide range of groups, mostly associated with New York's loosely defined downtown scene. She continually asserted herself as a formidable improviser and bandleader on such discs as 2005's 12 Songs and on 2011's self-released Mischief & Mayhem. Around 2008, she also started recording as a vocalist, and continues to alternate between emphasizing the two instruments on different projects. Her striking compositions tie everything together.

On The Littlest Prisoner, Scheinman primarily sings, with the instrumental parts contained in short interludes or a few brief solos. Emphasis is placed on the songs themselves, and her lyric writing is no longer a secret strength. Scheinman writes love songs, but they're loaded with dark underpinnings—even pastoral images never seem safe. It's not the first time she's penned her words or focused on the verbal: After leaving the Oberlin Conservatory, she went on to graduate (with honors) from University of California, Berkeley, with a literature degree. But on the new disc, Scheinman's narratives hit harder than before.

"Brother," which opens The Littlest Prisoner, sets the tone. Scheinman imagines if her lover would be more considerate if they were siblings. No doubt, the sentiment is somewhat creepy, but, ultimately, the song's indelible melody and her understated delivery make the whole proposition actually sweet (someday, another literature student will write a term paper comparing/contrasting this song with Prince's "If I Was Your Girlfriend"). The title track begins with hopes for an infant



©Photo by Joshua Black Wilkins

daughter before taking a turn toward noir. "Just A Child" looks at the rural West Coast that blends nostalgia with wry commentary without flinching. Similarly, her sense of urgency doesn't overdo the pathos on the breakup tune "Run Run Run." And her gentle high voice doesn't shy away from relating that aromatic cedar and pine trees are used to build coffins. Upcoming country singers like Lindi Ortega should be taking notes.

But it's also difficult to imagine any other singer delivering these lines with the stunning inflections that Scheinman does throughout. On "Houston," she pauses in the right places that make the line "delicious little hurt" stab without lingering. In the same song, she's able to make the word "acupuncturist" flow with understated grace.

Guitarist Bill Frisell—a longtime collaborator—is part of the group alongside drummer Brian Blade. Frisell's single-note lines provide the ideal accompaniment to Scheinman's higherpitched voice on "Sacrifice."

When Scheinman does pick up the violin, her slight dissonance and Appalachian inflections fill in the guitarist's open-ended spaces. Blade's background on "My Old Man" adds one more argument that he may be the best colorist currently working behind a kit. Ultimately, these musicians know their presence here is to help Scheinman breathe. —Aaron Cohen

126 TONEAUDIO NO.63





Eric Revis Quartet In Memory Of Things Yet Seen Clean Feed, CD

or a decade or so, when Eric Revis was largely perceived as the bassist in Branford Marsalis' Quartet, he was often cited for the agility he brought to the cohort's brawny rambles. Instrumentally, Revis has long been a pivot expert, nudging the group action in a variety of directions with an unexpected harmonic gambit or a surprising tempo shift.

While he's still part of the saxophonist's feisty squad, for the last three years he's earned a larger profile as a bandleader, and it's been as terrific to see him clock the acclaim as it has to absorb his creative music. 2012's Parallax connected him with the titanic presence of multi-reedist Ken Vandermark and brokered a limber spin on aggression. Last year's City Of Asylum is a triumph of ensemble synergy that opts for the soft touch and genuflects to the kind of poetic abstraction Andrew Hill favored. With the arrival of In Memory of Things Yet Seen, we have another Revis ensemble, wholly separate from the sound of its predecessors—and equally impressive.



©Photo by John Rogers

Variety defines the disc. With a two-reed front line of Darius Jones and Bill McHenry, the bassist sets up the group to freewheel through myriad territories. There's no piano involved, so the harmonic terrain remains comparatively unencumbered. And while obviously distinct, McHenry's tenor and Jones' alto share common ground. Each loves to entwine with the other and neither is afraid of harsh declamation. With drummer Chad Taylor pushing hard at every turn, they quickly reach such regions. Sometimes that yields full-throttled blowing, the kind that drives the enticing squall of "Hits." But clamor is only one hue here. The lithe bounce of "Something's Cookin'" and breezy stroll of "Hold My Snow Cone" testify to the band's interest in graceful introspection.

Because the rhythm section is so adamant about bringing a handful of swing variants to the table, the music possesses plenty of liftoff. When Marsalis sits in on "Unknown," the term freebop is cast anew, with plenty of emphasis on the second syllable. The three reed players pinball off each other, effecting a balance even as the action turns frenzied. Taylor's pummel has a deep thrust, so forward motion is always in the air. By the time they rage through Sun Ra's "The Shadow World," it's all about propulsion.

Playing 13 tracks of singular pieces—tunes with quaint melodies sharing space with more blustery maneuvers—Revis makes a statement about breadth and its usefulness. Here's a group that sounds masterful regardless of which way it pivots. —*Jim Macnie*

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MUSIC



The Bad Plus
The Rite Of Spring
Sony Masterworks, CD



little more than 100 years ago, Russian composer Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite Of Spring* debuted in Paris. The reaction has been held up as a textbook example of the Shock Of The New. The piece was dissonant and rhythmically jarring. It generally messed with conceptions of what was popular in classical dance music. The audience responded with a near riot. Nowadays, such techniques are the norm in modern music, and the composer's later years—spent delving into jazz and Hollywood scores—contributed to such mass acceptance. While this classic work has been recorded innumerable times since, the Bad Plus brings a new vibrancy to it.



Ironically, the Bad Plus had a polarizing impact itself when it emerged at the turn of this century, inciting controversy among jazz critics rather than French classical elites. As a piano trio using rock anthems and rock energy to fuel its improvisations, the group drew a wide and youthful following, causing chagrin among some music journalists. Still, classically trained pianist Ethan Iverson has proven to be more erudite in discussing music than most scribes (check out his blog, Do The Math). Drummer David King and bassist Reid Anderson are just as thoughtful, even if not as publicly verbal. So this group is a perfect match to interpret Rite Of

Spring, which Duke University commissioned in 2010 (the year earlier, the trio recorded Stravinsky's "Variation d'Apollon"). On this recording, it's not just about emphasizing the volume, but showing how these jarring dynamics add up to tell a compelling saga.

Essentially, the Bad Plus knows The Rite Of Spring is a ballet, and the group never loses this sense of musical choreography—even when it seems like it's wildly shouting at each other. That comes through when King's crashing intro on "Games Of The Two Rival Tribes/Procession Of The Sage" engages with Iverson's ostensible delicacy.

Somehow, a funk backbeat also fits well into the conversation. The pianist and drummer also deliver an exciting sense of pacing as they circle around Anderson's repeated two-note motif on "Evocation Of The Ancestors/Ritual Action Of The Ancestors."

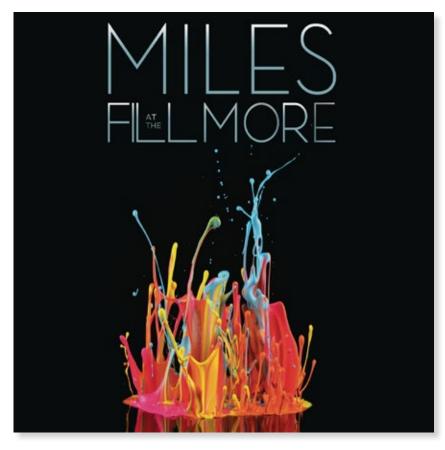
When the trio takes liberties with the score, the innovations enhance the ritualistic imagery that Stravinsky likely envisioned. The composer created a stir when he had horns featured in passages of contrasting ostinati on "Mystic Circle Of The Young Girls." Here, Iverson pulls off that effect through his own forceful technique. Anderson's electronics

also add an ominous tone, while his bass lines add a bit of swing to "The Sage/Dance Of The Earth."

With a playing time of slightly less than 40 minutes, some may feel including extra tracks would have enhanced the disc's value. But that would be missing the point. This version of *The Rite Of Spring* expresses a strong narrative, and that includes the ideal conclusion.

-Aaron Cohen

134 TONEAUDIO NO.63



Miles Davis

Miles at the Fillmore: Miles Davis 1970—The Bootleg Series Vol. 3 Columbia/Legacy, 4CDs

uring the handful of times I saw the Replacements, singer Paul Westerberg had his vocal mic higher than need be. He chose to stand on tiptoe and crane his neck a bit to have his mouth in the right place to get the job done. It seemed a mistake when I first noticed it, but by the third or fourth go-round, a theory hatched: The positioning was purposeful, a chance to juice the yearning aspect of his performance. And it worked. When that trademark rasp blasted from the PA, it had I-can't-get-it-all-out poignancy.



Along the pathways of this four-disc set, Miles Davis does something similar with his horn. True, he plays plenty of phrases in midregister, a spot where his attack is vicious enough to be punitive. But during the zenith of his electric period, from 1968 to 1973 or so, one of his go-to ploys was a keening shriek that spoke volumes in emotional currency. Sometimes it's just one note—a stab in the heart. Sometimes it's a blast of blats that trail off into a wounded yelp—an extended wail. Always, it's a jolt. He's trying to articulate something seemingly ineffable, and listening to him come close is about as engrossing as jazz gets.

At this late date, we know the bandleader's electric era centered on physical impact. Inspired by the power of rock and funk, he had his musicians plug in and freak out. Since most were skilled improvisers, the results moved from ornery to sublime. Cranking the volume on this stuff reminds us just how communicative a player Davis himself was, and how he nurtured the same effort from his cohort. Together they create a savage backdrop for the leader's trumpet exhortations.

Recorded at Bill Graham's famed Fillmore East in New York, these gigs are typically turbulent. The group's personnel were in steady flux during this era. By the summer of 1970, the band contained a wildly aggressive rhythm section of keyboardists Chick Corea and Keith Jarrett, bassist Dave Holland, drummer Jack DeJohnette, and percussionist Airto Moreira. Saxophonist Steve Grossman shared the front line with his boss. (continued)

136 TONEAUDIO NO.63



Previous albums offered music from these shows, but this package debuts the unedited tapes. The band, whose searing sets won recent acclaim from pop audiences, grinds through some seriously engaging episodes. The ensemble started on a Wednesday and rocked 'til Saturday, picking up steam with every show. Having the music united in one package (previously unissued pieces cut at the San Francisco Fillmore two months prior round out this collection) details the creative process and nuanced shifts from night to night.

The set lists don't change much, but in the interplay remains deft enough to keep every performance distinct. Holland sets up bedrock grooves, Moreira throws in splashes of color. Grossman snarls in stormy whirlwinds, and Corea and Jarrett cross swords while their instruments speak in tongues. DeJohnette is ferocious, bent on exploding each crescendo into a thousand bits and instantly resuscitating any sluggish passages. Davis was proud of his music's flexibility (could this Fillmore set be the hippie version of Live At The Plugged Nickel?), and its dogged sense of exploration is one of its defining traits.

From the audacity running through the second night's encore of "Spanish Key" to the

Ra-like jumble of keyboards that marks the third night's spin on "The Mask" to the final show's "Willie Nelson" and its ominous blues lingo, we hear inquiries posed as proclamations. Davis' temperament guides the action, vulgar one second, vulnerable the next, and the band shadows him even as they throw up its own version of defiance. A few of my favorite moments come when Moreira adds a police whistle to the mix. The sound enhances the sense of mayhem the band generates with regularity, and offers a touch of irony as well. Not a chance in hell a simple traffic cop's tool could ever straighten out the glorious snarl of this bunch. - Jim Macnie



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SAM RIVERS/CONTRASTS



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own album by a one-time-only quartet and, as far as artistic affinity goes, a telling session. It's there on which the pair's magical rapport presented Altschul, and three years after making the album, they were in a New York studio cutting extended duets that charged listeners with appreciating the flow of their excursions. Those dates, released on the Improvising Artists label and now rightly deemed iconic, helped cement a relationship that proved to be one of jazz's most fruitful.



Sam Rivers with Manfred Eicher

Contrasts, an oft-overlooked entry in ECM's 1970s catalog, speaks to the power of flow as well. The record's seven discrete pieces are individual statements that present singular moods. But this disc, made by a 1979 quartet that includes trombonist George Lewis and percussionist Thurman Barker, is best heard in one clip. Thanks to the depth of the teamwork, the program takes on the vibe of a suite. By the time one of these distinctive nuggets concludes, you're curious about how the next will play out to amend

The vignettes might move from tom-tom thuds and 'bone smears to sax flurries and marimba forays, yet Rivers' aes-

the overall story line.

thetic—which makes a case for linking motifs into a steady stream of ideas—is sated along the way. The uptempo aggression of "Dazzle" has more impact when adjacent to the flute esprit of "Verve." The opening swirls of "Circles" seem inextricably linked to the concluding "Lines." Contrasts spotlights the way Rivers the bandleader views continuity as a performance staple, offering "one ongoing song," as it were.

Rivers had cut something similar a year and a half earlier. The same group (with Joe Daley's tuba rather than Lewis' trombone) made the compelling Waves. But Contrasts is the richer album. The saxophonist was in his mid-50s at this point. He'd

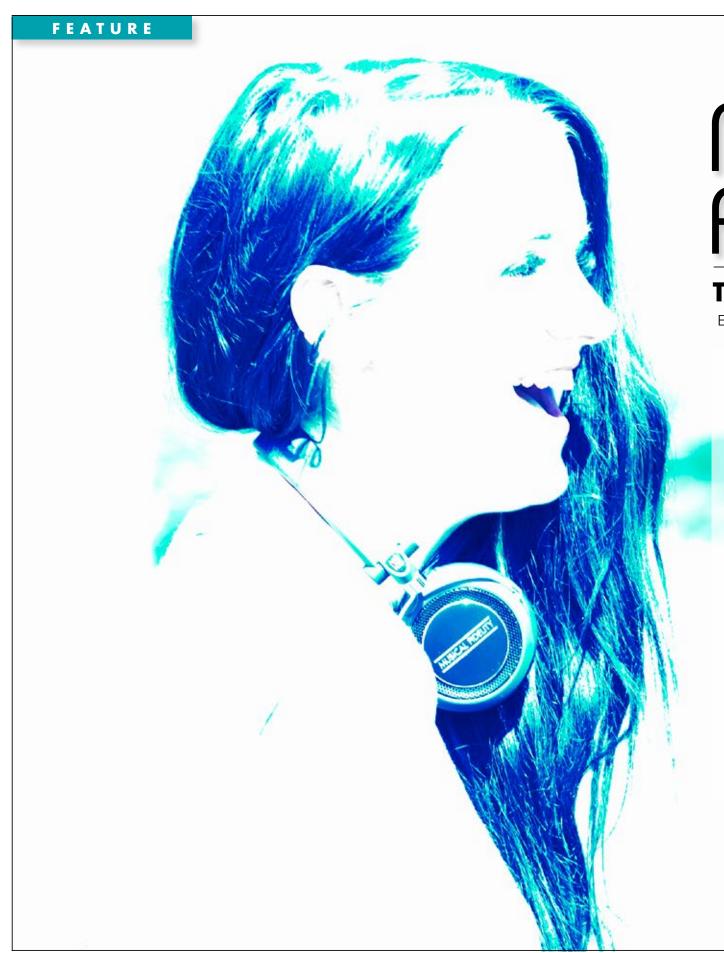
collected paychecks from Miles Davis, waxed important Blue Notes, and gained global kudos for the Altschul/Holland trio. His iconoclastic tendencies are also bolstered by a lyricism flecked with a personalized blues argot.

The evocative chirping on "Images," the long tones that unfold on "Solace"— abstraction is the lay of the land here, but the music's beauty is unmistakable. Getting to know Contrasts again through this reissue proves just how poised the saxophonist and his colleagues were as they brought their experimental concord to a wider audience.

-Jim Macnie

am Rivers and Dave Holland first recorded together on the esteemed bassist's 1972 freebop cornerstone Conference Of The Birds—a mustitself, and the musicians felt it, too. The bassist and reed player quickly became part of an insightful and ongoing trio with drummer Barry

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Musical Fidelity's First Phone

The MF-100

By Jeff Dorgay

uring my recent trip to the Sterling Sound mastering studio in New York City, where I visited with senior mastering engineer Greg Calbi, I had the rare privileged of listening to the new Beatles' *Yesterday and Today* from Calbi's chair. An uncompressed version of "Doctor Robert" comes through the MF-100 phones via my iPod Classic rather crisply.

This \$199 pair of phones does a cracking job at capturing the essence of the music. As I track through some of the tunes on the U.S. Beatles albums that were just released, the MF-100s become even more endearing. I forget that I'm sitting in terminal 2 at LaGuardia airport, as I become lost in that happy, comfy space in between my ears.



I stay locked into my own Beatlemania, with *Sgt. Pepper's* next on the list, and all the trippy psychedelia contained within this classic is lovely when played through the MF-100s. There's plenty of bass rumble in the intro of the title track, with a sound-scape that floats well beyond the left and right ear boundaries. The pingpong stereo effect reminds me of the conversation that Calbi and I just had about why we like the stereo mix of this record after all.

Initial listening in the *TONEAudio* studio reveals a slight sound difference between the Alcantara ear pads and the leather set (both of which are provided with the phones), such that I prefer the former. Changing the pads requires a modicum of dexterity, so I suggest picking your favorites and sticking with them. Only those with

surgeon's hands should attempt performing this task in an airport lounge, but kudos to Musical Fidelity for offering a choice, especially at this price point.

While we're talking price, it's well worth mentioning that the MF-100s have a build quality above and beyond what you'd expect from headphones in this range—from the ear pads and sleek frames to the internal workings and sonic reproduction. For those who care, the packaging is equally snappy. Though some might argue that the packaging is a trifle, my experience has always been that careful attention to all the details, no matter how minimal, is usually backed up by care in design and build throughout. The MF-100s are no exception. The look, feel, and sound are exquisite, especially for a \$199 pair of phones. (continued)

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The MF-100 is My BFF

By the time I touch back down in Portlandia, I've listened to six solid hours of familiar tracks via a 160-gigabyte iPod Classic, full of uncompressed titles ranging from the Rolling Stones to Justin Timberlake. With the iPod as the source, the MF-100s offer a healthy upgrade over the stock ear buds and they have a compact enough form factor that they are easy to travel with. The MF-100s look like open-back headphones, but they are not—a fact that Musical Fidelity designer Antony Michaelson confirms when we discuss his latest creation. The MF-100s continue his ongoing design philosophy of offering maximum performance while keeping costs in line. Every one of my headphone-crazed friends peg the MSRP of the MF-100s to be about \$100 more than the actual price.

A few online forums have made note that the MF-100 sound slightly bright in overall tonality. These phones do have more than enough resolution to reveal the differences not only in source material but also in the nuances between sound sources. Admittedly, after six straight hours with only an iPod to drive them, I was feeling a bit of user fatigue starting to creep in, but switching to the ALO Audio PanAm DAC/amplifier (adding a few vacuum tubes to the mix) makes for a great upgrade in the overall sound quality, particularly in the highfrequency spectrum.

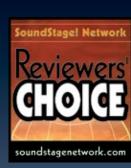
Keep in mind that the 64-ohm impedance of the MF-100s makes them a breeze to drive with whatever source you have at your disposal—they are more than good enough to warrant an amplifier upgrade. (continued)

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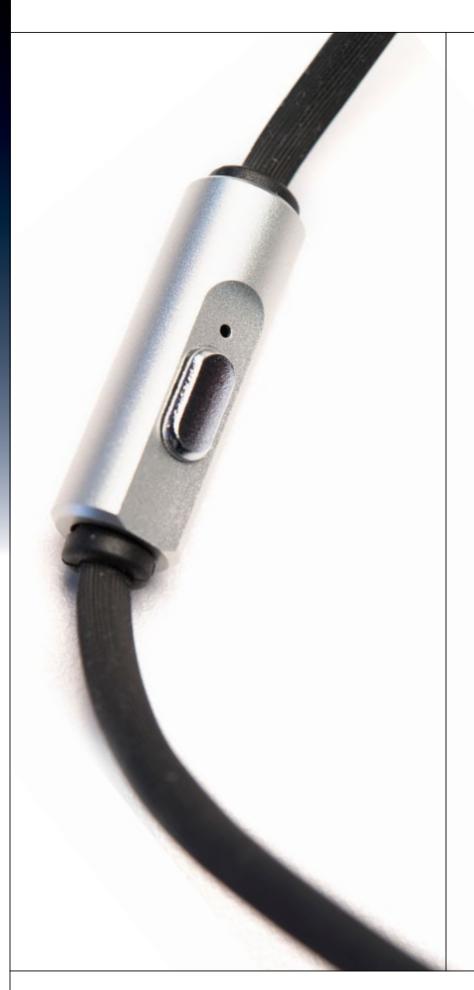
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FEATURE

And it doesn't have to have valves: The equally affordable AudioQuest DragonFly 1.2 DAC (\$149) is a lovely step up that easily takes the MF-100s to another level sonically, making for a great portable hi-fi setup that won't require your entire tax refund check.

The MF-100s benefit from about 50 hours of break-in before the drivers really stabilize sonically, eliminating the last bit of glare out of the box. Fortunately, these phones suffer less of this effect than a number of others we've sampled, so the delta from good sound to great sound is short.

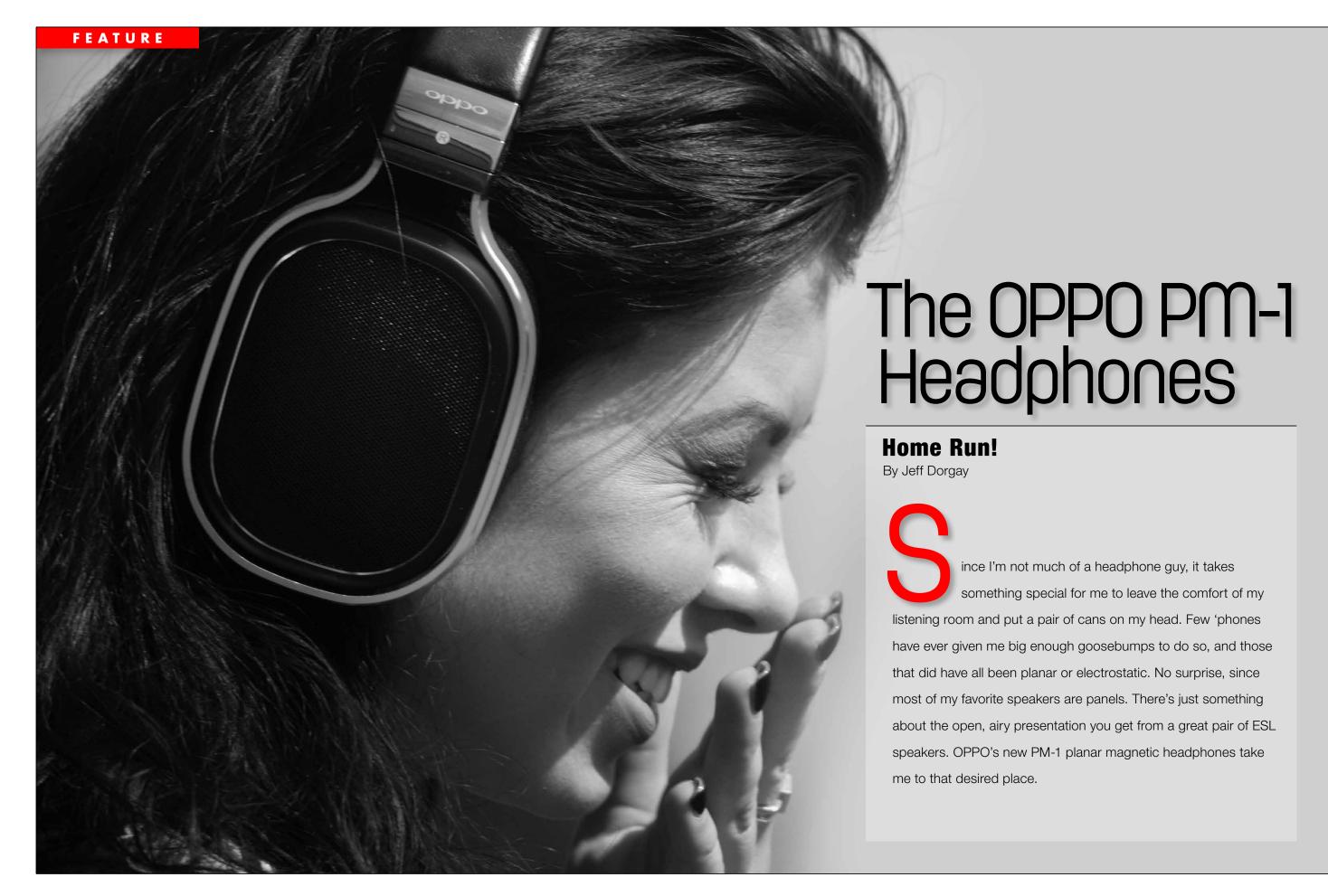
Further Listening

Once the MF-100s are broken in and my ears recalibrate to their sound, I pull out the big guns, including the Taurus headphone amplifier from AURALIC, ALO Audio's Studio Six, and the latest signature amplifier from Coffman Labs. The MF-100s are indeed resolving enough to discern the nuances between these top-shelf headphone amplifiers, which offer a glimpse at the ultimate performance envelope of the MF-100s. But much like putting a \$5,000 phono cartridge on a \$500 turntable, this is indeed overkill for the \$199 MF-100s.

However, the MF-100s are ideal headphones for the music lover on a tight budget, and if great sound and build quality weren't enough, the signal cord of the MF-100 features a button that syncs to your mobile device. For iPhone/Pod/Pad users, this allows you to access Siri—a nice touch for the jet-setter.

It's safe to say that Musical Fidelity's first attempt at a closed-back, over-ear headphone is a massive success—enough that we happily award it one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2014 and purchase the review sample for our permanent headphone collection. We'll be curious to see what comes out of the mind of Michaelson when he decides to give a \$500 pair of phones a go.

www.musicalfidelity.com





By nature, headphones provide the same feeling of sound pressure offered by a pair of large speakers in a room. Still, the PM-1s deliver a degree of fine sonic distinction often mustered by six-figure speakers. If you're a music lover considering plunging into audiophilia, a pair of PM-1s are your stairway to heaven. And while you're at it, grab OPPO's matching HA-1 headphone amplifier/DAC. (Full review is in the works, but it's equally enticing.)

Recent entries from HiFi
Man and Audeze redefined
the paradigm for what constitutes a great headphone
obtainable without spending
the megabucks required for
top-of-the-line Stax headphones. Now, another name
can be added to that elite
group— OPPO, the folks that
make one of the world's best
combination disc players at an
incredibly reasonable price.

Sure, building world-class headphones requires a completely different skill set than manufacturing disc players, amplifiers, and DACs. But OPPO's design ethos binds these products together. No detail is left unaddressed, and in typical OPPO fashion, the packaging is exquisitely refined without being ostentatious. The PM-1s offer performance concurrent with the worlds best 'phones, yet are priced at a very reasonable \$1,099.

That Good

Listening to Robin Trowers' highly phased lead guitar on his For Earth Below album instantly reveals the delicacy the PM-1s can capably deliver. They play loud and clean, and throw a prodigious stereo image, making me feel like one of those guys on the fruit roll-up commercial whose head explodes when a grape-flavored candy gets ingested.

The PM-1s are so clean, dynamic, and undistorted, you will have to be careful with the volume control so you don't hurt yourself. If you pair these with a premium headphone amplifier capable of a lot of juice, you'll be tempted to crank the PM-1s beyond the point of pain. I noticed a slight buzz in my ears after playing U2's Rattle and Hum at a rather enthusiastic level, so don't say I didn't warn you.

However, playing loud isn't necessarily as easy as playing soft. Squeeze's classic *Spot the Difference* is full of stylistic departures from the original versions of the band's top tunes. When listening closely via the PM-1s, it becomes much easier to hear differences in the mix. Glenn Tilbrook's lead vocal on "Is That Love" is more stripped down, yet also throatier, with drums, rhythm guitar, and bass better sepa-

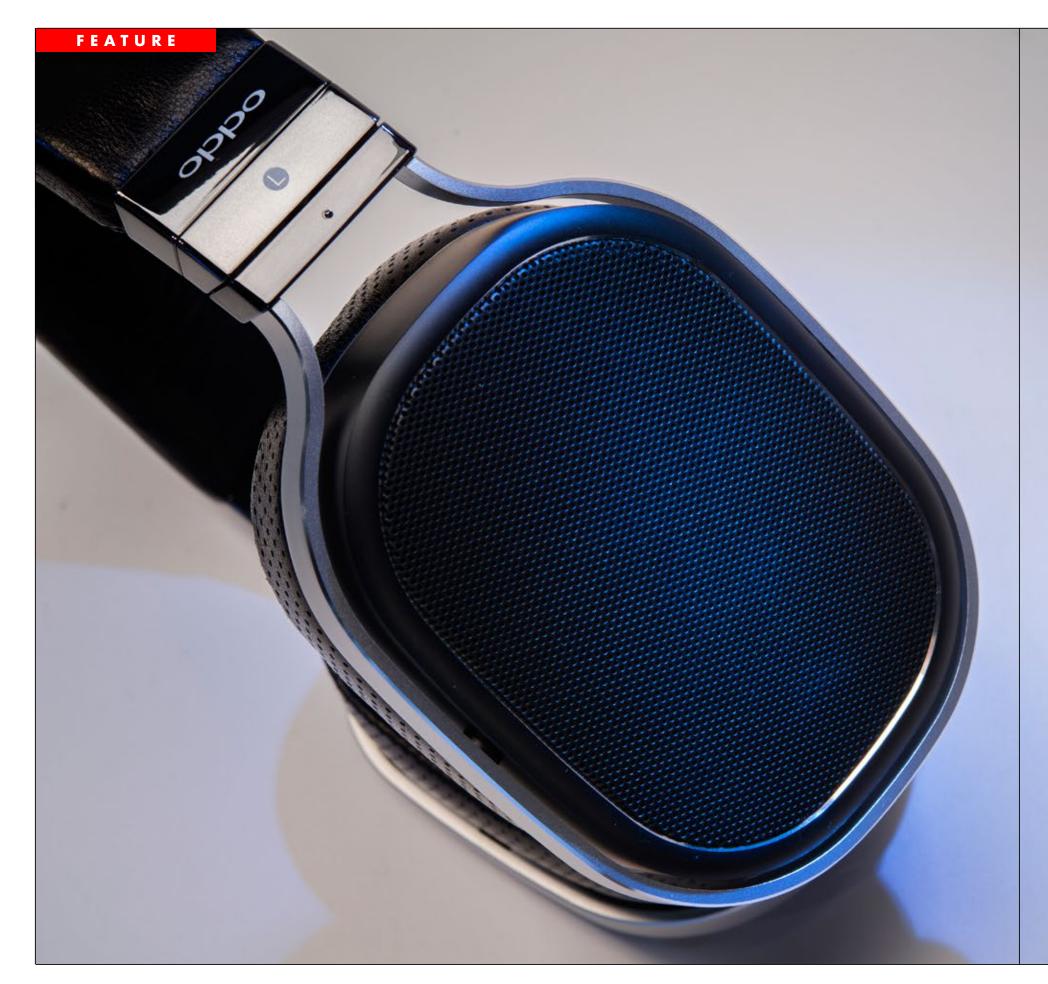
rated as the piano sneaks in and out. Experience the same track on a budget pair of 'phones, and the intricately woven ball of sound collapses into a flat, one-dimensional sketch. Even densely packed recordings, like the self-titled Audioslave album, reveal additional nuances (guitar fills, vocal layers) through the PM-1s.

Bottom, Top, and Middle

As it is in speakers, coherence is key to planar sound in headphones. There's a natural ease to the sound of the PM-1s that I've never experienced with a pair of dynamic 'phones. Call it a lack of grain (especially with acoustic instruments) that helps the listener forget they're wearing headphones in the first place.

The upper register revealed by the PM-1s is smooth albeit extended. The gentle mix of drumming, keyboards, and Miles Davis' horn on his classic *Bitches* Brew comes together in an alluringly homogenous manner to the extent the sound feels like it's coming directly from your brain stem, deep inside your head, with a touch of tape hiss from the master tape floating out beyond your consciousness but there to keep you aware you are listening to an analog recording. (continued)

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Davis' double-album effort is an equally good test for bass, as many tracks feature acoustic and electric bass guitars comprising the rhythm section. Most 'phones reduce this information to a single bass line. The PM-1s have enough resolution to pluck both instruments from the mix and appropriately present them.

A wide range of acoustic test tracks underlines the PM-1s' ability to nail musical fundamentals. Instruments sound stunningly correct from a tonal perspective, no doubt in part to the incredibly low distortion of the driver, which uses a double-sided design and more conductors than other planar magnetic models. OPPO claims that, in addition to additional sensitivity, it offers tighter damping, contributing even further to the natural response.

Efficiency is Key

The PM-1s' additional sensitivity and nominal 32-ohm impedance make them a breeze to drive with your mobile device. While these headphones definitely benefit from a premium headphone amplifier, your high-end audio journey can start with an iPod. Tracks saved in Apple Lossless via the iPod Mini render headphone amplifiers unnecessary on an extended business trip.

In addition to electrical efficiency, the PM-1s are considerably lighter than competing planar 'phones (395 grams vs. about 600 for my reference Audeze), making them easier for the unheadphone guy (and perhaps you) to enjoy more extended listening sessions.

Combining high electrical efficiency with benign impedance also means the PM-1s are simple to drive with any headphone amplifier. OPPO's HA-1 might be the obvious choice, but we experienced great results with a number of different solid-state and vacuum-tube headphone amplifiers. Moving up the ladder to the new Cypher Labs Prautes (\$3,695) and ALO Studio Six with Teflon capacitors (\$4,995) proved breathtaking, and removed yet another barrier to sonic reality. *(continued)*

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Considerable time with the OPPO PM-1s reveals no shortcomings. While the hardcore headphone enthusiast will no doubt want to add the PM-1 to their stable, more monogamous headphone lovers will find simple sonic bliss. I know I did.

FEATURE

The PM-1s combine everything we find of high virtue at TONEAudio: high performance, aesthetic purity, and careful attention to detail. All at a reasonable price. This is the new benchmark for premium headphones.

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For maximum comfort and ease of use, the ATH-W1000X features Audio-Technica's self-adjusting 3-D wings-support housing, which automatically fits any wearer, with no need for adjustment. Those accustomed to traditional headphone headbands may find the feel a little strange at first, as if the headphones aren't secure on your head. The entire headphone's weight is distributed even across the headband, while the ear pads rest lightly, leaving some perceived space between the pads and the side of your head. But this fit actually helps give the music a more spacious and open sound than is typical for a closedback headphone. It took me a while to get used to the fit, but now that it's familiar, traditional headphones feel a little bit like C-clamps on my head.

With a 42-ohm impedance, the ATH-W1000X is easy to drive and works well with an A/V receiver or even an iPod/iPad—but like any premium set of phones, it responds even better to a high-quality headphone amplifier. I pair the phones with Sound Performance Labs' new Phonitor 2 headphone amp, which employs SPL's dual-channel 120-volt technology (a result of the company's extensive work in the pro-audio world, where many consider the Phonitor a reference).

My main music source for this review is a MacBook Pro, with digital-toanalog processing handled by Wyred 4 Sound's \$499 µDAC-HD paired with Nordost Heimdall 2 cables. This palmsize USB-powered DAC can be hidden neatly behind the Phonitor 2 for a clutter-free workspace, a trend I'd like to see from more manufacturers. (continued)





On Girl Who Got Away by Dido, the ATH-W1000X exhibits a smooth tonal balance through the midrange, with Dido's voice sounding relaxed, natural and uncolored. Overall presentation is bolder than the similarly priced MrSpeakers Alpha Dog phones, which I recently evaluated. Through the Technicas, mid bass blends nicely with the midrange without noticeable cross contamination. Treble is equally smooth and displays good extension. I play my music library in shuffle mode to get a variety of music through the headphones, looking for signs of sibilance—with none to be found.

The ATH-W1000X delivers a surprising amount of bass. (No, it is not the kind of heavy bass that bass-heads enjoy.) The album Settle by Disclosure does a good job giving the large 53 mm drivers a workout. There's enough bottom-end to bring music to life. Soundstage on these headphones is respectable, though as not pinpoint accurate as the MrSpeakers Alpha Dog. Through the Phonitor 2, the ATH-W1000X exhibits better dynamics and speed than through the µDAC-HD, which reinforces that this headphone scales well with high-current power sources.

When at the *TONEAudio* office for photography, Jeff Dorgay (our publisher) put these phones through their paces with the ALO Audio

Studio Six headphone amplifier. Jeff commented how neutral, dynamic and extended they are on the wide range of music being fed from his dCS Vivaldi stack.

Standout tracks ran the gamut from classic rock to oldschool rap to electronica. "The alarm clocks in Dark Side of the Moon were larger than life," Jeff noted. The bass response was also a big hit through the Vivaldi, shuffling through a number of discs from the famous Hôtel Costes series. Jeff was quick to point out that the ATH-1000X exhibits low audio fatigue and causes low physical fatigue for the wearer—so that 3-D mount is indeed highly effective.

Audio-Technica has done a phenomenal job building an elegant, versatile headphone that is not limited to any specific genre of music. A modest, benign load makes them easy to drive and easy to integrate into whatever your system happens to be right now. While the headphones resolve enough musical detail to warrant highquality source and amplification components, you can start your headphone journey with just your smartphone and a pair of ATH-1000Xs. Whatever your source, these headphones will deliver a compelling presentation.

Audio-Technica ATH-W1000X \$699 www.audio-technica.com

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May 2014 163



ROKSAN KANDY K2 INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

\$1,900 www.roksan.co.uk

Roksans Kandy K2 is ready for anything, combining five line level inputs and a MM phonostage for the vinyl lover into a sleek package that will fit into just about any space.

125 watts per channel (into 8 ohms) makes for a wide range of speaker choices, and we found the Kandy K2 was even able to drive a pair of Magnepan MMGs handily, making for a component that you can really grow with. Watch for staff member Andre Marc's review soon.



PREVIEWS

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packaged with loving care, this is a presentation worthy of a much more expensive component.

As with their BDP-105 digital player, the HA-1 has inputs for everything digital, and can be used as a preamplifier with single ended and balanced outputs, along with standard and balanced headphone outputs on the front panel.

Sound quality is top shelf, but OPPO takes it even further by offering the option of a full spectrum analyzer on the front panel, that can also be configured as a pair of traditional VU meters. Fun and functional.

We can't wait to tell you more about this one.

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

















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

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

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Compatible **Predictable Optimized**



Yes, There Is a Best Cable for Your Speakers

And, yes, you can find that cable. Or, you could—if you borrowed every A low-level audio interconnect doesn't carry power and doesn't have cable ever made and used it in a bypass comparison. OK, so borrowing every cable is kind of a pain, but an easy bypass comparison is the only way to truly understand the "sound" of a speaker cable, or, better yet, to verify its desired neutrality, its lack of character or sonic signature. When we compare the sound of one component with that of another, we are almost always comparing one version of not-quite-right with another version of not-quite-right, and then choosing the component that seems most compatible with our system.

However, true compatibility, with any one speaker or with every speaker, is only achieved by using the cable that does the least damage, allowing the music and its emotion to pass freely from the system to the listener. This is all about damage control: A cable can never improve the sound of the source, but the nature of what it does wrong makes all the difference in the world. For instance, in any system, a cable with a slightly soft focus, or "coloring" the sound like a neutral gray filter, won't get in the way of the music. In an imperfect world, these are comparatively acceptable compromises. However, in any system, a cable that creates perceived resolution due to upper-midrange irritation, or a perceived bass boost that sacrifices midbass control and overall bass definition, does get in the way of the music. That kind of distortion is never acceptable.

How can you distinguish a perceived short-term enhancement from real long-lasting quality? It's surprisingly easy! There are always multiple cables in the circuit path. There's wire and/or circuit trace inside the amplifier, there's wire inside the loudspeakers, and there's a wire between the amp and speaker. If all three of these links are treated as constants, an additional speaker cable can be added between the amp and the existing speaker cable. The result will always be more damage and reduced sound quality, and, beyond that, the change will reveal the character flaws of the cable being evaluated. Whether the overall system is lean and irritating or fat and warm, this simple bypass test will reveal the nature of the evaluated cable.

But, Which Path To Take?

If it's that easy to determine a cable's absolute character, or, better yet, verify its lack of character, then why does AudioQuest offer more than one series of cables? Shouldn't one cable or the other always be better

Yes and no. Context is everything. Driving inefficient speakers on the other side of the room is very different from driving a pair of desktop speakers close to the amp. As a baseline, it's important to understand that all speaker cables cause sonic degradation that accumulates with length. Though several other distortion mechanisms are also cumulative, inductance, and its smearing of time integrity, is the primary culprit causing an increasing loss of focus.

to manage strong magnetic fields, so we almost always recommend putting the amp as close as possible to the speakers and, if required, running a long interconnect. With a very few easy-to-predict exceptions (a few tube preamps, passive preamps, and low-input impedance amps), interconnect performance is far less susceptible to sonic degradation that accumulates with length.

No, it's not all about resistance (or impedance)! A normal 18 AWG lamp cord is rated to safely carry 10 amps—enough to kill you. Getting power to a speaker is easy. Getting it there undistorted is complicated. AudioQuest makes some very large speaker cables because diluting the energy and resulting magnetic fields across more metal is an effective brute-force way to reduce a number of distortion-causing mechanisms. The lower impedance of such large cables does allow some amplifiers to better "control" the motion of the bass driver. However, this effect is usually much smaller than the overall full-bandwidth improvement that results from causing less distortion within the cable

If all else is equal, and the sound is just enough louder for anyone to agree, "OK, that's definitely louder," then it's probably about a 3dB difference, which requires twice as much power to the speaker. When each strand or conductor has to carry twice as much power, the interaction between any two internal elements is exponentially greater—that is, four times as great. Using a value of 1 for the lower power, the interaction is 1x1=1, but for a signal that's 3dB louder, the interaction is 2x2=4. If two different speakers are 3dB more or less efficient, and the volume is the same, the formula for internal cable interaction is exactly the same.

The very effective Counter-Spiral Geometry of AudioQuest's Tree Series is made possible by a bigger cable with more conductors. However, in the more moderately sized AudioQuest Flat Rock Series, the money that didn't go into more metal and the more expensive geometry is used for higher-quality metal, making it possible for our Comet and Meteor Flat Rock models (fantastic in my desk system!) to take full advantage of the openness made possible by AQ's PSS silver conductors.

It's Up To You

So, while it's still possible to tailor a cable to fit your specific needs, it is also possible to reasonably and rationally choose a cable that will bring you closer to your music.









MOREL OCTAVE 6 SPEAKERS

\$6,500/pair www.morelhifi.com

While Morel drivers grace a number of other speaker companies designs, their own line of speakers remain somewhat understated. Hopefully, the Octave 6 will make some headway at changing that.

These compact and stylish floorstanders utilize a pair of 9-inch, side firing woofers (in a port-loaded isobaric configuration) along with a 3-inch midrange and Morel's handmade 1.1-inch Acuflex soft dome tweeter. Tech talk aside, these babies sound even better than they look. Available in gloss white or gloss black, thanks to a 90db sensitivity rating, the Octave 6 requires precious little power to deliver the goods.

Full review in process.

REVIEWS

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A Lot of Juice Indeed

Digital Amplifier Company Cherry Maraschino Monoblocks

By Andre Marc

he Digital Amplifier Company—founded in 1996 and located in Allentown, Penn.—solely produces hyper-engineered, audiophile-grade Class-D amplifiers. Its products output plenty of power from manageably sized and attractive packages. The company's Cherry line comprises stereo and monoblock variants, which are available in standard or higher-output Ultra configurations.

The company says it does not use prefabricated modules and that it designs all vital components in-house, with everything built in the Unites States. Every amplifier comes built to user specifications, allowing customers to choose standard or Ultra configurations and the amp's

When it's time to go digital JUST ASK THE EXPERTS



MARANTZ NA-11S1 Reference DSD DAC



MYTEK Stereo 192 DSD DAC



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BENCHMARK DAC2 HGC



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NAD D1050 DAC



WADIA 121 DAC

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The \$4,000-per-pair Cherry Maraschino monoblock model is the newest brainchild of company designer Tommy O'Brien. The Maraschinos are mighty mites, with published output power of 250 watts into 4 ohms. The parts employed are very high quality and include Dayton binding posts, Neutrik XLR inputs, and high-tolerance metal oxide resistors.

The amps feature true balanced input and external power supplies with IEC receptacles. These power supplies are upgradeable, with an available power increase of up to 800 watts. The chassis sits on a granite block, with Sorbothane feet for resonance control. The Maraschinos are produced with a brilliant, high-quality red finish (which is fitting considering the amp's name).

Setting up the Maraschinos is pretty straightforward, with some twists. The accompanying documentation asks that the user plug in the power supplies last, after all other connections are made, and with low-level music playing through the system. There is no power switch, as the amps automatically detect a signal and come out of standby mode; when no signal is present for a period of time, they return to standby. The amplifier sensitivity is on the high side, at 2.2 volts, but that should be no issue with most preamps and sources.

The Maraschinos accept only XLR inputs, but very nice RCA-to-XLR adaptors are supplied. The adaptors are put to good use, as a passive preamp is what we put ahead of the amps, driving a pair of Harbeth Compact 7 ES3s. (continued)

REVIEWS

After cycling through more genres of music, I discover that the Maraschinos greatest strength is coherence. Bass notes are deep and punchy yet speedy and nimble, with high frequencies sounding extended and smooth. Certainly, system matching is going to be important here. If your speakers edge toward the speedy side of things, that may be too much of a good thing with the Maraschinos. These amps will expose lean-sounding speakers and sources. If listening preferences trend toward mellow and rosy, there will be other amps to look at. However, if clarity, brilliance, and agility are your thing, then the Maraschinos will serve you well. A balanced tube preamplifier ahead of the Maraschinos may indeed provide a perfect balance of both worlds. Neutral, open-sounding cables will also pay dividends.

Perhaps the only quirk to nitpick is that one of the amps is
slightly less sensitive than the other,
so it takes a few extra seconds to
come out of standby. This is not a
deal breaker; just a minor annoyance. The fact that the amps save
watts while still being ready for optimum performance when awakened
is worth the trade-off. They also
run cool as a cucumber—a very
nice contrast to some of the space
heaters usually in for review.

The Digital Amplifier Company has wonderful success on its hands with the Cherry Maraschino monoblocks. By the way, the company's name does not reflect its design mission: It does not make digital amplifiers. These are analog amps all the way. *(continued)*

REVIEWS

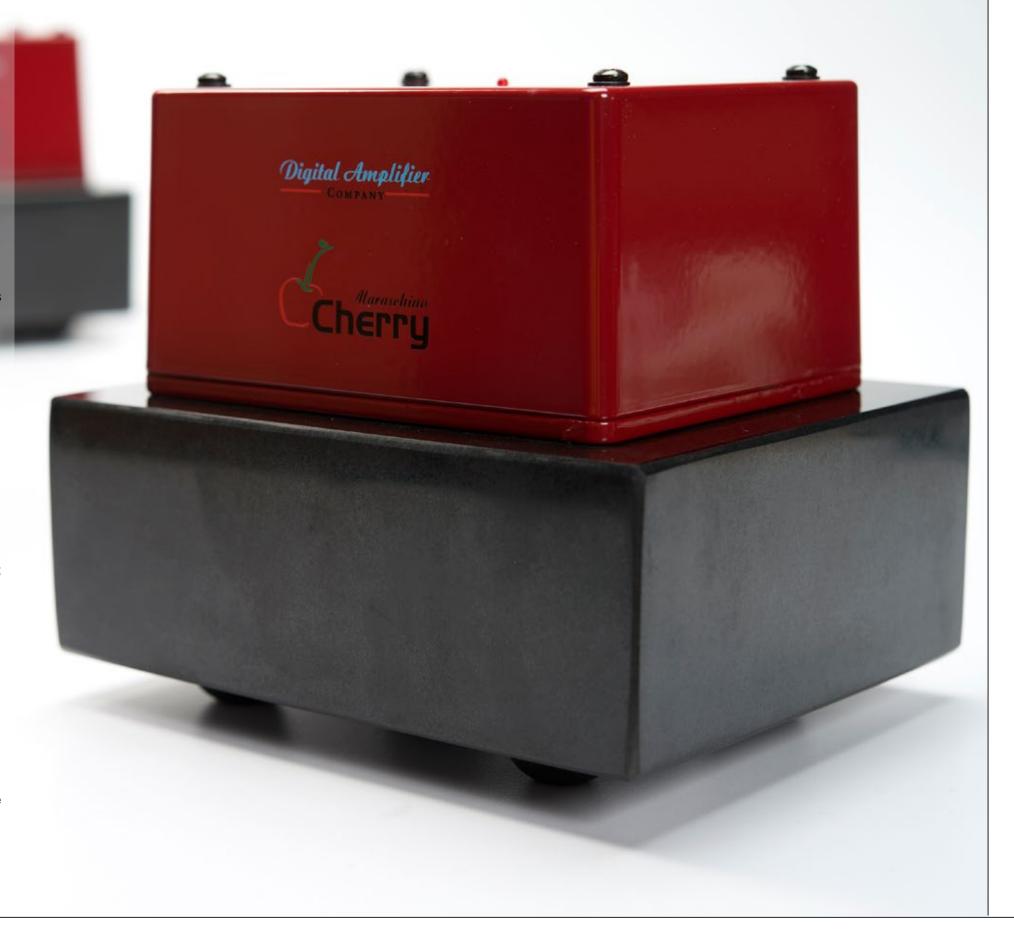
Sources include a variety of DACs and disc players. Cabling comes courtesy of Transparent, Shunyata, and Stager Sound.

The amplifiers very much make their identity known from the get-go, with their wonderfully open, clear, transparent, and precise sound. There are no mechanical artifacts or spotlighting of any kind. There is a top-to-bottom, even keeled balance that becomes very quickly addicting such that even familiar recordings come alive with a fresh perspective. This may be due to the Maraschinos' incredibly quiet background. Music seems to appear out of the ether. Recordings that seemed previously homogenized now appear spacious and wide.

The amps render the Punch Brothers' Antifogmatic with startling dynamics, precise imaging, and stop-on-a-dime timing. Chris Thile's well-recorded vocals and virtuoso mandolin playing take on very human qualities, and the groups clever arrangement of Radiohead's "Kid A" through the Marachinos is worth the price of admission alone.

Peter Gabriel's *New Blood*, featuring new interpretations of some of his classic songs, is a hair-raising showpiece through the Maraschinos. The recording is amazingly dynamic; the use of a live orchestra in lieu of rock instrumentation allows the amps to showcase their sound-staging chops. One listen to the new version of "San Jacinto" brings you as close to the recording as you could hope for.

The recent 96 kHz remaster of Nick Drake's three sublime albums are ravishing through the Maraschinos. Having heard these albums in every format and through countless amplifiers, I find it rather impressive that they still sound fresh, with the amps unexpectedly lifting even more detail from the recordings. If you have a collection of high-resolution music, the Maraschinos will serve you well, as they reproduce what the mastering engineers intended.





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REVIEWS

Cherry Maraschino Monoblocks MSRP: \$4,000 per pair

MANUFACTURER

Digital Amplifier Company

CONTACT

www.digitalamp.com

PERIHPERALS

Speakers

Harbeth Compact 7 ES3

Preamp

Channel Islands Audio PLC-1 MKII

CD transport

Musical Fidelity M1 CDT

DAC

Denon DA-USB300, **CLONES Audio Sheva**

Music server

Squeezebox Touch

Cables

Transparent, Shunyata, Stager, DH Labs

Conrad-Johnson MF2550 SE Amplifier

Striking Gold By Rob Johnson

he generally accepted wisdom is that tube amps display a warm sound while solid-state

lines are blurring, with great designs in both camps that defy past assumptions—and this

amps offer more punch and control. But those

is where Conrad-Johnson comes to mind.

Compared to the company's legendary valvebased gear, its MF2550 power amp takes a

different approach—namely the fact that it's

solid state. The amp is available as a standard or special-edition (SE) version, the latter of which

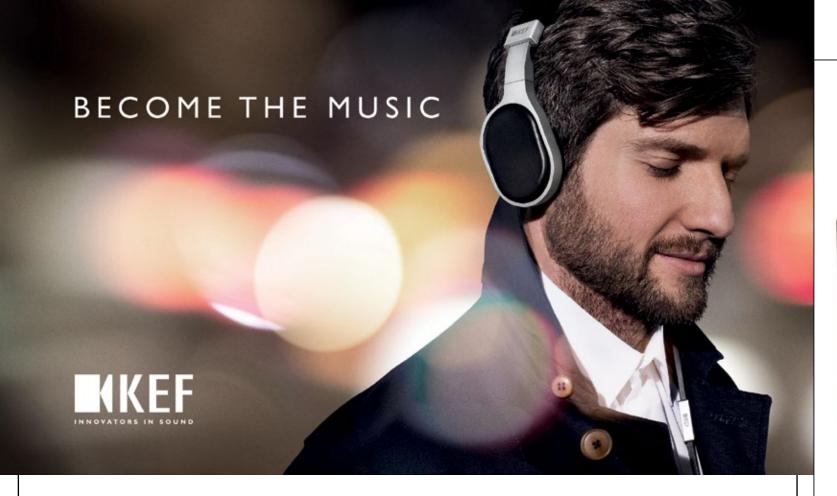
is priced at \$7,800 and includes CJD Teflon

hybrid capacitors and precision foil resistors.

We did not have the opportunity to test these two versions side by side, but considering the outstanding performance of the SE version, it's

likely that the standard version is no slouch.





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silver audio components, the amp's gold color—a signature of CJ—certainly stands out. The only feature interrupting the smooth faceplate is a power button the size of a quarter on the lower right corner. A gentle yellow LED halo illuminates the button when pressed. The only thing distinguishing the special-edition amp from the standard version is a small plate on the back of the unit that notes the serial number and the SE designation.

handle a post wrench. The posts easily accommodate two-banana adapters and offer plenty of space to connect spades and even bareended wire. Pushing the gold-colored button to reveal the sonic prowess within, I first wonder if the amp is on, since it is silent. Even the rib-

bon tweeters in my Piega P-10

power source. (continued)

speakers do no hiss at the visiting

R E V I E W S

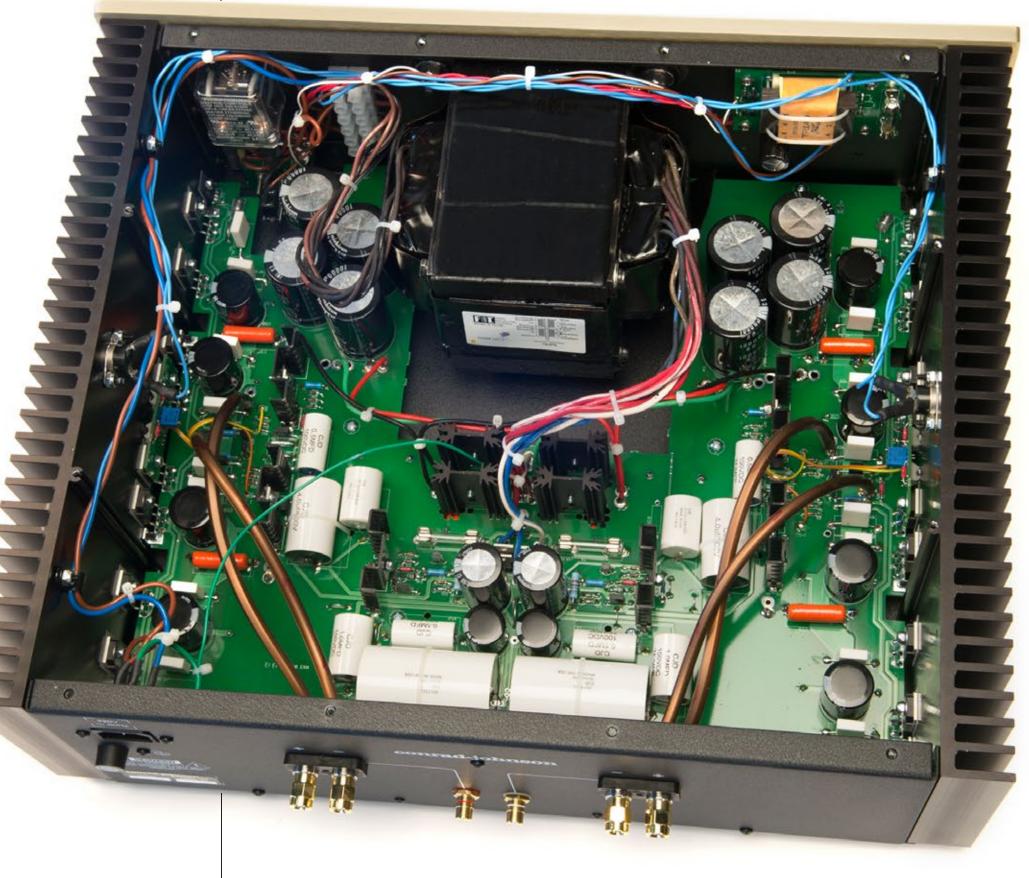
Hidden Treasure

Much of the amp's 52-pound weight comes from the hefty power supply fueling 250 watts into 8 ohms, or 500 watts into 4 ohms. On paper, the MF2550's power output is a deadringer for my Mark Levinson reference amp, so it's exciting to swap in the CJ. There are indeed many similarities between the two amps, as well as a few key differences.

Three-dimensional presentation is a dramatic strength of this amp. Music appears independent of the speakers and audible in all directions. Left-to-right imaging extends the music well beyond the speaker boundaries, with a very convincing central image. The amp also pinpoints other musical elements across the soundstage. Front-to-back layering leaves the vocalist up front, while allowing ambient background sounds to extend beyond the rear wall of my listening space. There's no perceived vertical limitation either, as the music extends from floor to ceiling. On Lyle Lovett's song "Church," from his Joshua Judges Ruth album, the background vocalists are rendered well behind Lovett, who appears front and center. While my reference amp is quite good in its ability to layer musical elements, the CJ

The MF2550 takes command of my speakers with deep, rich and robust bass. Compared with my reference amp, the MF2550's bass response is not quite as tight and punchy. Rage Against the Machine remains one of my guilty pleasures. The band's song "Bombtrack"

exceeds it.



provides a good reference point for bass. Through the CJ, the bass portrayal is not loose or lacking depth, though there's just a touch less immediacy and excitement compared to my Levinson.

Throughout my listening experience, there's a very slightly warm tendency to this solid-state amp, which I wasn't expecting. To be clear, the CJ does not overly romanticize the sound; it's just a bit more forgiving than I'm used to. There's a slight gentleness when listening to recordings that usually prove overly revealing. I'm able to turn the volume up higher for an immersive music experience without any hard-edged notes piercing my eardrums. At first, I wonder if some higher frequencies are rolled off, but after testing several frequency sweep tracks, all the highs are there. The CJ's design just manages to somehow take most sting and vocal sibilance out.

Some live instruments can have an inherent bite. During live performances, it's never pleasant to be in the blast zone of a trumpet, saxophone, snare drum, or cymbal crash. Nevertheless, that experience is the reality of the music. Through the CJ's portrayal of music in my own system, while subtle, there's just a touch less detail and realism. For instance, the sonic decay of the cymbal on the Dave Brubeck Quartet's "Blue Rondo à la Turk" subsides more quickly than I'm used to. At the same time, the Civil Wars' "Dust to Dust" on vinyl proves an utterly opulent experience. Minute sonic details aside, it's easy to find oneself immersed in the emotion and beauty of the song. (continued)



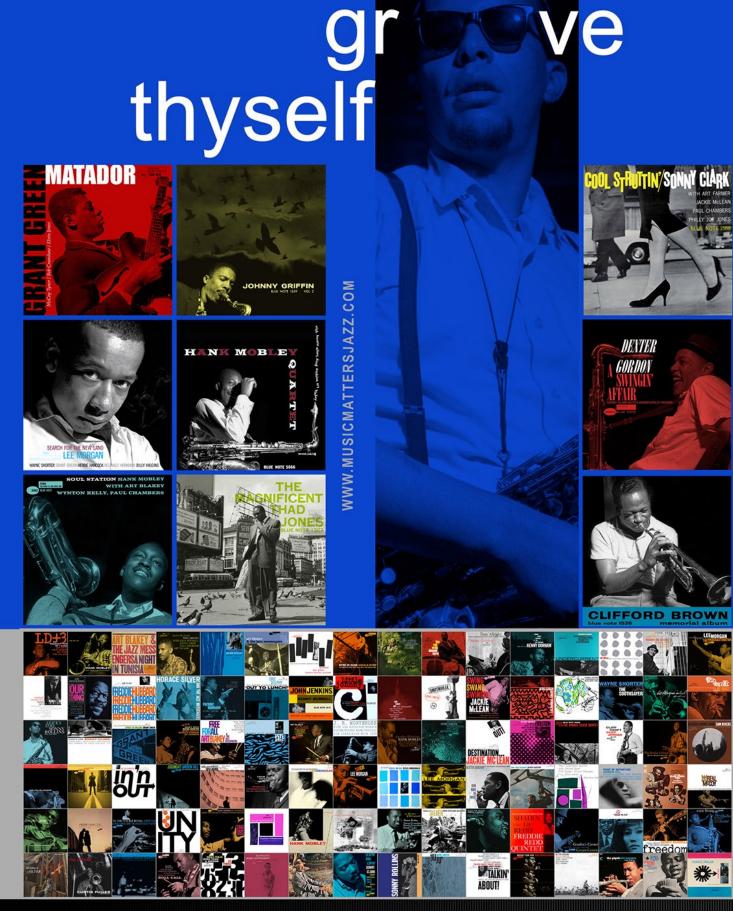
I would not call this amp euphonic, but it leans to the side of forgiving musicality, as opposed to pure realism. Is this a bad thing? No. On a sunny day, many folks prefer to tame the glare with sunglasses, right? Similarly, if your system is a bit bright for your taste, or if you just prefer a portrayal that's a tad relaxed, the MF2550 may provide the balance you've been looking for.

The Golden Ticket?

I thoroughly enjoyed the month I spent with the MF2550 SE in my system, as did several of my friends who regularly come over to listen. The MF2550 SE is something I could enjoy happily for a long time. On vocally driven performances, jazz and orchestral pieces, the CJ leaves little to desire. For those who prefer rock music with all its inherent aggression and vigor, the CJ stands more toward the polite end of the spectrum. In all cases, though, the musicality of the performance shines though.

With plenty of power and a non-fatiguing presence, this amp will likely pair well with many speakers and components. It certainly plays nicely with all my test equipment. Given its \$7,800 retail price, the amp represents a longterm investment for many audio fans, but many rewards come with it.

Combining great sound with substantial build quality and a three-year warranty on parts and labor, the MF2550 SE could be something that you find at the end of your quest for sonic treasure. If these benefits sound compelling to you, definitely make a run to your local Conrad-Johnson dealer and hear for yourself what this amp can do.







Additional Listening By Jeff Dorgay

While so many audio enthusiasts think of Conrad-Johnson as a strictly vacuum-tube company, the brand has made some very impressive solid-state amplifiers over the years. The benchmark that comes to my mind is its Premier 350, which served as my reference amplifier for years. So when Lew Johnson told me about the MF2550 SE, this was the immediate comparison floating around in my head. But Johnson was quick to point out that the MF2550 SE is a "completely different amplifier" that would really surprise me.

And surprise it does. Thanks to a bevy of CJD Teflon capacitors, the ones that have been highly influential in the sound of CJ for the last 10 years or so, the MF2550 SE has a thoroughly modern sound. Bringing back my Premier 350, along with CJ's ACT2 Series 2 preamplifier, makes it easy to compare and contrast the two amps.

Overall, the MF2550 SE has a very dynamic, extended sound. Those of you who remember the company's early solid-state amplifiers and who did not experience the Premier 350 will be stunned at just how spectacular this new amplifier sounds, especially considering how well CJ is known for vacuum-tube amplifiers. The overall tonality is highly natural, with barely a hint of warmness. It's not quite as neutral as, say, the top-of-the-line Simaudio Moon amplifiers that we've listened to or the Premier 350, but it's not as warm as my Burmester 911 MK3 or the Pass XA series amplifiers.

Running the MF2550 SE through its paces with a wide range of speakers, including the Focal Maestro Utopia, Dynaudio Evidence Platinum, and even my old Acoustat 2+2s, reveals that this amplifier will drive any speakers comfortably, with power to spare. Whether rocking out with AC/DC, or relaxing with a string quartet, this amplifier presents a wide, deep soundstage and a level of nuance and control usually associated with a much more expensive amplifier.

As with the Premier 350, Conrad-Johnson's MF2550 SE's simple, elegant, and understated design delivers breathtaking musical performance in a compact package. And, as someone who has owned quite a few CJ products over the last 35 years, I will say that the Champagne-colored faceplate is just fine by me.

MF2550 SE amplifier MSRP: \$7,800

MANUFACTURER

Conrad-Johnson

CONTACT

www.conradjohnson.com

PERIPHERALS

Digital source

JRiver Media Center 15, Light Harmonic DaVinci DAC, Audio Research CD3 MK2

Analog source

SME 10 turntable with tonearm and Dynavector 17D3 cartridge

Preamplifer

Coffman Labs G1-A

Power amplifier

Mark Levinson No. 335

Cables

Jena Labs interconnects, phono interface, USB cable, and Twin 15 speaker cable

Power

Running Springs Audio Haley with RSA/Cardas Mongoose power cords

Accessories

ASC Tube Traps, Cathedral Sound room-dampening panels, Mapleshade Samson racks. Coffman Labs footers

Clones Audio 25i Integrated Amplifier By John Darko What started as a one-off unit intended as a family birthday

What started as a one-off unit intended as a family birthday gift has blossomed into a full-fledged audio equipment manufacturer. Hong Kong's Clones Audio now counts monoblocks and a DAC among its product roster, but its 25i amplifier (\$865/€629) is what jump-started the boutique manufacturer. The 25i, which is a 25 watts-per-channel integrated amplifier, was inspired by a 47 Labs' circuit design that later landed in the public domain for the DIY crowd. After all, not everyone would see the \$3,000-plus asking price of the 47 Labs' Gaincard amp without wincing—and some might double over in pain upon seeing its internal part count.



This shoebox amplifier's genetic connection to the circuit design from 47 Labs' founder Kimura-San makes the 25i a proper Gainclone. Little wonder then that Clones founder Funjoe went with a brand name that connotes body doubling. His integrated amp mirrors the Gaincard's short-as-possible signal paths and broader emphasis on circuit simplicity. None of the 30 dB gain comes from the pre-stage; it is only present for input selection, of which there are three. At the business end of the 25i is an in-house-designed board that houses Texas Instruments LM3875 amplifier on a chip.

Funjoe describes his clone as using "no protection print oil to enhance clarity of sound image and musicality." That's funny because clarity is also the first descriptor that comes to mind when trying to encapsulate the sound of the 25i. The other word that keeps surfacing is *fruity*. The 25i offers solid punch, dynamics and tonal color. It's possibly not quite as zippy as Peter Daniel's similarly Gaincloned Patek integrated amp, but the 25i fleshes out more acoustic mass to keep the trade-off seesaw perfectly balanced.

Comparisons

First up: the REDGUM RGi60, which is made in Melbourne and is somewhat of a reference at Darko HQ Down Under. The 25i trades in some acoustic mass for upper-midrange zip and caffeination, which lends it that sportscar vibe: a speedy ride with the top down. The REDGUM is warmer, more majestic and better suited to source material like the valium-drenched sound of Lampchop's *Nixon*. Conversely, Morrissey's *Your Arsenal* really benefits from the Clones' keener energy with transients that, via the REDGUM, come across as softer and more rounded.

The 25i looks down its nose at the NAD D 3020. The little Gaincloner is an altogether more refined and nuanced listen that those with more luxurious transducers are likely to

appreciate. This by no means negates the NAD's far more impressive feature-driven bang for buck, but the NAD gets found out long before we call time on the Clones.

Playing week in and week out with Wadia's 151PowerDAC Mini calls for intervention from of one of neatest budget thumb-DACs currently doing the rounds, one that won't physically crowd out the 25i itself and keeps the DAC-amplifier combination costs within range of Wadia's all-in-one unit. I lassoed Resonessence Labs' Herus to the Clones integrated with a ZuAudio breakout cable. The Wadia and Clones/Herus pairing shares similar high-relief edge definition, but the latter steps forward with the larger soundstage. Similarly, the Clones plates up more body, but (crucially) it does so without bringing with it the fuzzier definition that could be attributed to the likes of Rega's excellent Brio-R.

Loudspeaker Matches

With the French Atohm GT1.0 (\$3,440/€2,500), things can get a little too bitey up top when less-than-stellar recordings are running higher SPLs. Thankfully, the Atohm has adjustable tweeter gain on the rear for such occasions. With the top end dialed back, this co-habitation proves to be one I could happily live with long term. I'm not saying the Clones is bright per se; that B word is too blunt an instrument and one that fails to connote this shoebox's ebullient handling of subtlety. The abundance of micro-dynamic flair might not suit everyone, especially those whose systems are already strong on lower-treble caffeination.

As such, I'd peg the Clones integrated as ideally suited to lusher loudspeakers. Harbeth's C7ES3 immediately springs to mind. And don't think for a moment that a \$1,000 integrated has no place driving loudspeakers four times its sticker—Funjoe's shoebox is a genuine over-achiever. *(continued)*



Don't have Harbeth money? Don't fret. Wharfedale's limitededition Denton loudspeaker is one that channels a vintage vibe in both looks and, to a lesser extent, sound. They definitely lean towards a warmer, thicker-aired presentation and the 25i is just the (dream) ticket; it's a match that'll keep your total system cost under \$2K. This Gainclone is the hot blade to slice through the Denton's butter, keeping tight control on the mid-bass so that things don't get too rich. With the electronic-infused world music of Banco De Gaia's Maya, bass notes are tight but abundant with texture.

I like this amplifier a lot. It's no powerhouse and perhaps that's the reason why I found loudspeaker matching to be more crucial than usual during my three-month audition time. However, find the right dance partner and the Clones 25i brings the goods: acoustic mass, illumination and tonal color, all in one tidy solution. Like the sound of this but need more power? Clones' 55pm monoblocks might be the answer.

Don't be fooled by the budget pricing, though. Know that the Clones' integrated is a bona fide high/er-end wolf dressed in entry-level sheep's clothing.

Clones Audio 25i Integrated Amplifier MSRP: €629 (Apx \$863)

MANUFACTURER

Clones Audio

CONTACT

www.clonesaudio.com

PERIPHERALS

Sources

Antipodes DS music server, Resonessence Labs Herus, Aqua La Scala MKII, VPI Scout 1.1 w/ Zu Denon 103-R, PS Audio NuWave Phono Converter

Amplification

REDGUM RGi60, Wadia 151PowerDAC Mini, NAD D 3020

Loudspeakers

Zu Soul MKII, Atohm GT1.0, Wharfedale Denton

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Everyone I know who's had the good fortune to hear this little Clones 25i has really jumped up and down about it, so after the photos were taken I proceeded to really put this little jewel through its paces in the context of a \$200K system. Yep, that's no misprint. Running the dCS Vivaldi stack directly into input one and the output to the Dynaudio Evidence Platinum speakers proves interesting.

While this is clearly insane with a source and speakers of this caliber, it's pretty obvious exactly what the amplifier in question can and can't do. No, it won't be replacing my \$84,000 pair of Pass Xs300 monoblocks anytime soon, but this little amp makes a very impressive showing. It drives the Dynaudios not only with ease but great control. Bass is tight and tuneful, with the high end being smooth and extended.

What you don't get here is the level of nuance and refinement that the big-dollar stuff offers, but the overall tonality is very neutral. When I swap the dCS and Dynaudio combination for the awesome OPPO 105 disc player and my 90-dB Vandersteen 1Ci speakers, this little amp really blows my mind. The level of clarity for under a thousand bucks is nothing short of amazing, and comparing it to my other favorite benchmark in the class, the Rega Brio-R, I concur with Mr. Darko 100 percent

Whether you are a budding audiophile or looking for a cool yet compact second system, I highly suggest the Clones 25i. It's got the right stuff.

www.clonesaudio.com

REVIEWS



SORAsound ZYX Universe II Phono Cartridge

By Richard H. Mak

earing the ZYX Universe I cartridge for the first time in 2003, I thought a significant milestone had been achieved in the world of high-end audio. The Universe I delivers unprecedented levels of micro detail, clarity and frequency extension compared to many of the popular cartridges at that time. The remarkable neutrality of its sound, combined with a pristine top-end extension, prompted its designer, quite appropriately, to name the lower models Airy 1, Airy 2, and Airy 3.

These cartridges soon achieved a cult following, but there were dissenters. System synergy plays a vital role and the Universe I did not mate well with systems voiced toward the analytical, producing the obvious complaints of a sterile sound character. Those with Koetsu cartridges remained unimpressed.

What's in a Name?

The name ZYX is not arbitrarily chosen. The three characters represents the three axis of an audio signal: X representing the frequency response, Y the amplitude, and Z the time domain, which, according to Hisayoshi Nakasutka San, designer of the ZYX cartridges, is the most important domain of the three. A true stereo cartridge is one that can "produce an even frequency response on the X and Y axis, without any delay or distortion on the time axis," he says.

He goes into great details explaining his winding geometry, material choice, grounding, and cryogenic treatment, leaving no stone unturned. All of this is well documented within the 10-page-long owner's manual accompanying all ZYX cartridges. Incidentally, Nakatsukan San has seven design patents pending for phono cartridge design.

Nakasutka San has 47 years of experience under his belt, and he takes a different approach from Japanese cartridge designers focusing heavily on subjective emotional response. Where the late Hiroyasu Kondo San of Kondo Audio Note Japan talked about the "reincarnation of dormant art," stating that his cartridges will bond with an audiophile's heart, and where the late Sugano San of Koetsu made cartridges to touch his heart and soul, Nakasutka San's methods are predominantly scientifically based, with very little subjectivity added to the equation. Nakatsuka San makes it clear that neutral-sounding cartridges with minimal distortion and an evenly distributed frequency-response curve are his priority. He remains tight lipped about the differences between the old and current iterations of this cartridge, divulging no design secrets, except for the fact that the body has now

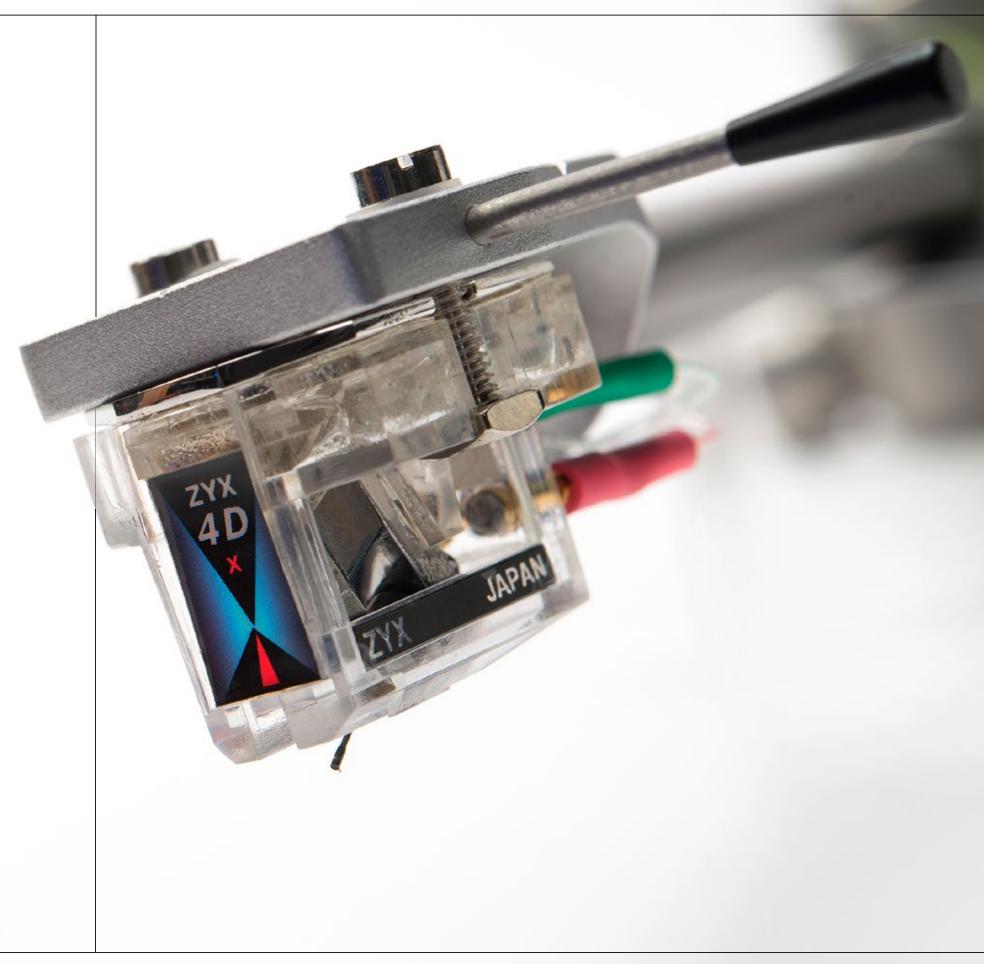
become a semi-nude polycarbonate (thermoplastic) body that exposes the coil windings, dramatically reducing body resonance and increasing low-level signal integrity.

The Universe II comes in six different versions, offering buyers a choice of gold, silver or copper coil windings, with an output either 0.24 mV or 0.48 mV. Buyers are also given a choice of the metal that sits on top of the cartridge, which impacts the mass. The tin-based version (TB2) weighs 6.9 grams, while the silver-based version (SB2) weights 8.2 grams. Each version of the cartridge is priced at \$8,500. My review sample is a low-output 0.24 mV copper-coil SB2 version, which is SORAsound's most popular model.

Pay Attention to Setup

The ZYX Universe II is relatively easy to mount, given the transparent body and a readily visible cantilever; however, there are two things to approach with caution: inserting signal clips onto the cartridge pins, as the distributor has mentioned a few instances where extreme force has been known to shear the pins; and removing the stylus guard gently, as it does not come off easily. The last thing anybody wants to do is to snap off the cantilever with the guard that it was intended to protect.

Mounted on the DaVinci Master Reference Virtu tonearm (currently under review) and the TW Raven AC turntable, the Universe II registers impressive readings on my spectrum analyzer. Crosstalk measured 31.5 dB and 31.3 dB between channels. Total Harmonic Distortion is less than 0.45 percent and intermodulation distortion is less than 1.45 percent at the optimal VTA level. Only the Clearaudio Goldfinger Statement cartridge has shown better numbers. (continued)



REVIEWS

The Universe II is quite responsive to setup changes, another sign of a well-made cartridge. The slightest change in azimuth, vertical-tracking angle, and tracking force affect the sound quality dramatically. The factory recommends anywhere from 1.7 to 2.5 grams; in my setup 1.986 grams is the optimal point.

Nakatsuka San made it clear that achieving the proper torque requires using the cartridge mounting screws. Optimal torque is said to be 0.6 to 0.8 kgf/ cm2 and never to exceed 1 kgf/cm2 (or 0.868 in/lbs in imperial units). Exceeding the proper torque level is not only detrimental to the sound, but will also run the risk of damaging the cartridge body. Interestingly enough, this number corresponds with the results of my own experimentation, with 0.6 to 0.65 in/lbs yielding the best results. If you do not have a torque meter, I strongly recommend spending the extra \$150, a drop in the bucket considering the cost of the cartridge.

The Sound

After having played over 100 recordings for this review, I find the sonic attributes of the Universe II to be obvious. The inherent qualities of the ZYX house sound remain intact, with remarkable ambience and frequency extension at both ends of the spectrum against an ultrablack background, thanks to the super low noise floor of the cartridge. The cartridge's ability to retrieve minute details with a level of clarity that aptly and succinctly reveals the subtleties of various instruments and vocals easily bests the abilities of the Universe I. The main difference is how the details are rendered, with the Universe II adding just enough weight and richness to the sound, qualities that were slightly lacking with its predecessor. (continued)



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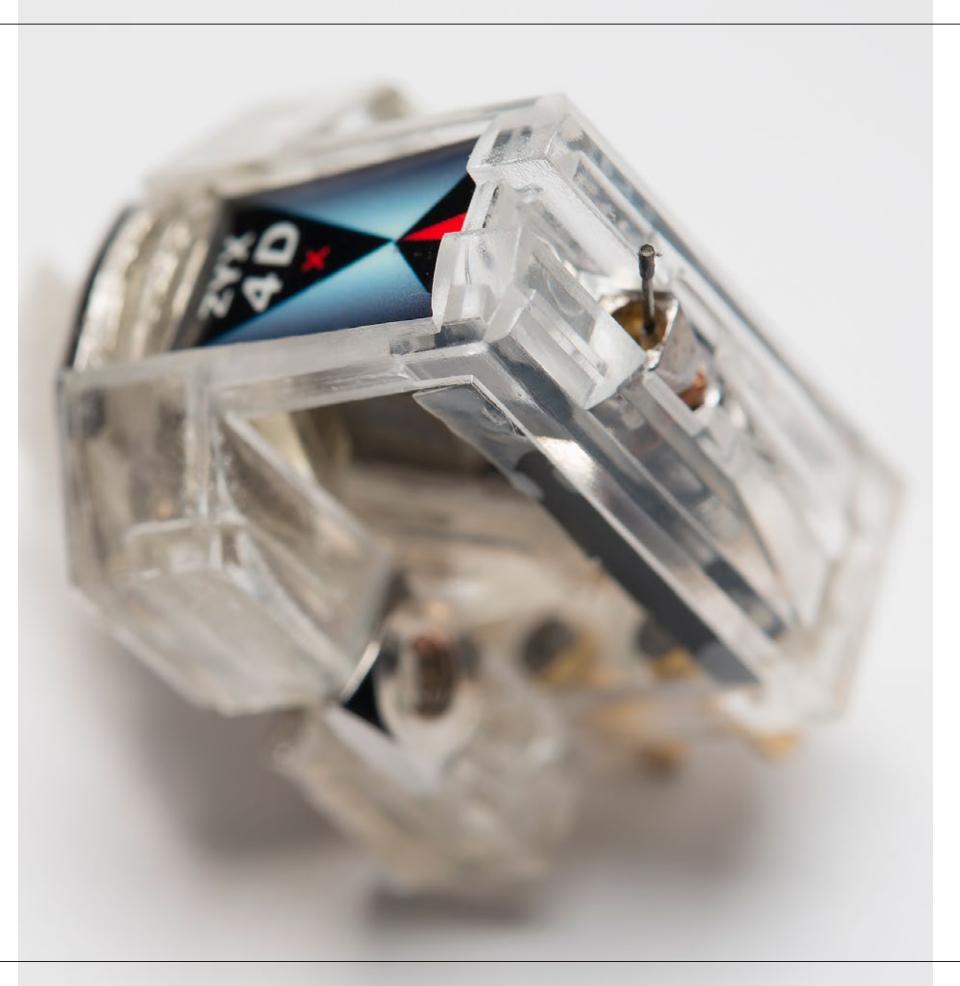


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I cannot think of too many cartridges I have heard that can rival the top-end extension and details of the Universe II, except maybe the Goldfinger V2 and the Van den Hul Colibri. Yet, the Goldfinger renders details in a much more aggressive fashion, and the Colibri does not carry the same mid- to low-range fullness of the Universe II.

The Universe II excels in swift transient reproduction, thanks to very low internal impedance; its minute coil windings and corresponding low mass allow nimble movement of the cantilever. Though the impedance of Universe II is low at 4 ohms, it offers pace and rise time on par if not exceeding that of my Sonic Lab Ultra Eminent BC and Kondo IO-M cartridges (0.6 and 1 ohms, respectively). Ruggiero Ricci's Lalo Symphonie Espagnole (Decca SXL 2155 ED1), a recording known for its extraordinary violin performance, which can sound dry and aggressive with the wrong setup. The Universe II renders Ricci's violin with full clarity and ultrafast transients, revealing the full intricacies of the violin and the explosive dynamism of the orchestra. The entire presentation has a vivid dynamic contrast, without any hint of aggression or abrasiveness.

The Universe II's well-textured mid- to low-end performance consistently comes across as a noticeably weightier presentation than the original, though it is by no means a voluptuous or bass-heavy cartridge. By comparison, the Goldfinger V2 exhibits more dynamism and impactful bass, and the Dynavector XV-1S has a far richer and heavier bottom end. The strength of the Universe II's bass performance lies not with quantity but with quality. Whether it is the bass drum and tam-tam mallets on Prokofiev's Alexander Nevsky (Columbia MS6306) or the bass strings on Kenneth Wilkinson's famous Clair de Lune recording (RCA Living Stereo LSC-2326), bass is adequate and tuneful,



REVIEWS

but not bloated or fat. It is rendered with plenty of definition and low-level resolution, but not to the point of tonal colors thinning out.

The neutral characteristics of the Universe II also extend into the midrange, arguably one of the most important regions of the musical spectrum for rendering vocals. Make no mistake about it, though; the Universe II will never be a Kondo or a Koetsu, so obviously it will not have the organic-inducing qualities of the former or the warming effect of the latter. True to Nakasutka San's design principles, the ZYX Universe II is without coloration. It is never forgiving or artificially warm sounding, yet it will display these qualities when they are present within the recording, adding minimal if any sonic characteristics of its own, which is remarkably difficult to achieve.

No cartridge review is complete without mentioning the portrayal of acoustic space. My go-to recordings to illustrate this are the early DECCA recordings, such as Dvorak's From the New World performance by Istvan Kertesz and the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra (DECCA SXL 2289) and Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture performed by the London Symphony Orchestra (SXL 2001). The Universe II projects layers of dynamic shadings of the various instruments, which it portrays in the acoustic space with proper proportions against an ultrawide soundstage that extends beyond the corners of my listening room. The holographic presentation is solid, with enough space between instruments to create a well-defined acoustic image that is solid but not overly sharp. I must credit part of this to the DaVinci Master Reference Virtu tonearm, which has the ability to project extraordinary dimensionality to the soundstage regardless of the choice of cartridge, underscoring the need for a first-class foundation in your analog setup. (continued)

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REVIEWS

Last but not least, the Universe I and II are amazing trackers. No matter how complex the musical passages or how close to the inside of the record grooves, they never once mistrack on any of my reference recordings. To owners of the ZYX Universe I contemplating the trade up, the answer is an unequivocal yes. To others who are simply looking for one of the top analog transducers, you will be hard pressed to find anything significantly better than the Universe II at any price, though you may find an alternate presentation that you prefer. I enjoyed the ZYX Universe II so much that I decided to purchase not one but two review samples.

ZYX Universe II phono cartridge MSRP: \$8,500

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PERIPHERALS

Turntables Kuzma Stabi XL 2, TW Raven AC, J.C Verdier La Platine

Tonearms Kuzma 4 Pt, DaVinci Master Reference Virtu, Schroder Reference TA-1L

Phonostages AMR PH77, Burmester PH-100, FM Acoustics FM-122 Mk II

Preamps Passlabs XP30, McIntosh MC1000

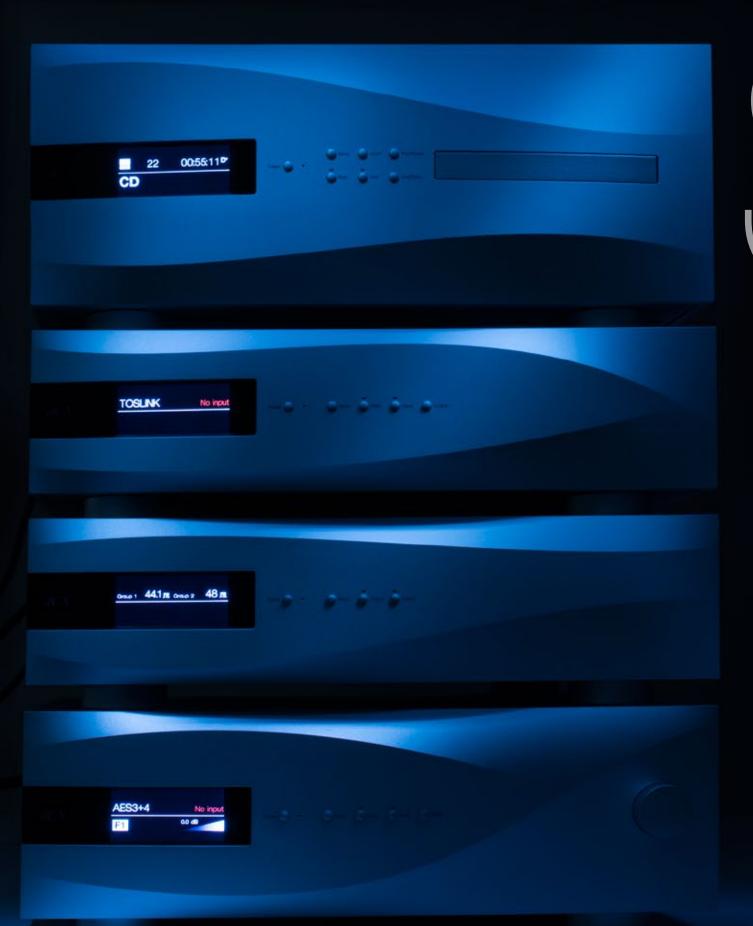
Power amps Passlabs XA200.5, McIntosh MC2KW

Speakers Dynaudio Sapphires, Dynaudio Temptations

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dCS Vivaldi Still Compelling

By Jeff Dorgay



pending four days with the Aston Martin DBS a few years ago was an enthralling experience to say the least—and beyond definition to say the most—but a brief time in the company of something outside of your means can often skew your perspective. When I return the silver beauty, a good friend who actually owns an Aston told me, "Yeah, she's a beauty, but wait until the first oil change: \$800. And let's not even talk about the first major service..." Two years later, said friend ended up buying the Boxster S that I told him to buy in the first place—but that's another story for another day.

Just like an Aston, Bentley or Ferrari, most megabucks hi-fi products have a way of seducing you that standard-issue gear does not. Unfortunately, the review process does not always make it feasible for a manufacturer to leave a six-figure component in someone's hands for longer than a reasonable honeymoon, and this is why at times these reviews seem overly enthusiastic: The reviewer never gets a chance to move past the honeymoon phase.

REVIEWS

So let's talk about a \$110,000 digital player—that's not a typo. I thought I had lost my mind when I purchased the dCS Paganini four-box system a few years ago (and I felt equally crazy when buying the Naim CD555 a few years before that); yet, after even a few months it was very obvious that the Paganini performed well beyond anything I'd ever experienced. And it just got better the longer I listened to it with an even wider range of music. So how much better could a player costing almost twice as much as the Paganini be? As it turns out, quite a bit better.

A Brief Tech Brief

In the past year, much has been written about the Vivaldi's technical prowess via *Stereophile, The Absolute Sound* and others, so if you're looking for a more geeky perspective (and even if you aren't), I suggest reading Michael Fremer's and Robert Harley's takes on this player. Should you be investing at this level, read everything you can and do some serious listening—one doesn't want buyer's remorse on a purchase like this.

Instead of focusing on the technical aspects, we're going to concentrate more on the Vivaldi experience. What's it like to truly live with a player like this for a whole year? Is it still exciting? Is it a fling or a long-term love affair?

To make an incredibly long story shorter for those not familiar with dCS, the British manufacturer takes a modular four-box approach to its top digital players, (separating the most critical parts of the playback chain as they see it: a CD/SACD Transport, DAC, system Master Clock, and what they see as the system hub, the Upsampler) with separate sections for the transport (which plays CDs and SACDs), DAC, master clock, and upsampler.



This allows the user the ability to build a dCS stack one box at a time, starting with the DAC alone if you so desire, or eliminate the transport entirely for those not using discs.

Where so many DACs rely on off-theshelf hardware, the Vivaldi, like all other dCS products, utilize the company's own "Ring DAC" technology, which is based around field-programmable gate array chips and the proprietary, discrete digitalto-analog converter circuit that runs dCS decoding software and gives the DAC its name. What does that really mean? On one level, it means that when dCS learns something new in the lab, your player can be reprogrammed with the latest software with ease, like having the software in your car's ECU upgraded for more horsepower. Having gone through a couple of software upgrades with the Paganini, I can tell you that it is an exciting process. Each time, I felt as if I had purchased an entirely new component, with the updates providing a significant performance upgrade at no additional cost. I merely had to insert a disc, upload the data, and voila, I received a much better player than I had before.

Not only does the Vivaldi offer this same functionality, but because the gate array on the new digital main board only uses about 30 percent of its total processing power, there is plenty of room for whatever future upgrades the brainiacs at dCS come up with in the years to come. This future-proof approach goes a long way in terms of consumer confidence when writing a six-figure check.

The Vivaldi is capable of playing all file formats from 16 bit/44 kHz to full DSD, with the option of playing all files natively or upsampling to any higher data rate, as well as upsampling to DSD or DXD. (continued)



Check the dCS website for all the fine details. Suffice it to say that the Vivaldi will play virtually any music format you throw at it with no issue, and as new formats become commercially relevant, upgrades are a snap.

Inputs, Outputs and Cables

As a four-(unit/box) system, the Vivaldi plays everything but Blu-ray Discs and DVD-A (however my MSB transport connected to the stack allows playback of these formats, giving me a fully functioning digital Death Star). The Vivaldi does play every known digital audio format, including DSD. John Quick, of dCS North America, brought me a hard drive loaded with DSD files; however, comparing these files to the SACDs in the Vivaldi transport, the optical disc always comes out on top in terms of clarity and a natural presentation. For this reviewer, DSD files continue to be a major non-issue, but the Vivaldi is fully equipped to handle the format.

With a full bevy of every input you can think of, the Vivaldi accepts digital signals from every source imaginable, including iPods, iPhones, and iPads (because the Vivaldi is Apple approved). Even the 320-kbps feed from Spotify sounds amazing—never better, in fact—when played through the dCS stack, especially when upsampled to DSD.

The key to maximum performance is proper setup and connection, and making sure that all three boxes (transport, upsampler and DAC) are all properly set to talk to the master clock. If this is done incorrectly, the clock does not lock all four pieces of the stack together and playback suffers dramatically. On the subject of upsampling, many will argue that imaging and timbre suffer from this approach, but I will tell you that the dCS nails this without any sign of artifacts.

A total of 13 cables are required to connect the Vivaldi stack together, not counting four AC power cables. Like changing the spark-plug wires on a 12-cylinder car, do it one at a time, should you decide to upgrade the complete set of included stock cables (see sidebar). Better yet, have your dCS dealer, who will probably sell you the cables anyway, make a house call.

Are You Experienced?

The Vivaldi is not a plug-and-play device. After getting through the somewhat daunting process of connecting all the boxes together, and getting them all synchronized with the master clock, there are still choices. As all filtering is done via software, you have about six different digital filters to choose from. Like the Paganini, after months of driving myself crazy, I settled on the default settings. Those with ADD/OCD issues will go slightly mad here, because there are so many possible combinations—which leads us to the question of upsampling.

While I rarely hear much difference when upsampling high-resolution files to DSD, 16/44 files (especially MP3 files) benefit tremendously from upsampling, having more air and life overall. There are no instances where I prefer going straight 16/44 all the way through to output.

Should you be using a source like a Meridian digital-music server, which does not offer a word clock input, the proper adjustments will have to be made on the Vivaldi so that the system is not running unlocked, causing effects similar to tape dropout. When using my Meridian server, I go into its menu and disable internal upsampling (which normally yields a 24/88 output) and force it to output CDs at native resolution and let the Vivaldi do the rest. (continued)



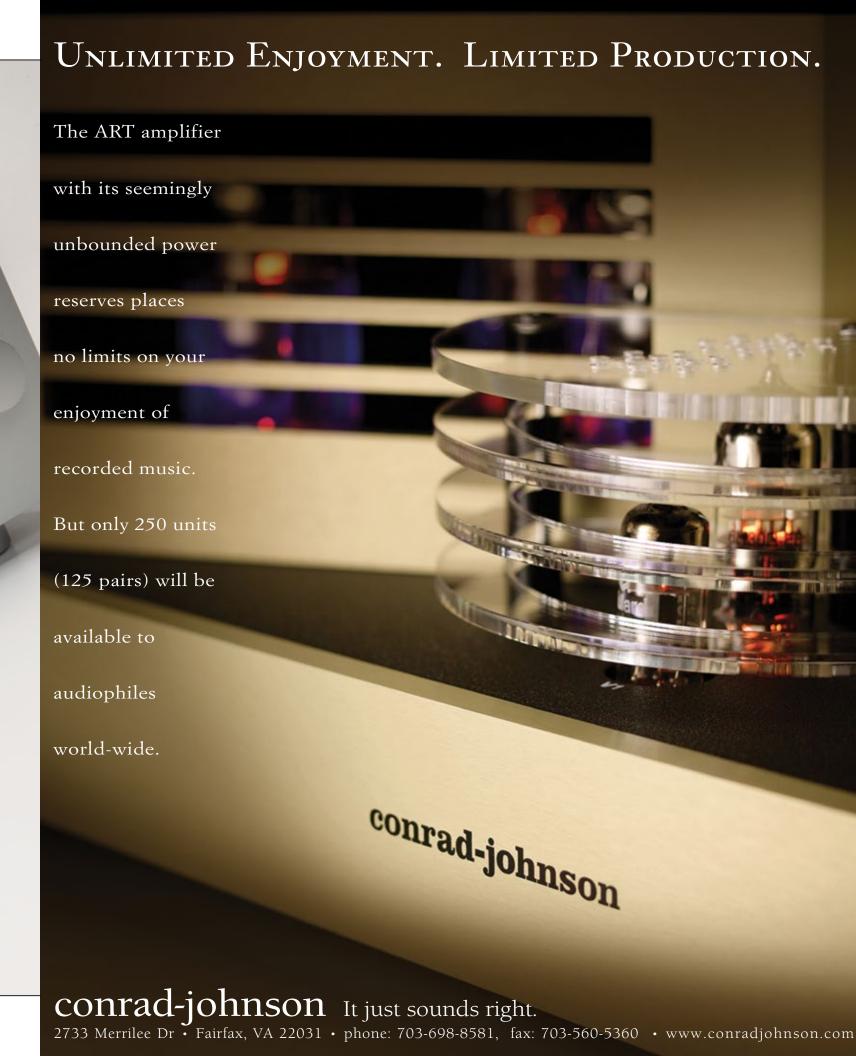
Serving It Up

Instead of using an external server for delivering digital files, the way to really roll with the Vivaldi is using a NAS drive and the dCS application. You can also access files directly via an external USB drive (or thumb drive) plugged directly into the Vivaldi's USB port. This provides the clearest, cleanest signal path and a major step up in reproduction quality over any of the servers I have on hand, which makes perfect sense. For my initial review of the Vivaldi, dCS had not fully sorted out the app, but now it is working rather nicely, and in addition to cataloging your music collection, it works as a giant remote control for the DAC and Upsampler, with the ability to control the entire stack in the works in an upcoming software upgrade.

As a music server, the dCS app gets a 7 for convenience (sorry, there still isn't a server out there that can beat the Merdiain for ease of use and speed), but an 11 for sound quality, so take your pick. Personally, I like the simplicity of having it all on one remote, but it is nice to know that if you purchase a Vivaldi, you won't have to buy or configure an additional streamer—just plug an Ethernet cable into the Upsampler, find your NAS with the App, and roll.

All Digital? Forget the Preamp

While dCS's digital volume control is excellent in the Paganini, it still sounded more lifelike going from the line-level outputs, with volume control set to its maximum level, to a great linestage. The Vivaldi closes this gap such that, if you are an all-digital music listener, you really don't need a separate linestage, thanks to the increased low-level linearity of its volume control and the transparency of its output stage. (continued)





We put the Vivaldi through its paces with a wide variety of power amplifiers. from the \$2,000 VanAlstine Ultravalve all the way up to the \$88,000-per-pair Pass Xs 300 monoblocks, which are my current reference. Comparing playback with and without a linestage—including the ARC REF 5SE, Burmester 011 and Robert Koda K-10—we found that, while the Vivaldi doesn't reveal more music without a linestage in the path, using one does not diminish the presentation either. So if you're taking the "less-is-more" approach, I'd forget the linestage if you are going all digital. The Vivaldi can be set via its menu to deliver 2-volt or 6-volt output through balanced XLRs or standard RCAs and it will easily drive two systems.

In a Word: Natural

Granted, the price of digital perfection is not cheap, but the dCS Vivaldi achieves it. The Paganini was fantastic, but switching to analog playback via the AVID Acutus Reference SP (with either the Clearaudio Goldfinger or Lyra Atlas cartridges) still stole the day. This always left me thinking, "That's damn good for digital," but the Vivaldi offers playback on a completely different level. I don't love analog any less than I used to, but 12 hour days listening to the Vivaldi instead of a turntable is never a problem. And after myriad comparisons of analog to digital files with various resolutions, not only can I easily live with the Vivaldi, half of the time the Vivaldi reveals more music than analog does in my system.

Listening to some high-resolution files of Neil Young's *Harvest*, supplied by Quick, illustrates this succinctly, when compared to the recent Chris Bellman remaster (which is excellent). Young's acoustic guitar intro is bigger and bolder and has more tonal richness. *(continued)*

INSTRUMENTS OF MUSICAL PERFECTION



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As the drums and piano enter the track, they have a more distinct space via high-resolution digital, and the sparse bass line and banjo are locked down into their own separate spaces in a way the LP just can't match. Yet, on Peter Gabriel's "Lay Your Hands on Me," via digital and the 45-rpm Classic Records box set, the vinyl takes the lead for all the same reasons, though the full digital recording is still quieter.

Time after time, it's easy to fool analog-loyal friends by spinning the LP and playing the Vivaldi at the same time, claiming to be playing vinyl. They would all chime in proclaiming analog's superiority. But when the truth was revealed, they were shocked that they were in fact listening to digital—oh, the horror.

For those with world-class analog front-ends, the digital part of your music collection no longer has to take a back seat to your analog collection. And that's the highest compliment I can pay the Vivaldi. If you don't have analog, you don't need it with this player. I am keeping it as my new reference digital component—and now that I'm 55 years old, it may be my last.

Minor Nits

After a full year, the only complaint I have with the Vivaldi (and the Paganini suffered the same problem) is its human interface. While the new display screens on the Vivaldi are much easier to read, the writing above all of the buttons on the silver-faced units like mine are nearly impossible to read by anyone over 30. If I had to do this again, I would opt for the black version with the white type, only to be able to read the buttons better.

Fortunately, once you get used to the Vivaldi and get it configured the way you

want it, you shouldn't be doing much more in terms of fiddling. And controlling the stack via an iPad and the app does make it much easier.

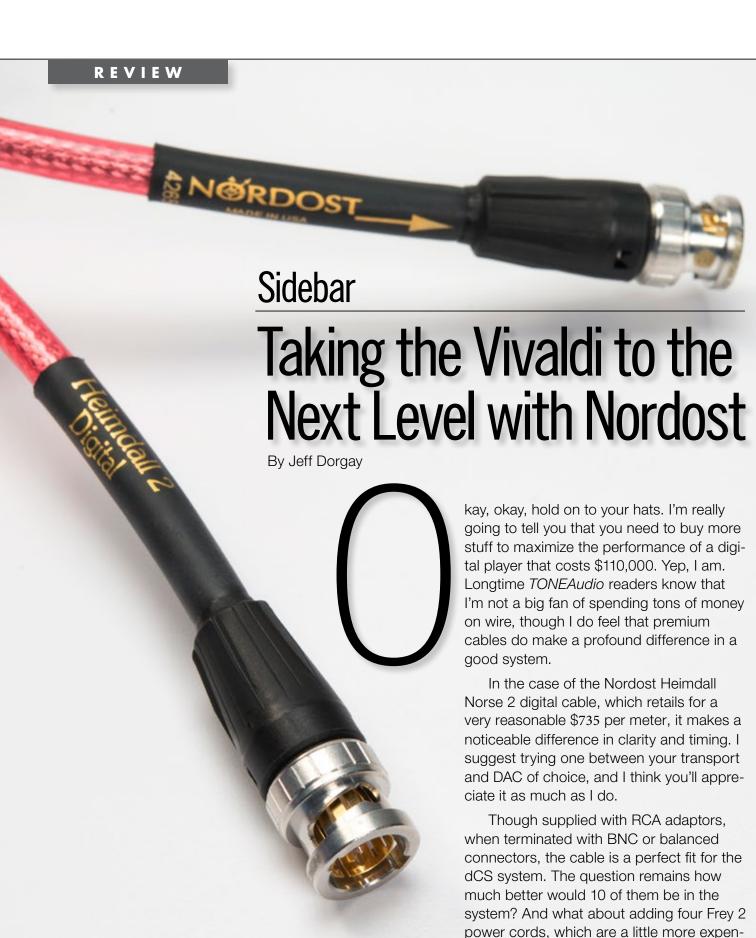
Line in the Sand

Bottom line: If the office ever burns down, I'll buy another Vivaldi and forget about rebuilding my record collection. It's that good. After an entire year of 12- to 16-hour listening sessions daily, I'm still pinching myself over the level of performance this player achieves—and now even more so with the built-in app and server capability.

The dCS Vivaldi becomes more engaging the longer you listen to it and the more of your music collection you can experience with it. It is one of the precious few systems at any price that completely disappears and lets you fully enjoy the music.

Much like an Aston Martin DBS or Ferrari 458, the dCS Vivaldi delivers a level of elegance and performance that is unmatched with lesser players. But unlike with the four-wheeled toys, you can build a Vivaldi system one box at a time. And should you not require a disc spinner, the \$68K price of a three-box Vivaldi is almost a steal for the performance it delivers, especially if you are an all-digital listener and can ditch your \$10K-to-\$40K linestage as part of the upgrade.

If you can afford a dCS Vivaldi, take it for a test drive; you won't regret it. The most exciting part of adding this player to my reference system is that it remains enthralling after a year of intense listening and it definitely reveals substantially more music than the excellent dCS Paganini that it replaced. This is definitely a long-term love affair, not a fling.



sive at \$1,680 each per meter? (continued)



REFERENCE 75

75 watts per channel. Weaving magic.







Of course, \$12,000 worth of wire is a major chunk of change, but in the context of a \$110,000 player, we are barely talking a 10-percent increase. And, yes, I'm speaking to the 1 percent here, but if you're in the market for a Vivaldi, or even a Paganini, this is a subject that will cross your mind at some point, because no matter how much horsepower you have, there's always that craving for just a little bit more.

Taking a systematic and pragmatic approach, I affix an RCA adaptor and try just one cable between the Meridian Control 15 and the dCS stack with the factory-supplied cables and power cords. Even swapping this single cable in a multi-cable system makes enough of an *aha* difference to

proceed with the rest. Connecting the dCS stack to the Meridian server using the red Heimdall Norse 2 cable works wonders clearing up some of the graininess that I associate with the Meridian. The guitar intro to Tom Petty's "A Face in the Crowd" is immediately smoother and airier, with more distinct spatial cues.

No, a piece of wire is not going to transform a shit system into a brilliant one, and this is the problem with so many wire comparisons. When the seas don't part from swapping a cable, the manufacturer is always seen as a charlatan. Whether you purchase cable from Nordost or any other manufacturer, I always suggest optimizing your system as far as is practical *before* you start messing

with cables. Can you live without that big glass coffee table? Ditch it. Got a few wall wart power supplies in your listening room? Get rid of 'em. Even little things like leveling your turntable (though not applicable here) will make a big difference.

Once you've done these things, you'll not only get an improvement in your system's current sound, you'll also probably become more at one with your system from having gone through the optimization process. This is the perfect time to introduce some premium cable.

Unfortunately, because the dCS stack has so many cables, it's tough to do a quick swap back to stock or get a second stack for a side-by-side comparison. Though I do manage to get a second OPPO

105 so that I can use both as transports—one with the Nordost cable and one with a \$40 garden-variety cable—the improvements are the same as I heard earlier with the Meridian Control 15, and being able to play the same disc in each player to do a side-by-side analysis is telling.

Skeptical audiophile buddies as well as a few other music-loving friends who know nothing about gear all make the same observations, preferring the sound of the OPPO with the Nordost cable. Interestingly, when I try tricking a friend by telling him the player with the Nordost cable is the one with the budget cable, thereby eliminating the expensive-cable effect, he still picks the Nordost cable.

"Dude, I hate to break the news to you, but that expensive cable sounds worse."

Replacing all of the cables in the dCS stack results in a major step up in terms of musicality, providing an increased smoothness and cohesion overall, while at the same time resolving more musical details. This is even more noticeable with classical and acoustic music. Piano and violins sound more convincing, with more subtlety from top to bottom.

I can't imagine if you've already bought a dCS player that you're looking under the couch for quarters, but if you were considering whether to purchase the 10 digital cables first or the four power cords, I'd suggest the digital cables. Trying both individually, I can tell you that the power cords still improve the sound of the Vivaldi, but the digital cables make a more noticeable overall difference by themselves than the power cords do with the stock digital cables.

Of course, if you're in the mood to shop, do it all at once. The dCS Vivaldi is one of the world's best digital players, but installing a full compliment of Nordost cable takes it to another level indeed, bridging the gap between digital and analog even further. Going back to the stock cables after living with the Nordost goodies for about a month is like putting the bald tires back on your Porsche. You just can't do it. •

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Many older audiophiles remember Yamaha's "natural sound" line of components, with their stark, purposeful design. Following in the footsteps of a few other premium Japanese component manufacturers, the matching CD-S3000 disc player and A-S3000 amplifier are solid audiophile components.

The amplifier produces 100 watts per channel into 8 ohms (150 WPC into 4) and features an outstanding MM/MC phono stage on board. Look no further than the gorgeous power output meters and a pair of tone controls to get the happy memories flowing. Yet the minute you push the play button on the CD-S3000, you'll be pleasantly surprised at the sound produced.

The CD-S3000 offers SACD playback as well as a full complement of digital inputs (USB, optical and coaxial SPDIF) with 24 bit/192khz resolution via the ESS/Sabre chipset, so it can be used with your favorite music server or laptop for digital file playback.

Both components feature massive, coppershielded chassis with power supplies to match. Every aspect of their design has been massaged to ensure top quality sound. We'll let the cat out of the bag to tell you they both sound magnificent, but you can read the full review here.



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After putting the DiaLogue Premium through its paces for the better part of the year, it remains a winner. If you want classic tube sound on a modest budget, this one gives you a glimpse at what a number of five-figure preamplifiers offer.

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SLUMMIN'

This issue we find the benefit in helping friends clean their office when they are in "pitch and organize" mode.



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Dali: www.soundorg.com dCS: www.dcsltd.co.uk

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