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No.64 July 2014

Finding That Spark

Jaan Uhelszki
Sits Down With
Dolly Parton

NEW MUSIC REVIEWS:

Parquet Courts, JJ, the Muffs, Le Butcherettes, Mary Gauthier, Sharon Van Etten, Clipping, and More!

DANISH GIANT Dynaudio Eminence Platinum Speakers

GRRRRR PART DEUX
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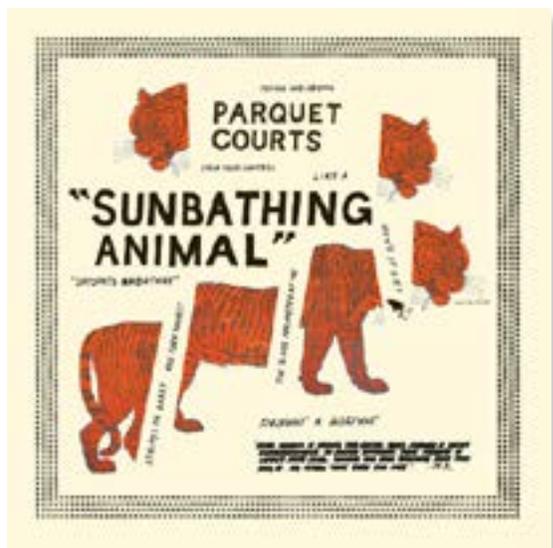


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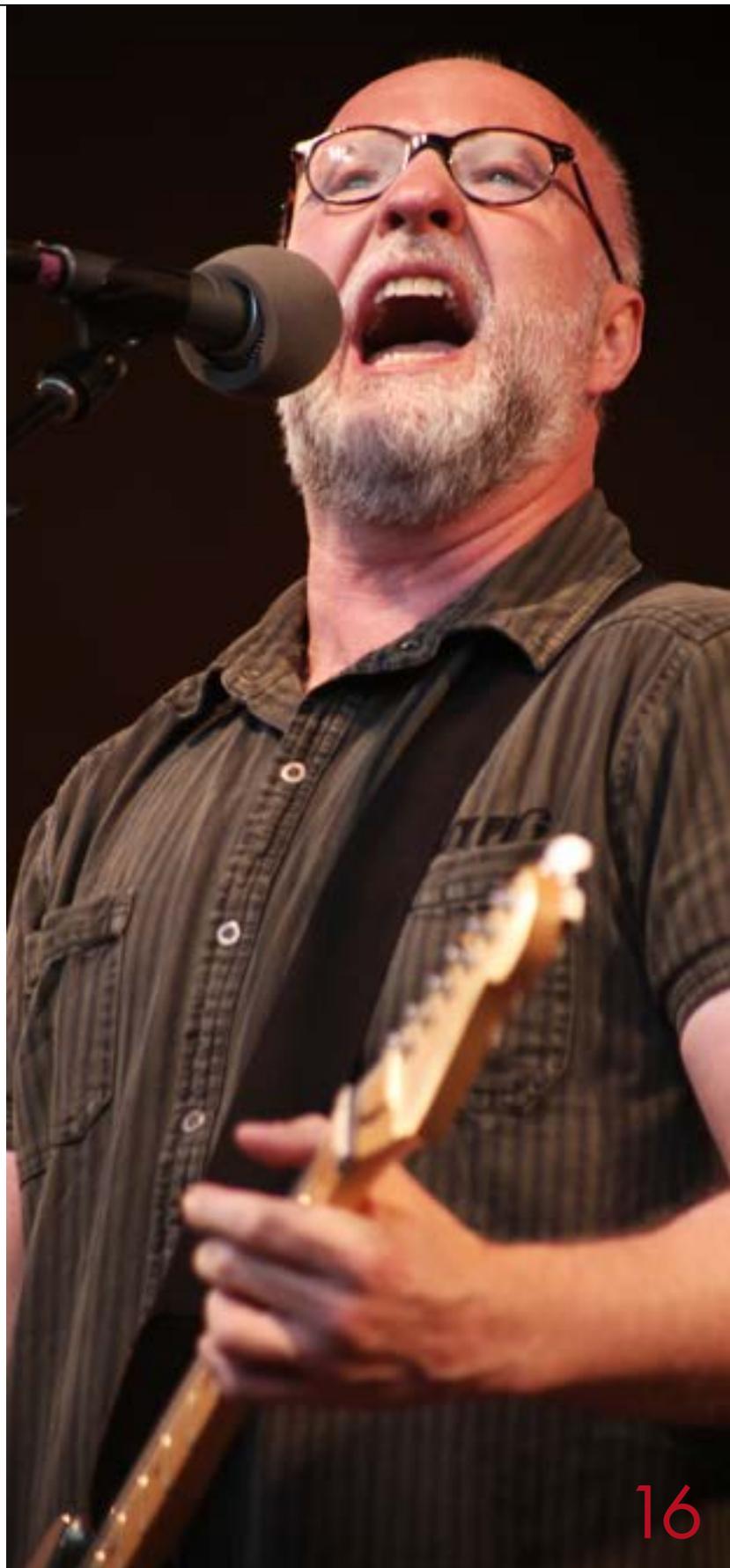
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PUBLISHER'S LETTER



Here we are, fully into summer mode in the United States—the time when most consumer magazines turn down the volume, thinking everyone is outdoors and not even considering purchasing any new hi-fi gear. But as SpongeBob likes to say, “That’s crazy talk!” Having recently stopped by a few of our local dealers here in Portland, Oregon, I can tell you that business appears to be stronger than it’s been in a while—I felt like I was back in the late 1970s again when hi-fi gear was in vogue. Sure, the local shops I went to recently weren’t quite Apple Store busy, but traffic was brisk and customers of all ages and *both* sexes were walking out the door with boxes—always a good sign.

I had a similar experience at this year’s Munich High End Show, where attendance was up compared to last year and there were more exhibitors. As with the Montreal show, Munich is a true consumer event, with plenty of young people, families and women attending, all with equal vigor for music and hi-fi. One of the secrets to these shows is actually something incredibly simple: Don’t waste a lot of time in the elevator at either one of these shows, especially Munich.

The biggest frustration with the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest and T.H.E. Show in Newport Beach isn’t the small rooms (though that could be improved with a little more planning); it’s the amount of time you have to wait on the damn elevator to get to the rooms! There’s nothing worse than having your enthusiasm drained by a 20-minute or longer wait just to get from floor to floor.

So, maybe it’s time to reexamine the business model a bit. A fresh coat of paint and a bit of a different outlook might go a long way to bring some fresh faces in the door. Manufacturers like Zu Audio, Peachtree and VPI are catering to a younger crowd and proving that there is plenty of excitement in the under-30 audience.

Perhaps the nature of the online world and our engagement in social media and online forums has actually increased interest in the world of hi-fi after all. Of course, the example of a few busy stores in Portland on a sunny Saturday is too small and random of a sampling to predict the future of an entire industry, but it is promising. And while so many of our peers love to predict the end of the (audio) world as we know it, it’s always refreshing to see enthusiasts getting together at their favorite hi-fi stores and buying gear.

Maybe the glass is half full after all; maybe it’s even three quarters full. As *TONEAudio* gets near the end of nine years of publication, I think the future is brighter than it was when we started. We look forward to hanging out with you for the next nine years—and then some.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'D. O. S.' or similar, written in a cursive style.



“I still think they like playing with

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the boxes best.”

Gregg Allman

May 24th, 2014

Photo by Jerome Brunet

Gregg Allman of The Allman Brothers Band live at the 22nd Annual Santa Cruz Blues Festival in Aptos, California.

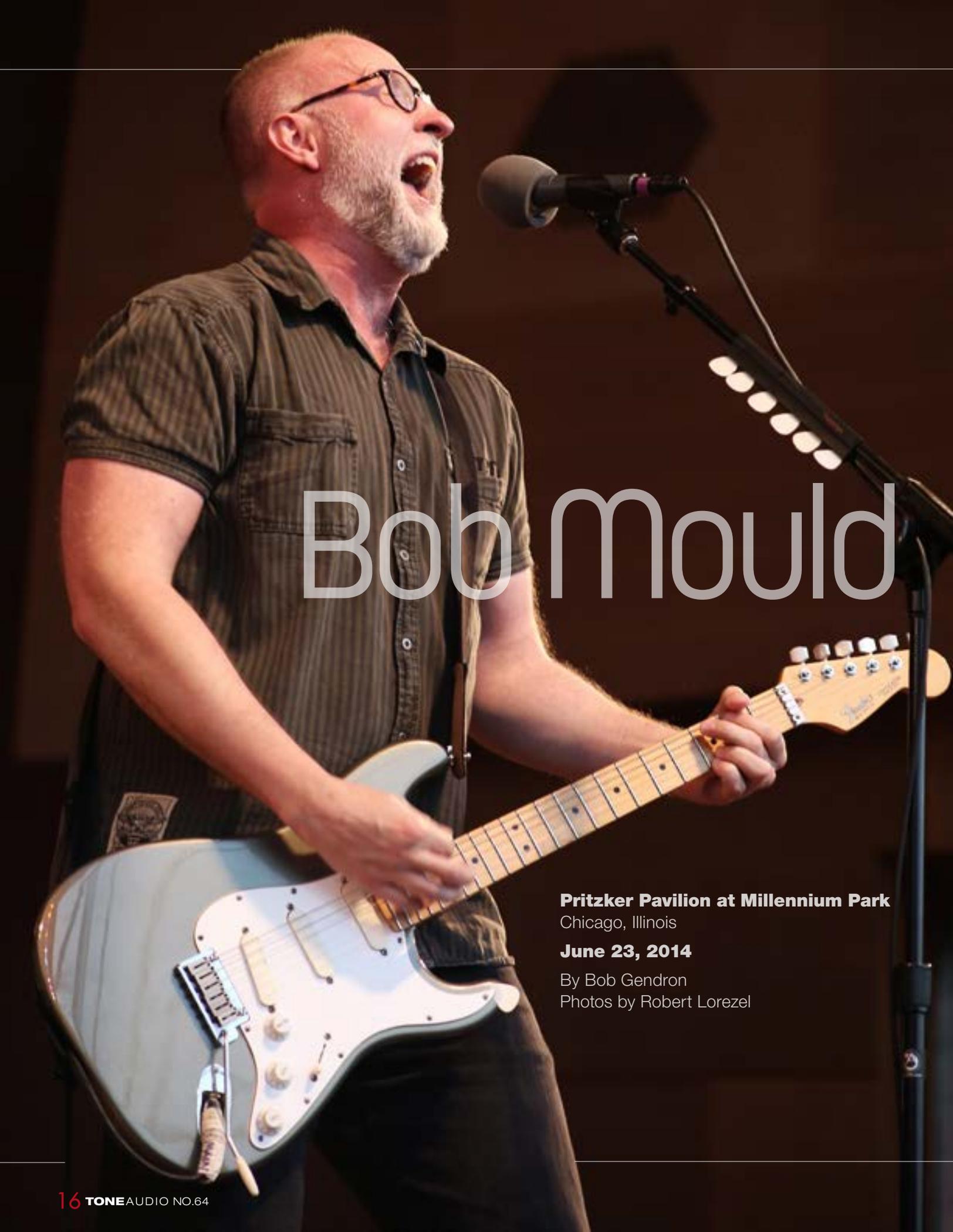
“One of my all time favorite live albums growing up was ‘The Allman Brothers Band at Fillmore East’, I remember sitting mesmerized by the 23 minute song ‘Whipping Post’, whilst staring endlessly at the cover art by legendary rock photographer Jim Marshall, whom I had the great honor of meeting years later in San Francisco and continues to inspire me to this very day.”

—Jerome Brunet

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

Limited edition prints are available.



A photograph of Bob Mould performing on stage. He is wearing a dark, short-sleeved, button-down shirt and glasses. He has a beard and is singing into a microphone. He is holding a light blue electric guitar. The background is dark with some stage lighting visible.

Bob Mould

Pritzker Pavilion at Millennium Park
Chicago, Illinois

June 23, 2014

By Bob Gendron
Photos by Robert Lorezel

S

o much for his tinnitus. Bob Mould, who only several years ago rarely plugged in due to recurrent ringing of the ears, blazed through an electrifying 75-minute performance at Chicago's Pritzker Pavilion in Millennium Park with the searing intensity of a man half his age. For the former Husker Du front man, the vibrant concert continues a mid/late-career revival hinted at back in 2005 and launched in earnest with 2009's *Life and Times*. Mould's creative trajectory, let alone his resurgent vitality at 53 years old, is largely unique among his contemporaries.

Buttressed by the release of back-to-back studio gems—2012's *Silver Age* and the recent *Beauty & Ruin*—Mould has reclaimed the urgent punk-rock territory he helped first outline with Husker Du in the 1980s and later with the more pop-prone Sugar in the early 1990s. It's a sonic landscape sculpted by his sheets-of-sound guitar work, concussive drums, concise bass lines, distorted overtones, and insistent vocals that roar to life with the forceful propulsion of a jet engine. Hardcore aggression and sweet melodies cross at its intersection. While Mould arrangements can favor one style over the other, his sense of balance and professionalism allow him to take chances that result in pieces such as the sledgehammer drone of "Come Around" and doo-wop-accented "Nemeses Are Laughing."

Those two songs were among the nearly two-dozen numbers the upstate New York native breathlessly rifled through on a perfect late-June night underneath a grand, twisted-metal canopy designed by Frank Gehry. Touching on every phase of his career, Mould was in reflective mode but didn't pine for nostalgia. Instead, he interwove ghosts of the past into the fabric of the present, wrapping the set around introspective new material that deals with the death of his father and their complex relationship.

Tense and tumultuous, potent tunes such as the hook-fueled “I Don’t Know You Anymore” and furious “Tomorrow Morning” emitted the sort of mixed emotions, self-awareness, and mortality struggles that linger in the wake of loss, grief, and attempted reconciliation. Similarly themed, the shell-shocked ferocity of “The War” bounced off imaginary walls, Mould ending the purge by whispering advice to himself: “Don’t give up, don’t give in.” The back-and-forth lyrical ricochet of “Hey Mr. Grey” battered around akin to a metallic pinball, Mould pushing the tempos high and hard, and drummer Jon Wurster and bassist Jason Narducy responding with a battering-ram charge. “Kid With a Crooked Face” arrived as an agitated hornet’s nest, the stinging instrumental notes a blur and the pace attempting to establish a new land speed record.

Through it all, Mould kept the accelerator depressed, sweating profusely and yet flashing brief smiles as if it all was just another day sitting in front of a computer screen in an air-conditioned office. During solos, he stomped around like a stallion, digging his heel into the stage floor, the movements signaling to the crowd and his two bandmates that he wasn’t going





to be taken or tamed by anyone. Sure, the balding head, salt-and-pepper beard, and bookish glasses served as obvious signs of middle age and settling down. But Mould has different plans, and for him as much as any artist, the decibels, density, and din provided cathartic release that's needed as much as it's wanted.

As he proved with the cleansing grooves during "A Good Idea," smash-and-grab assault of "Star Machine," socket-frying jump of "Egoverride," and spring-loaded overdrive on "Chartered Trips," beauty can be found amidst noise, desperation, and the crush of everyday life. Mould and Co. often knocked down everything in their way to uncover it. At other times, as on the slow-burning eulogy "Hardly Getting Over It," light wrestled with pitch-black dark, and the heavy burden of change and acceptance—perpetual Mould concerns—seemed suffocating. Still, gracefulness and optimism prevailed.

"Fix it, fix it, full enough," Mould commanded over racing rhythms and crunchy guitar lines on the soul-affirming "Fix It." "Time to find out who you are." At this juncture, it's safe to say Mould answered the challenge and is better for it, personal scars and painful mourning be damned. ●

FEATURE

OLD SCHOOL

Acoustat 1+1 Electrostatic Loudspeakers

By Jerold O'Brien





For many audiophiles, their journey with electrostats began with the legendary Quad 57—but not mine. As someone who really likes to rock, I spurned the audiophile approach and preferred to rock the house with my Altec 19s and a *big* McIntosh power amplifier. When our publisher Jeff Dorgay was giddy as a school girl with his first pair of Magnepans (turning his back on his beloved Cerwin Vegas speakers driven by a Phase Linear 400), I remained steadfastly non-plussed: They did not rock. I was equally unimpressed by his brief bout with a pair of Rogers LS3/5As. Fortunately, that phase passed quickly.

But one evening, Jeff bribed me with a lot of beer for helping him move a pair of Acoustat 2 speakers into his listening room. Little did I know that my life was about to change. I rolled my eyes, thinking, “Here we go again, another lame pair of panel speakers.” And on initial power up, these relatively small panels that only had about an 83 dB sensitivity rating did not impress. However, two days later, after the ESL panels were fully charged, these little Acoustats rendered music in a very interesting way, with a clarity and presence that the Magnepans just couldn’t muster and a delicacy that I had not yet experienced. They still needed a lot of power to move some air, and when these speakers were replaced with the much bigger 2+2s, I finally “got” the ESL thing—and I’ve remained a lover of the style ever since. But I tended to prefer the 1+1s, partly because they always remind me of the monolith in *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Charity Begins at Home

Perhaps the best thing about having audiophile buddies, especially ones that have a bit of adult ADD, is that they can't sit still for very long, meaning there are always great deals to be had if you wait long enough. Car enthusiasts seem to be that way too. And camera enthusiasts, but I digress...

While the model 2 always seemed a bit congested and lacking in ultimate focus, with the 2+2 a little bit too round on the bottom end, my goldilocks speaker has always been the 1+1. Essentially the 2 with the panels on top of each other, rather than side by side, the 1+1 creates sonic images like few other speakers can, even today, thanks to a panel width of about 9 inches and a floor-to-ceiling height.

Back in the 1990s, I had a set of 1+1s that I paired with Jeff's old Audio Research D79, and it was a match made in heaven in my 11-by-14-foot room. The 1+1s even generated decent bass and, just to be sure, I bought a pair of Quad 57s just to compare—not even close! Yes, the Quad has a midrange purity that is arguably tough to beat, but for this guy, the much greater low-frequency response and dynamic range of the 1+1 make it a more interesting daily driver.

Back to the Future

Driving today's 1+1s with a pair of 100-watt Pass Aleph monos, combined with an ARC SP-11, makes for a kick-ass vintage system on a reasonable budget. Borrowing a friend's D-79 to pair with the 1+1s brings back great memories, with a bit more romance through the midband, but the class A Pass amps make for more control and more bass wallop (not to mention eliminating the need to track down suitable tubes). *(continued)*





Balanced Audio Technology

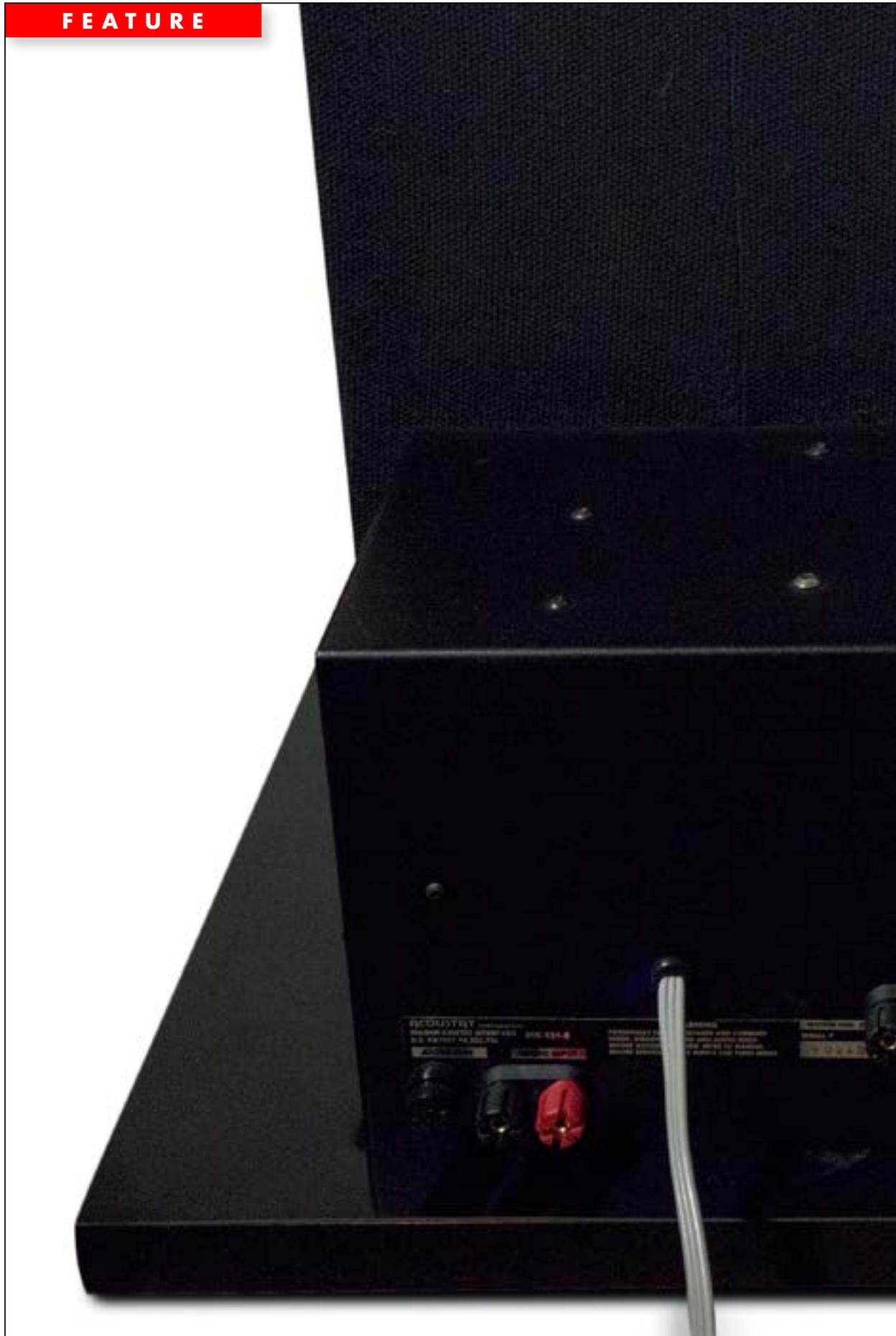
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CHECK OUT OUR NEW SITE [BALANCED.COM](https://www.balanced.com)

OLD SCHOOL

FEATURE





The original Acoustat ESL panel is nearly indestructible, but the power supply/interfaces are starting to have issues, mainly due to expired capacitors, with most of these speakers now over 30 years old. Thanks to speakers' straightforward design, those handy with a soldering iron can easily replace the capacitors, and while you're at it, take out the cheesy internal wire and replace it with a bit of your favorite premium wire from Cardas or Kimber, for a little more zip in the transparency department.

Later-model examples featured interfaces with the coveted "medallion upgrade," improved transformers that coupled the panel to your amplifier and were wired with Monster Cable inside. Those of you with these speakers will notice that they've turned a nice shade of green, which is a wonderful patina for a copper roof, but not the greatest thing for an audiophile speaker.

You can send your interfaces to Roy Esposito at Audio Haven for a full refurb for about \$600 a pair. We went this route and it was money well spent. Roy is semi-retired and a great guy, so don't pester him to hurry. Let the man do his thing in peace and quiet. About a month later, your Acoustats will sound better than new, and he works on all models.

Setup of these speakers is a breeze: Move them about 3 feet from your back wall and start with the speakers about 5 feet apart; move them farther apart in 6-inch increments until the stereo image falls apart; then move them slightly back toward the center; and play with a touch of toe-in until you achieve imaging perfection.

It's worth noting that a little bit of room treatment goes a long way with the Acoustats. I've always achieved the best results with some absorption right at the first reflection point, and either absorption or diffusion directly behind the panels will yield a more precisely focused stereo image. If room treatments are not an option, try moving the speakers slightly farther out in the room, however you will sacrifice a bit of bass extension by doing so. *(continued)*



EMERGE FROM THE DARKNESS

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





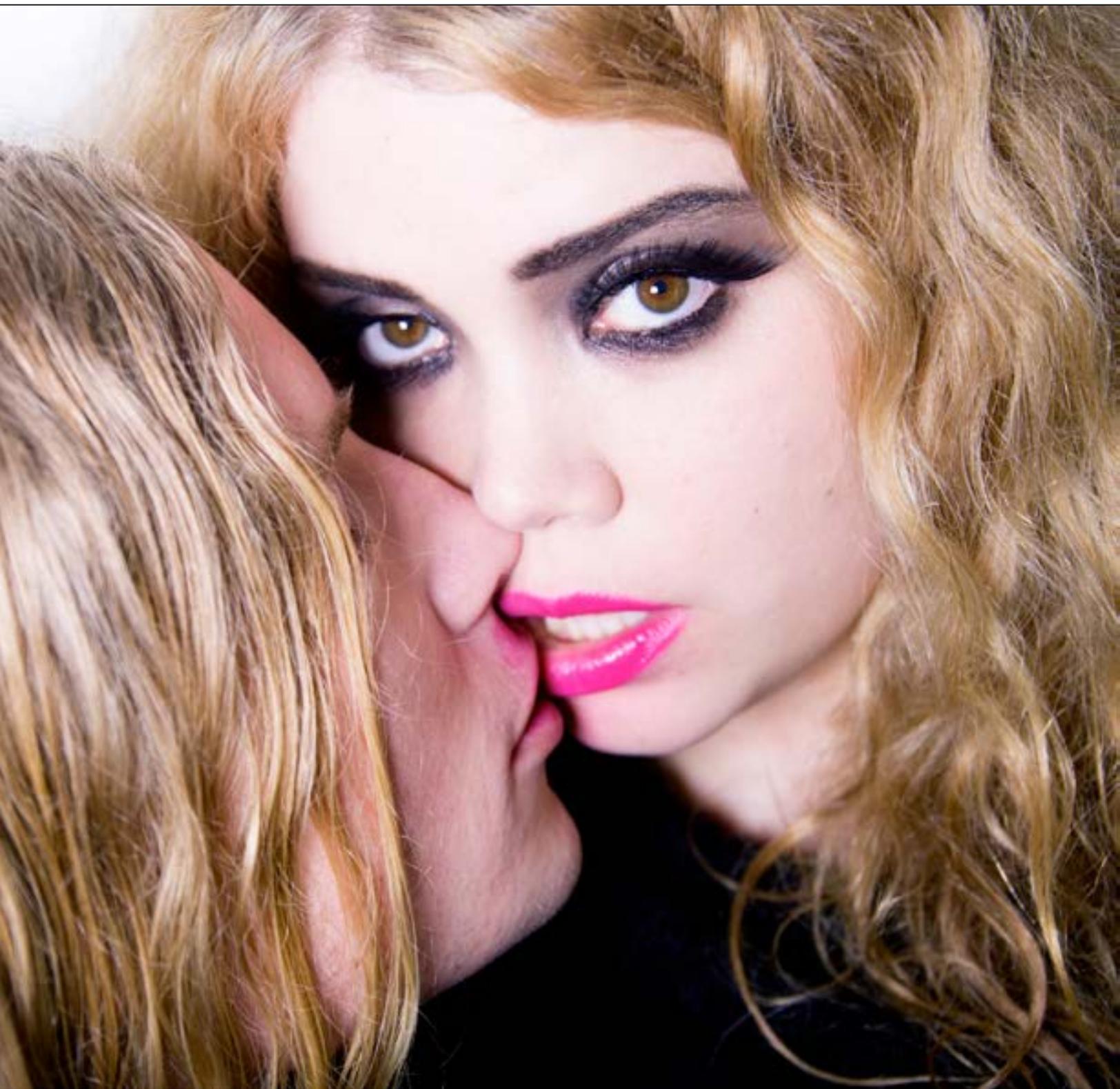
Getting Some

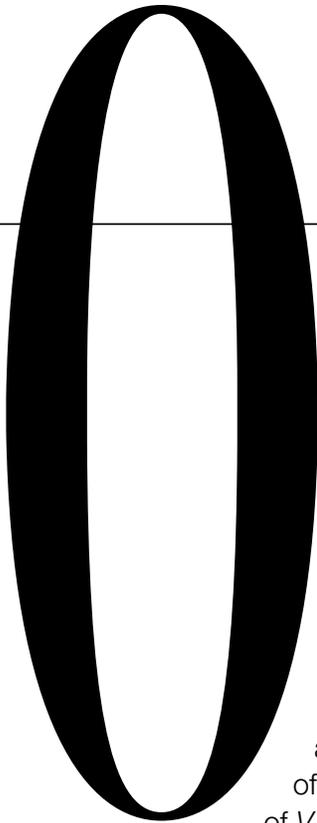
If you're looking for an alternative to a pair of Quad ESLs, I can't suggest a pair of Acoustats highly enough, regardless of whether you have modern or vintage electronics. Unlike my other favorite electrostat, the MartinLogan CLS, the Acoustats are a bit easier to drive with tube electronics, but you sacrifice some of the CLS's ultimate resolving power.

A clean pair of Acoustat 1+1s, with either cream or black grille cloth, should set you back about \$600 to \$800. As the grille cloth (or socks, as they're often called) is nearly impossible to find these days, try to find a pair that have not been physically damaged. Should yours be ravaged by age, dirt or even cigarette smoke, an overnight soak in the tub with a potent elixir of bleach and OxiClean followed by a spin in your washing machine's gentle cycle will have the cloth looking much better. Experience has taught me to dry them in the fluff cycle only—you don't want any heat. Even though the socks are made of a synthetic material, there's no sense in taking the chance of shrinkage. Resist the urge to dye them a funky color—or not. The vintage look of these speakers is definitely part of their appeal. ●

MUSIC

NEW RELEASES





Orchestral pop for the remix era, much of what Swedish duo JJ delivers is familiar. Fragments are recognizable. Lyrics sometimes unravel as a confluence of Miley Cyrus and Drake songs. Harmonies echo Madonna hits of the 80s. Synthesizers are glacier-cool like those of ABBA. And yet much of *V* sounds just beyond the reach of familiarity.

Is that a harpsichord, or bird chirping? Is that guitar feedback, or droning electronics? Did “When I Need You Again” just mash-up references to the Mamas and the Papas’ “Dream a Little Dream of Me” with Young Money’s “BedRock”?

Probably, as the duo of Joakim Benon and Elin Kastlander attempt to tap into our collective Top 40 and then turn it into a softly brimming haze. Alternating between abstract ambience and glistening melodicism, *V* filters a romance—from its courting to its dissolution—through the lens of modern pop. Images of spilled drinks on “Dean and Me” clash with those of fairly tale-like idealism, and



JJ

V

Secretly Canadian, LP or CD

the sound of a church-like hymn runs up against vague Auto-Tuned rapping on “Hold Me,” each noise emerging and dissolving as harmonies crest and violins drift into the clouds. The message JJ conveys is often one heard in the most accessible club music, but the sound is built for the heavens.

Past JJ releases—a pair of albums, a collection of singles—have drifted toward the experimental, equal parts folk-pop, hip-hop minimalism, and hypnotically looping digital landscapes. Bits of those sonic aspects are here, but *V* is all forward momentum. One song pushes into the next and a giant, layered hook lays beyond every hand-drumming break.

Moments, such as “Fågelsången,” sound as if they were recorded in the wild. Birdcalls and tribal drumming mesh with manipulated thug-like vocals, Kastlander’s fragile rasp, and electronically boosted violins. Others, such as “Inner Light,” are choral-quiet one moment and turn into finger-snap-enhanced reveries the next. Even then, knobs may turn Kastlander’s voice up high until it’s a dirty-minded chirp.

It all seems designed to disorient. Just when you think you have *V* figured out, the act drops a “Summer of ‘69” riff to close the album, and it becomes a work as much about love and loss as it is the songs that get us through it all. —**Todd Martens**

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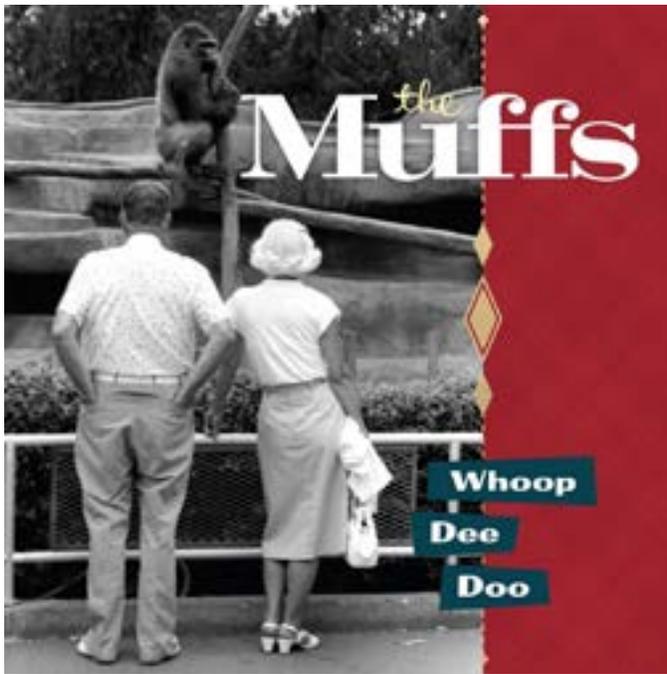


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The Muffs

Whoop Dee Doo

Burger/Cherry Red, LP or CD

Kim Shattuck will forever be the answer to the trivia question: “Who replaced original bassist Kim Deal in the Pixies?” Never mind that the former’s tenure in the once-impeccable band lasted only a few months before she was terminated, the fall girl for an embarrassing run of shows short on energy, purpose, and inspiration. As it happens, the Pixies’ decision to end the relationship with Shattuck is the best move they’ve made in nearly a decade—and they’re not even the direct beneficiaries. Rather, the dissolution prompted Shattuck to re-start her primary band, the Muffs, after an extended hiatus.

Whoop Dee Doo, her trio’s first album since 2004 and most consistent since 1997’s *Happy Birthday To Me*, bursts with bounding melodies, crunchy tones, and bash-and-slap raucousness that have been Shattuck signatures since the group released a self-titled effort on Warner Bros. more than 20 years ago and immediately announced itself as one of the most fun, catchy, and happy-go-lucky acts in pop-punk history. Too raw for the mainstream and too sugary for the underground, the Muffs attracted a cult following smitten by Shattuck’s sweet-and-tart vocals, goofy sensibility, and hummable hooks that would be the envy of Cheap Trick, Big Star, or any other formidable power-pop band.

These hallmarks course throughout this 12-track set in which concise songs go off like Black Cat fireworks behind a school and put grins on the faces of all the sly neighborhood kids watching the disruption. Carefree, punchy, and comedic, the Muffs give listeners permission to cause silly trouble, partake in shenanigans, and hang around in pajamas all day because, well, why not? Musically, fuzz-drenched chords, chiming tambourines, and broken notes stem from garage tradition. Shattuck’s come-hither coos and persuasively sultry hiccups suggest romantic girl-group swooning until she shatters any such illusions with guttural roars and husky growls that belong on a riot-grrl seven-inch.

Dynamic and pronounced, the contrasts lend to the group’s playful energy and sense that no matter the subject at hand—boys and their ignorant ways are a common theme, and fittingly so, since the Muffs’ fizzy tunes mirror the ups and downs of the rollercoaster emotions associated with fleeting crushes—Shattuck sings as if she’s completely infatuated and unable to concentrate on anything else. *(continued)*



IN ADMIRATION OF MUSIC

DALI BY DESIGN



Dali loudspeakers feature a performance consistency unmatched by any other speaker. From the entry-level Zensor, to the stylish Fazon to the flagship Epicon, all share the same engineering goals: combining low-loss cabinet materials, emphasis on maintaining time coherence and gentle easy-to-drive crossover networks in a range of loudspeakers delivering what the musicians intend you to hear.

Get to Know Dali.



The Sound Organisation

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©Photo by Kim Shattuck

Whether it's the annoying bore in "Weird Boy Next Door" or oblivious guy she pines after on "Like You Don't See Me," she invests her all in the vocal deliveries to the extent weaknesses, vulnerabilities, and strengths get exposed with the same no-regrets openness. Sadness and disappointment occasionally arise, yet the Muffs' infectious shimmy-shake means they don't linger.

Besides, Shattuck and Co. primarily reside in a headspace defined by cheerfulness, cuteness, and lazily wasting away hours. Even when Shattuck gets angry on the revenge tale "Take a Take a Me," declaring

her intent to punch out another suitor after her man, she's upbeat and hilarious. Her mates follow suit, tapping out bopping beats and leaning on a retro-styled organ for added punctuation. Violent tendencies again briefly appear on "Cheezy," but the harmonica-laden jangle-rock ditty turns into a charming ode during which Shattuck's voice breaks into an uneven falsetto. "Forever" is more gleeful, a low-key ballad that due to its sincerity never collapses from its too-good-to-be-true sentimentality. Bassist Ronnie Barnett even gets into the action on "I Get It," a relaxed

duet seemingly destined for a hand-in-hand strolling scene in "Portlandia."

"In the middle/Is the place I want to be," Shattuck professes on the magnetic "Up and Down Around." "But I know it/Won't come naturally." Indeed, the Muffs are anything but normal—and they know it. Their willingness to celebrate abnormalities and drop their guard on seriousness emerges from every corner of *Whoop Dee Doo*, which makes being an out-cast sound like much more fun than a day at Disneyland.
—**Bob Gendron**



“Y

ou don't have to over-think it,” Beverly vocalist/guitarist Drew Citron told a radio interviewer when asked about her duo's debut record. “It's just pop music.”

She's right on both accounts, of course, and the ten songs of *Careers* so easily fly by in under 30 minutes that the album dang-near invites an ignorance-is-bliss approach. But fast and familiar don't mean the same as lacking in charm. The latter characteristic is relatively bountiful on *Careers*, a set that feels like a soundtrack to a daydream. Guitars are bright but obscured, phrases get lost in harmonies, and melodies are so comfortable they already feel nostalgic.



Beverly

Careers

Kanine Records, LP or CD

The sprightly opening notes of “Medora” bounce along like they’re playing hopscotch with the tightly cropped beat, a summer pop feeling if there ever was one. That is, at least, until the song builds to a burst of power and fuzzy energy in the chorus (as most tunes here do). Still, the friendly, come-what-may vocals ensure things never get too out of hand. But Beverly certainly pushes the limits. “Ambular” conjures all the panic its phonetic, paramedic cousin implies. Hard-pounding, milk-carton-like drums are met with an array of alarming, counter-punching streaks of guitar.

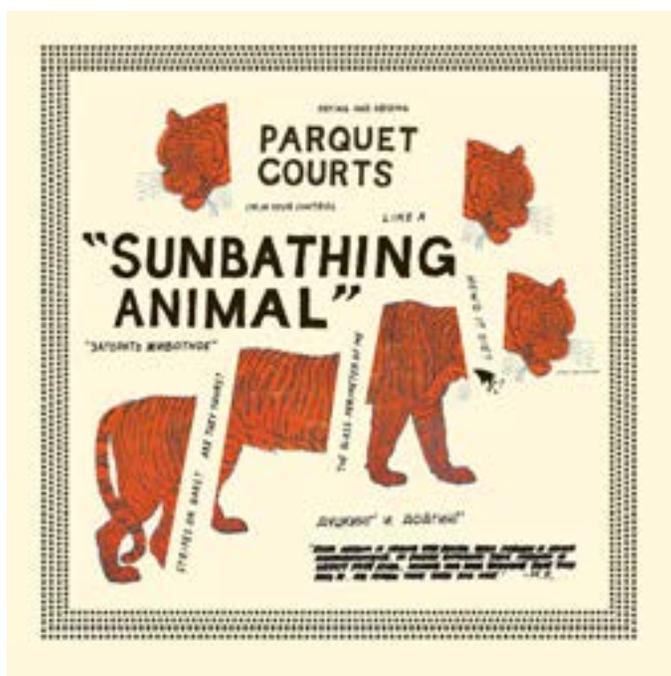
“Planet Birthday” is heavy on the bass and feedback, and “Out on a Ride” feels as if it’s on rails.

Throughout it all, sweetness prevails. A collaboration between Citron and Frankie Rose, the latter of whom has played in the likeminded Vivian Girls and similarly likeminded but moodier Dum Dum Girls, the Brooklyn-based duo ultimately has its radio dial tuned to upbeat, West Coast-style garage pop.

Vide, “Honey Do” is exquisite pop craft, with harmonies at their most yearning and washes of guitars broken up

by minor-key, surf-ready clarity. “All the Things” takes its left turns around swoon-worthy “whoa-ohs.” “Yale’s Life” answers its hot-and-bothered lyrics and breathy, whispering vocals with a reflective pace and chords manipulated to the point that they come off as church-like organs. Things seem more amiss in “Honk Kong Hotel,” with lyrics that allude to crimes and long-held secrets. Here, Citron’s guitar tempers the fast-moving pace with woozy balladry. Recklessness may be implied, but the tone is wistful.

—**Todd Martens**



Parquet Courts

Sunbathing Animal

What's Your Rupture/Mom+Pop, LP or CD

Light Up Gold, Parquet Courts' 2012 breakthrough, doubled as an indie-rock Rorschach test of sorts. Critics and fans gazed into the Brooklyn via Denton, Texas quartet's musical outpouring, a twitchy mash-up of angular guitar riffage, post-punk rhythms, and stream-of-consciousness lyrics—and depending on the person, were reminded of everything from Sonic Youth to Television to Guided by Voices to the Fall to Pavement. In an interview with *Rolling Stone*, Pavement frontman Stephen Malkmus even recalled hearing one of Parquet Courts' songs in a Portland burger joint and momentarily thinking it was one of his own. The recollection sounds like something culled from an episode of “Portlandia.”

There's going to be a similar urge with *Sunbathing Animal*. The droning, monotone “Dear Ramona,” for one, comes on like Lou Reed jamming alongside Modern Lovers, while the stoned and starving thrash of “Always Back in Town” conjures images of scrappy surf-punks like the Trashmen. Parquet Courts haven't tried to run from these influences, either. In a recent interview, singer/guitarist Andrew Savage described the hypnotic, seven-minute-plus “Instant Disassembly” as the band's attempt to pay homage to everything from Velvet Underground and Roxy Music to newly cast lover-of-lo-fi Neil Young.

But where previous efforts felt more like a joyous celebration of the band's idols, *Sunbathing Animal* arrives jammed with enough sonic quirks and unexpected left turns to quantify as something new. Witness the droning “She's Rolling,” where guitars saunter through like thick brambles of tumbleweed as Savage spouts his surrealist poetry. “She's rolling down a hill/She's rolling down a hill,” he drawls. “And I can still see her when I close my eyes.” (*continued*)

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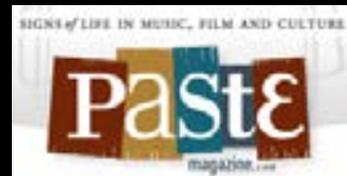
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Only a cranky blast of harmonica near the end of the tune—think Dylan if his harmonica had somehow corroded at a similar rate as his actual voice—disrupts the relative calm. “Into the Garden,” in turn, takes a Southwestern detour, the four players constructing a dry, airy musical landscape more in tune with their Texas home than their current, cramped Brooklyn digs.

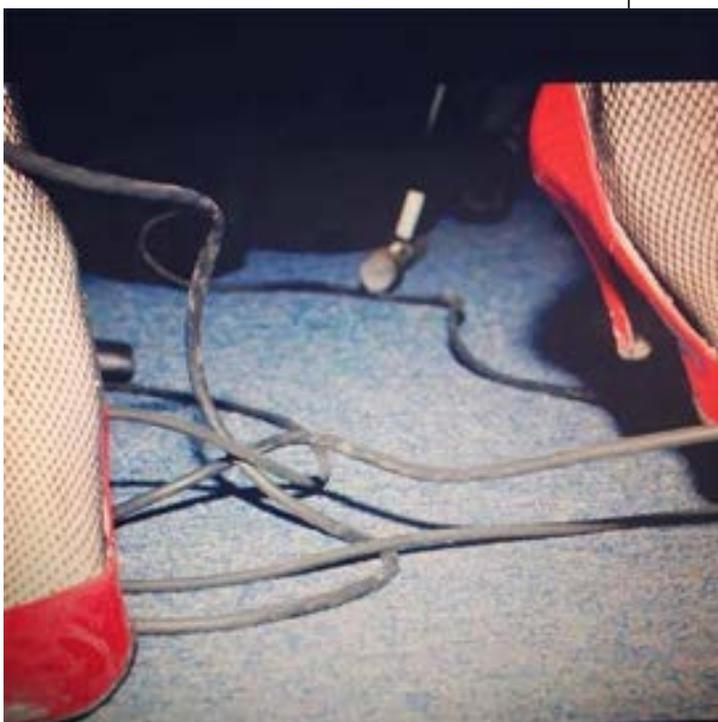
Lyricaly, Savage remains fond of dreamy bon mots, and there are times his words play like imprecise riddles. “What’s sharp as a knife, followed me all my life, waits never rests, till it eat me alive?” he sings on

“What Color Is Blood,” a slow dance of epileptic guitar and drummer Matt Savage’s tightly wound kit-work. Elsewhere, he veers between lines that seem to hint at the pressures placed on the band by the increased public spotlight (“The velvet stage, the concert stage...all my friends are disappearing”) and the kind of disassociated ramblings one might expect to hear shouted from a skid-row street corner (“Unalloyed joy/I thrice repeat/Unalloyed joy/Unalloyed joy”). That both lines fall within the same song—the urgent, pogoing “Duckin and Dodgin”—only shows how

slippery meaning can be in the frontman’s skilled hands.

While grasping the band’s words can feel a bit like trying to take hold of a puff of smoke, the music itself never feels anything less than primal. There’s momentum and physicality to tunes like “Sunbathing Animal,” a thrashing cut that throws sharp elbows. *Light Up Gold* might have served as the breakthrough, but tracks like the title cut announce Parquet Courts’ intentions to press onward even further.

—**Andy Downing**



Le Butcherettes

Cry Is for the Flies
Ipecac, LP or CD

The introduction to Le Butcherettes architect Teri Suarez may not always go smoothly. She is a force, a frontwoman who, in the tradition of Iggy Pop or Joe Strummer, puts emotion first. Ask her about her approach to singing, and Suarez is likely to act something out, to tell you that she sometimes “sings like a mad woman.” She will do this as her voice turns into a shriek and her eyes roll deep into her forehead. And she waits all of 40 seconds on her band’s second album *Cry Is for the Flies* before things get weird, before her stern command of the opening verse starts to give way to something that feels more possessed. “Burn it, burn it down,” she sings, her voice snapping and swiping at the words as if trying to break free of a leash.

As for what Suarez wants to burn down, take your pick. Now 24, she formed Le Butcherettes as a teenager in Guadalajara, Mexico, when she viewed punk rock as a weapon. Collaborators have come and gone, but her rage hasn’t tempered. A debut album, *Sin Sin Sin*, was released in 2011 after signing with a boutique label run by Omar Rodriguez-Lopez of Mars Volta and At the Drive-In fame.



It's loud, brash, and unpredictable. A song can be a blistering, guitar-fronted attack or little more than hollering and a rhythm. Adding another dimension comes via a left-of-center, carnival-like keyboard.

All that chaos has returned on *Cry Is for the Flies*, but it's a little more harnessed. "Demon Stuck in Your Eye" hits hard and fast—stop-and-start blues constantly catching its breath. "Normal You Were" is more expansive, adding eerie, angelic choirs to the mix. Consider it a mini-orchestra of aggression, where guitars scrape and clank before locking in sync around a swarm of layered vocals. Each addresses the album's primary themes, as songs deal with those that feel no remorse or, in the case of "Normal You Were," a mass shooter that has lost all grip on reality.

The topical, the political, and the personal intermingle throughout. "My Child" unwraps one tier of guilt after another, as drummer Lia Braswell hits like something medieval. "Shame You're All I've Got" tones it down as the rhythm stutters into a march and the keyboard gets dementedly toyish. "Poet from Nowhere" is an Eastern European brouhaha on which Suarez's dreams of being an artist clash with working-class realities. "The Gold Chair Ate the Fire Man" juggles images of class warfare amid a Stooges-inspired strut.

These descriptions barely touch on the multiple personalities Suarez channels throughout the album. But whether singing with crystal-clear furiousness or an impassioned growl, the message is the same: Le Butcherettes demand to be heard.

—**Todd Martens**

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Mary Gauthier

Trouble & Love

In the Black Records, CD

Fans of Mary Gauthier have long known she's a first-rate tunesmith. Keeping with her stellar reputation, the singer-songwriter's new *Trouble & Love* adds a fresh chapter to her already significant body of work. It's an album of fierce intelligence and unflinching emotional exposure. Throughout, Gauthier writes about the end of a relationship and does so with bull's-eye precision.

Trouble & Love is primarily recorded live, sans studio fuss. The direct approach shows. With its stirring Hammond organ sound and snarly blues riffs, "When a Woman Goes Cold" is so raw and immediate, it could pass for a lost track from Bob Dylan and The Band's *The Basement Tapes*.

Equally striking are the lyrics, delivered by Gauthier in a yearning drawl reminiscent of Lucinda Williams. The narrator is numb as she watches a lover walk out the door. There's no shouting or recrimination, no accusations or tears. *(continued)*



Gauthier captures both the narrator's shock and the lover's chilling matter-of-factness. "She didn't get mad/She didn't even cry/She lit a cigarette and she said goodbye," she sings. "I musta missed a sign/I missed a turn somewhere /I looked in her eyes/ There was a stranger there."

Penning a postmortem album detailing a shattered relationship is certainly not a new idea. But few writers are as masterful as Gauthier at analyzing every twisted piece of a breakup. "You woke up inside a cage/I woke up consumed with rage/A million miles from our first

kiss/How does love turn into this?," she asks quietly on "False From True." The gentle albeit lacerating cello-driven number nimbly traces a couple's doomed arc in less than three minutes.

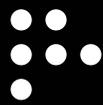
A co-write with the superb Gretchen Peters, "How You Learn to Live Alone" is Gauthier at her wrenching best. "You sit there in the rubble until the rubble feels like home," she sings, the bereft words tumbling forth and cascading down over sweetly reverbed electric guitar and brushed drums.

While a good chunk of the

song-cycle focuses on devastating romantic loss, it's also about redemption—and learning to love and respect yourself. Only a writer as skillful as Gauthier can make such truisms not sound clichéd.

"It took a mighty blow to crack me to the core/To finally come to know I could ask for more," she sings on the stunning "Worthy," a song about the hard climb back up. Like the rest of *Trouble & Love*, it's an unashamed and artful admission from a songwriter at the height of her powers.

—**Chrissie Dickinson**



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Sharon Van Etten

Are We There

Jagjaguwar, LP or CD

S

haron Van Etten recently covered Bruce Springsteen's "Drive All Night" for the A.V. Club's "Pioneering" video series, performing it solo at the Stone Pony in Asbury Park. While countless artists have paid homage to the Boss, Van Etten's choice to interpret the penultimate cut from *The River* both deviates from the norm (it's a deep track) and speaks volumes about the burgeoning singer-songwriter's own music.

At its core, the epic ballad serves as a devotional pledge from the protagonist to his lover, who the narrator attempts to win back after a split. Dig beneath the surface, however, the song addresses the lengths people will go for someone they cherish while simultaneously laying bare the weaknesses, regrets, and desperation that surface in such instances. Similar themes occur throughout *Are We There*, Van Etten's superb fourth album.

Accented by orchestral devices, ornate horns, and atmospheric elements ranging from humming Hammond organs to minimalist textures, the self-produced set witnesses the 33-year-old New Jersey native expanding with fuller arrangements and sounding even more self-assured and balanced than she did on 2012's excellent *Tramp*.

Akin to those in many of Springsteen's narratives, characters in Van Etten's tunes contend with anticipation, troubles, strife, and uncertainties. But, they're also frequently buoyed by hopeful undercurrents and the possibility of resolve. Even as the prospect of walking away often appears to be the better option, their want to stay and see flawed relationships through gives Van Etten's songs—and their scenarios—an undeniably human touch and graceful reach.

The vocalist has always traded in heartbreak, yet her lyrical insistence on taking chances and being alive no matter the consequence has only increased. At the same time, Van Etten's anger and accusatory tones continue to decline. She remains capable of unleashing lacerating emotions and calling out offenders with exacting detail, but she's also found a deep-seated stability and insight that arrive only after a person exits their 20s. The signer on *Are We There* is extremely confident, self-aware, direct, and intimate. Even during moments when confusion and indecision reign, her commanding vocals and shrewd phrasing eliminate doubt. *(continued)*

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Above all, Van Etten's first-person heroines know themselves and, in most cases, where they stand. "Maybe something will change?" she posits on the ponderous "Nothing Will Change," already knowing the answer to her question as echoing harmonies surround her falsetto coo. In a world filled with cynicism and hesitation, Van Etten clings to an unspoken faith that suggests goodness ultimately wins out over agony. Amidst the disappointment on the solemnly spare "I Love You But I'm Lost," her gospel-soaked declarations encourage reconciliation and growth. On the thumping chamber-rock drama "You Know Me Well," she fights against personal darkness and decay with a passionate cry seemingly pulled

from the depths of her soul. In Van Etten's vignettes, turmoil, sacrifice, and love often become synonymous.

She breaks her legs, cuts her tongue, burns her skin, and stabs her eyes in metaphorical fashion on the towering "Your Love Is Killing Me," projecting a self-consciousness that turns her from victim into someone in control. "Afraid of Nothing" comes on like the sun breaking through low-lying clouds, Van Etten laying down terms and acknowledging nothing worthwhile is gained waiting on the sidelines—risk and suffering be damned. She documents what can happen when such ventures breed fear and tentativeness on "I Know," a gorgeous solo piano-vocal piece that presents her as a singer with

few contemporary peers.

"Hold on/All I ever wanted was you," she confesses, her breathy timbre swooping down on each word as if to extinguish lingering ambiguity and wrap her partner up with the warm embrace sincerity brings. Van Etten realizes such happy endings may be the stuff of fantasy, but she's smart enough to understand that in order to attain dreams, chances need to be taken and protections must be surrendered. Listening to her voice—in both in its more insistent, liquid, huskier iteration on guitar-based fare and more patient, sensual form in which syllables float like weightless symphonies on lullabies—is all one needs to do to know whether or not the rewards outweigh the risk. —**Bob Gendron**

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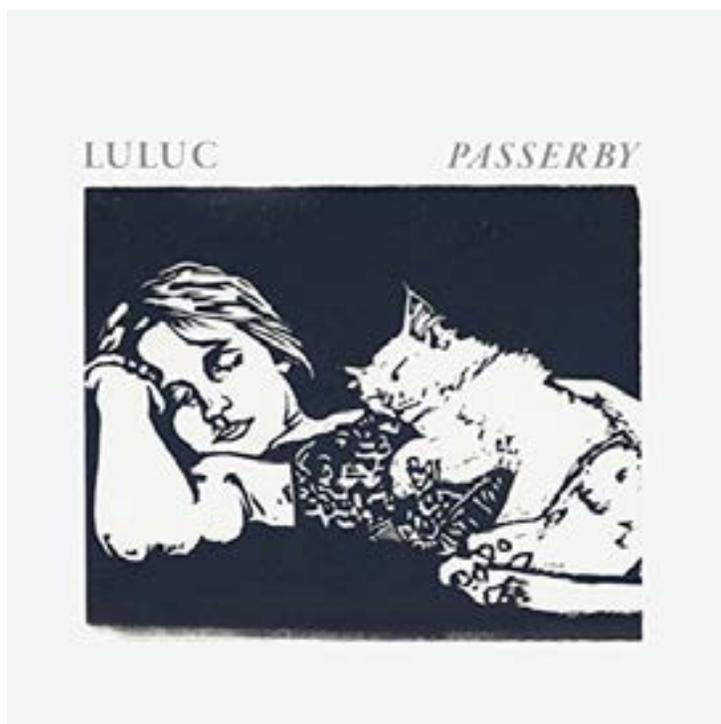


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Luluc

Passerby

Sub Pop, LP or CD

Luluc singer Zoë Randell begins *Passerby* by looking down on Chicago from the window of an airplane, the twinkling city lights essentially speaking to the tender-voiced vocalist in Morse code. As the plane begins its descent, the message is one of nervous anticipation, a lightly strummed ode to new beginnings. Randell ends the album with an emotional 180, her eyes swelling with tears as she looks to the sky, with the glowing stars recalling the memory of a lost loved one.



The group, on both emotional extremities and all sentiments in between, never loses its composure. The folk-pop sound Randell and creative partner Steve Hassett produces is one of amiable reflection, where guitar chords and harmonies are never less than precise but feel as if they could suddenly dissolve. *Passerby* often finds Randell lost in a moment, staring somewhere off into the horizon. Memories flow from the sight of a drawing on “Without a Face.” “Winter Is Passing” frets about a reconnection while watching “bone black twigs fall to the



©Photo by Karl Scullin

ground.” The sun sets on long dead dreams in “Gold on the Leaves.”

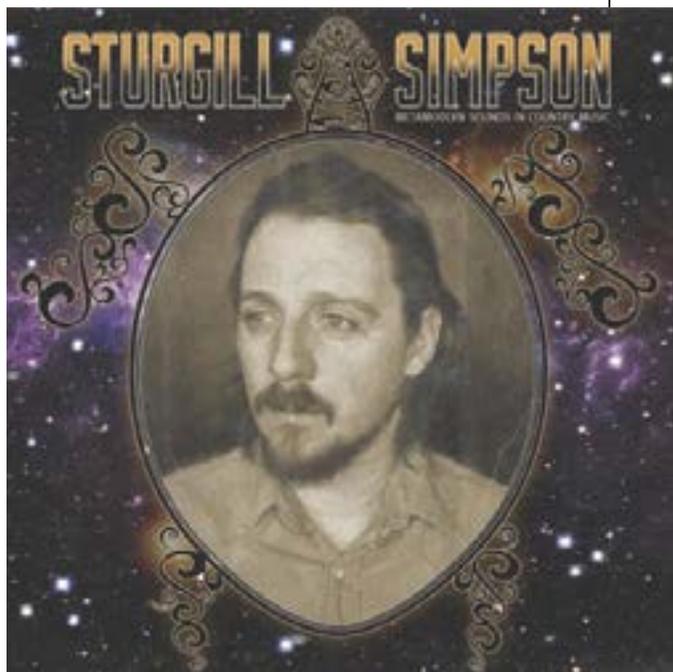
Randell and Hassett, tastefully augmented by small choral and brass arrangements, deliver drama in slow motion and songs for afternoons spent watching a light rain. *Passerby* is the Australian act’s second album, but the first to receive widespread release. Working with the National’s Aaron Dessner, the set takes a less-is-more approach. Violins, flutes, and harmoniums are so spare one may be excused for missing them. Before

catching the attention of Sub Pop, Luluc had the ear of Joe Boyd, the prolific producer who worked with the likes of Richard Thompson and Nick Drake. Fittingly, the latter’s gentle indie-folk serves as a touchstone.

Passerby is, first and foremost, a songwriter’s record, each tune investigating some form of longing. “Senja” leaves all the nature references behind to probe the depths of a rich girl’s eyes. “A pretty young face,” Randell sings, her voice relaxed and nonchalant. “Already she saw her part and

the boredom.” The acoustic guitar is clear, but the rest is a blur, as a piano doesn’t go out of its way to make its presence heard. “Reverie On Norfolk Street” comes on as the album’s most melodic moment, and easily its most readily chamber pop, as Randell muses how a city has changed without the company of another.

“Some noise above,” she sings, “interrupts my quiet reverie.” And that offense, one gets the sense after spending time with these songs, is a grave one. —**Todd Martens**



Sturgill Simpson

Metamodern Sounds in Country Music
High Top Mountain Records, LP or CD

Indie-roots sensation Sturgill Simpson is enormously talented. But on his second release, *Metamodern Sounds in Country Music*, it's often hard to find the contemporary artist inside the retro package.

On its surface, this album has the feel of an art-school project. Riffing on the title of Ray Charles' groundbreaking 1962 LP *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music*, Simpson pushes into hipster territory with the "Meta" in his title and a self-consciously cool cover photo. And when it comes to the sounds, most of the songs are carefully crafted period pieces.

Produced by Dave Cobb, the record functions a sonic throwback teeming with various musical reference points. Among them? "In the Ghetto" comeback-era Elvis; Merle Haggard's classic recordings with producer Ken Nelson; Glen Campbell's shimmery L.A. session sound meets country-politan Nashville; and Hank Williams Jr.'s career-making 1975 country-rock salvo *Hank Williams, Jr. and Friends*. (continued)

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Simpson and Cobb recreate past sounds to such eerie effect that it's hard to not be constantly reminded of the original artists. Simpson is a low, earnest vocalist—a neo Waylon Jennings. The clucking Telecaster in “Life of Sin” recalls the guitar work of the legendary James Burton. On “Living the Dream,” the sonics echo outlaw moments such as Waylon and Hank Jr.’s “The Conversation.”

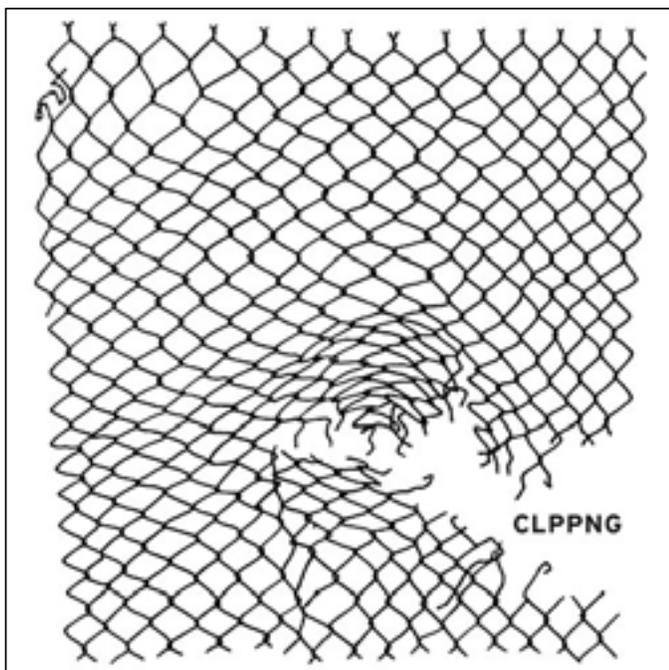
On one hand, it takes genuine skill for an artist to so closely mimic classic country moments. But the downside is that Simpson spends so much time duplicating such sounds and styles, his own individuality recedes into the shadows. His forays into psychedelia arrive as odd and awkward experiments. “Turtles All the Way Down” combines a familiar Bakersfield Sound with a brittle, hallucinogenic interlude that sticks out like a sore thumb. The long jam “It Ain’t All Flowers” devolves into a Beatles-esque “Revolution 9” outtake.

Instead, Simpson is at his best when he stops overthinking, gets out of his own way, and speaks directly from the heart. A pensive cover of When In Rome’s “The Promise” includes a shouted entreaty so genuine it hurts. The singer likely sounds his most authentic here because he isn’t trying to duplicate the original version.

Simpson could also take a lesson from Hank Williams Jr., who spent his early years as a mini-doppelgänger of his father before breaking free and finding his own voice. When Simpson loosens his ironclad grip on the past and relaxes into his own contemporary vision, he’ll earn the buzz that surrounds him. —**Chrissie Dickinson**

S

ay this about Clipping: The abrasive Los Angeles hip-hop trio certainly makes a night out at the club feel like hell. Familiar hip-hop tropes get the nightmare treatment throughout the act's proper debut, where beats sometimes feel fashioned of the torture equipment found in a slasher film series and rhymes place uncomfortable close-ups on the desperate, the misfits, the thugs, and the losers. When Clipping raps about a cold-blooded killer, it puts us not at the scene of the crime but inside his apartment, where paper plates litter the floor and an alarm clock, which doubles as the song's rhythm, won't stop buzzing. All that's missing is the drool stain on a bed sheet.



Clipping
CLPPNG
Sub Pop, LP or CD

Like the music of West Coast kindred spirits Death Grips, it's not always an easy listen. The soundscapes, courtesy of producers Jonathan Snipes and William Hutson, are deranged low-fi. It hits hard, as influenced by Black Flag as it is Cypress Hill—artists name-checked on the album. “Body & Blood” splices dentist-office drills with a groove that could have been created inside an empty dumpster. Voices echo just beyond the periphery, as lyricist/rapper Daveed Diggs takes pop-culture staples of



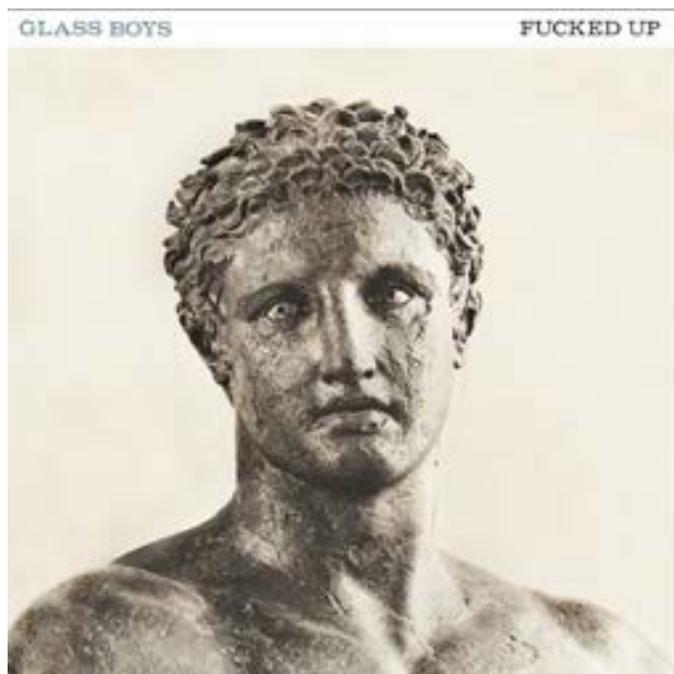
the past few months (think twerking) and finds more murderous uses for them. “Dominoes” learns a trick or two from “Hard Knock Life,” with a children’s choir framed around metallic rubber-band grooves that emphasize empty space. “Ends” should drive the listener mad with its CD-skipping sensation, and “Summertime” will confound or transfix, depending on how one feels about the sound of what sounds like the grinding of breaking glass.

Characters in Diggs’ songs are most often hiding

something most of us would prefer not to know. The protagonist of “Story 2” is spied on his way from a bartending gig, angry that life took a wrong turn when he spots a “blue Acura, dent on the left-rear fender” that lets him know his past has caught up to him. A thick-tongued narrator, Diggs muscles his way through a zig-zagging 8-bit groove to leave the listener with details that linger—the babysitter not picking up her phone, the awnings on the neighboring home. Individuals dance

around sexual assault in “Tonight”; a wayward noir horn and machine-gun beats document the inner-city politics of “Taking Off.”

Similarly grim, “Inside Out” places a wide-angle lens on a murder scene, jumping from the bitter cops to the crooks that drive by, never to get caught. Like watching a gruesome documentary, you’ll keep listening to this promising debut long after you told yourself you’d turn away. —**Todd Martens**



Fucked Up

Glass Boys
Matador, LP or CD

The post-hardcore noisemakers in Toronto's Fucked Up surely never envisioned they'd stick around long enough to flirt with rock-band middle age when they first adopted their moniker back in 2001. Yet somehow, the group, which was once defined by the seemingly self-destructive onstage presence of Damian "Pink Eyes" Abraham—its burly, bearded growler of a frontman—has not only survived, but thrived, releasing a string of increasingly ambitious albums that culminated in the sprawling punk-opera *David Comes To Life*, an 18-suite, 77-minute epic about factory bombings and doomed romances.

While Fucked Up's music is constantly searching and probing, forever stretching out into new sonic frontiers, its members have gradually transitioned from restless punks into responsible adults. Even Abraham has settled, becoming a family man and father plagued by the types of questions that arise among many as they move into their mid-to-late 30s: Have I made the most of my time here? Does what I do make a difference? Would the teenage me approve of the life I'm living now?

These are the challenges the band grapples with on *Glass Boys*, its fourth full-length and likely the most accessible album in its increasingly diverse catalog. Opener "Echo Boomer" sets the tone, with Abraham envisioning himself as a teenager enamored with the possibilities of a career in music. Rather than celebrating the successes he's experienced on this chosen path, however, Abraham, along with guitarist/co-writer Mike Haliachuk (the two split songwriting duties, yet everything here sounds of a piece), spends the remainder of the album struggling with confusion, fear, and doubt, wondering if the so-called compromises the band has made along the way (signing to a giant indie, appearing on network television shows, opening for the Foo Fighters, etc.) somehow tainted the youthful idealism once represented by the music. *(continued)*

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“We traded our moral high ground so they would sing along/ But is it so bad?” growls Abraham on “The Art of Patrons,” a tune that comes on like the Hold Steady doing its best Husker Du impression. “Is it as dark as it seems?/To trade a little purity to prolong the dream?” It’s an issue the crew confronts even more directly on the album-closing title track, with Haliechuk writing, “I’m afraid to grow up/And fuck my life up.”

Growing up is an inevitability, however, and much of the music here sounds as if it has similarly matured. The band continues to shed its hardcore skin in favor of a more melodic, classic-rock-influenced approach. “Warm Changes,” for one, opens amidst a raging see of fuzzed-out guitars before the weather breaks, giving way to a winding, two-minute guitar solo and organ passage that sounds on loan from the Doors, of all artists. Weirder still, it actually works.

Such increased accessibility and broader emotional palette have done little to dampen Fucked Up’s fire, however. The music on *Glass Boys* remains as vibrant, chaotic, and brash as ever, driven by reverb-laden guitar, complex drum patterns, and Abraham’s earthy bellow. The musicians are growing up, sure, but just because they’re getting older doesn’t mean they still can’t kick your ass. —**Andy Downing**



B

efore the May 13, 2014 release of *Turn Blue*, the Black Keys' eighth studio album, the Ohio-borne duo of Dan Auerbach and Patrick Carney released a tour itinerary. It was one befitting of one of the biggest rock bands in the country—a band that wins Grammy Awards and appears on gossip sites such as TMZ mocking Justin Bieber—and included stops at most of our nation's famous basketball arenas.

Turn Blue, however, is not an album built for arenas.

It's still the Black Keys, in that this is still a Midwestern band steeped in meaty heartland blues. Only this is the Black Keys turned down to...heartbroken. "Dance all night because people they don't want to be lonely," a clearly wounded-sounding Auerbach sings on album opener "Weight of Love." But where the band is heading certainly isn't straight to the dancefloor. The nearly seven-minute cut could well be the soundtrack to a film whose antihero is the boy sitting alone on the top bleacher in the gymnasium. Guitar solos weep, and then fade, and starlight atmospheres are mellow, as if they're reflecting off of a disco-ball moving in slow motion.

This—and the album itself—is more Pink Floyd than the sweaty bar band obsessed with the Mississippi blues that the Black Keys once were. It's somber, quite pretty, and will no doubt confuse some listeners that preferred the ease with which the band punched the accelerator and found a hook on

©Photo by Danny Clinch

its prior two efforts. The song isn't an outlier, it's the *Turn Blue* pacesetter, and only the eleventh and final track truly deviates from the tone.

Of course, the Black Keys never exactly were a band operating with blinders on. If it's big choruses and swoony ballads you're after, Kings of Leon are committed to working, working, working, and working that formula to death. While the Black Keys are still billed as a duo, producer/chameleon Danger Mouse is now more or less a member of the group. He pulls triple duty as co-writer, co-producer, and player on nearly each one of these cuts, and the middle-of-the-night comedown he works in his project the Broken Bells seeps its way into *Turn Blue*.

Only the Black Keys take a more organic, soulful approach. One would be hard-pressed to find any sort of review or preview of *Turn Blue* that doesn't reference Smokey Robinson. Auerbach's voice has never been so pliable. Guitars bend, effects get trippy, and there's a hint of gospel on "Waiting on Words." "In Time" mixes in even more odd turns. A dirty, loungey horn section punctuates the beat, handclaps are more forceful than communal, and demented hits on the keyboard seem to arrive without warning. Auerbach, it seems, learned much from his time working with Dr. John.

While the Black Keys proved on 2011's smash *El Camino* that they weren't going to stick to one genre, the album moved through garage and glammy twists with exuberance. On *Turn Blue*, it's attention to detail that's paramount. Characters mull over dead but not-forgotten relationships, as the album is a document of defeated emotional fallout rather than drama. (For those interested in such tidbits, the effort is said to have sprung from the dissolution of Auerbach's marriage.)

It's grim, even when the band flashes some rock grit. "It's Up to You Now" is full of sludgy explosions reminiscent of early 70s metal, the song constantly exploding on itself. The keyboard is sprightly on "10 Lovers," but the guitars are turned down, clearly not ready to match the mood.

Ultimately, the songs that pack that most life feel less inspired. The organ brims throughout "Fever," but in the larger context of *Turn Blue*, the brightness is false. Compounding matters, the Black Keys were never poets, and the open space between the beats doesn't do the band any favors.

"Gotta Get Away" is cute, but tacked on at the end, it's a throwaway, a hit-the-road breakup anthem that largely feels like a roll with an old fling—in this case, straight-up blues-rock.



The Black Keys

Turn Blue

Nonesuch, LP or CD

The surprise is that the Black Keys are pretty adept at wallowing, which pays off for those in the mood for a breakup record. The title track is a mini-orchestra in its own right, a time-shifting journey of wormy synths, redemptive keyboards, call-and-response backing choir, and circular guitar melody that's caught in a descendant loop. "Bullet in the Brain" finds some spring in a ripped-from-the-gutters bass line, and "Year in Review" pairs rattlesnake rhythms with Italian choral samples fit for a eulogy.

"Why you always wanna love the ones who hurt you?" Auerbach asks at the song's start, and while the guitars find a bit of room to soar, the effect is more Bond soundtrack than arena rocker. As for the question Auerbach asks, *Turn Blue* doesn't really present any answers but lets the Black Keys thrive as sonic explorers rather than deep thinkers. —**Todd Martens**



Tombs

Savage Gold

Relapse, LP or CD

Roughly 13 seconds into Tombs' third full-length, *Savage Gold*, the band throws its first haymaker, obliterating a spacy, psychedelic intro with a double-fisted assault of abusive drums and sludgy metal riffage. It's an attack the Brooklyn quartet continues over much of the album's surging first half before drifting into more exploratory (though no less satisfying) terrain on the record's comparatively winding back end. No matter the pace, however, the music remains as bleak and sunless as the group's sealed-beneath-the-earth moniker suggests. Fittingly, screamer/guitarist Mike Hill appears to be struggling with the concept of death throughout.

"Does the soul remain, does the spirit die?" he howls on "Thanatos," one of a handful of tunes with titles that could double as the names of X-Men villains (see also: "Deathripper"). "When flesh decays does the will prevail?" On the doom-laden "Echoes," the narrator slips into darkness as his or her soul begins a cosmic journey "across the void, between the stars." At times, the picture that emerges is far less poetic. Witness the chugging "Deathripper," which closes with Hill repeatedly growling the line "it's suicide" as guitars echo a brutal series of self-inflicted stab wounds.

Surfacing three years after the band's breakout sophomore album, *Path of Totality*, *Savage Gold* finds the crew both refining and expanding on its eclipse-conjuring sound, which forges elements of black metal, post-punk, and aggressive rock into a seamless whole. The approach is best represented by tunes like the genre-blurring "Edge of Darkness," which incorporates multiple tempo shifts (frenzied guitars give way to doomy, channel-scraping riffs—lather, rinse, repeat) over five-and-a-half roller-coaster minutes.

Over the course of the album's ten cuts, Hill and co-guitarist/new edition Garrett Bussanick veer between spacious, post-punk-inspired fretwork ("Severed Lives," for one, imagines what Joy Division might have sounded like had Ian Curtis and Co. been weaned on nightmarish bands like Behemoth) and comparatively finger-cramping fare like "Ashes," which sounds like the quartet taking a blowtorch to its environment. Drummer Andrew Hernandez, in turn, remains consistently revelatory with agile, powerful kit-work. *(continued)*



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



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Dig the way he holds back on “Deathripper,” for example, before leveling his surroundings on “Edge of Darkness,” laying into his drums with the skull-crushing force and sheer brutality of the Mountain physically overwhelming the Red Viper in “Game of Thrones.”

While Hill still tends to favor throat-shredding screams, he occasionally traverses down new, unexpected avenues. On “Echoes,” an eight-minute end-times epic where “worlds turn to dust,” the frontman whispers, screams, howls, and, ever so briefly, adopts a straightforward singing voice as

close to a conversational tone as his vocals have ever pursued.

This sense of exploration carries over in everything from the musical backdrop to the grave-obsessed lyrics, which find the band struggling with big questions surrounding the afterlife, death, and lasting scars impressed on individuals left behind in life’s wake. There are no easy answers, but Tombs have emerged from these depths with a powerful document as visceral and immediate as any metal album released this year. In death, it could be said, Tombs has found new life. —**Andy Downing**



The Stirling Broadcast SB-88

ANOTHER BRITISH GEM

By Jeff Dorgay

The Black Keys' new record *Turn Blue* reminds me of some of the finest psychedelic tunes from the 1960s. The opening track "Weight of Love" has a very Clapton/Cream vibe. There's something about British speakers and classic rock; they just feel right. I have used Harbeth's Compact 7ES-3 and the Monitor 40.1 speakers as references for some time now and a few of their main characteristics seem worth noting:

First, the midrange is spectacular; second, these speakers do an excellent job retrieving the timing information from whatever music you happen to be listening to; and third, even though the 40.1 doesn't have prodigious amounts of bass (though, with a 13-inch woofer, it's more than adequate), it does have a lot of life.

But enough about Harbeth. (More on that later.) While that brand gets much of the British-monitor love these days, there's another player that's not quite as popular but that is just as interesting, if not more: Sterling Broadcast began as a company repairing and refurbishing LS3/5A and other BBC-type monitors. It soon expanded to produce its own speakers, getting the license from KEF for new drivers in order to build a version of the LS3/5A, which was very well received.



JOURNEYMAN AUDIOPHILE

FEATURE





Another Classic, Updated

The SB-88 accomplishes the same thing as Stirling's version of the LS3/5A—this time as a revamped LS/AA speaker. A two-way design with an 8-inch woofer, the SB-88 is a British monitor through and through, from the thin-walled cabinets to the basic black grille that's nearly impossible to remove. Just like the Compact 7, this speaker performs best on a pair of 19-inch-tall speaker stands, to get the right tweeter-to-listener height.

As with the Compact 7, I suggest a very dense stand, like the Sound Anchors I currently use, to best ground the speakers, resulting in a smoother and more extended low-frequency response. In my reference system, the Devialet 110 proves a perfect match for these speakers, offering grip and control that gives them a more modern sound. When paired with a low-powered tube or solid-state amplifier, the SB-88s lean more towards the warm, wooly sound often associated with British monitors. So, choose the amplifier you want to give you the mood you seek with these—they can go either way.

While the SB-88s provide a wide frequency response, they live up to their heritage, providing a lush yet natural midrange that helps most recordings sound better than they have a right to. In the day of hyper-detailed, hyper-real-sounding speakers from YG, Wilson and Magico, the Sterling Broadcast SB-88s are a wonderful experience, almost like your favorite form of comfort food. What they lack in resolving power, they more than make up for in natural presentation. Day in and day out, they remain incredibly user-friendly and non-fatiguing. Should this be what you've been searching for, these are the grail. If you'd like to keep the British sound but still want a modern feel, the Harbeth Compact 7 might be more your spot of tea, as staffer Mark Marcantonio reveals on the following pages...

Harbeth Compact 7ES-3 vs. Stirling SB-88

By Mark Marcantonio



Heritage: It's a key component to how stereo equipment is designed and how it sounds. When it comes to speakers, BBC monitors arguably have the most famous lineage. Simple, thin-walled boxes designed to be placed on stands, these types of speakers add in a sonic signature of low coloration and flat measurements, which are the basics of a successful monitor. Two companies currently epitomize the BBC design: Harbeth and Stirling.

While direct comparisons are not the norm at *TONEAudio*, when a pair of Stirling SB-88s arrived for review, the obvious comparison to the Harbeth Compact 7ES-3 couldn't be helped. Possessing a nearly identical cabinet size (20.5 by 10.7 by 12 inches for the Harbeths; 19.5 by 10.7 by 11.75 inches for the Stirlings), along with similar drivers and port layouts, these speakers present instant curiosity. Even grill removal on both models calls for patience and an old credit card. Besides veneers, the biggest differences are the flat front flange, sealed back panel, and dual binding posts of the SB-88, and the slightly rounded bevel, screwed-in rear panel, and single set of binding posts of the Compact 7. (*continued*)

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FEATURE

True to their DNA, both models prefer slightly shorter stands for optimum performance—in this case, the 19-inch Sound Anchors. After a weekend playing with positioning, the results for the 9-by-12-foot room were identical, sans a 1/4-inch less toe-in for the SB-88. Two other rooms were used as well: an 11-by-18-foot family room and 14-by-18-foot living room. Powering the competitors is the 150-watts-per-channel Simaudio Moon i-7 integrated amp. Sources include the Rega RP1 with Ortofon Super OM 40 cartridge and Sim Moon LP 5.3 phono pre, and a MacBook running iTunes/Pure Music paired with a Sim Moon 300D DAC.

The SB-88s resolve with a sense of intimacy. Allen Stone's bluesy vocals in a live recording of "Sleep" ache with emotional clarity. The tightness of the acoustic guitar strokes leaves little doubt as to technique. Yet, for all the purity of high frequencies, hiss and edginess are never spotted.

The midrange of the SB-88 continues the purity of signal, which is not surprising considering the design parameters of the BBC concept. Percussion is equally tight, with obvious definition between each piece of the drum kit. The strong piano-key strokes on Trixie Whitley's "Breathe You in My Dreams" hold their own space next to her rich and complex vocals.

But the lower registers really give away the SB-88 as a monitor. The rich layering that bass brings to so many songs just never kicks in with the SB-88. The funk classic "Fire" by the Ohio Players, with its foot-tapping bass line, gives only a hint of its existence. The lack of bottom-end has always been mini-monitor territory. No matter which of the three rooms are utilized, I'm left wanting so much more.



A close-up photograph of two speakers mounted on a wooden cabinet. The top speaker is partially visible, showing its black grille and metal frame. The bottom speaker is more prominent, showing its black frame and the top of its cone. The wood grain of the cabinet is clearly visible.

Interestingly enough, both speakers sound their best in nearly the same position in all three listening rooms, another nod to their lineage. However, when the music begins to play on the Compact 7s, the difference is palpable. The Harbeths bring more bass grunt and detail. Listening to music with any sort of low end through the Compact 7s is a whole different experience. The bass guitar in “Fire” resolves and thumps, matching the speaker’s 46-Hz low-end rating.

The upper frequencies of the Harbeths offer a wider imaging sweet spot, while the signal coming forth just has more of everything: detail, depth, spaciousness, etc. A sense of soulfulness is present on the Compact 7s that isn’t there with the SB-88s. Through the Harbeths, the xylophone near the beginning of Steely Dan’s “Aja” rings from the deepest regions of the speaker cabinet. And Trixie Whitley’s vocals take on a sense of aged richness, much like a fine wine.

As with the SB-88s, the Compact 7s take advantage of the space in the cabinet and that in between the speakers, but the latter speakers extend all the way to the walls. Acoustic treatments do come into play, though I find no need to reset the position of the GIK panels. The music comes to the listener rather than he or she needing to step into the musical space. There’s no need to check with head/ear position to confirm the sweet spot with the Harbeths—just sit back and enjoy the experience. *(continued)*



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The Compact 7s reproduce two of the hardest instruments for speakers—the piano and the human voice—with a naturalness and clarity that stuns. The piano notes roll over the music like waves. Jan Gunnar Hoff's piano on a vinyl version of his album *Living* cascades throughout the room. Tonal structure and timbre are beautifully accurate and as non-fatiguing as one can rightfully expect at this price point.

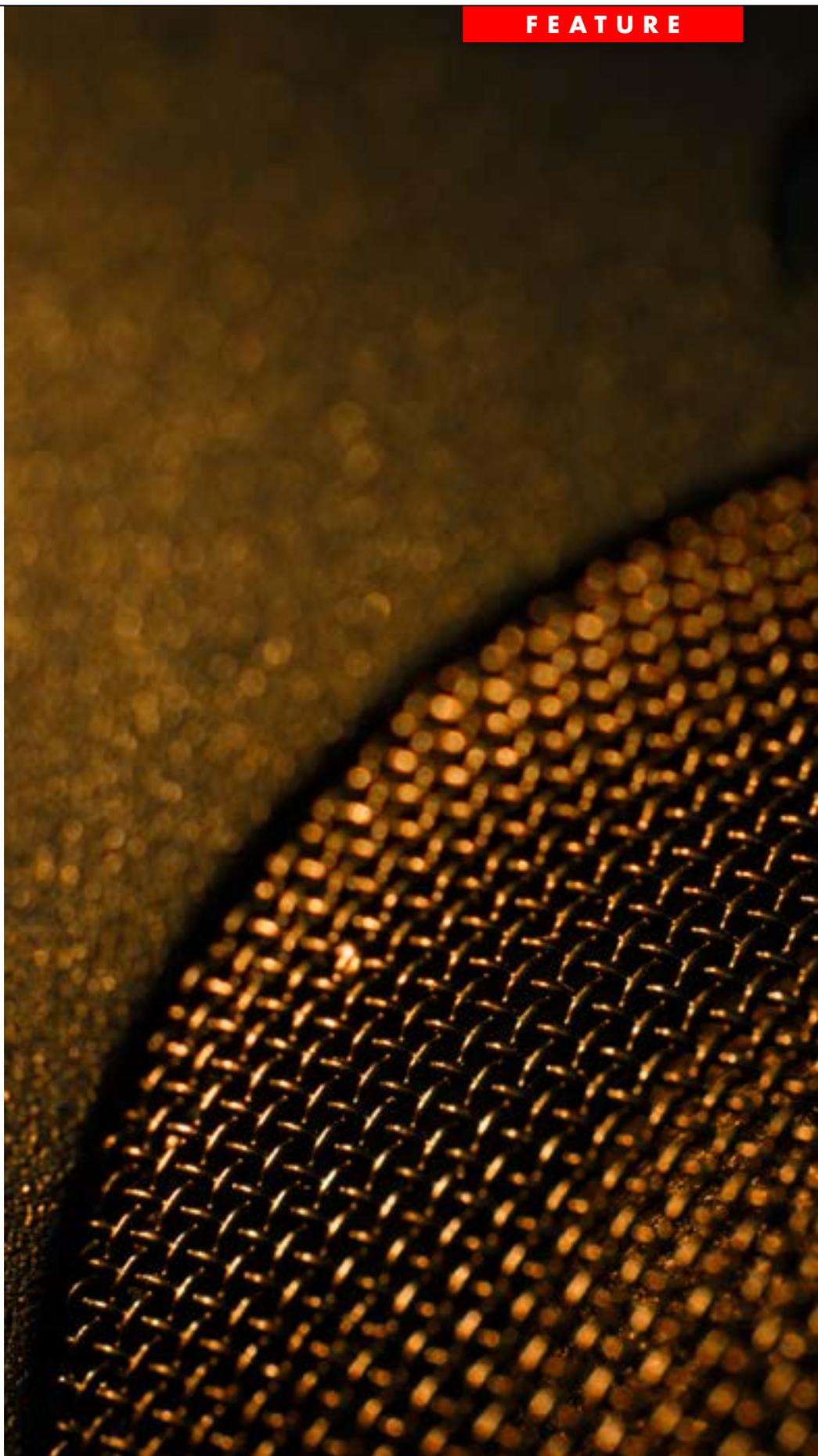
Listening to pre-Auto-Tune vocal performances demonstrates the additional resolution that the Compact 7s have over the Stirlings. From Ella Fitzgerald to a young Melissa Etheridge and from Dean Martin to Kris Kristofferson, the Compact 7s deliver a complete vocal performance, including the imperfections that make each singer's voice an honest and terrific treat.

The Final Tally

While the Stirling SB-88 is a nice speaker, with all the good intentions of the BBC monitor tradition, it cannot match the broad, rich sonic experience that the Harbeth Compact 7ES-3 provides. Alan Shaw (Harbeth owner and speaker designer), the BBC monitor crown belongs to you. ●

Stirling Broadcast SB-88
\$3,450 – \$3,850,
depending on finish
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Harbeth Compact C7ES-3
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Finding That Spark

A Sit-Down Conversation With Dolly Parton

By Jaan Uhelszki

Dolly Parton has a gift of intimacy, and makes every person she comes into contact with feel like they're the only person in the world. It's not something you'd expect from one of country music's most recognizable icons—someone who has sold more than 100 million records and just released her 42nd album, *Blue Smoke*. So, how does she do it?

"I never think of myself as a star. I think of myself as a working girl, always have. That's why I never had any ego problems. I'm thankful and grateful," she says. And you know she means it.

In a sit-down interview, *TONEAudio* talked to the eight-time Grammy winner, theme park mogul, movie star, philanthropist, and singer-songwriter about cooking, creativity, Bob Dylan, and what she really thinks about when she's onstage.

JU: You've just released your 42nd studio album. How do you know when it's time to make a new record? Does a buzzer go off in your head?

DP: Something like that. I have to weigh everything and ask myself: Should I tour? Put together a band? Record an album? I'm 68 now and I have to be smart about time.

JU: So you overthink it? Or do songs usually just demand to be written and you know it's time.

DP: Yeah, most of them do. But in this particular case, I had a lot of songs in the can. "Blue Smoke" I wrote years ago, and I used to do it onstage because it was just a fun song to do. A lot of fans remembered it and they kept saying, "Why don't you ever put that out?" So when I got ready to do this [album], not only did I include the song but I thought *Blue Smoke* was a great title because I was going to do a lot of bluegrass stuff.

JU: And you love the word blue. You've put the name in so many of your song titles.

DP: I guess a lot of it comes from growing up in the Smokey Mountains. The Cherokee had a word, "shaconage," and it meant land of blue smoke. That's what they called them the Great Smokey Mountains. When I did my bluegrass album, I named it *The Grass Was Blue*. I was going to travel around with a bluegrass band, and at one time I thought I was going to call my band Blue Smoke. That was before I wrote the song. I was going to call my label Blue Indigo. I never thought about that until you said that. I wrote a song called "Blue Me."

JU: I love how you referenced the Cherokee word.

DP: Well, thank you, because I am very spiritual. I'm not religious at all but I totally believe in that. I have to. I need to. I can't imagine anybody not believing in something bigger than us because I'd choose to believe it even it wasn't so.

JU: You are a known early bird, and you've said you commune with God, or you actually write songs with him in what you call the Wee Wisdom Hours.

DP: Wee-hour wisdom.

JU: Is there a time that you always wake up? [Self help guru] Wayne Dwyer has said if you are awakened early in the morning at the same hour, you should stay up, because someone/some universal force has a message for you.

DP: Years ago, I used to wake, it was almost like clockwork, it was just a thing. I would wake up at 3:00 a.m. every day. But now that I'm older, I'm waking up earlier and earlier. I go to bed early though, but I get up really early because I love the mornings. That's my time. Nobody else around, everybody asleep, all the energies have died down and I really feel that God's just waiting to come there. I think about God as like a farmer, and he's always throwing stuff out. I want to be one of those early-rising people so I get some of that stuff before it gets picked through. I always feel the energies, other people's energies, bad or good, that the world is kind of settled about that time. So I just feel like it's quieter and I have a clearer direction.
(continued)

We all have our own time. That's my time, anywhere from like midnight to six a.m. I'll get up, I'll do my spiritual work, I'll answer mail or I'll call in messages to be typed up, and I definitely always do my affirmations, my reading, my Scriptures, and whatever I'm doing at the time. A lot of times I write songs, especially if I'm writing for something. I wrote a lot of the stuff for *Blue Smoke* in the wee hours.

JU: You have some interesting things on the album. The cover of Bon Jovi's "Lay Your Hands on Me" that you turned from hot to holy, and back to hot. Can you tell me a little bit about working with Jon Bon Jovi?

DP: We didn't get together to do it. When I first heard that song years ago I thought, wow, that is spectacular. What a great gospel song. I grew up Pentecostal church where laying on hands meant invoking the Spirit. Or to pray for the sick. Even now I'm always asking God to lay his hands on me. And so when I first heard that I thought it was a gospel song till I started listening to what it was *really* saying. I'm always loving to do covers, so I thought, well, I just can't take the liberties to think that I'm just going to go ahead and record this song without knowing if they'll let me do it. My manager worked as Jon Bon Jovi's tour manager for a long time, so he put me in touch with him and I just asked him if it would be okay if we turned his song into a gospel thing. He said he thought it would be fantastic. I said, "Well, you throw in some stuff, too." He said, "Okay. I'll throw in some stuff." Then I called [ex-Bon Jovi guitarist] Richie Sambora, who wrote the music for it, and made sure he was okay with it. I didn't want to just take the liberties. I wanted to make sure that we were all okay. We sent things back

and forth. This line works. What about this line? So out of all that, we got this version. I was really inspired, so I wrote a whole bunch of lines.

JU: You also cover Bob Dylan's "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right." Did you feel you needed to work with him on that?

DP: No, I did not. I met him years ago but he we really didn't connect. Although, I've always loved his songs. I'd recorded "Blowin' in the Wind" years ago on another album, and I've sung a lot of his songs through the years. But no. We just didn't connect.

JU: You also sang a duet with Willie Nelson, "From Here To The Moon and Back." You too seem to bring out the best in each other.

DP: I love Willie. I've worked with him through the years. He's very hard to sing with because of his phrasing. I mean, just like you'd think, because we both are stylists, and you'd think we'd be able to do it easily. It was really fun singing with him, but it was like an exercise of some sort, trying to catch him with all his little phrases and all. He called up and said, "Let's do that moon song you wrote because I can really play some hot guitar on that one." I love that old funky sound he gets on that guitar. I love what he played on that, too. I'm glad we did that together.

JU: Do you have any rituals before you write?

DP: I cook. I love to get in the kitchen when I'm getting prepared to write because if I'm in a good creative mood, my food is spectacular. If my food is spectacular, my writing's going to be spectacular. *(continued)*



20 Things You Might Not Know About Dolly Parton

- 1.** Dolly once lost a Dolly Parton look-alike contest.
- 2.** While it's reported she's Miley Cyrus' Godmother, Parton is Cyrus' honorary Godmother. There was never a formal ceremony.
- 3.** It's often reported that her breasts, measuring a reported 40DD, are insured for \$600,000. False.
- 4.** While Parton turned down Jack White's offer to produce her, she did let him buy her and her friends dinner at an expensive Nashville hotspot.
- 5.** Parton and her husband Carl Dean often go food shopping in the middle of the night at 24-hour Walmart near their home outside of Nashville.
- 6.** Parton has stopped trying to disguise herself in public because people always recognize her voice. Last time she tried, some kids said: "You're Dolly Parton in a black wig!"
- 7.** Although she's co-owned the Dollywood theme park since 1986, she claims she's "too terrified" to ride any of the rides.
- 8.** The world's first cloned mammal—a sheep—was named Dolly after her in 1996.
- 9.** Parton once had a line of wigs distributed through Revlon cosmetics. *(continued)*

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It's very creative for me, so I always cook and write, usually at the same time. When I prepare to write, what I love to do—my favorite thing to do in the world—is to have time set aside, like two or three weeks to say I'm just going to go write. I go up to my old mountain home. Sometimes I fast and pray for a few days to get myself kind of in a spiritual place—get through the headaches, and everything with comes with the fasting till I get kind of clear. I hate to fast but I try to do that and kind of humble myself a little bit. After that, I get into the writing, then it starts to be creative, and then I can cook. After I've got connected.

JU: You are in tremendous shape. You're a flirt. You say you've never met a man you don't like, yet you're a role model for women. What do you attribute that to?

DP: Well, I think women see me more like a sister or a girlfriend, or like a special aunt. I think they sense that feeling I have for them because all of my sisters—I have five—and I were very close to my mother, my aunts, and my grandmas, so I just really connect with women. But I don't think women are threatened by me. Because I'm overdone, I'm more like a cartoon character, so I don't think they feel threatened in that way either. Like I'm going to steal their man.

JU: In your book *My Life And Other Unfinished Beauty*, there are a number of photographs of you. Despite what you say, you really were a natural beauty.

DP: I'm really not, trust me. You haven't seen me without all my makeup. Even in those pictures, I was already made-up. I'm not a natural beauty so I've tried to make the most of everything I've got. I've tried to turn all my negatives into as many positives as I can. That makes me feel better.

JU: You were never afraid to show your brains or your tough side. Even in less-enlightened times. Where does that come from?

(continued)

10. Parton has never made a big decision without fasting first. She usually fasts in multiples of seven. Either seven days, 14 days, or 21 days.

11. She was rejected from the high-school cheerleading squad at Sevier County High School.

12. The Ku Klux Klan once picketed Dollywood because of Parton's annual Gay Day.

13. She once played herself in an episode of "Alvin & the Chipmunks."

14. Kevin Costner was the one insisted Whitney Houston record Parton's "I Will Always Love You" for *The Bodyguard*.

15. "I Will Always Love You" was Saddam Hussein's re-election theme song.

16. A photograph of Parton's little-seen husband Carl Dean is on the cover 1969's *My Blue Ridge Mountain Boy*.

17. Parton received death threats after she wrote "Travelin' Thru" for the film *Transamerica*, about a transgender woman.

18. She has three tattoos: An angel on her upper left arm, butterfly on her chest, and a red flower in between her cleavage.

19. Her production company, Sandollar, produced the hit show "Buffy the Vampire Slayer."

20. Parton hates to fly and suffers from motion sickness.

INTERVIEW

DP: I knew I was a woman but it didn't dawn on me that could be a detriment until I came up against somebody who was trying to overrun me or come on too much, or trying to offer me this and that *if* I would do *that*. It was only then that I would [get tough] because I always believed in myself. I believed in my talent. I believed in my brains. I would always go into any place of business with any man, no matter how big or strong they were, and say: "I've got something to offer here. I think I can make us both a lot of money if you're interested in this." But if it got out of line, I knew how to walk away and say, "I guess it wasn't meant for us to do any business." You always have to be willing to walk away from something that's not right.

JU: You seem like you've always had that brutal confidence.

DP: Well, I always was confident in myself. But I think a lot of that comes from my faith in God, and depending on him and believing that through God all things are possible. I would gather strength from that.

I've been stronger all my life because of that. I never turned [my belief] loose. Never stopped believing, never. Never will. Even if I die a horrible death, I can't blame God for that because I'm sure I will have brought a lot of that on myself.

JU: What do you think your job is? You have said you would have been a hairdresser if you hadn't done this.

DP: Or a missionary. I woulda, too.

JU: But what do you think your job really is?

DP: I pray every day, and certainly every night before I go onstage, that God will let me shine and radiate with his light.



And to let me be a blessing, and let me not have people idolize me because I do not like idolizing stuff. If they see a light in me, I want them to think that it's the light of God. And even if I don't get to heaven, if I can help somebody else head in a better direction, that makes me happy. I just want God to use me to uplift mankind, to let me do something to point people in his direction, not mine.

JU: They say that the people that you like are a mirror for you. You're a mirror for so many people.

DP: Well, we're all God's children. We're all pieces of God, we're all pieces of one another. Everybody I see, I relate to. I see somebody in my family in that person, somebody I love. And I try to go right to that God light in everybody, to that God spark that we all have. I try to play to that even if I don't, well, immediately like them. I know there's that little spark in there.

JU: One of my favorite stories is when you went to see the Judds perform in Lake Tahoe and when they went offstage before their encore, you snuck out onstage and took their bows for them.

DP: I haven't done anything like that in a while. I still am embarrassed about that. I had to do it, just like I had to take off all my clothes and run across Tom Jones' lawn. But don't put anything past me. I'm capable of doing anything.

JU: You mean if someone dares you to do something, you just have to follow through. I love that personality quirk of yours—if it's a quirk.

DP: It is. I'm just like that. So if somebody dared me to do anything right now, I'm sure I would have to be held back from doing it. But I haven't done anything like that lately. With the Judds, I was back there watching. But I don't think they cared that I ran out there and took their bows, but I worried that they did. I'm sure they talked about it, talked about me bad. But I just couldn't help it.

JU: Is there one thing you'd change about yourself?

DP: Well, to change one thing would change everything. It's like of course we all wish to have great hair if we don't. We all want to be tall if we're short. But I think God gives us just what we need to have and he has to keep us humble some way, so I just accept that I am who I am and how God meant me to be, and it's working so far. People always ask me, "Do you have any regrets?" I say, "Well, I don't think so because I never did anything I might regret." I might regret getting caught at a few things but I didn't regret the doing it because I never did anything that didn't feel like the thing I had to be doing at the time, or wanted to do. I mean so how can you go back and say, ooh, I regret that?

JU: I don't know about you, but I just regret the things I didn't do. The shoes I didn't buy.

DP: Yeah, that would be me. I would regret more of what I don't do than what I've done. Always.

JU: UK talk show host Graham Norton talked about how much he loved you, and thought you could be friends. He wanted to.
(continued)

But he realized that you really couldn't, because you were busy being Dolly all the time. Is that accurate? Are you Dolly all the time?

DP: Did you think that was a negative statement?

JU: Maybe a little. I think he was just hurt. Or wanted you to let him into your life. Into your inner circle.

DP: Well, it's not that you don't let them in because every time I meet somebody, like I say, I play to that little spark that I find in them, and I loved him. I thought we worked so great together. But it's true, sort of like me and Kenny's [Rogers] song from this new album ["You Can't Make Old Friends"]. It's like there's new people all around. But it's just that you just don't really have the time to even be with your family and your old friends, or do the things you need to do. But it doesn't mean every now and then there's a person that will worm their way. But I don't even, like I say, have time for the things I need to do.

JU: Is it difficult to be such a big celebrity and have a private life?

DP: No, not for me. My life is good. I've managed to manage that really well. When I'm home, I'm really home. When I'm with my husband, I'm totally with him. I figured that out early. I had to because this is what I do. I've dreamed myself into a corner, so I have to be responsible for all of the things that I've dreamed and I've seen come true. I've been blessed that my dreams come true. But there's a big responsibility. It's wearing. Sometimes you just physically and emotionally can hardly keep up.

But, this is what I do. I never think of myself as a star. I think of myself as a working girl, always have. That's why I

never had any ego problems. I'm thankful and grateful. And I look at the body of work that I've done sometimes and I'm just shocked by it. I'm amazed by it and think, "How in hell did I get all that done? In this many years. How did I do all that?" But I did it.

JU: You have many gifts, but I think one of your greatest gifts is your ability to connect. To fully see someone when you're with them, as if they're the only person in the world.

DP: Well, thank you. That's what I go back to that looking for God in everybody. Finding that spark. But I do feel that way, though. People also say, "Don't you get so tired of singing the same songs, saying the same stuff?" I say no, because every one of those little faces is not a face I'd seen before, so that's the first time they heard it from me. First time I've said it to them. And I know that it's real coming from me, and I know that it's like an energy there. Even though I do these interviews day in, day out, it's like looking at you and the way you ask questions and the tone of voice makes me have a whole different delivery, makes me add more to something I've said before. But it takes on new meaning for me.

JU: What do you think about when you're onstage? Did I unplug the iron?

DP: You know, that's funny. Right in the middle of a song, especially songs when I'm talking to the audience, I'm really right there with them because you can't lose your concentration. But I've sung these songs so many times, right in the middle of a song my mind will trail off, and I'll think, "Did I leave the coffee pot on? Did I unplug the iron?" Like you said. And then I'll think, "Ooh, you better get back or you're going to miss your words." ●

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W

ell, there's no stairway yet, but Jimmy Page informed us in a recent press conference that he is going to oversee the rest of the Led Zeppelin catalog and release it in the same grandiose fashion achieved on the recently released Super Deluxe Edition reissues of the band's first three records. Yes, \$140 is a lot of money for a single album, but there is quite a bit more included with the price—namely, a “companion” album featuring outtakes, matching CDs of the original and companion album, 24/96 downloads, a book and memorabilia.

Using the original analog masters, Page worked with Metropolis mastering in London, trying to get as much information as possible out of tapes now more than 45 years old. Analog enthusiasts often talk about tape degradation, and I suspect that's probably a big part of what's happened to these classic records. *(continued)*



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Photo Courtesy of Atlantic Records

Much like the audience for the Beatles reissues, three distinct types of people will buy the bulk of these mega-box sets: completest collectors, those hoping to improve on Zep vinyl already in their collection, and vinyl newbies that think these reissues are cool. First, the good news.

Group A will likely love these versions because the team responsible for production did a brilliant job aesthetically recreating every aspect of the originals. The printing is superb, full of color and contrast, with a wonderful UV overcoat. These will last much longer than the originals did. And, the material on the companion discs is fun,

much like the Beatles *Anthology* volumes, uncovering bits and pieces that previously hadn't seen the light of day. Group C will love them because they look great and, since they don't have ten other pressings of the albums to compare, the sonics will be more than acceptable. My copies were perfectly flat, perfectly centered, and extremely quiet.

However, Group B will most likely be disappointed. If you've got rare, early stamper originals of these records, these reissues lack in oomph—and dynamics are a lot of what Led Zeppelin is about. In its time, the quartet pushed louder, harder, and with more distortion than its peers. *(continued)*



Regardless of whether you're spinning *I*, *II*, or *III*, the fine detail, spatial cues, and ultimate dynamic crush just aren't there.

But remember, even though the grass is greener on the other side of the fence, it usually has to be mowed and watered more often. Are you willing to pay the price? If these three records are part of your holy grail, spend the \$500 (or more) apiece it will take to get mint originals. You will not be disappointed. And then consider these records your go-to communion for when you just can't be otherwise transfixed at your audio altar. Save the precious for when you can give them your full, undivided attention.

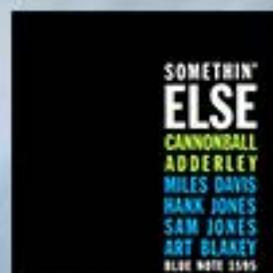
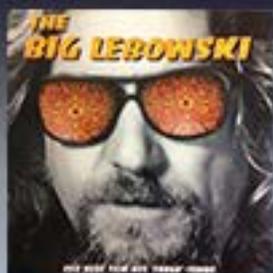
If you aren't locked into vinyl, or you have mediocre pressings, consider the 24/96 downloads—they are the best value of the lot.

When A-B'ing the LPs and high-res files on the dCS Paganini stack against the AVID Acutus Reference SP/Tri-Planar/Lyra Atlas combo, the sound quality of the digital files is so close to that of the LPs, it makes the vinyl pointless. A similar conclusion came via the opposite end of the financial spectrum with a Rega RP3 'table and Oppo 105 universal player, a competition almost too close to call.

It's commendable of Page to want to polish these classics and take them out for one last, glorious test drive. On one level, they are exquisitely produced and packaged, certainly setting a standard for future audiophile releases. Unfortunately, there is only so much life left in these old tapes. A+ for effort and execution; B for results. —**Jeff Dorgay**

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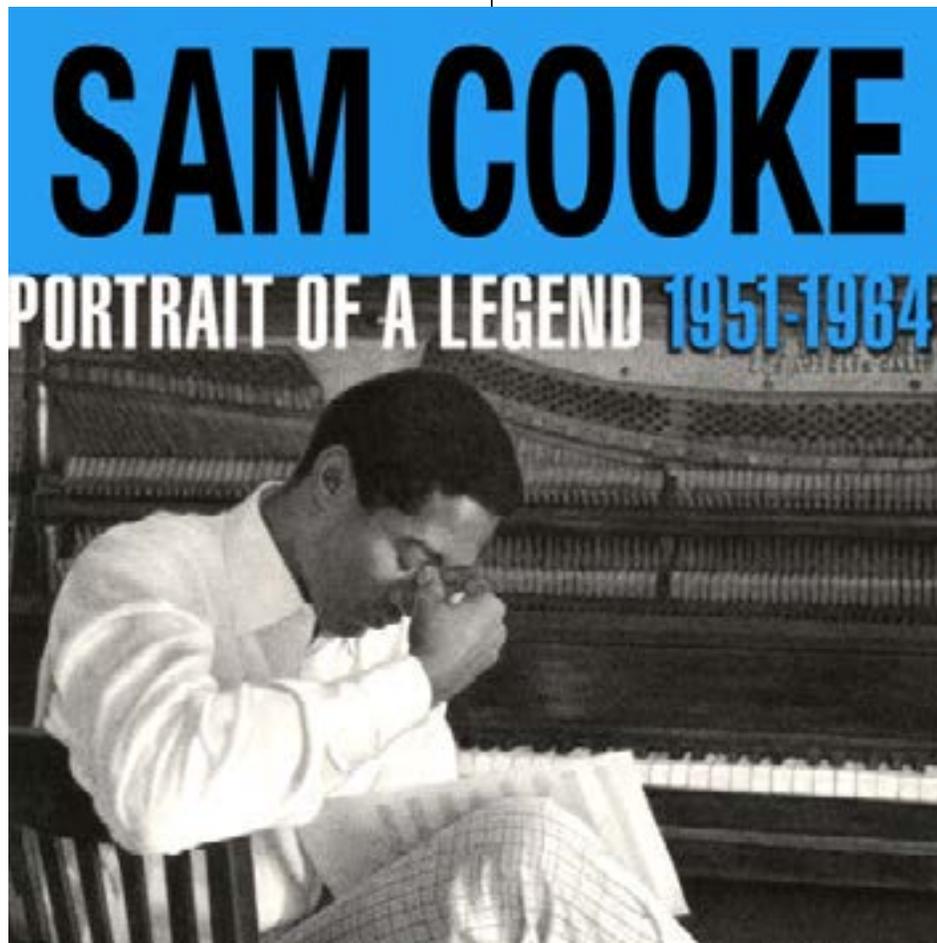


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Sam Cooke

Portrait of a Legend: 1951-1964
ABKCO, 180g 2LP

More than a decade ago, during the brief window when it appeared SACD stood a chance to gain a foothold in the mainstream, ABKCO released two of the finest-sounding and musically seminal reissue series the format has seen to date. The Rolling Stones' early-career work came first, followed by five titles documenting the similarly crucial output of soul great Sam Cooke. Both are long out of print. But, to quote one of Cooke's snappy hits, "(Ain't That) Good News," the label is now restoring the crooner's albums on vinyl.

Presumably taken from the same masters as the corresponding SACD, and making its debut in analog, the 180g 2LP version of *Portrait of a Legend: 1951-1964* sounds just as divine in analog. Pressed at QRP, the gatefold edition contains a small essay by Cooke biographer Peter Guralnick as well as the latter's track-by-track histories. While solid, the outer jacket isn't up to par with, say, Mobile Fidelity's supreme standards, yet the dead-quiet and ultra-clean LP surfaces more than meet audiophile demands. Spanning 31 of the Chicago native's best-known sides—ranging from the full-on gospel “Touch the Hem of His Garment” to the soaring equality anthem “A Change Is Gonna Come”—the collection possesses incredible transparency and tonal balances.

As heard via these grooves, the purity, clarity, richness, and deceiving complexity of Cooke's voice will strike even fanatics. His phrasing, control, smoothness, range, and verve are front and center, unimpeded by artificial ceilings or interference from instrumentalists. And yet, the placement and imaging of the musicians is equally notable. Much of it is owed to the direct simplicity of the original production. Whether the swaying snap

of a snare drum, rhythmic call-and-response of backing vocalists (check out Lou Rawls during “Bring It On Home”), silkiness of tasteful orchestral strings, or jazzy counterpoint of horns, the passages are all impeccably shaped and located. Sound-stage width, too, surpasses that of the excellent SACD.

Yes, *Portrait of a Legend: 1951-1964* skews towards Cooke's tamer side that helped him attract white audiences during a period when most of his now-legendary soul contemporaries failed to do so. Yet that's a small quibble. The emotional impact of being brought closer to the majesty of Cooke's singing, and his seamless blend of secular and spiritual, isn't something that happens everyday. Revisiting these classics on this pressing strengthens the case for fans that believe Cooke, who died a truly tragic and largely unresolved death at 33, was the best soul singer not only of his era, but of all-time.

—**Bob Gendron**

WOW!

MartinLogan's Crescendo

By Jeff Dorgay



995: SOUND THAT WON'T BREAK THE BANK

n the years since Bowers & Wilkins introduced the Zeppelin (now the Zeppelin Air), there have been many imitators, but no one has really come close to the combination of form and function that this innovative British company started. Until now.

I got my first glimpse of the Crescendo at this year's Consumer Electronics Show in the MartinLogan room—I thought it was a static display and I was listening to a pair of class-leading ElectroMotion speakers. When informed that I was listening to the Crescendo, it was a revelation. Hard to believe a desktop player could not only sound this good, but throw such an expansive stereo image. Justin Bright, MartinLogan's PR guy, smiled and said, "You can hook it up to one of our subs for an even bigger sound," which had me thinking about other possibilities.



Not everyone is brainwashed by Bose. Many want decent sound, don't want to become audiophiles, yet sheepishly know that a Wave Radio is wrong. They always have that guilty look in their eyes when they ask, "So what should I buy?" Without question the Crescendo is the way to roll. For \$895 you can't beat it.

Major tech under the hood

The Crescendo utilizes a lot of existing MartinLogan technology to work its magic. The same folded motion tweeter design from the ElectroMotion speakers is at work underneath the grille, along with a 5x7-inch midwoofer speaker, crossed over at 3,600 Hz, so the effect is stereo up beyond that. It works remarkably well, giving as much of a stereo impression of any of the other tabletop portables I've experienced.

Combining a 50-watt amplifier for the woofer, a 2x25-watt amplifier for the tweeter and a full-blown DSP preamplifier, the Crescendo produces room-filling sound with ease. Blasting "Firehouse" from *KISS 40* proves that the Crescendo is not just a pretty desktop with no guts. A long playlist of Nine Inch Nails (played at equally high volume) without damages to the Crescendo underlines its robustness.

The Crescendo is equally adept at moderate volume levels, and those enjoying more subdued fare will be just as happy as the headbangers in the audience. The subtle, waif-like vocal shadings of Sharon Van Etten on her *Tramp* LP are reproduced with the delicacy required. Equally delightful were the textured vocals in Jonsi's *GO*. (continued)



The one.



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Setup as easy as one, two, three—well six, actually.

There are six different ways to connect to the Crescendo: Via WiFi, Bluetooth, USB, line level, Toslink and a standard wired Ethernet cable, so no matter what you have, you'll be able to plug in. I made it a point to try them all and had equally good luck. The enclosed quick start guide is very concise and this device works as described, so no matter what level of geekiness you possess, you should be up and running in a few minutes. The folks at MartinLogan have produced one of the best instruction manuals I've come across in years, so take ten minutes and read it.

As cool as this all is, the subwoofer output really adds to the Crescendo's oomph. Not only can you use a wired subwoofer (with a switchable crossover at 80 Hz), Paradigm's PT-1 wireless subwoofer controller and Monitor Sub 10 make for a killer combination. Adding an \$849 subwoofer to the Crescendo might seem like overkill, but seeing I just happen to have these two items as reference components in my home theater system, it seemed like a smashing idea. Those on a more reasonable budget might want to consider the Paradigm Cinema Sub at \$349, though you do give up wireless capability. It only took about 30 seconds of LL Cool J's "I'm Bad" to convince me that adding the sub was a ton of fun. *(continued)*

FEATURE



For those going sans subwoofer, where you place the Crescendo will weigh heavily on its bass output. Even though you can boost the bass with the “bass mode” switch on the aluminum remote, this won’t be quite enough should you place the Crescendo in the middle of a room or on a freestanding table. Take advantage of room and surface gain—install the Crescendo against a wall or even in a room corner if possible. Just as you would with your favorite pair of conventional loudspeakers, experiment with position until the perfect balance between midrange clarity and bass weight is achieved.

A lovely package

The gorgeous, half-moon shape, available in black or walnut complements any décor and it fits marvelously in my little mid-century modern abode. So much so, that I might just be keeping the review sample. As cool as the Crescendo is, I think the folks at the MartinLogan custom shop, the same skilled artisans that produce MartinLogan ESL speakers in custom finishes, should offer a hardwood upgrade for the Crescendo. No doubt this baby is going to make its way into some stylish abodes—why not go all the way and really make it a work of art? I’d happily pay extra for this option.

Though the MartinLogan Crescendo has a winning combination of sound quality, build quality and ease of use, it’s a truly fun experience. Thanks to its wide range of connectivity, anyone can plug in, whether literally or wirelessly and be enjoying their music in seconds. And enjoy it you will. ●

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THE WINO

By Monique Meadows

Summer is the Season for Rosé!

The United States, which recently overtook France as the world's largest wine market, is having a love affair with rosé. France saw its rosé exports to the United States jump 43 percent in 2013; in May, Forbes.com ran an article entitled "Real Men Drink Rosé;" and Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt now produce a rosé at their recently acquired Provence property, Chateau Miraval.





Côtes de Provence in southern France, which specializes in dry rosé, produces almost three-quarters of the wines in Provence—and 80 percent of those are rosé. The French pair these wines with every Mediterranean dish, including seafood, olives, and cheese. And while plenty of other countries also produce rosé—including the United States—many people need a bit of coaxing to try the pink wine, which for some can conjure memories of sweet Portuguese Matus or the sugary anomaly called White Zinfandel. I meet such skepticism with an approach that has created many rosé converts. My most successful method of conversion is to recommend pairing rosé with rotisserie chicken. For me, there is almost nothing as sublime as warm rotisserie chicken and a chilled glass of rosé—and my converts return beaming.

The 2013 rosé vintages from all over the world are now arriving in wine shops and restaurants. The pink hues range from flower-petal blush to the deep color of fresh sockeye salmon. The wines offer structure and finesse, with flavors of light-red fruit and styles that can be dry or slightly sweet. Most modern rosés are fermented in stainless steel and bottled without any barrel aging to maintain the fresh flavors. Here are my recommendations for the 2013 rosés that are arriving this summer.

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Bieler Père et Fils “Sabine” Rosé

Coteaux d’Aix-en-Provence, France

\$12



Winemaker Charles Bieler is a man of many wine projects. He began Bieler Père et Fils as a nod to his father Philippe, who founded Provence’s Chateau Routas, an estate focused on producing red blends and rosés from the Grenache grape. The younger Bieler and his sister Mira founded Bieler Père et Fils to solely produce rosé. The Sabine rosé—named for Bieler’ daughter, who was born in 2005, the wine’s inaugural year—is made from grapes grown on five hillside vineyards surrounded the Provencal village of Aix-en-Provence.

A blend of Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon and Cinsault, with a small splash of Rolle, the salmon-colored wine is fermented in stainless steel and concrete tanks in order to maintain the fresh fruit aromas and flavors. Bieler stirs in fine lees (the sediment of residual yeast and grape skins left behind during fermentation) to give the wine extra body, which results in flavors of raspberry, cherry, strawberry and herb notes dancing across the palate. The very reasonable price helps make this one standout. Show up with this wine at a summer deck party and your friends will likely ditch their Pinot Grigio for a glass of it.

Mittelbach “T” Rosé

Zweigelt, Wachau, Austria

\$16

This Austrian star has been a top U.S. seller for several years. It is produced by the Mittelbach family, now in its 5th generation, at the Tegernseerhof wine estate located in Austria's Wachau region. The property dates back to the Middle Ages, with some of its structures built in 1176 by Benedictine monks. The vineyards sit on steep terraces, where grapes receive the perfect amount of sunlight for ripening and where stones keeps the vines warm at night. The “T” rosé is 100 percent Zweigelt, the best known grape in Austria, which produces red and rosé wines with deep berry flavor, soft spice and light tannins. The wine is just a hint deeper than Provencal rosés. Its aromas will jump out at you, as will its flavors, which include cherry, strawberry, and a surprising hint of watermelon.



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Paso Robles, California

\$23

After tasting this rosé at a wine trade show earlier this year, I eagerly awaited its market release. Striking notes of strawberry, rose petal and a gorgeously long citrus-tinged finish led me to learn more about this California contender. Tablas Creek Vineyard was created in 1985 as a partnership between the Perrin family of France's Château de Beaucastel (one of Châteauneuf-du-Pape's top domaines) and Robert Haas, longtime importer and founder of Vineyard Brands. In 1989, they purchased a 120-acre lot in the Las Tablas district of Paso Robles in central California. The area has qualities similar to those of Châteauneuf-du-Pape, including limestone soil, a rocky terrain and a favorable climate.

The Patelin de Tablas rosé is a blend of Grenache, Mourvèdre and Counoise grapes grown on vines cloned from France's Rhône Valley. It delivers flavors of fresh red fruit, especially strawberry, as well as darker fruit flavors and acidity, which is balanced by the minerality provided by the Paso Robles terroir. Due to a second consecutive drought year, low yields, a warm summer and the winery's earliest harvest on record, the 2013 vintage shows "excellent concentration, refined tannins and good freshness," according to the winemaker. "[It is] a vintage that should be impressive and approachable young but that has the stuffing to age."



**Commanderie de Peyrassol
Cotes de Provence Rosé**

Provence, France
\$25

This famous French estate, located north of Saint-Tropez in the heart of Provence, was founded by the Knights Templar and saw its first harvest in 1256. Throughout the winery's embattled history, the vineyards stayed in tact and well maintained. Today, Philippe Austruy owns the estate, known now as Chateau Peyrassol. The vineyards, which are organically farmed and planted on rocky clay soil that includes limestone, are surrounded by Mediterranean forest. Olive and oak truffle trees grace the property and wild pigs are common in the area—an alluring landscape indeed for growing wine grapes.

The 2013 Commanderie de Peyrassol rosé is a blend of Grenache, Syrah and Cinsault. Beautifully crisp and laced with delicate minerality, this is one of the most elegant rosés you will find, and it is consistently gorgeous year after year. It also sells out quickly, so be on the lookout for it. If your wine shop doesn't have it, look for it on the wine lists of higher-end restaurants.



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Seattle's Sub Pop records has been host to some of rock's most interesting acts; Nirvana, The Afghan Whigs and Mudhoney, just to name a few, now has a retail outlet. But you'll have to go to the Seattle airport to shop there.

With a vibe somewhat similar to the Hard Rock Café, memorabilia abounds and there is plenty of swag in all shapes and sizes. The staff is friendlier than the Jack Black character in *High Fidelity*, and of course, the whole Sub Pop catalog is available for purchase. Not a bad way to end your air journey, taking a few slabs of vinyl home on the way.

Of course, we had to pick up a replica of the original Sub Pop shirt, still a perennial favorite. \$49.95 and you can only buy it in person. Make it classic grey, *not* a foo foo color.



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Orange is th



e New Red

Jaguar's F-TYPE Coupe

By Jeff Dorgay



C

olors, like fashions, change in such a fluid manner that at times you don't even realize that they've happened. Pretty soon everyone is wearing skinny jeans and you're caught without. The same could

be said with the color orange. It snuck in a few years ago on a few Lamborghinis and now it's everywhere. Even yours truly has a bright orange (make that Valencia) BMW and the color has really caught on—it's a happy color.

Perhaps nothing is more happy than a 550 horsepower Jaguar F-TYPE coupe (or coup-eh, as the Brits like to call it) in Firesand Metallic. While it is stunning on the F-TYPE convertible, the coupe takes the excitement to another level entirely. The biggest question posed by many auto enthusiasts and critics at the launch of the convertible was "how about a proper hardtop roadster in the style of the legendary E-TYPE?" When the Jaguar gods decided that the concept would go to production, the next curiosity was to see how close the final car would resemble the design brief.

At times, it's best to keep your top on

The results are indeed smashing, and the coupe succeeds on every level. It not only casts a sleek silhouette, the additional rigidity of the coupe improves on the already highly competent roadster chassis, sharpening the handling even further. You don't really notice it until you drive the two back to back—the hardtop really gets the nod for driving purists.

This is made perfectly clear while behind the wheel of the coupe at Willow Springs Raceway with Davy Jones (not the ghost of the Monkees, but the '96 winner of the 24 hours of LeMans) in the passenger seat telling me I'm braking too late, repeatedly. Where the ragtop feels great for a convertible, with no scuttle shake, the coupe is a few major degrees more crisp, with no sense of squirm under hard braking, or making a slight course correction in the midst of a high-speed sweeper.

Serious music enthusiasts will enjoy the coupe for yet another reason: the 380-watt Meridian sound system that comes standard with the F-TYPE. An extra 1,200 dollars steps you up to the 12-speaker, 770-watt Meridian system. We described the system in depth in Issue 58 and concluded that with the increased cabin noise of the soft top, the upcharge for the bigger system is hardly worth it; however the coupe is a different game entirely.

The dual purpose exhaust system stays quiet while tooling around town, giving the F-TYPE the civility of a luxury sports sedan, yet when the accelerator pedal is mashed to the floor, the baffle opens, providing more than enough growl to feel sporty. Even more so with the 550 hp, supercharged V-8.

(continued)





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You don't have to drop 100k to have fun

Don't let the evil British villains in the Jaguar commercial fool you: you don't really need 550 hp to enjoy the F-TYPE. While we didn't have any of the \$65,000 base model cars with a meager 340hp V6 at our disposal, the 380hp supercharged V6, priced around \$75,000 with a few options is still no slouch, getting from 0–60 at 5.1 seconds and having a top speed of 172mph. This should be good for all but those needing to leave the scene in the most fiendish manner. Interestingly enough, the V6 felt a bit better in the convertible, even though it specs the same in the coupe and all of the auto journalists present made the same observation.

Again, the folks at Jaguar made the comparison to the iconic Porsche 911, as if it were the benchmark they are striving for. And again, after having driven more than a few 911s since the convertible launch and now, I maintain that they are entirely different automobiles. If I were in the income bracket to afford it, I'd have both in my garage.

Obvious comparisons

The current Carrera is more capable at the limit—and as good as the 8-speed ZF auto box is, Porsche's PDK is still the one to beat, offering a connection to the road like no other. When driving in more subdued situations, the Jaguar gets the nod, being way more sporty than a Mercedes SL or BMW Z4, yet more posh than the current 911. *(continued)*









The F-TYPE offers two driving modes, standard and dynamic. Dynamic is the more sporting mode, stiffening the suspension, altering the shift points and programming the torque vectoring more aggressively. This innovative system feeds more power to the inner rear wheel, while gently applying braking to the outer rear wheel, offering tremendous driver control. This was instantly evident when we took the cars out on the skidpad at Willow Springs Raceway for a brief drifting session. When disengaged, it takes the skill of a professional driver to keep the tail in line, yet with the driver assist engaged, the F-TYPE practically defies the laws of physics, even in the wet.

Hard top or soft?

My experience has been that those loving topless motoring won't care about most of the coolness built in to the F-TYPE coupe because the top doesn't go down. Where the classic E-TYPE convertible still stands as one of the most beautiful automobiles ever made, the coupe was always somewhat of a homely stepchild. This is not the case with the F-TYPE coupe—it is easily as beautiful, if not more so, as its soft-top sibling.

Much as it is with high end audio gear, it's tough to call a \$75,000 to \$100,000 car a "bargain," though in comparison to its competitors from Porsche and Mercedes, the F-TYPE certainly offers excellent value. And if you don't need the prestige of an Aston Martin badge, the new Jaguar is a steal. Having spent plenty of time in both the DBS and Vantage, I can't see why anyone would want to shell out the extra dough for an Aston, when the Jaguar is so capable. ●

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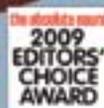
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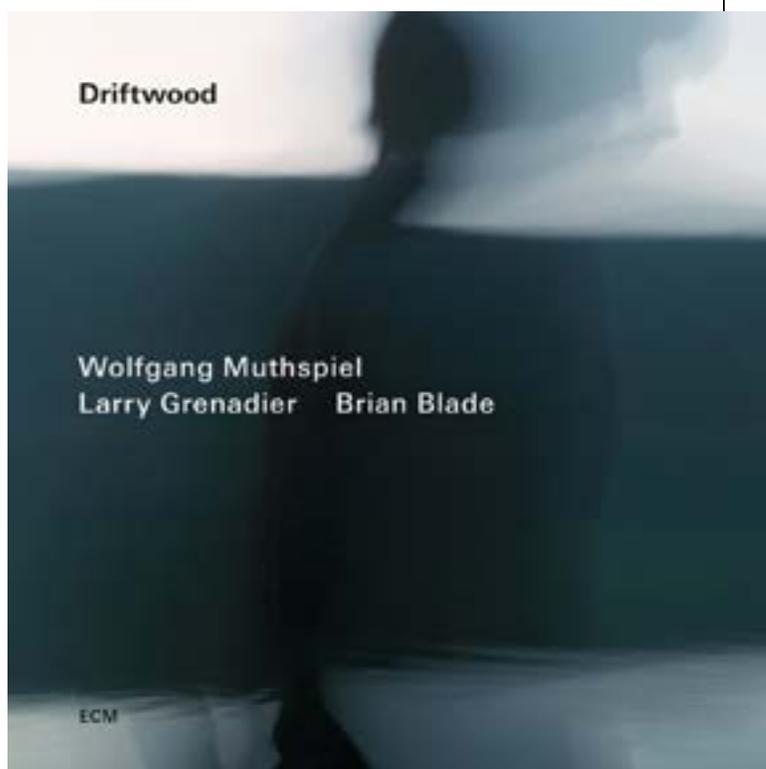
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JAZZ & BLUES



Wolfgang Muthspiel

Driftwood
ECM, CD

Austrian guitarist Wolfgang Muthspiel wanted to think differently for his debut on ECM, which is also his first recording with the ace rhythm team of bassist Larry Grenadier and drummer Brian Blade. Playing electric and acoustic, he has said that he wanted to reach the wider possibilities a piano trio offers. Muthspiel's moving compositions and the group dialogue throughout *Driftwood* more than accomplish his goal.

Another ideal for the disc, Muthspiel has also stated, is to bring the ECM aesthetic to the recording. Whatever that sound may be (and it has never been sufficiently described), *Driftwood* makes the most of the elements that built Manfred Eicher's reputation as a producer. The silent spaces within the studio become another instrument; Muthspiel manipulates the ethereal at all the right moments.

The trio establishes this inclination from the beginning of "Joseph," a tribute to Joe Zawinul. Muthspiel, on electric, unveils an array of bent notes and staccato runs without breaking an overall sense of serenity (sounding nothing at all like, say, a typical Weather Report track). Blade's low-key skittering across the kit serves as the ideal response. On the acoustic "Uptown," Muthspiel echoes such Brazilian guitarists as Baden Powell while Grenadier provides a gently swinging groove. "Madame Vonn," an homage to ill-fated Olympic skier Lindsey Vonn, recalls the melancholia of Portugues fado, which might



L-R Larry Grenadier and Brian Blade with Wolfgang Muthspiel

©Photo by Sun Chung

derive from Muthspiel's time working alongside Maria João.

His acoustic emphasis never means simple delicacy, as he shows via surprising off-kilter note choices on "Cambiata." Similarly, Blade seems like he's lightly brushing against the cymbals. But he's doing so to construct a sturdy frame as well as creating strong rhythmic changes with Grenadier. On the title track, a free-improvisation work credited to all three musicians, hesitation is the key: An understated dialogue between Muthspiel and

Grenadier with Blade rolling in the background hinges on their perceptive way of ending each line.

Grenadier's lyrical arco technique takes the initial lead on "Highline" while Muthspiel's electric notes begin as background effects. But, gradually, the guitarist moves to the front with the kinds of chords that suggest a piano trio's dynamics. Only then does Muthspiel unleash an array of effects that resolve with an assertive rock coda. Some processing is also part of "Lichtzelle," and its impact is equally tasteful.

As with the opening, *Driftwood* closes with a memorial, "Bossa For Michael Brecker." Muthspiel's electric homage deliberately builds while avoiding any clear crescendos. He also never tries to imitate the saxophonist's tone, knowing that bringing one's own personality to a project is the best tribute to any musician.

—**Aaron Cohen**

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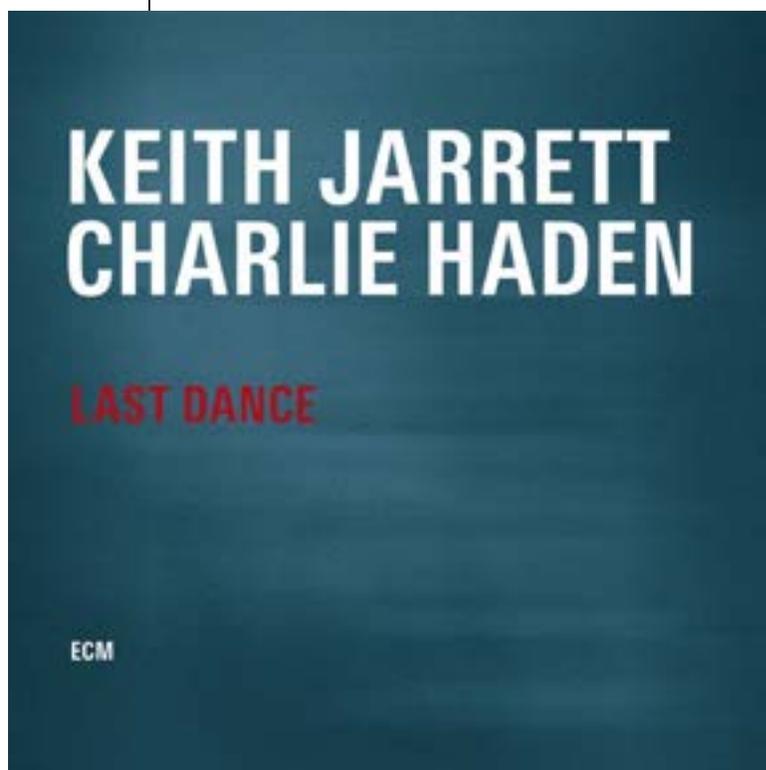
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**Keith Jarrett & Charlie Haden**

Last Dance
ECM, CD

C

harlie Haden has recorded duets with a handful of pianists. Among others, Kenny Barron, Hank Jones, John Taylor, Hampton Hawes, and Gonzalo Rubalcaba have had the chance to contour their lines around the bassist's plush notes. While each boasts a distinctive approach, a through-line marks their sessions: An unmistakable sense of grace—as well as the serenity it seems to seek—often sits proudly in the foreground, and it comes from Haden's deeply pliant touch.

That artistic signature glows with emotional power as a matter of course, but it reaches an unusual depth when he's connecting with his longtime friend Keith Jarrett. *Last Dance*, the duo's second disc, teems with heart. Whether examining a Broadway ballad or pulsing through a bop nugget, the aging partners turn their focus to the task of rendering lyricism in the name of camaraderie. *(continued)*

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Things move slowly here. Both Jarrett and Haden are quite comfortable with sullen tempos (head back to their sublime “Ellen David” from the bassist’s 1976 *Closeness* to hear the roots of their rapport), and as they wind their way around the melodies of “My Ship” and “Everything Happens To Me,” their appreciation of nuance stands in the foreground. Throughout, the pianist refrains from rapturous runs and the bassist pares down his already minimal approach. *Last Dance* isn’t a place to turn for effusive improv (which isn’t to say that Jarrett’s right hand doesn’t knock off a pithy string of trills every now and then). Rather, it’s a spot that seduces with the deep grace of unity.

Regardless of how they saunter through these reflections, a deliberate nature stays in play. At certain moments it seems as if “Every Time We Say Goodbye” is taking a breather—it’s just the pair’s way of giving silence its due. “My Old Flame”

may introduce the album’s dreamy program at a creep, but there’s a glide inherent in the duo’s moves, and the tactile way they align themselves sustains the action. The sole uptempo track, Bud Powell’s “Dance of the Infidels,” is strategically placed and infuses the program with the ardor of bop.

Recorded during a 2007 meeting at Jarrett’s home studio in the Jersey countryside, these sessions have already given us 2009’s *Jasmine*, an album with a similar personality. And while this is formally part two of the work done seven years ago, it’s more fetching than its predecessor, whose candlelit character occasionally brokered a snoozy vibe.

Yes, it may inch along in some spots, but *Last Dance* comes on as a rumination on romance that simply chooses to make every note count. Its sentiment is fetching.
—**Jim Macnie**

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Jamie Saft/Steve Swallow/Bobby Previte

The New Standard

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Keyboardist Jamie Saft takes a direct turn toward the melodic on his new disc. In the past, he's brought the noise in an array of contexts, from his own electric groups to collaborations with such colleagues as Bad Brains and the Beastie Boys. But on this session with drummer Bobby Previte and venerated electric bassist Steve Swallow, the introspective edges out the aggression and seems to have tightened his focus.

Saft, who doubles on piano and organ, is also a member of Slobber Pup. The latter's 2013 album *Black Aces* throws free jazz, metal, and funk in an amalgamation that doesn't contradict the group's messy name. He's also been active in New York's downtown scene, where he and Previte have collaborated with John Zorn and a host of other genre-breakers. Previte recruited Saft for his Weather Clear, Fast Track band in the early 1990s and also introduced the keyboardist to Swallow. While Saft wrote all but three of the 10 compositions on *The New Standard* and shares production duties with Previte, he has mentioned that this trio is a full collaborative effort—vide, there's an upbeat track here accurately titled "I See No Leader." Throughout, the group's interplay backs this claim.

Recorded in analog direct to two-track ½" tape through a Neve console by five-time Grammy-winning engineer Joe Ferla, *The New Standard* opens with Saft's bluesy tone on "Clarissa," where he eases into and out of the solidly written piece with response from Previte's understated cymbals before the cut eases into a quiet resolution. Saft conveys a similarly relaxed approach during most of the disc. On "Trek," Previte's march and Swallow's determined lines set the pace while the pianist remains in the background. Then, the trio's rhythmic and harmonic roles intuitively switch as Saft becomes more intense. But on organ, Saft can sound just as assertive as he needs to be, especially on the gospel-inflected "Clearing" and via a series of weighty minor-key arpeggios on "All Things To All People."

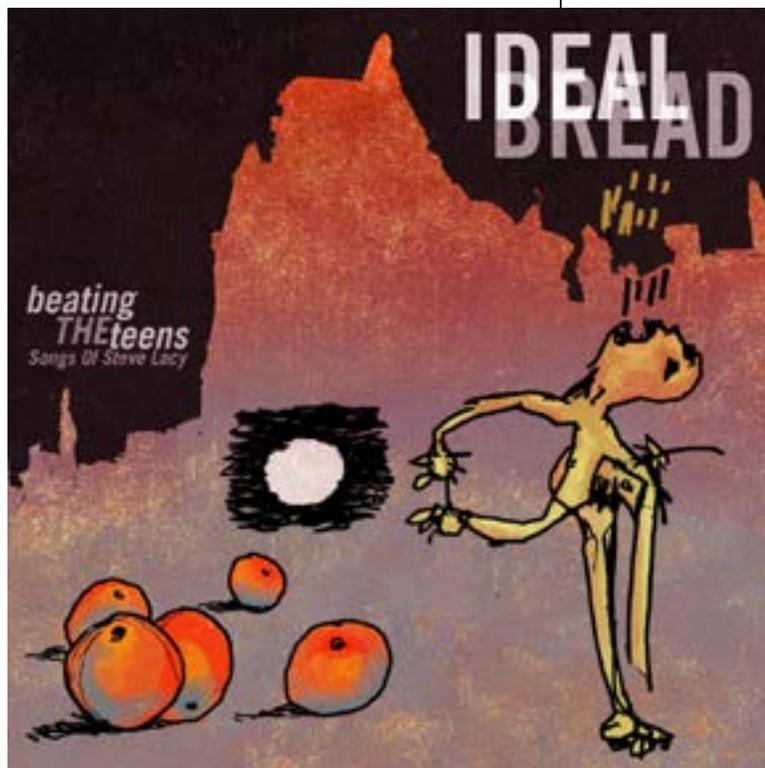


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Swallow provides another reminder of why, after so many decades, he remains the most respected electric bassist in jazz. On “Step Lively,” his staccato low-end notes are the ideal complement for Saft’s high-register runs. “Blue Shuffle” begins as a vintage Jimmy Smith-style organ groove until Saft and Pre-vite sound like they’re remixing the sound in real time while Swallow holds everything down like the elder statesman he is. The closer, “Surrender The Chaise,” presents Swallow sounding like he’s nudging Saft into the ether, but the group’s quiet strength suggests these guys are not going away anytime soon.

—*Aaron Cohen*

W



Ideal Bread
Beating the Teens
 Cuneiform, CD

When Josh Sinton organized this Steve Lacy tribute band a decade ago, it was just that—a group that resurrected the esteemed saxophonist’s chestnuts so new ears could marvel at their unique designs. Featuring some of New York’s most inventive instrumentalists, the ensemble—drummer Tomas Fujiwara, cornetist Kirk Knuffke, and bassist Reuben Radding—did a terrific job of making their hero’s odd structural lines invitingly flow. From “Papa’s Midnight Hop” to “Kitty Malone,” the collective brought panache to the pieces. Sinton had studied with Lacy, and it was a treat to hear the late master’s tunes come alive again.

But repertory missions sometimes have a creative wall built into them. For its third album, *Ideal Bread* (the band name is taken from a Lacy pearl about how improvising is like baking fresh loaves each day) ditches the overt reproduction approach and instead crafts charts that genuflect to the originals while brokering a more kaleidoscopic spin. *(continued)*



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Sinton chose a focus—Lacy’s *Scratching The Seventies/Dreams* box set—and tasked himself with reimagining these tunes just enough to have their souls remain intact while new bodies were issued. Lacy played soprano sax, and Sinton is a baritone man, so there’s already some distance between their essential sounds. Adam Hopkins is the bassist these days, but Ideal Bread’s general tone hasn’t changed much since its start: Four cats inject themselves into the heart of a songbook and peel back layers of the music to reveal more about themselves and the music at hand.

Pondering questions of flexible authorship—and how a 21st century improviser messes with myriad sources—is part of the fun here. (Don’t forget, Lacy upended plenty of Monk nuggets.) Sinton and associates make you think about the pliability and definition of “a cover tune.” But the joys of *Beating the Teens* are elementary, too. After lots of bandstand time, the quartet’s chemistry is superb, and the architectural ploys provide plenty of room for wily gambits.

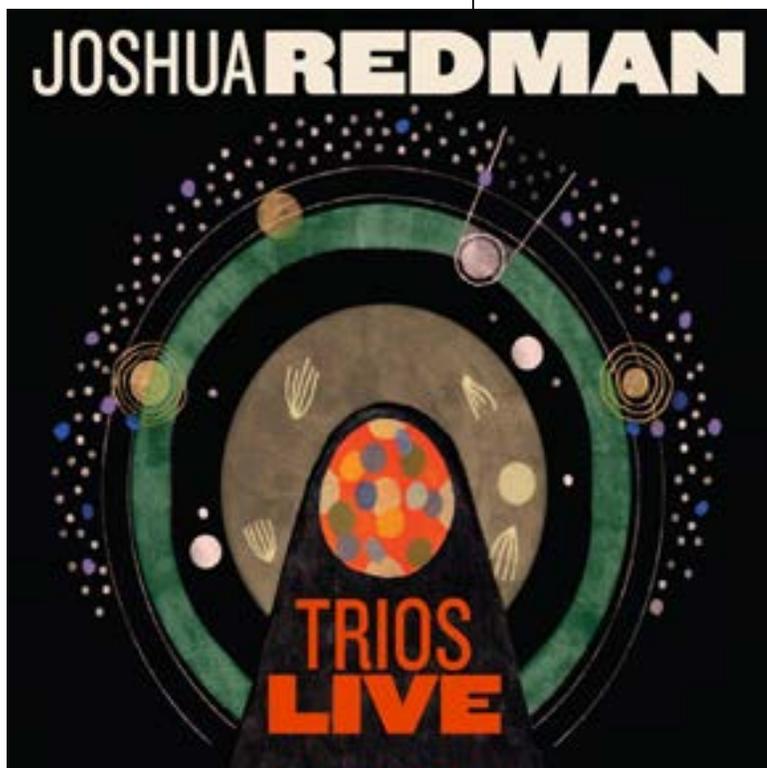
Knuffke has a sly way of coming around corners. Fujiwara can be dense and lilting. Hopkins trusts the power of melody. Sinton banks on textural nuance, even when he’s shredding. Everything is up for grabs in these fertile interpretations. A horn theme in an original Lacy piece might become a fragment for the bassist to run with here. One of Lacy’s key rhythms might re-routed forever. Listeners shouldn’t go hunting too closely; A/B’ing the updates with the source material could turn up as many questions as answers. Uncertainties are left hanging, and that’s a good thing. But it’s not as if you can’t hear Lacy floating through the program.

The descending lines in the theme of “The Wane,” the quacks of “Scraps,” and especially that eerie aura the bari creates on “Somebody Special”—yep, Lacy’s around for sure, probably grinning as his progeny try their hand at making their own ideal bread. If you try sometimes, you get what you knead. —**Jim Macnie**



A

trio may be the most challenging format for a jazz saxophonist. The player has no place to hide. He or she can't play off of another horn's ideas, and there's no piano to provide a cushion of chords. In some ways, it's even more daring than performing solo because the leader still must engage and inspire a rhythm section.



Joshua Redman

Trios Live

Nonesuch, CD

Joshua Redman began recording with this kind of group about seven years ago. His 2007 *Back East* album features the trio at its core (including bassist Reuben Rogers, who returns here on three tracks), but it also includes a number of guest players. Since then, he's worked with the collaborative *James Farm* and orchestral *Walking Shadows*. On the new *Trios Live*, he goes back to the stripped-down setting for this concert recording of two different groups performing at New York's Jazz Standard and Washington, D.C.'s Blues Alley. Getting back to the basics and taking on this dare in front of discerning audiences

makes his playing sound stronger than ever.

Redman has mentioned that Sonny Rollins' classic trio dates, especially 1957's *Way Out West*, have been especially inspirational when he began working within the format. While those are large shoes to fill, Redman, on tenor and soprano, sounds more than up to the job, especially since he consistently displays a personality of his own.

The way Redman, bassist Matt Penman, and drummer Gregory Hutchinson approach Kurt Weill's "Moritat (Mack The Knife)" can be considered the most ostensible connection to

Rollins. They extend the piece, and Redman in particular fills it with an array of squeals and clever quotations. Hutchinson, especially, helps guide all these forays into a resolving logic; Redman's rich tone also emphasizes this sense of clarity. A power take on Thelonious Monk's "Trinkle, Tinkle" steamrolls through the composer's singular intervals—a piano may have slowed them down. The saxophonist's voice is equally convincing on such quiet pieces as Jay Livingston's ballad "Never Let Me Go," which features Redman's subtle vibrato and subtly bold upper-register harmonies.

Trios Live also serves as a reminder of Redman's considerable skills as a composer. His "Mantra #5" provides the ideal structure for his soprano lyricism. "Act Natural" sounds like a multipart suite with Rogers' pizzicato bass solo leading back to Redman's embellishment of the theme with growls that hang outside the bar lines. Hutchinson also brings in different, and surprising, melodic tones here, as well as on "Soul Dance."

A rousing version of Led Zeppelin's "The Ocean" concludes the outing. Redman, Penman, and Hutchinson bring the funk and unleash a few gimmicks—like the saxophonist's slap tonguing. But, considering the source, throwing every fun trick in the service of Zeppelin is more than all right. —**Aaron Cohen**

AURALiC Gemini 2000

An all-in-one headphone partner

By Jerold O'Brien

Is the Gemini 2000 a headphone amplifier? Is it a headphone dock? Is it a DAC? Well, yes. Through the Gemini, Hong Kong-headquartered AURALiC creates a design that manages to pack all that into an attractive and great-sounding component. For those seeking a headphone-based desktop system, this AURALiC offers a turnkey package.





Headphone stand

At first glance, the most eye-catching and unique feature of the Gemini is its headphone stand, licensed from Klutz design. Standing about a foot tall with graceful curves, the stand not only looks great, but it offers a secure way to display your favorite headphones and keep them at the ready. AURALiC offers a lot of color options including a glossy white, black, yellow, blue, and the bright red of our review sample. In addition, there's a choice of a shiny gold or silver base finish. With so many choices each prospective owner is bound to find some color combination to his or her liking.

Acting as a headphone stand, the Gemini certainly has stability and heft. The base of the unit is quite heavy, and lifting the unit makes me feel as if I'm accepting a hefty Oscar statue. The Gemini is not likely to tip over with your valuable headphones draped over it. Another really nice feature of the stand is the ability to wrap the headphone cord onto it, keeping the desktop tidy. Metal pegs at the top and bottom facilitate the process, acting in a similar fashion as the electrical cord holder on an upright vacuum cleaner.

The business end...

The stand element by itself may look impressive, but the real design feat is squeezing the DAC and amp into base of the unit, about an inch tall with 5.5-inch diameter. Each Gemini comes equipped with a 4GB SDXC card which includes Windows computer drivers, a manual, and some sample music.

The Gemini 2000 we reviewed also has a little brother, the 1000. The main difference between the two is the option of a balanced headphone output on the former, and the amount of power output. The Gemini 1000 offers 1000 milliWatts (a.k.a. one watt), and as you might guess, the 2000 offers double that. We didn't have the opportunity to compare both units side-by-side, but I expect the 1000 would have adequate power to meet the requirements of many headphones.

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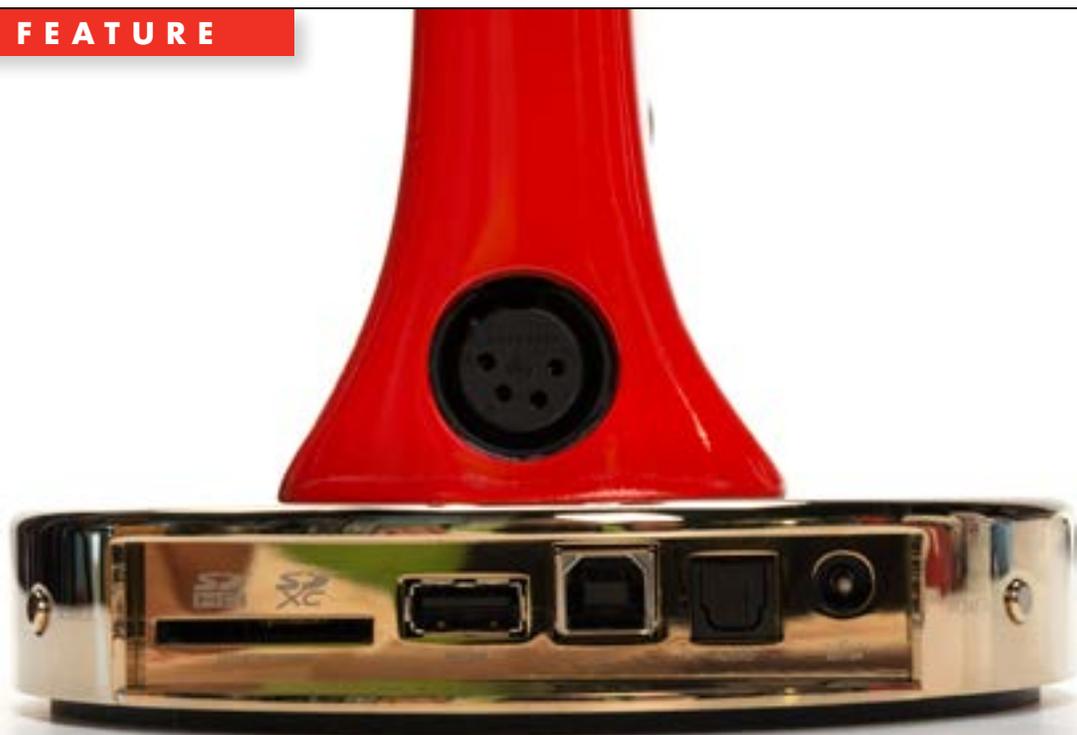




The lower, narrow part of Gemini 2000's stand offers $\frac{1}{4}$ " headphone output on one side and a balanced output on the other. Those who desire a mini-output will need to use an adapter.

Tiny red LEDs grace the circumference of the base's top, indicating the user-selected volume, input source, and file resolution. Equally diminutive buttons on the side of the base facilitate power-up and source changes, while the knurled edge of a scrolling wheel adjusts volume. AURALiC doesn't label "Volume" as such though. Instead, it humorously claims, "Niceness." Moving the wheel, I have to agree with the nomenclature. Until you get used to placement of the controls be sure to bring your reading glasses because these labels are almost microscopic. *(continued)*

FEATURE

**DAC**

With some trickle-down technology from AURALiC's marvelous Vega DAC, the Gemini's DAC is capable of decoding high resolution files including CD-standard 44.1k, 48k and DSD, double DSD and DXD.

In addition to the standard USB connector, there's the uniquely shaped digital input for Android phones and tablets. Finally, those with a Toslink-enabled CD player or Astell & Kern player can purchase the appropriately terminated cable for connection with the Gemini. As mentioned earlier, Gemini sports a SDXC card slot, and depending on the card's capacity, quite a bit of music can reside within the amp itself, controlled by the connected computer with included software.

Connecting the Gemini to a MacBook Pro laptop proves a breeze. After tethering the Gemini to the computer via the included USB, simply go to the System Preferences, and

under the sound options AURALiC appears as a selectable option. Once done, iTunes recognizes the change immediately and diverts all sound to the Gemini. For those using Windows-based computers AURALiC provides a Gemini driver to facilitate the interface between the two machines.

Amplifier

Gemini 2000's shiny base sports a class-A amp design that takes all the DAC, feeds it, and generates great sound. As with the DAC section, the amp benefits from trickle-down technology borrowed from AURALiC's Taurus II headphone amp. Class-A circuits, in addition to great sound, generate a lot of heat and the Gemini is no exception. Seriously, if the amp remains powered up for an extended period you won't want to handle the metal base. That's one hot potato! Don't worry though; it is designed to act as a heat sink and to handle the temperatures safely.



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Listening

Borrowing a few pairs of headphones for this review, I had the opportunity to listen though Audeze LCD-X, Sennheiser HD-650, and others on hand. Two watts produced by the Gemini 2000 proves more than enough for the driving power needed to make all the headphones sing. Trying both the single-ended (1/4") and balanced outputs, sound is quite similar, but with a bit more detail retrieval and bass substance though the latter.

CD-quality 44.1 KHz or 48 kHz songs render very nicely through the AURALiC. There's never the singe of high frequency edge, and midrange portrays both vocals and instruments well. Piano, trumpet and cymbals on Enrico Rava Quintet's "Tears for Neda" demonstrate the Gemini's prowess with the nuances of instrumental jazz.

When listening to some rock tracks with Apple Lossless files, bass through the Gemini can appear slightly subdued. It's not quite as robust and punchy as some other amps I've heard. However, what's there is both tuneful and enjoyable. To my ears, the Gemini's overall sound signature is well-voiced and slightly warm, focusing on the bigger musical picture more than every minute, ambient detail. Switching to the Sennheiser HD-650 reveals similar sonics from the Gemini.

Listening to higher fidelity DSD files truly gives the Gemini a chance to sing. Listening to Bob Marley's "Three Little Birds" with

high res, the soundstage opens up, and every aspect of the musical spectrum comes further to life, bass included. Similarly, listening to the title track from Paul Simon's *Graceland* on DSD offers a sonic treat. Background vocals, various types of percussion and other instrumentation float into the soundstage and with a more pronounced attack and decay. The driving guitar and bass give a sense of speed and energy to the recording, and Simon's voice remains very upfront.

For those who have invested in DSD-quality files, you'll definitely get more mileage out of them through the Gemini. If your digital collection does not yet have any, this amp is a very good incentive to take the plunge in purchasing a few favorite albums.

Is the Gemini 2000 right for you?

After experiencing the Gemini 2000, I find myself a fan of its modern, practical design and the very good sound it produces. Indeed, there's a lot to love! However there are three considerations a potential buyer should be aware of. First, the Gemini is designed primarily for use in a desktop scenario. There's no battery-powered option so the electrical tether is a must. Obviously, this isn't the kind of portable setup you will take with you on a plane.

Second, for those who want to bypass the Gemini's DAC and input an analog source from an iPod or a turntable directly to the



amplifier, you are out of luck. The unit does not offer an RCA or a mini-jack input, so many portable sources prove incompatible with a Gemini rig. To be fair though, the Gemini's DAC is quite good, so there's not a lot to be achieved from bypassing it anyway.

As a last minor quibble, there's not a manual impedance selector to help optimize the feed to a variety of headphones. While the Gemini is no slouch regardless, it's nice to have some options to experiment with to ensure your 'phones are giving a listener the best sound they are designed to provide.

If those caveats are no concern to you, the Gemini 2000 could become your new best friend at home or at the office. The form factor is elegant and practical, with options to match any décor or preference. The sound it offers is very good, and it pairs well with the headphones I had on hand for testing. A key benefit with the Gemini 2000 is price-performance. In the often-expensive world of hi-fi, \$1,995 is a reasonably small investment. Heck, the Audeze headphones cost almost that much. For all the technology packed into this marvel the price tag is very reasonable. Trying to buy a top-of-the-line headphone stand, DAC, and amp as standalone units will cost a lot more. Do keep in mind that the Gemini 1000 costs \$995, so if you need only a single-ended 1/4" headphone output and can get by with less power, it might be a more economical alternative. Either way, if you seek an all-in-one solution for personal hi-fi, do yourself a favor and check out the Gemini!

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Further Observations

It's rare that Mr. O'Brien and I agree on things like this, as he's more of a "performance is everything" kind of guy and I'm more of a "but it's gotta look cool" kind of guy. And though we enjoy the Gemini 2000 for different reasons, I was hooked the minute I saw the cool shape. Knowing what AURALiC has accomplished with everything else we've auditioned, I had a strong hunch it would sound great—and I was not disappointed.

I don't think I've ever had a more conversation-provoking piece of audio gear. It looks marvelous sitting front and center on the Noguchi table in my living room with a pair of Audeze headphones perched on top. Guests to my home always beg to play with it, and for me, that's what the world of audio needs—more "ooh, can I touch it?"

Think of the Gemini 2000 as a headphone hookah. Display it in a prominent place and let everyone partake! While the performance is world class, the style points are off the chart. Get the party started.

—*Jeff Dorgay*

AURALiC Gemini 2000

MSRP: \$1,995

www.auralic.com



Conrad-Johnson LP125sa Power Amplifier

\$12,000

www.conradjohnson.com

Conrad-Johnson has been making fine tube power amplifiers for almost 40 years now and the new LP-125sa is more evolutionary than revolutionary; borrowing from their past LP series of amplifiers and their current Art amplifiers.

However, the results are indeed stunning. With 125 watts per channel, thanks to a quartet of KT120 output tubes, the LP125 does not sound like a vintage tube amplifier. If the last time you sampled a CJ power amplifier was more than 10 years ago, you don't know what you are missing.

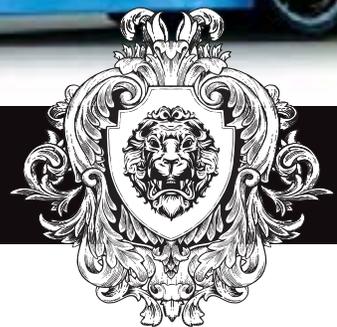
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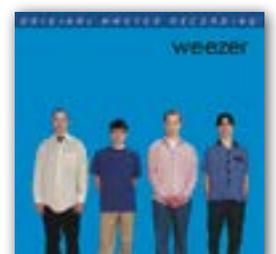
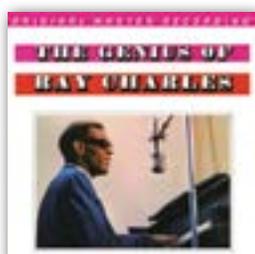
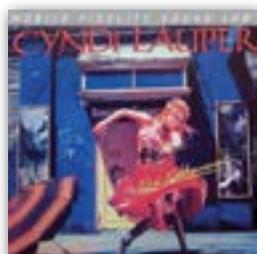
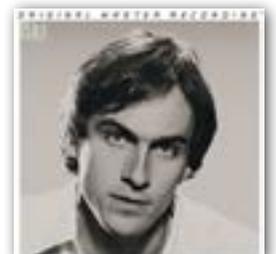
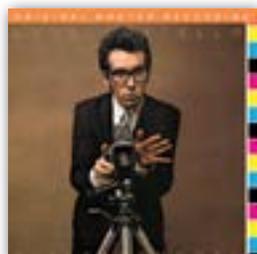
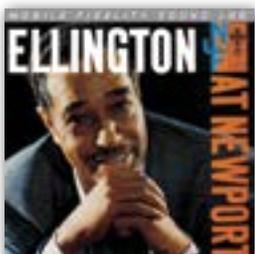
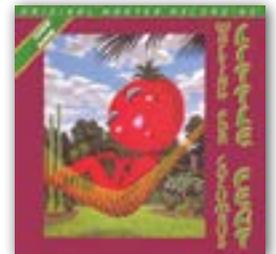
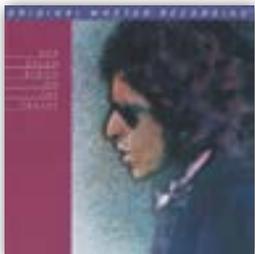
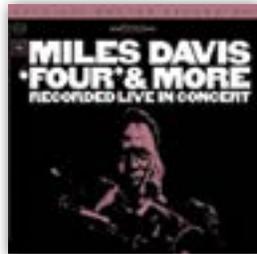
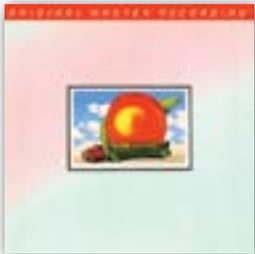


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Think of it as an analog kids meal. The first collaboration between VPI's founder, Harry Weisfeld and his son Mat, who is now the company frontman is an outstanding success. An astute businessman in his own right, the junior Weisfeld recognizes the way to lure more people into the analog world is by connecting with a newer audience, in this case the booming personal audio market.

With a great MM phonostage and headphone preamplifier built right into the table, you can enjoy your LPs day or night,

without fear of waking the neighbors. Even if you don't have a full blown system, (yet) all that's required for a most excellent analog journey is your favorite pair of headphones and the Nomad. Those wanting to integrate it into a standard system can use the RCA jacks on the back to interface.

And for those of you new to the vinyl game, the Nomad comes with an Ortofon 2M red cartridge already mounted, so setup is minimal, both in terms of time and complexity. So what are you waiting for?



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



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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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Dynaudio's Ultimate Rendition

By Jeff Dorgay

A

s the sound-level meter bounces above 105 dB during playback of the title track from Iron Maiden's *The Number of the Beast* (and I see nods of approval from the non-audiophile buddies present to take this all in), I'm reminded that you need big speakers that can move a substantial amount of air to really enjoy this kind of music. The same can be said for *Mahler's Symphony No. 5* or Deadmau5, if Maiden is not your favorite faire. Dynamic swing and contrast is a big part of recreating the illusion of live music in your listening space, and a large pair of speakers with the appropriate amount of power gets the job done.

In the day where \$200,000 speakers are becoming more and more common, Dynaudio's top speaker tips the scale at only \$85,000 per pair. Yes, yes, the word *only* is going to offend a lot of people, but if you happen to be in the market for a six-figure pair of speakers, this level of greatness for \$85K is a bargain—it's all relative. After living with the Evidence Platinums for some time now, I see no need to drop \$200K on a pair of Wilson XLFs. And that's enough money left over to put a new Porsche GT3 in your garage. I know what I'd rather buy.





A number of things make the Evidence Platinum speakers unique. Though they are over 6 feet tall, they carve a very small footprint in your listening room, and thanks to a wide range of wood finishes, along with piano black, they should blend in with any décor. While minimalist yet tasteful grilles are included, the precision craftsmanship of the front sculpted baffles beg them to be left uncovered. Those without large pets or small children will have an easier time leaving the grilles off.

No Limitations

Much like a high-performance supercar, the Evidence Platinums have few limitations. And just as an Aston Martin feels different from a Porsche or a Ferrari, all three cars still provide stellar performance way beyond that of normal transportation. Sticking with the automotive metaphor, the Evidence Platinums remind me of the Audi R8: a new concept that offers similar if not better performance than its contemporaries—and with a bit more style. The Dynaudios are definitely one of the most svelte large speakers around.

Having lived with Dynaudio's much smaller Confidence C1 Signatures for a few years, I notice a striking parallel between the two speakers. The comparatively diminutive C1s, with their highly optimized front baffle, present a musical picture almost like a point source, while the massive Evidence Platinums simply disappear. In a small room at low volume, with equally high-quality electronics driving the speakers, you'd be hard pressed to tell the difference, other than on the deepest low-frequency excursions. *(continued)*

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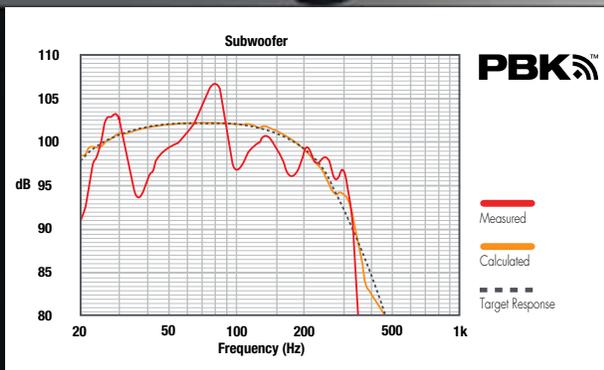
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Shown: SUB 1



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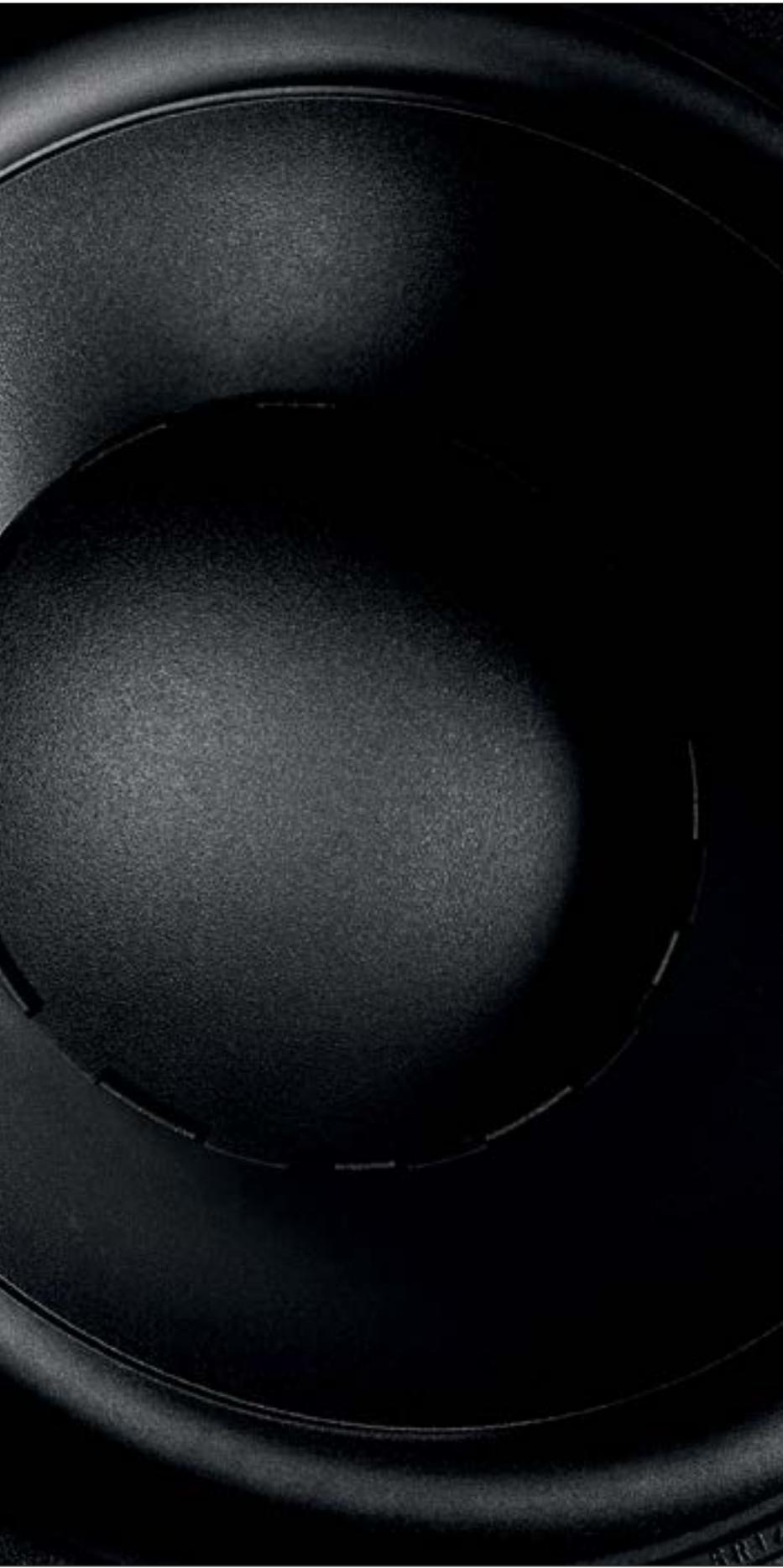
However, in a larger room, when the sound level comes up and dynamic expectation increases exponentially, the Evidence Platinums justify their price tag. Queuing up the *Stereophile* test CD reveals solid bass performance at 25 Hz, which is lower than what you'll need for most program material. Playing Mickey Hart's "The Eliminators" at high volume confirms the measurement; these speakers can punch you in the chest—hard. The four 7-inch woofers move more air than a single 12-inch unit; yet, because of their small size, they are faster, providing mega bass with maximum tone and definition.

The Evidence Platinums make it a breeze to discern between bass players and their respective styles: The difference between a Hartke bass-guitar amp with aluminum cone drivers and a vintage Ampeg amp with paper cones is now easily apparent. This is what adds so much to the musical experience, making your music so much more immersive. And that's what you *should* get when you write the big check.

Top-of-the-Line Technology

Dynaudio has left no stone unturned with the Evidence Platinums, taking advantage of the company's top technological advancements. Relying on silk dome tweeters since the beginning, Dynaudio's design requires a very labor-intensive process that involves shaping the fine-fabric dome and treating it with a specially formulated coating. The "Precision Coating" used throughout the Platinum range is Dynaudio's latest refinement to that process. The higher uniformity of the dome's shape results in a smoother high-frequency response and even more dispersion of mid and high frequencies.





This is clearly evident when comparing female vocals through the Confidence C1s and the Evidence Platinums. A quick spin of *Ella and Louis Again* uncloaks the difference in the timbre of Ella's voice, which is already silky smooth and convincing when played through the C1s. By comparison, the Evidence Platinums dematerialize completely, even though they are so much bigger physically. This is truly the magic of these speakers: They vanish like a mini monitor and are transparent like an ESL, yet they have the drive of an enormous cone speaker.

The Evidence Platinums throw a soundstage that is staggeringly wide and deep, but they also get the height aspect right—probably due in part to their physical height. While playing the MoFi copy of Frank Sinatra's *Nice And Easy*, I feel as if Sinatra is standing right in front of the speakers, with his voice coming from where his mouth would be.

Custom drivers, check. Precision optimized crossover network, check. Premium electrical and mechanical parts throughout, check. The combination of all these technologies is certainly present in most flagship loudspeakers, but Dynaudio's DDC (Dynaudio Directivity Control) system is the heart of what makes these speakers perform the way they do.

The combination of the finely shaped front baffle, driver placement and matching the phase response of the individual drivers makes for a more focused dispersion pattern that does not require nearly as much room treatment to sound their best as do many large speaker systems. This is all trickle-down technology from Dynaudio's professional division, taking advantage of what the company has learned building studio monitors. *(continued)*

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Another benefit of this optimization is the ease of setting up the Evidence Platinums. We've spent hours (sometimes a day or more) to get reference-caliber speakers to sound their best. The Evidence Platinums sound great right out of their crates before much attention is paid to positioning. About an hour's worth of fine-tuning brings the speakers to the point where, when Dynaudio USA's Michael Manousselis stops by to check my work, he merely makes a few fine adjustments and then I'm on my way. These are not finicky speakers by any stretch of the imagination. Even the machined plinth offers a choice of footers for hard and soft surfaces. Once unpackaged, the Evidence Platinums only take a few days of 24/7 play at modest volume to open up and sound their best.

Still Solid, Months Later

After listening to these speakers day in and day out for months, I am still amazed and impressed. It's easy to get carried away with premium speakers after first listen, especially after running through a number of well-recorded audiophile classics.

This is not the case with the Evidence Platinums. I go out of my way to dredge up even the worst-sounding selections in my music collection, and these speakers do a fantastic job with any program material. There is nothing I can throw at them that trips them up. Regardless of the program material and volume level, we simply cannot drive the Evidence Platinums hard enough to invoke listener fatigue. *(continued)*

With a sensitivity rating of 89 dB and a cross-over network of 6 dB per octave, the Evidence Platinums are very easy to drive with either tube or solid-state amplification. Even in my 16-by-25-foot listening room, more than adequate volume levels are achieved with the 20-watt-per-channel Nagra 300i integrated amplifier. I would suggest about 100 watts per channel or more for best results, especially if you like to hear your favorite music reproduced loudly.

While these speakers can reproduce some great dynamic swings, they are highly linear, with their massive stereo image still intact, even at very soft volume levels—again, not unlike a great mini monitor. Chrissie Hynde’s signature vibrato comes through clearly on the original *Pretenders* album. The delicacy present in “Private Life” puts Hynde in the room, right near the center of the listening position.

Coupled to the amazing Pass Labs Xs300 monoblocks, with nearly boundless power on tap, the Dynaudios really come to life. As I blast Lou Reed’s *The Creation of the Universe*, there isn’t a point at which the wide, vivid stereo image ever collapses—no matter how high the volume. Much like the Focal Maestro Utopia speakers that we just got done auditioning, the Evidence Platinums excel at reproducing large-scale music, especially drums and percussion—and they do so without fatigue.

You Need a Pair

If you are looking for a statement loudspeaker, look no further than the Dynaudio Evidence Platinum. After six months of constant listening (and punishing) on an incredibly wide range of musical program material, I can tell you that there is nothing that the Evidence Platinums can’t handle, if you have enough amplifier power on tap.

Along with their musical performance, the Evidence Platinums offer a level of fit and finish that is in keeping with a speaker of this level. They exude luxury and will be an excellent fit for the world’s finest listening rooms, a fact that can’t be overlooked when spending this kind of money.

Lastly, Dynaudio is a major player in the speaker industry, so this is a purchase that can be made with confidence, knowing the company will be around to support these speakers.

With so much capability, the Dynaudio Evidence Platinums should be your last speaker purchase. ●

Dynaudio Evidence Platinum loudspeakers
MSRP: \$85,000 per pair

MANUFACTURER

Dynaudio

CONTACT

www.dynaudio.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source AVID Acutus Reference SP/Tri Planar/Lyra Atlas

Phonostage Rogers

Digital Source dCS Paganini Stack, Meridian Control 15, Aurender S10

Preamplifier Robert Koda K-10

Amplifier Pass Labs Xs300 monoblocks

Cable Cardas Clear



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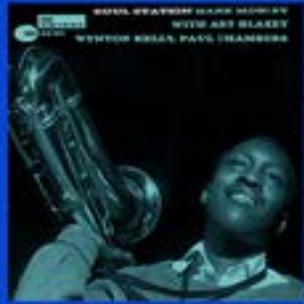
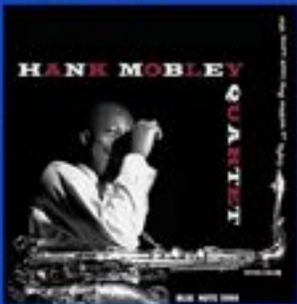
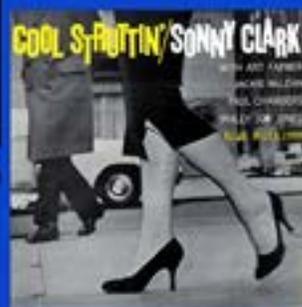
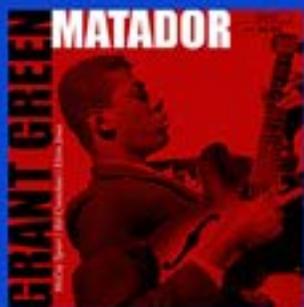
Taking It Personally Burmester B10 Speakers

By Jeff Dorgay

If you've ever had the opportunity to audition Burmester loudspeakers, you know they mate perfectly with the company's electronics and that, together, they put forward a very dynamic, powerful presentation. And, as founder Dieter Burmester is a bass player in his spare time, his speakers are never lacking in low-frequency authority.



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In a fairly good-sized room, pairing the hefty Burmester 911 amplifier (or the larger 909) with Burmester speakers makes for highly engaging listening. But for those of us wanting the Burmester experience in a smaller room, the B10s—which are only about 15 inches tall, 9 inches wide, and 11 inches deep—deliver just that. They fit on a pair of stands; I use sand-filled Sound Anchors in my modest 11-by-13-foot listening room.

This understated-looking pair of two-way speakers is something of a happy accident. Originally designed as personal reference monitors for Dieter's studio, they became part of the product lineup and they make for an excellent match with Burmester's smaller 101 integrated amplifier and 102 CD player, which we review here. With an 87-dB sensitivity and 4-ohm nominal sensitivity, the B10s are obviously

geared towards Burmester amplification, but they work great in the context of any system, whether tube or solid state.

For initial break-in, I run the B10s for a few days with the Devialet 110 (now upgraded to 120 status) in my second listening room, merely swapping out the Stirling Broadcast 88-B8 speakers (also 87 dB) that have been in for review for some time. This could not have been a more night-and-day difference; it was like going from a mid-1980s Mercedes 300 turbo diesel (the Sterlings) to a current AMG C63 (the Burmesters). There's more resolution and extension everywhere, and even though these are fairly small speakers, the signature Burmester low-end performance is there in spades.

The Burmester B10s have an MSRP of \$9,000, without stands. *(continued)*

Initial Listening

Once settled in, my Devialet/Meridian combination goes out and in comes the Burmester 101/102 combination, which proves very interesting, as this amplifier is Burmester's foray into class-D design—no doubt as a result of the company's work on high-end automotive audio systems. For those already familiar with the Burmester house sound, (read: slightly warm for solid state), the 101 does not disappoint; it lacks the slight haziness and harshness normally associated with these designs.

Listening to Thomas Dolby's "I Scare Myself," I find that the B10s exhibit excellent pace, keeping the deep bass line firmly anchored in place, as the synthesizers float about the soundstage with plenty of width and depth. Interestingly, the B10s use a dome tweeter where the rest of the Burmester line uses a ribbon/AMT driver. Ribbons in general tend to elicit a polarized response from most music lovers, and reviewer bias admitted, it is not my favorite driver, so I find myself very drawn to the overall sound of the B10s, especially since I have a soft spot for well-designed two-way loudspeakers.

Setup is simple and straightforward. As with any compact high-performance monitor, a pair of rigid stands is a must in order to extract the best possible performance. Burmester does make its own stands, which are more attractive than my Sound Anchors, but the Sound Anchors are very dense stands and so they are a great match for the B10s. Putting the speakers on less-massive stands does, in fact, compromise bass extension and focus, so regardless of which way you go, don't set these speakers on weak stands or you will be disappointed.



Seat Time

The more time spent with the B10s, the more comfortable I become. Expanding the musical palette reveals no shortcomings, with the only thing missing being the extremely low frequencies of large floorstanding speakers. Yet, taking advantage of the room gain in a small room, the B10s do not disappoint, even when playing tracks from Deadmau5, Pink Floyd and Mickey Hart. Though it might seem counterintuitive with a \$9,000 pair of speakers, the B10s deliver more low-end heft with a larger amplifier—in this case, my reference Burmester 911 MK3, which has been in service for some time now.

Listening to the new Black Keys album *Turn Blue* is much freakier with the added power of the 911 driving the B10s. The fuzzy guitars come alive with more weight, bite and roundness, while the vocals seem more real and full of life. A similar experience is had with Pink Floyd's classic album *Wish You Were Here*. The title track comes in with barely a whisper as the acoustic guitar spikes up, standing out clearly in its own acoustic space. The smaller 101 amplifier, though similar tonally to the 911, flattens the leading in and trailing off of sound ever so slightly, though it is still involving and something you wouldn't notice if you didn't happen to have a 911 hanging around.

As hinted at earlier, the B10s will work fine with vacuum-tube amplification, suggesting

that they have a well-designed crossover network, though you can expect that a slightly softer sound will reflect what comes out. The 35-watt-per-channel Van Alstine Ultravalve renders a very mellow performance, per its character, while the 125-wpc Conrad Johnson LP120SA+ is much more authoritative and incredibly deep. While these comparisons offer different flavors than the Burmester amplification, the experiment is a ton of fun, turning my listening room into a fishbowl full of music—not necessarily real, but highly engaging.

Keeping It Real

The B10s rock with authority and image like crazy, but they do not present an overblown sense of perspective, preserving tone and timbre with acoustic instruments. The Jung Trio's *Dvorak Trio in F Minor Op. 65* quickly demonstrates how well these small monitors keep violin and piano sorted, especially the violin. This masterfully recorded piece is so clean that any hint of harshness in a system will be revealed instantly. The B10s pass this tough test with ease.

The subtle brushwork at the beginning of Thad Jones' "April in Paris" is equally impressive. As Jones' smooth horn gently glides into the mix, it's easy to hear him move ever so slightly across the soundstage, and the B10s nail the subtle phrasing of this jazz master, delivering a very emotional experience. *(continued)*



Chrissie Hynde's highly processed vibrato in the Pretenders' self-titled debut is perfectly rendered through the B10s. Each of her breaths on the track "Private Life" comes through the mix with an exciting sense of immediacy. Shelby Lynne's not bad either, so the audiophile whose taste leans more towards female vocalists will not be disappointed with these speakers.

Going through record after record, I find that the design and meticulous build quality that goes into the B10s (like that of every single Burmester product) is evident. These speakers may look understated and simple, but the musical result is fantastic. A perfect match for an all-Burmester system, the B10s will also mate fantastically well with a non-Burmester system. They may even pull you further into the world of Burmester. ●

Burmester B10 speakers
MSRP: \$9,000 per pair

MANUFACTURER

Burmester Audiosysteme GmbH

CONTACT

www.burmester.de

www.rutherfordaudio.com
(North American importer)

PERIPHERALS

Digital sources

Meridian Control 15, Burmester 102 CD Player

Amplification

Devialet 120, Burmester 101, Burmester 011/911

Cable

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REVIEW

GOLDENEAR TECHNOLOGY

Triton Seven Speakers

By Mark Marcantonio

Golden



Boom! Ba-boom!
The shock of
thunderous bass
waves is what
the GoldenEar
Triton Seven
speakers greet me

with to start a surprising review experience. Put away your preconceived notions of what slim, budget mini-towers should sound like—these are the first such speakers that don't prompt me to add a subwoofer, even just to see if any bass response is missing. Unless you're trying to out-thump the teenage neighbor with the 15-inch woofers in the back of his hatchback, the Sevens provide as much bass as you could ever want from a \$1,400 pair of speakers.

Thanks to their dual passive radiators, the Sevens go down to 29 Hz, which is plenty of low-frequency extension for most listeners. From the instrumental thunderclap in James Taylor's "Gaia" and the cannons in Tchaikovsky's "1812 Overture," to Dire Straits' "The Man's Too Strong" and non-ear-bleeding hip-hop or techno dance music, these speakers easily provide the necessary weight to get the job done.

If imaging floats your boat, the Sevens flood the room with that characteristic—so much so that my small man cave (about 9 by 12 feet) isn't quite large enough to let them breathe. In my 14-by-18-foot living room, the speakers thrive, with instrument placement that reminds me of much more expensive speakers.



The individual percussion whacks of the Indigo Girls' "Three Hits" rotate around the outside of each speaker, with the individual voices placed far left and right, and the magical harmony point placed well in front of the mini-towers.

Aerosmith's classic "Dream On" is a stress-test song. Steven Tyler's vocals can push many tweeters in the sub-\$1,500 range into screechy crunchiness. Triton's High-Velocity Folded-Ribbon (HVFR) tweeter keeps the high frequencies clear and dynamics strong. A testament to their driver design, the Sevens manage to keep even dense recordings well sorted.

Tech and Setup

Optimizing the Sevens takes very little effort. In my room, I achieve the best results using an equal triangular measurement, with the speakers toed-in directly to the listening position and placed four feet out from the wall. If you place the speakers too far apart, male vocals will hollow out and the center image will collapse. During setup, I suggest moving them apart a few inches at a time until you've gone too far, and then move them a touch closer.

With an 89 dB sensitivity rating at 8 ohms, the Sevens get jumping pretty easily. Though they thrive with the 150 watts per channel of my reference Simaudio Moon i-7 integrated, the 35-wpc Vista Audio i35 tube integrated still delivers plenty of punch though with a slightly softer presentation than the Sim. These speakers are truly amplifier-friendly, as they work equally well with class-D amps. *(continued)*

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 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 or worse?

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.



A low-level audio interconnect doesn’t carry power and doesn’t have 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.

It’s About Power

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 $1 \times 1 = 1$, but for a signal that’s 3dB louder, the interaction is $2 \times 2 = 4$. 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.

Sincerely, 
William E. Low CEO / Designer

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Standing just under 40 inches tall, 7.25 inches wide, and 10.5 inches deep, the Triton Sevens appear quite ordinary from a distance. Step up close and the first difference becomes apparent: A black grill sock topped with a shiny black plastic cap covers each speaker—no veneer or vinyl anywhere. Why the grill sock? It provides a sleek and uniform look and covers the dual passive 8-inch radiator bass drivers located near the base on either side panel. This old-school usage of the passive radiators comes from Golden Ear president Sandy Gross's experience as cofounder of Polk Audio. The result is an impressively detailed bass response down to 29 Hz.

The two midrange drivers and the Heil-inspired HVFR tweeter are mounted in a D'Appolito mid-tweeter-mid array. Incorporating the passive radiators requires only a single third-order crossover set at 3 kHz. Other speakers I've reviewed with a Heil-type tweeter have a much lower crossover point, but 3 kHz works just fine in the Sevens. The speakers come with a simple but sturdy plastic base, and four spiked or rubber-tipped feet are provided, for those desiring such floor coupling. *(continued)*

Further Listening

Never one to shy away from testing a speaker's limits, I play a multitude of symphonic recordings and discover that the Sevens will expose poorly recorded performances. Two versions of Gustav Holst's *The Planets* aptly demonstrate this characteristic: One recording gives a muddy, undefined soundstage during the thunderous "Jupiter" movement, while the other recording is open and enveloping.

Through the Sevens, powerful vocals appear dead center and about a foot out in front of the speakers. Adele's "Daydreamer" shows off her conversational singing style between the powerful moments, with the Sevens picking up her soft accent. On "Best for Last," the second track of her debut album *19*, there is a background chorus humming that I've never heard from similarly priced speakers—and the Sevens present it with ample clarity. When Adele lets loose with full-thrust vocals, these speakers don't shrink; they stay faithful to the performance.

Getting timbre right in the listening sweet spot is one step, but getting it right off center is another level altogether. Even with the toe-in, I find reasonable timbral accuracy in off-angle listening spots. Achieving faithful tonal character of unique vocalists is something I always look for, especially when it comes to James Taylor. Many speakers in the sub-\$2,000 range either embellish his nasal sweetness or thin out his voice. The Sevens lay off the sugar just a bit, thus keeping his vocal character intact.

The Seven's most stunning musical performance during my review





comes from live small jazz ensembles. On Bill Frisell's *East/West [Live]*, all the characteristics mentioned above come together. The soundstage presented is a three-dimensional revelation—an audiophile nirvana experience, where the listener gets totally lost in the music. Every instrument has a place but at the same time comes from everywhere; it's stereo reproduction at its best. For a \$1,400 pair of speakers to so strongly recreate a live performance is a remarkable auditory feat.

Solo piano recordings are notorious for showing speaker flaws. The Sevens perform admirably here, producing a very natural-sounding piano. George Winston's "Ike La Ladana" does show a bit of midrange congestion, but not as much as a pair of Totem Rainmakers, another pair of speakers in this price category with fine imaging. Other George Winston albums and songs don't show the same level of congestion, though on a couple of occasions a slight hint can be detected.

For head bangers on a budget or limited in real estate, the Sevens will make you toss your hair with abandon. My ears fly the white flag of surrender numerous times at the 103 dB mark, while the speakers continue to provide a solid soundstage. The instrumental layering on "Stairway to Heaven" doesn't muddy up the overall sound that the speakers present. Instead, the 5.25-inch midrange drivers create ample acoustical space without limiting the multiple instruments. Good speakers recreate the strength of individual instruments, and that is what the Sevens do consistently. *(continued)*

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During my last weekend with the speakers, I hook them up to my 2.0 home theater set-up and am not disappointed. Dialogue is clear, sound effects during car chase are well placed, and gunshots make me feel like I'm in the middle of the violence. Most importantly, I never need to reach for the remote to turn the volume up or down, as I neither strain nor feel sonically overwhelmed.

Final Tally

For speakers that do so many things well for just \$1,400 a pair, one might ask what was sacrificed? The Triton Sevens don't have the level of resolution of my reference Harbeth Compact 7ES3 speakers, but the extra 15 Hz on the bottom end earns some serious points, especially when the speakers are used in a home theater set-up. The Sevens do the basics well and add in the treats of outstanding imaging and real, prodigious bass.

These are speakers that a family with myriad musical tastes can enjoy. Watch out competition: Sandy Gross has a winner in his lineup. ●

Triton Seven Speakers
MSRP: \$1,400 per pair

MANUFACTURER

GoldenEar Technology

CONTACT

www.goldenear.com

PERIPHERALS

Amplification

SimAudio Moon i7 integrated amplifier, Vista Audio i35 integrated tube amplifier, Virtue Audio Sensation M451 Tripath/hybrid integrated amplifier

Phono Stage

SimAudio Moon LP5.3

Source

Rega RP1 w/Ortofon Super OM40 cartridge
MacBook iTunes/
PureMusic

Digital Processor

SimAudio Moon 300D

Speakers

ACI Emerald XL
Harbeth Compact 7es3
Magnepan 1.6 w/Skiing
Ninja crossovers
Totem Acoustic
Rainmakers

Wires/Cabling

Shunyata Venom 3 power cord, AudioArt IC-3 interconnects, AudioArt SC-5 speaker wire

Penaudio Cenya Monitors

MINIATURE MASTERPIECES

By Jeff Dorgay

C ranking Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" to a level way beyond what I'd ever expect from a small pair of monitors causes me to redefine my mental short list for a final hi-fi system. While I routinely audition six-figure speakers (and enjoy every minute of it), the Cenya and its slightly more expensive sibling, the Cenya Signature, deliver so much music that I would happily retire with these Finnish beauties as destination speakers.

The Cenyas do everything but deliver the last octave of deep bass, and at \$4,000 a pair, they leave you enough scratch to add your favorite subwoofer, should you require it.



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REVIEW

But in a small- to medium-sized room, you may not need the extra bass. These speakers are positively heavenly in my new small listening room (10 by 13 feet) powered by the Devialet 120. Penaudio speakers have always needed a little bit of juice to give their all, and the 120 watts per channel provided by the Devialet gets the job done, no matter what the musical faire. The opening bass drum beats from Led Zeppelin's "No Quarter" are delivered solidly, without overhang. As the cymbals linger in the air and fade off into black, the sparkle remains potent, which leads me to believe that these little speakers move some serious air.

It's worth noting that Devialet owners that are running the current firmware can now take advantage of their new S.A.M. (Speaker Active Matching) system, which offers phase alignment for a list of speakers, like the Cenya, custom tailored to the individual speaker. S.A.M. also offers bass equalization/compensation in the DSP domain that extends the frequency response cleanly down to 25hz. This had just become available at the end of this review, so watch for a follow up when we've spent more seat time with it. The short story is that it works incredibly well. You'll swear there is a subwoofer in the room!

My history with Penaudio goes way back to the Serenades that we reviewed in issue 4 and that ended up as my reference speakers for a couple years. I've always appreciated Penaudio founder Sami Pentilla's ability to build speakers that combine understated good looks and natural tonality in a compact form.





The tiny Cenya is no exception. It looks like a slice of the Serenade, with a 6-inch woofer and a 1.25-inch soft dome tweeter, and it is available in a wide variety of finishes.

This particular pair comes in the high-gloss white that was the rage at this year's Munich High End show. Considering psychoacoustics, this may be the best color for these mini monitors, as it lets them disappear even further into my listening environment, which is painted Ralph Lauren Studio White. A knuckle rap demonstrates cabinet rigidity, which contributes to the speakers' stellar bass response and freedom from cabinet-induced vibration.

Super Simple Setup

As with any high-quality pair of mini monitors, the Cenyas benefit from doing two things: placing them on massive stands and providing a solid coupling between the speaker and stand. Though not as attractive as the Cenyas deserve, a pair of 24-inch sand-filled Sound Anchor stands works perfectly, with a set of small Isonode feet (\$19.95 for a set of 4; available from Bright Star Audio) providing an ideal mechanical interface.

The Cardas Clear Light speaker cables also work well with these speakers, but for those requiring a bit more zip and high-frequency extension, the Graditech speaker cables provide it. They prove a perfect match for the Conrad Johnson LP125sa power amplifier, while the Clear Light cables are a more balanced solution (for these ears, anyway) with the Devialet. *(continued)*

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Final speaker placement takes about 15 minutes, with a bit of fine-tuning after the Cenyas have about two weeks of major break-in. Like all of the other Penaudio speakers we've auditioned, a good week's worth of listening to dynamic music at moderate to high volume does the trick—though they do sound fabulous right out of the box.

Jah Wobble's *Japanese Dub* leads the way into a long session of bass-heavy tracks that help define the low-frequency response of the Cenya2. The official specification is ± 3 dB from 45 to 28,000 Hz in an anechoic chamber, and thanks to a little bit of room gain, the Cenya 2s reproduce the 40 Hz test tone on my *Stereophile Test CD* with ease, though bass response falls off rapidly after this. For most musical material, this will rarely be an issue, considering the quality of the bass that the speakers produce. Again, this was all done *without* S.A.M. engaged on the Devialet.

A Nimble Performer

In a modest-sized room with first-class amplification, the Cenyas will spoil you. Thanks to their small front surface and high-quality SEAS tweeter, they throw an expansive soundstage that not only extends beyond the speaker boundaries but also past the wall boundaries.

When I revisit Springsteen's *The Wild, The Innocent & The E Street Shuffle*, it's a pleasure to hear the nuance in his young voice and, even though the recording is only mediocre, the coherence provided by this high-quality two-way speaker makes it come to life. *(continued)*



As with the previous Cenya iteration, the new Cenya exhibits a transparency much like an ESL. The Hammond organ at the beginning of “Kitty’s Back” remains in the air, slightly above the speakers, lingering in the room as though through my Quad 57s, but with more punch and dynamics.

The Cenyas excel at keeping the musical pace intact. The rapid-fire drum beats in Blamstrain’s “Dog Song” stay solidly anchored in the middle of some dreamy synth riffs, while the deep bass line fills the listening room without blurring the spacey presentation, until the volume is turned up well beyond a reasonable level. This is the only limitation of these petite Finns: They can only move so much air, and when pushed past their limit, they compress rapidly. However, I think anyone demoing a pair of Cenyas for the first time will be surprised at just how loud this level is.

Of course, the vocal performance of these speakers is beyond reproach. Those

preferring more audiophile fare will be highly satisfied at the deftness with which the Cenyas project both male and female vocals. Whether you love Tom Waits or Shelby Lynne, the speakers deliver the goods.

Compatibility

With a sensitivity rating of 86 dB, the Cenyas work better with more power, though in my small room, even the 25-watt-per-channel 845 SET amplifiers at my disposal prove adequate, albeit not able to push the speakers as far as the 120-wpc Devialet can.

Regardless, the Cenyas are very tube friendly in a way that my Serenedes never were. The McIntosh MC275, PrimaLuna DiaLogue Monoblocks and the new C-J LP120sa vacuum-tube amplifiers all work well with the Cenyas, delivering great dynamics, extended HF response and good damping of the woofer cones without issue. *(continued)*

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The Cenyas are equally versatile with solid-state amplification, from about 35 wpc on up, proving a good match with the 35-wpc Naim Qute2, the 50-wpc Rega Brio-R and the 60-wpc Pass Aleph 5—all reasonably priced yet high-performance small solid-state amplifiers.

Surprisingly, the Cenyas are transported into another world with the 300-wpc Burmester 911 MK3 and the similarly powered Pass Xs 300 monoblocks, though it is hardly likely that someone would spend \$30,000 to \$80,000 on amplification for a

\$4,000 pair of speakers—though, if you do, these little beauties are up to the task.

The \$4,000 Question

If you are looking for maximum performance with minimum footprint, look no further than the Penaudio Cenyas. They will do justice to whatever ancillary components you have at your disposal and they produce way more music than you would expect from a speaker this diminutive in size. Highly recommended. ●

Penaudio Cenya monitors
MSRP: \$4,000 per pair
www.penaudio.fi

PERIPHERALS

Digital Source

Devialet 120, Meridian Control 15, MacBook Pro

Analog Source

Thorens TD-124 turntable, with SME 3009 tonearm and Ortofon 2M Black cartridge

Amplification Devialet 120

Cable Cardas Clear





Morel Octave 6 Limited Floorstanding Speakers

By Rob Johnson



Though I knew little about Morel before this review, after listening to its new Octave 6 Limited floorstanding speakers, the company now has my attention. Based in Israel, Morel builds car speakers, in-walls, and various standalone options, as well as its own drivers. Morel has been a manufacturer of premier drivers for a number of major speaker companies for some time now, however while all of their drivers share core technologies, the ones utilized in their own systems are built from scratch and customized for that individual speaker. Everything from crossover to the drivers is done in house, except for cabinetry.

The Octave 6 Limited speaker line, which is among Morel's mid-tier hi-fi offerings and contains some trickle-down technology from the top speakers (mainly the Fat Lady flagship speaker), includes a bookshelf/stand-mounted model, a limited-edition floorstander with larger woofers and voice coil, finished in either black or white lacquer.



Design and Setup

I put the Octave 6 Limited floorstanders through their paces. They utilize a 1.1-inch soft dome tweeter, a 6-inch mid-range unit with a 3-inch voice coil, and a single 9-inch side-firing subwoofer with a gigantic 5.1" voice coil and a hybrid carbon fibre/paper cone. All the drivers are covered with protective lotus grille, utilizing a special pattern to minimize reflections and resonance—a special tool is enclosed to carefully remove these grilles for maximum sonic effect. Though they are disparately placed, the drivers display fantastic sonic cohesion.

The box cabinet is modified with some curved edges and includes a rear port. The forward-firing tweeter is molded to the top and set slightly back to ensure proper time alignment with the midrange driver, which is set into a slight bulge extending from the otherwise straight cabinet. These floorstanders are rather small in stature, measuring 38 inches tall, 13.4 inches wide, and 7.3 inches deep; they weigh about 52 lbs each.

A double set of binding posts allow for bi-amping. For those using standard speaker wire, stamped and gold-plated jumpers connect the binding posts. In testing, I found that a set of Jena Labs jumpers sound better than the stock jumpers. The speakers also come with a set of spikes to couple them to the floor.

The binding post and driver placements remind me of the Audio Physic Virgos, which I had for several years. A new pair of the Virgos cost around \$7,000, so I found myself very eager to hear what the \$7,000 Morels could accomplish. As much as I loved the Virgos, the Octaves prove themselves a better choice for my taste. *(continued)*

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After an hour of scooting the Octaves around my listening room—which is 17 feet deep and 20 feet wide, with a 10.5-foot ceiling—I find the ideal placement to be about 4 feet from the front wall with a slight toe-in, thereby twisting the side-firing woofers slightly toward the rear of the room.

Sound and Performance

My reference speakers, the Piega P-10s, are larger than the Octave and in their day, the Piegas cost twice as much as the Octaves, so it's not a fair comparison, though the Octaves offer some similarities in terms of sonic signature. They reproduce a little less detail and ambience than the Piegas, though they absolutely hold their own, filling the room with wonderful music. The Octaves create the illusion of sitting a few rows back in an auditorium during a live performance. From that perspective, a bit of lost detail is natural.

Morel says the Octave's frequency response covers the 20-Hz-to-20-kHz range of human hearing and extends to 22 kHz. The speakers offer a high level of neutrality, more so than the Virgos, which have a slightly warm character. Considering the Octaves' modest cabinet size, the amount of low-frequency information they portray is impressive. The upper and mid-bass regions remain tuneful, tight, and well defined. Frequency-sweep tracks verify the speakers can produce very low frequencies, though they roll off below 40 Hz in my room, despite experimentation with speaker placement. The Octaves do work magic, but at some point the rules of physics take over.

There's only so much stomach-tingling oomph that a small enclosure can muster.

The Octaves don't offer the level of bass tangibility I'm accustomed to with my reference speakers. For example, passages on Pitch Black's "Ape to Angel" leave me longing for more heft. Still, I remain amazed at what the Octaves can produce, given sufficient amplifier power. The touch of low-bass shyness I experience may not be as apparent in a smaller room.

The Octaves do a great job of high-frequency extension without tipping toward an edge of stridency or etch. They deliver plenty of detail while maintaining the music's natural sound: accurate male and female vocals; cymbals retain their shimmer; saxophones and clarinets are rendered with appropriate woodiness; and on good acoustic guitar recordings, it's easy to discern the difference between nylon and metal strings.

Soundstage and Dimensionality

The Octave 6 Limited speakers have the ability to cast sound in all directions, while drawing no particular attention to the physical location of the speakers. Music drifts organically and effortlessly between and beyond the speaker boundaries, immersing the listener in sound. Everyone's listening space provides different benefits and challenges. In my room, the perceived depth of the soundstage behind the speakers is not quite as dramatic as some speakers I have encountered. However, the left, right, and vertical sonic extension rivals that of some of the best speakers I've heard in this space. *(continued)*





Audio By Van Alstine

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The Chesky Records test disc illustrates how far the Octaves can extend a sonic image into the room. One track features David Chesky beating a tom drum while walking around an omnidirectional microphone; another utilizes a surround-sound processor to simulate the same activity. In both cases, the Octaves convincingly create the auditory illusion that Chesky is indeed walking a big circle around my listening space. Though my listening chair is against the back wall of my room, it's as if David Chesky has somehow walked behind me. Many speakers do a good job approximating this illusion, but the Octaves do a *fantastic* job.

To Each Their Own

The Morel Octave 6 Limited floorstanders are marvelous speakers, especially considering the value they offer at a \$7,000 per pair. Across objective audio metrics and subjective musical preferences, the Octaves excel.

Those with large listening rooms, those who crave every ambient nuance of a performance, or those who prefer bass-heavy rock and electronica may want to seek larger and more expensive speakers that can better deliver those characteristics. Those caveats aside, the capability of the Octaves across the audible spectrum is extremely good for speakers in this price range—and their ability to deliver three-dimensional imaging is indeed rare for this price. If that appeals to you, head to your local Morel dealer for a demo. ●

**Morel Octave 6 Limited
Floorstanding Speaker**
MSRP: \$7,000

MANUFACTURER

Morel Ltd.

CONTACT

www.morelhifi.com

PERIPHERALS

Speakers Piega P-10

Digital Source Audio Research CD3 Mk 2, HP Quad Core desktop with Windows 7 and JRiver Media Center 19

Analog Source SME 10 with 10 tonearm and Dynavector 17D3 cartridge

Preamplifier

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However, the minute you push play, it's a Boulder through and through, with a sound that is fast, transparent and completely uncolored. So, if you have a slightly smaller space and don't need unlimited power, consider the 865. Think of it as a quart of Boulder rather than a full gallon. And it comes with one of Boulder's cool remote controls!

● Our review can be found here.

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We enjoyed the Koru from Plinius for many reasons. While not an inexpensive phonostage, it is a jewel in that big dead zone between about \$2,500 and \$10,000, where there are few top performers.

The Koru ticks all the right boxes, with its massive power supply (which is physically isolated from the rest of the chassis), killer dynamic range and dead quiet solid-state design. It offers up a substantial helping of \$10K phonostage performance, all wrapped in a very hip enclosure that has become the hallmark of current Plinius lineup.

However, the Koru's single input makes it better suited to the more monogamous audiophile who stays true to a single table and cartridge. Gain is set from inside and the loading is set on the rear panel—you can't adjust this one from the comfort of your Eames lounge chair. But that's just fine, if you're an analog lover who wants performance at a more approachable price.

● [Read our full review here.](#)

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BARGAIN

SLUMMIN'



Meridian 501 Preamp

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www.echoaudio.com

The Meridian 501 hit the audio scene around the turn of the century, with a four figure price tag. Many of their current styling cues are in place, albeit in a smaller enclosure than today's Meridian gear, and we can see a distant cousin of the massive, square remote controls that comes with current product.

For just under 300 bucks, it's not a bad anchor for a budget system, with multiple inputs and two variable line level outputs, as well as a headphone jack on the rear panel. Ironically, it features a MM and MC phono stage—a commitment to the analog world that Meridian has long since abandoned.

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