

TONEAudio.

The e-journal of analog
and digital sound.

no.7

2006



THE TONE EXCEPTIONAL VALUE AWARDS

**NEW
PREAMPLIFIERS
FROM
CONRAD-JOHNSON
AND McINTOSH**

**CATCHING UP
WITH
JACQUI NAYLOR**

**SITTING IN WITH
TOM PETTY**

**A MADMAN'S GUIDE
TO YES FRAGILE**

**LAST MINUTE
SHOPPING IDEAS**

**REVIEWS, MUSIC
& SO MUCH MORE**

CONTENTS

4. STAFF

5. CONTRIBUTORS

6. PUBLISHER'S LETTER

8. TONE TOON
— *Liza Donnelly*



● FEATURES

9. **OLD SCHOOL**
Vintage McIntosh
Receivers
— *Kurt Dosl*

14. **THE VINYL
ANACHRONIST**
A Tale of Yamamoto
— *Marc Phillips*

20. **THE TONE
EXCEPTIONAL VALUE
AWARDS**

30. **BUDGET GEAR**
The Onix sl-1 Speakers
— *Jerold O'Brien*

33. **TONE'S HOLIDAY
GIFT GUIDE**

● PRODUCT REVIEWS

42. The Conrad Johnson
ACT2-Series 2



49. The Sota Comet

54. The McIntosh C220
Preamplifier



CONTENTS

● SHORT TAKES

- 60.** The Lyra Argo-i Phono Cartridge
- 62.** The Grado Mono Cartridge
- 64.** New Cables From Audio Art
- 66.** Style and Function From Finite Elemente

● HEADPHONE PLANET

- 68.** The Classic Sennheiser 650s Keeping Your Headphones In Order

● MUSIC

- 72.** Catching Up with Jacqui Naylor
- 76.** Audiophile Recordings: Close to the Edge of Madness — Jeff Dorgay
- 81.** Classical Music A to Z — Dan Babineau
- 90.** Sitting In With Tom Petty
- 93.** Fresh Holiday Friends — Nicole Wilson
- 98.** The Beatles LOVE
- 100.** The Torturous Sophomore Slump — Joe Golfen
- 103.** Club Mix — Scott Tetzlaff



● SLUMMIN'

- 111.** Audio on the Cheap!

● MANUFACTURES INFO

- 114.** Contest Winners!



STAFF

JEFF DORGAY

A Wisconsin native, Jeff built his first amplifier from a schematic in the RCA tube manual. A brief career selling mid-fi gear ended in 1981, when he told a customer to take his big check up the street to the local Levinson dealer for some really cool equipment.

Having spent the last seven years writing about photography and digital imaging for a number of publications, he also had a brief career at another popular high end audio magazine before starting TONE.

TONI MCQUILKEN

Toni McQuilken steps up to the big chair at TONE after being assistant editor at Digital Output for three years. A confessed technology junkie, she has a Communications Degree from Flagler College in St. Augustine, Florida, and recently finished her MBA from the University of Phoenix Online.

She lives in New York with her two spoiled-rotten cats, loves most types of music, and chews Cinnamint Orbit gum.

JEAN DORGAY

With a wealth of advertising experience, Jean brings 25 years as an art director to TONE. Her early studies of fine art and marketing were spent at the University of Southern Oregon. She later moved to the Southwest to work on her tan and finish a degree in design at the University of Arizona.

When she's not digitally designing, you can find Jean at the local gardening shops looking for cool things to add to the yard and dreaming about living in Tuscany.

JOE GOLFEN

Joe comes to us from Phoenix, where he has been a long-time friend of the family. Now as he is about to graduate from Arizona State University, he is following in his father's footsteps at the Arizona Republic, where he regularly writes about music.

With a depth of music knowledge beyond his years, Joe also plays guitar whenever he has the time. Keep an eye on this one!

NORWOOD BROWN

Our music editor, Norwood Brown has an interesting past. Playing drums professionally since age 12, Norwood is a music industry veteran, having spent many years behind the scenes in the record company and recording studio worlds. Now living in the Pacific Northwest, he is a certified living legend and walking encyclopedia of all things musical.

JEROLD O'BRIEN

JD can't remember if he first met Jerold at a Badger game at the University of Wisconsin or standing in line waiting to see the Rocky Horror Picture Show on Milwaukee's East Side.

The staff hermit, JO now also resides in the Pacific Northwest where he listens to a lot of '60s and '70s rock music, restores old BMWs and vintage tube amplifiers. He is the only member of the staff that does not own a TIVO.

SCOTT TETZLAFF

Scott keeps the computers running for the world's largest advertising agency by day, but is a big music enthusiast, with almost a full terabyte of music on his hard disc. Because his job takes him all over the world, his buddies keep him on top of the coolest new music in all of the clubs in Europe and elsewhere. Incidentally, he and JD met working in Milwaukee's infamous Safe House spinning records many years ago.

DAN BABINEAU

Dan joins TONE as our classical music authority. Much more than just another opinionated audiophile, he brings a wealth of knowledge playing classical music (oboe and bassoon) for a number of well known orchestras and has more equity in his record collection than most people have in their homes. A certified analog enthusiast, watch for DB contributing an occasional review concerning the stratosphere of LP playback.

STEVE HOFFMAN

Known to many in the music business as one of the world's most talented mastering engineers, Steve is a passionate Leica collector and known to take some pretty good pictures when the mood strikes. He's not a bad drummer, either.

Steve resides in Los Angeles to stay close to the music business with his wife Karla and two year old son, Mikey who would very much like to get his hands on Dad's Leica collection, or better yet some of those antique 300Bs in the nice wooden boxes.

NICOLE WILSON

A graduate of the University of Washington, Nicole spent her early years listening to classic pop/rock and later developed a taste for goth and hip hop. A time spent on the London music scene broadened Nicole's music collection as well as her hair colors.

When she's not catering to the coffee connoisseurs, Nicole can be seen toting a Dachshund named D.C. and enjoying double short cinnamon non-fat lattes with a bit 'o whip on top.



CONTRIBUTORS

NEW IN TONE THIS ISSUE

Marc Phillips

Marc Phillips is well known to the audiophile community as The Vinyl Anachronist and we are very proud to add him to our regular staff. He brings a wealth of knowledge, both in the hi-fi and music worlds. In addition to normal reviewing duties, Marc will help us explore more of the analog and SET worlds.

In addition to being a great writer, Marc knows where the best food in town is, making him invaluable to the TONE staff. Watch for an upcoming book from him in this direction in the near future...



PUBLISHER'S LETTER



It's that time of year again. The hustle bustle of the holiday season is upon us and depending on where you live, will determine just how maddening the holidays will be for you. Hopefully now more than ever, your hifi system can provide a bit of relaxation to make all of this more palatable. Now's a great time to get out to your favorite record or CD store and grab some new music while everyone else is busy with other things. This issue features our first annual gift guide, which might be to your advantage if you have someone that is just at a loss for what to put in your stocking.

The TONEAudio Exceptional Value Awards are also a premier this issue. Just as we don't hand out awards for best show sound, we won't be handing out awards for the best sounding components or making long lists of recommended components. Because we have a policy of only reviewing gear that we are really excited about, you can rest assured anything that makes it into the magazine is worthy of your hard earned cash. Page xx will reveal our choices for our first year.

We are very proud to announce our newest contributor, Marc Phillips, known to many of you as the Vinyl Anachronist.

I've been following Marc's work for a few years now and am happy to have him on board. On my last trip to Los Angeles, I got to spend the day with Marc and his pair of Brussels Griffons (Nick and Chachi) while photographing the Yamamoto gear that is in his first column this issue. The new guy has good taste in sound as well as dogs!

That's all for now. Here's to you and yours in hopes that you have a relaxing holiday season. Most of the TONEAudio staff will be attending this year's Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, so keep your eyes open; we look forward to chatting with you in person!

See you next year. Thanks again for your support.



IF WE DON'T HOLD ONTO THEIR DREAMS,
WHO WILL?

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Timeless Beauties

The Early McIntosh Receivers

Kurt Doslu

The other day I decided to do something quite unusual. I turned on the television. There stood a very over-tanned, 40-ish something man in a plaid shirt holding a 7 inch, Swiss-Army-like knife in a fake wood-shop promoting the benefits of his 29-in-1 tool, the Solution-Master 9000! Each feat he conducted was more incredible than the next. After Dremmeling two Christmas ornaments out of wood and carving a block of ice into a pumpkin, he pro-

ceeded to slice a tomato cleanly and shave his mustache off. Then he sawed through an aluminum coffee can and, again, sliced another tomato cleanly. Hell, after chopping down a tree with the thing and cutting enough tomatoes to make a pretty good salsa, I was ready to slam down my credit card! But just before I purchasing, I found the strength to ignore the force and get my audio system fired up. *(continued)*



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So I proceeded to turn on my hi-fi in a simple sequence that I've perfected over the years: First I flip on the power conditioner, wait a few seconds for it to settle in. Follow it with the tube preamp (which will take a minute or so to come out of mute). And then it gets easy because I can quickly roll through the succession of turning on the CD transport, Digital lens, D-A converter, turntable, step-up device, phono stage, tuner, analog buffer, and amplified antennae. Finally, and with the circumspection of a bombardier who has established his target, I trigger on the amplifiers. There. Easy enough. And barely a drip of sweat on the brow.

So while everything was warming up I decided to step into the office and check some emails. I walk into the room and hear Eva Cassidy singing a soulful rendition of "Time after Time". All of the sudden, it hits me. I've already got the auditory equivalent of the Solution-Master 9000 in my office. A McIntosh 1500 receiver!

Receivers get a bad rap. They really do. Honestly, if you walk into a hi-fi exhibition and start telling people that you listen to a receiver at home, they'll look at you with the same horrified glare reserved only for people that would wear a tuxedo t-shirt to the Emmys. Who knows why? I'll tell you this, this is not the place (or time) to try and convince a stiff-necked, hi-fi snob (whose just paid 4K for the room) that your 30 year old receiver sounds better than his 6 piece setup with more tip toes than a ballerina on crack.

(continued)



While it might be fun, you'll be ostracized from the audio world faster than a rat out of an aqueduct.

Now back to the great sound I was hearing in the office. In 1965, McIntosh, the Harley-Davidson-of-Hi-Fi as I like to call them because of their bountiful chrome and American tradition, was known as the preeminent maker of unsurpassable hi-fidelity gear. Their tube preamps, amps and tuners were instant collectibles and demanded your attention due to their elegant look and obvious horsepower.

Who knows whether it was the idea of Gordon Gow or Sidney Cordesman to say, "hey, lets put out a receiver", but in 1965 the McIntosh 1500 appeared. It was a beautiful. A 40lb hybrid piece which consisted of a tube tuner, a solid-state preamp and a tube power amp. Remember that transistors were all the 'rage' at this time and McIntosh had just released its first solid state preamp a year earlier, the C-24. So for McIntosh to produce a hybrid receiver based mainly in tubes was remarkable. The hefty power supply and four 7591 output tubes delivered a strong 30 watts per channel into 4, 8 or 16 ohms. The specs were good. Damping factor, frequency response, distortion and stereo separation were among the very best anyone had seen in one chassis. And for \$499 – POW! – you had an entire system. *(continued)*



In 1967, McIntosh produced the Mac 1700 receiver, 40 watts this time with a tube tuner and a solid-state pre and power amp. Now distortion dropped in half and damping factor was up by a factor of 10. The selling price was \$599. Definitely not cheap at the time, but a veritable steal if you were to consider what a separate McIntosh tube tuner, a solid state preamp and a solid state power amp would have set you back.

Then comes the Mac Daddy 1900, an all solid state receiver (with a new AM section included) boasting better signal to noise ratios, power (55w) and greater stereo separation. While keeping the same look (which no one does better than McIntosh), feel and integrated volume control/ power switch, the Mac 1900 also provided pre-outs and main-ins so that we could plug it into our Mc240 amp and use it as a Tuner/ Preamp if the mood strikes. The price in 1973: \$949. *(continued)*

I'M A HEDGE FUND MANAGER

A FASHION DESIGNER. A LEAD SINGER.

And wherever I go, my sales reports, my design ideas and my songs go with me. Some might say I have my whole world in the palm of my hand.

All three of these receivers sound great. Thought it is a sound that is uniquely different from McIntosh separates, the lineage of this prestigious maker is obvious. Warm, resonant tones are the hallmark characteristics of these brethren. You won't hear 20ft of depth in the soundstage or detect what kind of floor the band is standing on, but rather a conjoined sound with velvety high frequencies and a beguiling midrange that might make you wonder why you have ten pieces of equipment in the other 'high end system'.

Buy one on the used market if you can. Imagine getting three pieces of McIntosh gear for roughly \$500-900. I suggest a quick tune-up/inspection to make sure the volume control is good (one that has gone south will have a major channel imbalance) and the tuner is aligned. Then, you will have a faithful workhorse that will offer years of good service and provide you with a keepsake from one of the greatest names in high fidelity. ●

Pub. Note: I had so much fun photographing and listening to the receivers you see here, that I broke down and bought the 1900! It has been a ton of fun to listen to and has been the envy of a few of my audiophile buddies.

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Turning Japanese

— Marc Phillips

For well over a decade, I've been a huge fan of British hi-fi. I've always been attracted to its general sense of refinement, simplicity, and modesty. And, considering that I spent my formative years as an audiophile living in small apartments, I respected most British gear's ability to sound great in small spaces.

So I started off with the Rega-Creek-Spendor thing. Then I moved on to the LFD-Naim-Rega thing. Then I toyed with the Naim-Michell-Harbeth thing, but ultimately went back to the Naim-Quad-Spendor thing. I almost did the Naim-Naim-Naim-baked beans-and-Naim thing, but I was never really impressed with Naim speakers. But for most of the '90s, my reference system was absolutely, positively 100% Brit. *(continued)*

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Rob Fraboni

- *Legendary Grammy-Winning Producer/Engineer for Eric Clapton, Bonnie Raitt, The Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan and The Band. Co-Designer of the new Tetra 606 (a.k.a. Thee Fraboni)*



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Then, quite surreptitiously, the Japanese arrived. I awoke one morning to find a Koetsu Black cartridge mounted on my Rega Planar 25. **Who would put a \$1500 cartridge on a \$1275 turntable/ tonearm combination? What did I have to drink last night, anyway?**

Then I listened. The match surpassed all expectations. The Koetsu added something to my system, a lush, enigmatic quality that was utterly beguiling. The up-front, almost aggressive nature of my Naim amplification was suddenly tamed, treating me to a sound that was relaxed and detailed at the same time. I still had that famous Naim pace, rhythm and timing, but for the first time I had world-class imaging and soundstaging as well.

When I upgraded the P25 to a Michell Orbe SE with an SME V tonearm, I also took the opportunity to change, through Koetsu's very liberal trade-in policy, to the classic Rosewood Standard, the next model up from the Black. With this improvement, I instantly deemed myself a Koetsu man for life with the same conviction most audiophiles reserve for Lowthers or LP-12s or Quad ESLs. This small, gorgeous wooden cube on the end of my tonearm instilled a certain soul into the reserved nature of my audio system, which reminded me of how handmade products often convey the very spirit of the person who made them.

After a turbulent couple of audio years, where my system has been driven by everything from a Naim NAIT 5i to a Scott 299B to a pair of Quad II Classic monoblocks, I shouldn't be surprised that I finally wound up in the SET game. *(continued)*

THE VINYL ANACHRONIST:



I always imagined, however, that I'd start off dipping my toes in the triode waters with a 300B-based amp which would sport about ten watts, allowing me to continue the use of my beloved Spondor SP100s, which are easy to drive. I had no idea I'd keep driving right past those 300Bs, ignoring the 2A3 crowd gathered on the corner, only to arrive at the doorstep of that scariest, most extreme breed of single-ended amps, the ones using the ancient 45 tube and offering no more than a couple of watts per channel, if that.

What I found most surprising, however, was that I had chosen a Japanese amplifier. Not only that, but I'd chosen a Japanese preamplifier to go with it. My experiences with Koetsu aside, I still thought of "mass-market dreck" whenever I heard about Japanese hi-fi. I thought about Sony and Technics and Hitachi and Toshiba and cheap \$39 CD players and turntables with plastic plinths and planned obsolescence and horrible sound designed for those who didn't know any better. I always used a disclaimer when making such generalizations, that the Japanese still made great cartridges, citing Supex, Scan-Tech, Kiseki, Dynavector, Shelter, and of course Koetsu. And some of those Onkyo tuners from the late 80s were pretty nifty, too. But that was it. The Japanese were more interested in buying worthy audio products than making them.

Then, of course, I started hearing rumblings in the world of amplification, that some fine products were emerging from across the Pacific. I'd known about Air Tight and Audio Note for years, but considered them anomalies, the result of the passions of single men. Then, I started reading about Komuro and Shindo and 47 Labs, among others. Something was definitely afoot. Perhaps the Japanese, after buying up all the vintage Marantz and Fisher and McIntosh amplifiers, were hungry for more, and they had the resources to make it happen. Or perhaps I had been utterly, completely wrong about Japanese hi-fi from the get-go. *(continued)*

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I stumbled upon the products of Yamamoto Sound Craft almost by accident. I'd been searching for something to replace my eight-year-old Sendor SP100 loudspeakers since I was going to surrender them to a second system for my wife. I'd been looking for something efficient, since I'd just bought the 15wpc Quad II Classic monoblocks, and was trying to decide between the Hyperion HSP-938s and the DeVore Fidelity Gibbon Super 8s, both superb speakers in the \$4K range. I really had my heart set on a pair of Harbeth Monitor 30s, but their 85 dB sensitivity rating seemed a little daunting in the face of the Quads, despite their 8-ohm impedance.

Last November, I found myself at the Vacuum Tube Valley show in Pasadena, masquerading as the member of the press, but really trying to figure out how to finish my system up for good. The Quad IIs were already starting to wear out their welcome, due to their flabby, indistinct bottom end, and I really was starting to think about SETs, as opposed to finding a pair of speakers to match the Classics. I'd been won over by every single SET-and-vinyl based system I'd ever heard, and I knew I ultimately wanted to go in that direction. But I was discouraged by the cost of such a move.

Then I wandered into the Zu Cable room at the VTV Show, and I knew I had figured out part of the equation. The Zu Cable Druid Mark IVs sounded every bit as exciting as those other four-grand speakers, but for significantly less. And their jaw-dropping 101 dB sensitivity made it possible for me to add those flea-powered amps at a later date if I was so inclined.
(continued)



I donned my reviewer's cap, and conned Zu founder Sean Casey into loading those Druids into the back of my Subaru wagon.

Right before I drove away, however, Sean dropped the bomb. "I've heard that those Yamamoto amps are the best amps for the Druids," he told me. And before I knew it, I was on the phone with Brian Bowdle of Venus Hi-Fi, the sole dealer and distributor of Yamamoto Sound Craft in the US, ordering not only the A-08S 45 amplifier, but the matching CA-03L preamplifier. So I sold the Quads, not to mention my Naim 112X preamplifier with Flatcap 2x power supply, and Stageline phono preamp, and I never looked back.

So here I am, staring at these works of art in my listening room, these delicately beautiful amplifiers made of Japanese cherry and ebony and aluminum that just happen to sound exquisite. I'm hearing music differently than when I went the UK route. It's much more immediate, palpable, and like I've described before, soulful, imbued with the spirit of the humans who created the music.

Okay, so the transition wasn't as smooth as all that. I did look back once or twice.

Making both the Zus and the Yamamotos work well in my house was a bit of a chore.

That's one of the things I remembered about British gear, that it was truly plug and play. It worked immediately well in real-world situations, and didn't require fiddling. This new gear, however, definitely taxed my knowledge of proper set-up like nothing else I'd encountered, even that old Scott 299.

First, the spikes on the bottom of the Druids didn't want to pierce my carpet. I had trouble coupling this tall, slim floorstander to the ground, and I couldn't get them to stop wobbling. With the Druids, it is absolutely essential to maintain a gap between the base of the speaker and the floor in order for the speaker to reach down to its claimed lower limit of 35 Hz. The guys at Zu told me that correct space was about the width of a single CD jewel case. With my heavily padded carpet, this was next to impossible, and the result was a very dynamic yet nuanced speaker with almost no low-end. You know, like a Lowther. Only after I threw a couple of heavy granite tiles between the carpet and the Druids was I able to solve this problem.

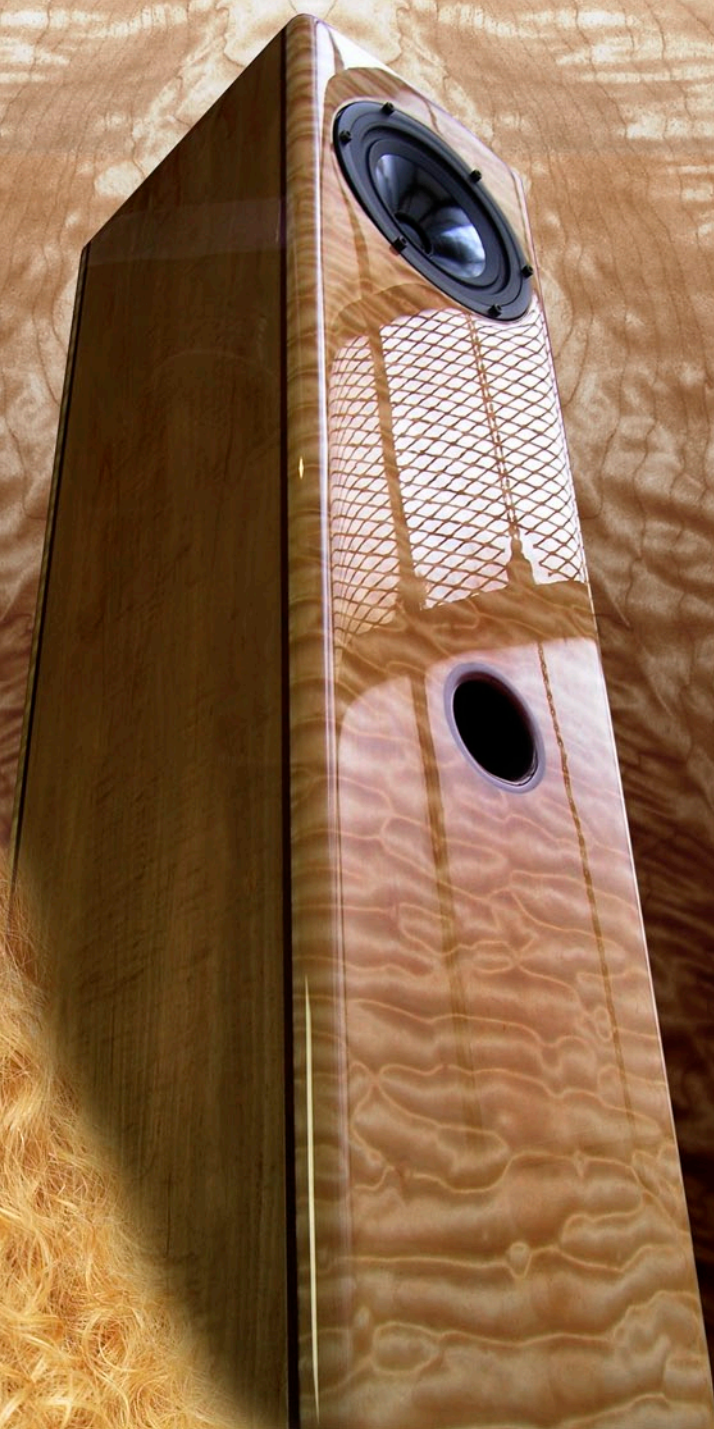
That was nothing compared to what I experienced with the Yamamoto gear, however. First of all, the preamp was humming and buzzing right out of the box like no one's business. At first we thought it was a tube problem, and a fresh set of Telefunken 6AK5Ws were dispatched immediately. The noise was still there. While replacing the tubes, however, I noticed that one of the capacitors was loose. I thought about breaking out the old soldering gun, but I really didn't want to compromise the exquisite design by attempting some amateurish last-minute repairs. So I sent the preamp back to Japan, a bit frustrated.

The amp returned, surprisingly, in a little more than a week, and now the line stage sounded truly incredible. With my recently purchased Naim CDX2 CD player, I was experiencing digital sound that was, for the first time, truly competitive with the analog side of my system. This was exacerbated, of course, by the fact that the phono stage of the Yamamoto CA-03L was still incredibly noisy. Underneath the noise everything sounded okay, but this wasn't just a little noise, the expected tube rush, but something that could be heard clearly in the next room. Brian Bowdle contacted Shigetani Yamamoto himself, and the three of us put our heads together. Something obviously wasn't right.

Much to my chagrin, the problem was with my Koetsu Rosewood. While the MC stage of the CA-03L could certainly handle the Rosewood's 0.6 mV output, there was a mismatch with its 5-ohm impedance, and the solution was one of Yamamoto-san's step-up transformers. At first I balked at adding even more equipment and spending even more money to make things right, especially since I had just heard a Unico Unison SE integrated amp matched with those splendid Harbeth Monitor 30s, and was wondering if this was truly the way to go.



Angelus



Brain and Yamamoto-san, however, implored me to stay the course, and I was promised one of the very first SUT-03 transformers to leave the Yamamoto Sound Craft factory. The SUT-03 was an improvement on the current SUT-02 transformer. In fact, the SUT-03 was actually two transformers, little monoblocks, and even came with their own 40 cm length of interconnect. These solid-feeling and heavy aluminum cubes arrived within a couple of weeks, and I was eager to see if they fixed the problem. Oh boy, did they.

Now, I'm hearing some of the finest sound I've ever encountered, and it's right here in my living room. The best part was, Yamamoto-san refused to charge me for the SUT-3, because I had suffered so long without truly great analog sound. Now I have it in spades. And while my current system is no longer a real rock-n-roll system, it does dynamics incredibly well, considering the amp has just two watts per channel. I know the Druids have a lot to do with this, but the Yamamotos give the sound an overall grace and clarity that was lacking with the Quads, or even the Naim amplification I've loved over the years.

Looking at the current incarnation of my stereo, I'm reminded of my grandfather. He used to head the Civilian Defense in Long Beach during World War II, and was actually one of those guys who used to sit on the beach at night with a pair of binoculars, looking for Japanese submarines. The Japanese have definitely snuck up on me, and now I'm surrendering completely. ●

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The ToneAudio Exceptional Value Awards

We agonized for a long time about handing out awards; what to give them out for and how many to give. Obviously, starting from the beginning, we wouldn't have years of reviews to draw upon and also because of our newness, how much weight would a TONEAudio list of suggested components carry anyway? And even if they did, the last thing I want any of you to do is go buy something just because we at TONE like it. I want you to go take a look at something (or rather a listen to something) because we like it and we hope you are as excited about it as we are. Then you can buy it. I've seen too many people buy a set of components based on awards or recommendations, wire it all together and ultimately be disappointed. Like it or not folks, it's about the journey.

Then there are always the ensuing arguments about our choices and all the conspiracy theories about awards going to advertisers versus non-advertisers and it gets pretty murky in the end. So, we've decided to keep it very simple. Every year in the December issue, we will award a group of products that we feel are a cut above in terms of value. This will be like a beauty contest in the sense that you only get the title for one year. Next year we will pick new ones.

This award does not mean that said component is the best one at that price, it just means that we feel that it offers something extra that warrants congratulations. Again, hopefully you will agree with us enough to investigate.

Here are our choices for year one, let the arguments begin!



The Audio Art IC-3 Interconnects

\$99 For One Meter Pair www.audioartcable.com Reviewed In Issue 7

These were a last minute addition to the list, but very worthwhile. Whether you are a budding audiophile or just really frugal, these cables might just be for you. Their performance is way better than their modest price would suggest, and you might be surprised in a comparison to what you are listening to now.

Those of you with mega systems need not investigate these, but for everyone else, it's open season.



ONIX xl-s Speakers

\$219 A Pair www.AV123.com **Reviewed In Issue 7**

What's the first thing you think of when someone asks you to recommend a new pair of speakers UNDER \$300? Cheap. Cheap quality, cheap construction, but most of all, lousy sound. No more.

I can't believe the folks at AV123 can offer something this good for this kind of money even with construction in China. These speakers have cabinets that are on par with a thousand dollar pair of speakers from anyone else and they sound great. Better than Wilson MAXX 2s for \$220 a pair! Just kidding, but they really do sound amazingly neutral for even twice the price and on a decent pair of stands with a \$100 pair of speaker cables will be a fantastic way to add a second or third system

somewhere in your life.

They are also a great way to introduce your kids or friends to the world of audio. Add a good budget integrated and CD player and for way less money than a BOSE lump (or an expensive power cord), you can be a real audiophile! And once your non-audiophile friends see how easy this whole process is, they will get hooked on enjoying music.

Granted, something at this price point has limitations. However, it's just crazy how much music these speakers will let you have for barely over \$200 a pair. These could be one of the most incredible values in audio, period!



The Sota Comet

\$1150 www.sotaturntables.com **Reviewed In Issue 7**

I have been a REGA fan for years and still own a couple of their tables, so don't call me a traitor just yet. My biggest complaint about the REGA table has always been the relative difficulty using other than REGA cartridges. Granted there are a few aftermarket solutions out there and even REGA offers some spacers, but the nice thing about the Comet is that you get all of this right out of the box, along with a clamp to boot!

In all fairness, the Comet does feature the OEM version of the RB300 arm, which is fantastic, but it's the combination that makes this one a jewel for me.



The Benchmark DAC-1

\$975 www.benchmarkmedia.com **Reviewed In Issue 3**

This is one fantastic digital product that gives you a good portion of top-shelf digital sound on a shoestring. Find a couple year old transport that used to be megabucks and you can have a pretty convincing digital rig for around \$2000. Featuring all the major digital inputs as well as RCA and balanced outputs, the DAC-1 will integrate into any system with ease.

The volume control on the front allows you to use it as a linestage in a pinch and there is a decent headphone amplifier built in too, giving this box even more versatility. Buy one now before they start putting these in a big, fancy box and start charging \$3000 for them!



The Lyra Argo-i Phono Cartridge

\$1200 www.immediasound.com **Reviewed In Issue 7**

Classical editor Dan Babineau was over the moon with this cartridge and trust me, he's a hard guy to please. Our resident analog expert, he's got more cartridges than your girlfriend has shoes. "Anyone who is stepping up from a cartridge in the \$750 range is going to be VERY excited about the Argo, it does everything well" was his comment.

For \$1200, the Argo-i gives you a very good look at what the mega cartridges have to offer on a budget. If you skip ahead a few pages to read the review, we hope you will put the Argo-i on your short list if you are shopping in this price range. We can't wait to audition the new Skala at \$3200!!



The ACI Sapphire XL Speakers

\$1700 www.audioc.com Reviewed In Issue 4



The ACI company is from Stevens Point, Wisconsin and has been quietly going about their business for about 25 years now and building their reputation by word of mouth. I've had a pair of these for almost a year now, and I'm still amazed at how much of the fundamentals they deliver, yet reveal a lot more musical detail than the other stuff I've heard at this price point.

Add the Titan XL subwoofer for another \$1300 and you have a fantastic full range system with a lot of versatility that won't break the bank. It just so happened that Mike Dzurko at ACI was my next-door neighbor at the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest this year and a lot of people came in our room commenting on how great his system sounded. (Some kudos to the folks at GIK, for bringing great room treatments along...)

What I like best about these speakers is that while they can be the foundation of a great \$5000 system, you could upgrade your components significantly before you would want to replace these speakers.

The McIntosh C220 Preamplifier

\$3300 www.mcintosh.com **Reviewed In Issue 7**

Granted, there are a couple of preamplifiers in this price range that will reveal a bit more musical detail, I haven't seen anything for this kind of money that includes a full 12AX7 based phono preamp (MM or high-output MC only), and a built in headphone amp as well! This is a true preamplifier in the old school tradition, built the McIntosh way.

That means it's built like a tank and has that gorgeous look and feel that makes this McIntosh a contemporary classic.

The C220 also features tremendous input and output flexibility along with a pair of tone controls! Stick your nose up in the air if you will, but when no one is looking, you know you will use em sooner or later. If that wasn't

enough, this preamplifier has one of the best remotes I've seen at this price point, which makes it that much easier to use.

One of the best features though, is the McIntosh name on the front. I guarantee you can hand this one down to your kids and they can sell it on Ebay 25 years from now for pretty close to what you paid for it. Thanks to the improvements in switching technology, this preamp should be pretty trouble free for it's entire lifespan.

Want vintage McIntosh sound? Pop the top, drop in some NOS Telefunken's and you are THERE. Otherwise, keep it stock and enjoy. Add a cool McIntosh power amp with some big, blue meters and enjoy the music while all your other buddies are arguing about speaker placement.



The Herman Miller Eames Lounge Chair and Ottoman



\$3750 www.hermanmiller.com **Reviewed In Issue 5**

This chair is still the ultimate seat in which to listen to your hifi or do anything else for that matter. Not only does it take good care of your booty, it's a work of art when you aren't sitting in it. And talk about value, just try and find a used one on Ebay. Just like a McIntosh amplifier or a good watch, people hand these down through generations.

The Conrad-Johnson ACT2 Series 2

\$16,500 www.conradjohnson.com **Reviewed In Issue 7**

You probably think I'm insane putting something this expensive on a list of "exceptional value" components, but the ACT2 IS an exceptional value, and here's why:

The build quality is phenomenal. There are only a couple of tiny electrolytics in the circuit (not in the signal path) and the rest are CJD Teflon, so one of the biggest sources of long-term component failure is absent. Everything else is equally well built, electrically and mechanically, so the chance of failure over the next twenty years is very slim. In the event of a problem, CJ is one of the cornerstones of the industry, so you can rest assured they will take care of it in an expeditious manner.

The sound quality is phenomenal. These days, the flagship sound at C-J is not the warm, romantic sound you grew up on, but a very dynamic, powerful, accurate sound that is still very seductive indeed. I've heard a

couple of mega-expensive preamplifiers in the 30-50 thousand dollar range that have a slightly different flavor (and we haven't auditioned the new ART series 3 from Conrad-Johnson, which associate editor Dan Babineau should have in his hot little hands by the time you read this), but so far, nothing to make me sweat.

Bottom line, this could very well be the last preamplifier you ever need to buy, regardless of what level your system is. (Or what you would like it to become) Thanks to only having four 6H30 tubes, even the cost of ownership will be pretty reasonable over the long term. You can buy a replacement tube set from CJ for about \$200 and if you are lucky to find some NOS 6H30's about 2-3 times that.

I've owned a lot of preamplifiers over the years from CJ and many others, but this one's a keeper.



The Onix xl-s Speakers

— Jerald O'Brien

There we sat in the TONEAudio photo studio, oohing and aahing over the amazing cabinetry, as we gently slid them out of their smooth fabric bags. Closer inspection revealed a level of quality we were not used to, very impressive speakers indeed; if they sounded even half as good as they looked, we knew we had a winner on our hands.

Are we talking about the latest multi thousand-dollar mini monitors from Britain or Italy?

No, all the excitement is about the Onix xl-s speakers from AV-123. And, they are only \$219 a pair! For Radio Shack prices, you can have a pair of serious speakers. As much as I wanted to tell all of you that these speakers sound as good as others I've heard for five times the price, our editor bitch slapped me into line and gave me a homework assignment. I had to revisit a few of the classic monitors and other speakers around the thousand-dollar price point, temper my enthusiasm and then write this article.

(continued)



He then put a pair of ProAc Tablettes and Rogers LS3/5as into my trunk and sent me packing. I still had my Vandersteen 1Cs at home and my next door neighbor just picked up a pair of Aperion 633s, so it was a date – with some speakers, for me this weekend!

Take a peek on any audio discussion forum and half the people there are looking for an entry-level speaker that they can trust.

If you are a budding audiophile, you could buy these three pieces and be enjoying some very musical sound indeed, even on a student loan budget.

Often times the agony is new vs. used and many people have been burned on EBay. AV123 makes it easy, offering a 30-day trial period, and if you peruse their site, you will see a number of other goodies that you can probably make use of; amplifiers, CD players, they even have directors chairs for sale!

Our music editor Norwood Brown had the Onix SP3 tube amplifier in his home, and was gracious enough to let me borrow it for the week, so combining that



with my Onix CD player, I had a complete budget system for about \$1500 (less cables and other assorted paraphernalia) to evaluate.

Just to get some break in time, I hooked them up to a flawless Marantz 2275 that I just purchased recently and after a few days of continuous play, I was very pleased with what I heard. This is the most serious speaker I've ever heard for this kind of money!

Next, they moved on to the Onix system and were able to reveal quite a bit more music through some contemporary gear. If you are a budding audiophile, you could buy these three pieces and be enjoying some very musical sound indeed, even on a student loan budget. But the real treat was moving them up into my main system, which isn't the pinnacle of high end, but offers good sound for what I have invested.

The xl-s speakers are surprisingly neutral for something at this price point. The best news about these speakers is that they don't really have a ton of colorations to speak of; their sins are much more of omission. One tweak that is worth mentioning is a decent pair of stands will actually help the bass response quite a bit. The problem is that most good stands cost more than the speakers! However, they did work quite well on cinder blocks, lots of mass and the price is right!

Stopping by the TONE mothership always has its benefits. While we were shooting the photos, the UPS man brought a box from AudioArt cable. While Jeff Dorgay grabbed the interconnects straight away, I called the speaker cables first. As Halloween had just passed, we were still in trick or treat mode, except this time it was for cables!

The AudioArt SC-5 proved a perfect match for the xl-s speakers and was neither harsh nor rolled off.

Granted, you can only expect so much from a \$219 pair of speakers, but again they cover the basics incredibly well. They worked equally well with my old Krell KSA-50A or my modified Dynaco Stereo 70. The impedance curve is pretty benign, so either form of amplification is cool, making these even easier to integrate into your system. *(continued)*

The lower end of the spectrum goes down very solidly to 50hz, and you have your two choices of keeping them out in the room for better imaging or putting them against the wall for a bit more bass. The 87db efficiency was pretty misleading, as they always seemed to play a lot louder than 30-50 watts per channel should have been able to go.

Back in the day, editor JD and I both had AR-7s that we bought from J&R Music World for \$65 bucks a pair. At the current rate of inflation, I think that would make them worth about \$650 a pair and they were nowhere near this good. I can't imagine something out there that would offer more performance for this price. I'm happy to say these speakers have won one of the Exceptional Value Awards for 2006. I think you will enjoy them too.

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TONEAUDIO'S

Last Minute Gift Guide 2006

Even though it's getting pretty close to the holiday season, you can always find a fun present for your fellow audiophile. My first suggestion is always software; a gift certificate from your local or global music purveyor will go a long way if you can't decide what kind of interconnects or phono cartridge to buy. If you have a lot of extra moolah, buy a gift certificate to your favorite hi-fi shop!

However, if you need a few hints, we've rustled up a couple of things that you might want to put on a short list, if they apply. As always, shop early, shop often and save the receipt, just in case (Heaven forbid) you get the wrong thing!!



audience

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"The Audience Au24 and powerChord cables share a family resemblance—they balance tonality extremely well, have superb detail (again, in balance; neither too much nor too little of it), and they're smooth. Not colored-smooth, but just-right-smooth."
OnHiFi.com - **Wes Phillips** - April '04



auricap
inside

"The Adept Response made a phenomenal difference in my system. Fundamentally, it improved the clarity of recordings by eliminating a previously undetected lack of definition, without introducing any brightness or most importantly any coloration. That is worth repeating. I did not hear any coloration from the Adept Response or any obscuring of the rhythm of the music. The Adept Response just made every recording I listened to more natural and in turn more musically engaging." **The Absolute Sound** - **Max Shepherd** - June '06



FINNISH ELEGANCE

The PenAudio Charisma

Want world class sound coupled with stylish yet understated Finnish good looks? The PenAudio Charismas are a home run. (and the only speaker that has ever had the coveted status of making it into my living room) If the receiver of this very generous gift has a small to mid sized tube amplifier, pass on the Pens, but as long as they have at least 20 watts per channel of clean solid-state power, these will definitely produce a big smile on Christmas morning.

www.penaudio.fi



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TUBEY GOODNESS

The ModWright SWP 9.0SE

Designer Dan Wright has been working on this one all year long and it's a winner. Priced at \$3000, it is certainly a substantial step up from the entry level phono stages and will give you a good look at what the big boys offer. This phono stage offers 78db of gain, so it should work wonders with any phono cartridge out there. Best of all, even with all that gain, it's really quiet.

Watch for a review on this one very soon,
it sounds great!

www.modwright.com



FEED YOUR HEAD

Grado - GS1000 Headphones

Last year, I thought the folks at Head-Fi were a crazy, obsessed bunch with all those pairs of headphones, amplifiers and such. Now, I'm one of them, with multiple phones and amplifiers, but my favorite pair are the flagship of the Grado line, the GS1000. With a big, open airy sound, these really are a feast for your ears. \$1000 isn't small potatoes, but if I could only have one pair, these would be the ones I'd keep.

www.gradolabs.com





KEEP EM CLEAN

TTVJ Vinyl Zyme

Exclusively distributed by Todd The Vinyl Junkie, Vinyl Zyme has become my record cleaner du jour, in both extra and regular strength formulations. With really dirty used records, I like to clean in one direction with extra strength and then clean in the opposite direction with normal strength. The secret: rub it in and let it soak for about one minute on the first pass. You will be amazed at how good those old records can sound and VZ is quite good at removing stubborn fingerprints! Price \$40, 2oz. concentrate.

www.ttvj.com



JUST SAY NO TO BOSE

The AudioEngine A5

Need a cool space saving system? Forget about Bose, get one of these! For \$349 it's the best deal going; even with the basic power cord and cable it's great. Add a decent power cord and length of good speaker cable for even better sound. Whether you use your iPod (the AA5 has a built in charger for your iPod.) or a good budget CD player, this is the most fun you can have with your pants on in black or white.

www.audioengineusa.com





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Tired of seeing dust collect on that mega expensive turntable? I'll bet the owner of said turntable is also tired of it, but not all great tables feature a working dust cover. If you can't think of what to buy the audiophile that has everything, here you go. There are four different sizes depending on your table, ranging from \$579-679.

www.dedicatedaudio.com



DON'T WEAR THIS ONE ON YOUR CHEST

The Squeezebox

Plug it in to your system and enjoy the music collection on your computer with the ease of an iPod. Best of all, the type on the front is legible! But seriously, if you have imported your music into your computer in loss-less (or even better) uncompressed format, you are in for a real treat; The Squeezebox sounds as good as most of the CD players costing 2-3 times as much. A perfect match for the Audio-Engine 5 as well. For \$249, buy a few of them and place around the house where convenient if you have a wireless network.

www.slimdevices.com



series 9

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921 mono Decoding Computer



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KEEP YOUR POWER CLEAN
The Audience powerChord

No audiophile can resist the temptation of a new power cord. The aptly named powerChord from Audience is a high performance cord that will let the music through to your system far better than what came packed in the box. At \$649, these aren't cheap, but perform very well and feature first rate construction.

www.audience-av.com



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www.wadia.com

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TONEA **38** NO.7 2006



GIVE IN TO THE MADNESS

Tara Labs - The Zero

Fifteen thousand bucks for a pair of interconnects?

Yep, it's crazy but all the big boys in the audio world are raving about these. If you have money to burn, check these out. We will try to get some in to review and give you the full story next year, but in the meantime, they should make for great conversation!

www.taralabs.com

GET OUT YOUR SOLDERING IRON

Bottlehead SEX

Not getting kinky with you, just suggesting a great DIY project. The S.E.X. (single ended experimenters) amplifier from Bottlehead. Assembling a piece of gear with your own hands will give you a new appreciation for how hard the guys that make this stuff for a living really have to work, and you can have a little fun in the process. If you have some super efficient horn speakers, you can even use it's 1.5 watts per channel as a power amplifier. \$389 from your pals at Bottlehead.

www.bottlehead.com





ENCORE PERFORMANCE

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With the stunning ACT2 composite triode preamplifier conrad-johnson has again dramatically raised the bar for line-stage performance and again that leap in performance has been transferred to a more affordable model. Introducing the CT5 line-stage preamplifier featuring the same zero-feedback composite triode circuit, 6N30P triodes, and CJD teflon capacitors that elevate the ACT2 above the competition. Visit your conrad-johnson dealer soon to hear just how life-like recorded music can sound.

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www.raysamuelsaudio.com





ALL THAT GLITTERS

If you are eyeing up that new CD player for your own Christmas present, grease the skids a bit and give Coffin & Trout a call. These new pieces from their Axis collection won't even set you back as much money as some expensive speaker cable. The pendant is \$2500 and the ring \$1650. See how easy that was? Just make sure your better half opens the box before you open yours!

www.coffinandtrout.com




FORGET ABOUT HI-FI FOR A WHILE

Porsche GT3

If you would like to side track your favorite audiophile and get him or her to stop thinking about power cords, cartridges and the like, spring for one of these: The Porsche GT3 will set you back about 150 large, but the good news is that it doesn't have enough storage space to hold any serious gear. How's that for a distraction? If this doesn't do it, nothing will.

www.porscheusa.com





The Conrad-Johnson Act 2 Series 2

— JEFF DORGAY

When I started TONE, one of my goals was to assemble a reference system that offered a high enough level of quality, musicality and accuracy that could be a benchmark that I judged everything else by. I got a lot of good advice and fortunately our classical music editor, Dan Babineau just happened to have the two pieces that were at the top of my list; the Conrad-Johnson ACT2 and their Premier 350 power amplifier. The more time I spent listening, it just grabbed me; I would also choose these two for my system.

The beauty of my job is that I got the opportunity to listen to about 25 very good linestages in the process, but I still went for the ACT2. My ACT2 arrived early this year and a few months into the review process, Lew Johnson informed me that there would be an upgraded version of the ACT2, so I moved up to the ACT2 series 2 you see here. *(continued)*



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The Series 2 version of the ACT2 features some upgrades to the power supply; some improved parts including two quieter power transformers.

“Adding some additional internal shielding and changing the ground topologies cut 2-3db of noise on an already quiet tube design” Lew told me.

There has been a price increase as well; the current ACT2 now costs \$16,500. Again Lew commented, “The increase in parts cost over the last few years has been exponential. Even wire costs three times what it used to!

Other than a small “Series 2” logo screened on the lower right front corner, there is no outward evidence of any difference between this one and the original ACT2. For those of you not familiar with the Conrad-Johnson look, the Series 2 features the classic champagne front panels with round buttons that they have used forever, so if you are moving up from other CJ gear, you will feel right at home.

There are 6 inputs, as well as a pair of external processor loops. If you are a tape deck enthusiast, use the fixed output of the EPL 1 and you are in business. Inputs are selected via the front panel push buttons or the substantial remote control. Volume level is adjusted by a series of microprocessor controlled relays in .7db steps. The audible clicking sound from the series one remains, which is a personal favorite of mine.

(continued)



INITIAL SETUP AND BREAK-IN

The rest of my reference system consists of the Premier 350 amplifier, Aesthetix Rhea (with Great Northern Sound Mods) phono preamplifier, SME 10 (with SME V arm and Shelter 90x cartridge), Wadia 581 disc player and the Tetra 506 customs (along with a REL B2 subwoofer). All power delivery is courtesy of Running Springs Mongoose power cords and power conditioners. (A Duke for the Premier 350 and a Haley for everything else, each on their own dedicated 20amp lines). Speaker cable and interconnects (between the ACT2 and Premier 350) are the Tetra Artet

cables and everything else is a combination of Cardas Golden Presence and Golden Reference.

Just like the Series 1 ACT2 and the Premier 350, this one is full of CJD Teflon capacitors and that means a lot of break in time. Interestingly enough the series 2 sounded much better with little break-in time than the series 1 but I wasn't completely happy until about 150 hours had passed. Granted, that's a lot of time, but trust me, the reward will justify the wait!!

When you unpack the ACT2, make sure to remove the four transit screws on the bottom of the unit, allowing the subchassis to float freely on its elastomers and remain suspended from the rest of the chassis. At this time you can install the tube dampers and bolt the plastic discs back in place. CJ thoughtfully supplies a tool for this, the remote and the four tubes (a great place to keep four spares) in a nice black leather foam lined case. I suggest a pair of gloves for doing this, so that you do not get any fingerprints on the acrylic, but I'm a little obsessed. *(continued)*



Thinking outside the box...



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THE SOUND

Again, to reiterate, I've had the privilege of listening to a lot of great preamplifiers over the years, but I love the ACT2 Series 2 and I'll spend the next thousand words telling you why. While many of you have the luxury of just listening to music for personal enjoyment, my reference system has to be a benchmark by which I judge everything else that I review; it has to be a tool.

For my money, the combination of the Act 2 and the Premier 350 gives me more of this than anything else I have yet encountered. I've said it before, but for those of you just tuning in to our magazine, the current crop of CJ gear is not the romantic sound that they delivered 10 years ago. Don't get me wrong; I still love the PV-1 and MV-50 in my fun system, but for this gig I need an accurate tool that I can depend on every day.

The ACT2 Series 2 provides me with the perfect balance of musical involvement and neutrality coupled with accuracy that this job requires. When I listen through this combination, I hear the WHOLE orchestra, the WHOLE band.

To be even more demanding, I want the maximum amount of resolution without being harsh and the Series 2 delivers - in spades.

And thanks to only four 6H30 tubes, it's easy to maintain as well.

As I went through the same protocol with the original ACT2, I left it in my third system to play for about a month, knowing it would take some time to achieve greatness. Once that was out of the way, I got right down to business.

(continued)

THE KEY ELEMENT OF THE ACT2 IS ITS ABILITY TO SEDUCE YOU

If you have not experienced the ACT2, it possesses a degree of seduction that is truly amazing. Ever since this component was ready for serious listening, I spent a lot more time typing on the couch with my laptop because I just could not break away. I would sit down intending to spend a little time doing some serious listening and hours would pass. Big piles of records were starting to grow around my reference system to the point that I ended up hiring my daughter to put them away; I just wanted to keep listening!

This is truly the highest compliment I can pay the ACT2; once I start listening to music, I never want to turn the damn thing off! I mentioned in my review of the Conrad-Johnson Premier 350 last issue that the true synergy comes from mating these two components together and I'll hold that party line here. While I did use the ACT2 with quite a few different power amplifiers with excellent results over the year, the best combination was with the Premier 350. I'm sure it would be fantastic with the Conrad-Johnson LP140 tube monoblocks as well, but I haven't had time to investigate...

No matter what I play, whether LP or CD, the ACT2 never ceases to amaze me. Here's what the ACT2 does in a nutshell:

It has a big, deep soundstage for starters. On any good recording it just seems like the soundstage expands in all directions; musicians go from about three feet in front of your speakers to well behind them. This is where this preamp starts to pull you in. Put on a couple of your favorite recordings and you notice instantly that something special is going on. This goes well beyond the usual audiophile clichés, it has to be experienced.

One of my favorite vocal records is **Music in a Foreign Language**, by Lloyd Cole. On other systems, the vocals on the title track are right in the middle, yet here you can here them move around a little bit from mid left to mid right, while it appears that there is one more overdubbed acoustic guitar in the mix than you might have thought before. Another oldie from the record bin of obscurity is Tim Curry's **Simplicity**. On the first cut, *Workin on My Tan*, when he says "Take a bus, take a

truck" you would swear that bus is going to run you down! Impressive to say the least.

Next, it has tremendous dynamic range. Thanks to the already massive power supply in the ACT2, the upgrades have made it two clicks better than the original ACT2. No

The ability of the ACT2 to convey the weight of a performance is another dimension to be experienced.

matter what kind of music you enjoy, if it possesses a lot of dynamics, you will be floored at how much more of this you are now able to experience. Everything from the lowest bass notes to the uppermost treble has power, weight and control to the nth degree, which allows you to see much further into a recording; Complex musical passages no longer sound constricted, you get all the music.

I put Stravinsky's **Firebird** on the turntable and I thought my Tetras were going to roll over in front of me! That's the kind of punch that gives recorded music real excitement! Granted, we can't put a concert hall in our living rooms, but this kind of range sure makes it a good alternative. The ability of the ACT2 to convey the weight of a performance is another dimension to be experienced. *(continued)*



SPACE, THE FINAL FRONTIER

No matter what kind of music you enjoy, I guarantee you will freak out at the way that the ACT2 recreates space in your music room. Listening to one of my favorite guitarists, Adrian Belew on King Crimson's **Thrak** album was another amazing experience. I was hearing a lot more spatial information and again it was as if someone added a few more guitar and keyboard tracks that just weren't there before.

Even though it is a bit wacky, if you still have a copy of John Klemmer's **Cry**, dig it out and put it on your turntable. This one is definitely spooky through the ACT2. If you really want to freak out, give **Joe's Garage Act 1** a spin, The Central Scrutinizer sounds as if he's hiding behind your couch! Yet all of this would just be more audiophile parlor tricks without tonality that is spot-on. Again, the ACT2 does not disappoint. Listen to your favorite Anne-Sophie disc and dig that sound! It's the subtlety of the presentation that sets the ACT2 apart from everything I've heard yet.

Granted, you will experience this a lot more with good recordings, but what I enjoyed most with the ACT2/Premier 350 combination was that even some of my favorite records (that are less than ideal recordings) revealed more information than before. Notice I'm not saying that the ACT2/Premier 350 made them sound better, that would imply a lack of detail. But it did allow more information to come forward than I had heard before and that is an important distinction. Too often, audiophiles that have upgraded their systems to a very high level complain that now their systems only sound good with a few records that have been flawlessly mastered. This is not the case here.

Last but not least, the ACT2 does a fantastic job at retrieving the most miniscule inner detail from a recording. The longer you listen to it and the more you go back to things you are intimately familiar with,

it will just keep offering surprise after surprise. The ultimate test; if you still have it, put your old preamp back in your system after you have really become accustomed to the ACT2. That brings it home instantly!

YES, IT'S THAT GOOD

Many other major audiophile journalists have been extremely enthusiastic about the ACT2 for good reason. It's time for me to be a mind-reader again; I'm sure there are a few skeptics in the audience that think the ACT2 can't be as good as some of the boutique linestages that cost as much as a Porsche. Keep this in mind, Lew and Bill build about 300 ACT2s a year. If they built them in lots of five each, they WOULD cost 50k. That's why the ACT2 series 2 was chosen to get one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2006. At this stage of the game I can have anything I want for my reference and I'm still happy with the ACT2 after listening for a year.

You can count on seeing this one in my system for years to come. Is there anything better? If I come across it, I'll let you know. I suspect the ART series 3 will have even better performance, but I can't have one and as they are only making 25, you probably can't either. By the time this article makes it to you, I suspect the remaining 22 ART 3s will all be spoken for. (Lew and Bill kept one for themselves and our Classical columnist; Dan Babi-neau is getting one too.)

But fear not, we'll let you know how good the ART 3 is in the near future.

If you are ready to buy a linestage that is at the pinnacle of audio performance, I would give the ACT2 series 2 a serious listen before you make your final decision. I've yet to experience anything that has brought me this close to the music. ●

At this stage of the game I can have anything I want for my reference and I'm still happy with the ACT2 after listening for a year.

MANUFACTURERS INFO

Conrad-Johnson Design, Inc.

2733 Merrilee Drive
Fairfax, VA 22031
703-698-8581

www.conradjohnson.com

PERIPHERALS

Preamplifier: Aesthetix Callisto, Emotive Audio Poeta

Amplifiers: Conrad-Johnson Premier 350, Red Rock Audio Renaissance, Nagra PSA, Pass F3

Speakers: Penaudio Serenades, Tetra 506LTD

Analog Sources: SME 10/ Shelter 90x with Ray Samuels XR-10B phono stage, Aesthetix Rhea phono stage (w/Great Northern Sound mods)

Digital Sources: Wadia 581, Metronome CD-3 Signature, Meridian 808

Interconnects: TARA RSC, Acrolink, Cardas Golden Reference, Tetra Artet

Speaker Cables: Tetra Artet

Power Cords: Running Springs Mongoose

Power Conditioning: Running Springs Jaco and Duke

Vibration Control: Finite Elemente Pagode Signature rack with full compliment of Cereballs and Cerepucs

FAVORITE TEST TUNES

Music in a Foreign Language

– Lloyd Cole (CD)

Simplicity – Tim Curry (LP)

L.A.Woman – The Doors (DCC LP)

Highway Companion

– Tom Petty (LP)

Cry – John Klemmer (LP)

Headhunters – Herbie Hancock (LP)

The SOTA Comet

— JEFF DORGAY

I've been listening to the SOTA Comet for quite some time now and even though my reference tables are quite a bit more expensive (SME 10 and AVID Volvere), I still come away highly impressed at what a good job this table does for \$1150 with an S300 arm included.

While it is big fun for all of us to probe the limits of analog playback, which ends up getting pretty spendy, a lot of people live in the world of 1000-2000 dollar analog rigs and there's no shame in that at all. Actually, there are quite a few really good turntables in this price range and the dilemma is to find the one that suits your needs the best. If you are shopping in this range, I would put the Comet at the top of your short list. *(continued)*

SOTA has been making turntables for a long time and even though the Comet has not been around as long as some of the others, it has definitely been able to benefit from what the folks at SOTA have learned over the years with their other models.

The base is a thick composite of layered MDF with the motor mounted inside. The platter is made from two pieces of acrylic with a piece of damping material sandwiched in the middle and an integral mat on the top surface. As Nigel Tufnel would say “How much more black could this be?” The end result is a very simple, understated table that quietly goes about the business of playing records without calling any extra attention to itself. The standard version has a textured finish, and my artistic sensibilities recommend the one you see here, it is much more elegant.

INITIAL SETUP

Setup is extremely easy. All you need to do is unpack the turntable, mount the platter and setup the cartridge of

your choice. You can even ask the folks at SOTA for some assistance with a cartridge and have your Comet arrive with a cartridge pre-installed. In this case, all you have to do is attach the counterweight, set the tracking force and anti-skate and you are on your way. Regardless, you should be playing records in less than 30 minutes, even if you have to install your own cartridge. Because this arm is the OEM version of the one on the Rega P3, it's a snap to use.

You can also have SOTA add an expressimo VTA adjuster for an additional \$55. While this is a good aftermarket solution, SOTA is working on their own design, due out sometime next year. Considering the ratio of Rega cartridges to non-Rega cartridges, this gives you a lot of flexibility when it comes time to pick cartridges later.

(continued)

As Nigel Tufnel would say “How much more black could this be?”



EXCEPTIONAL AUDIO COMPONENTS



EMOTIVE AUDIO

Emotive Audio components have won high praise from listeners and reviewers around the world. We invite you to audition our products and see the craftsmanship and artistry that makes Emotive Audio unique. The highest quality components assembled by hand combined with our exotic wood bases, make a visual and sonic statement in your listening room!

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Bellefonte, PA 16823
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www.emotiveaudio.com



A quick use of my handy strobe disc revealed the speed accuracy to be almost perfect, just the slightest touch of creep, but nothing to worry about. For an additional \$150, you can add a dust cover and the I-clamp that came with my test table is another \$90. I didn't worry about not having the dust cover, but felt that the I-clamp is a real bargain and would highly recommend adding the clamp to your order. The Comet offers two speeds, 33 and 45, selected by moving the belt up and down the drive pulley.

SO LET'S PLAY SOME RECORDS, SHALL WE?

I started this test using my tried and true Shelter 501, which I felt was a reasonable choice for this table from a price and performance perspective. After my exposure to the Lyra Argo-I which Dan reviewed later in this issue, I would even feel comfortable stepping up this far with the Comet. Any of the decent cartridges in the 500-1200 dollar range will give the journeyman audiophile some very involving analog playback.

Again, to stay in keeping with the price point, I did a fair amount of listening through the phono stage of the new McIntosh C220 linestage (also reviewed in this issue) but for critical listening put the Comet into my reference system and made it go head to head with the SME 10/SME V/Shelter 90x combination to see where the boundaries of its performance really were. Using the Aesthetix Rhea (with Great Northern Sound mods) makes this an easy task because you can adjust gain, loading and switch from any of three inputs on the fly from the remote control.

(continued)



This preamplifier, like the Ray Samuels XR-10B I use in my other reference system, really makes comparing turntable, arm and cartridge combinations a snap.

I played a lot of records with this turntable and while I didn't expect it to be a challenge for the SME, it does a great job on the fundamentals. Bass was extended and solid throughout the range. Where all of the tables in this price range fall down compared to those higher up on the food chain is detail and texture. Some people will argue that acrylic based tables are not quite taut enough, but I liked the organic texture of the Comet. Personally, I would always have the bass err a little bit on the round side rather than the thin, over damped side, but that is my personal preference.

The S300 arm is a classic and thanks to

such large production numbers, offers fantastic performance for the money. It has a very good midrange presentation as well as fleshing out the highs rather nicely. Another bonus of using this arm is that there are a number of aftermarket tweaks available. Once you get used to your Comet, you can make a few upgrades similar to the ones we've been discussing here to get even more performance.

My favorite upgrade to this arm is the GrooveTracer counterweight. This is \$179 from www.groovetracer.com I use one of these on my Rega P25 that has been extensively modded with excellent results and adding this to the Comet will take it another step further down the path of higher resolution. It will definitely offer a bit more refined top end, with a bit bigger soundfield, as well as a bit tighter bass response.

Stock, the SOTA is very good; the GrooveTracer mod takes it to the next level. Definitely something to treat yourself to after owning your Comet for a few months.

MOVING ON TO MONO

As great as this table is with a better than average stereo cartridge, the Comet won its way into my reference system with the Grado Sonata Mono cartridge. These two components achieved a fantastic level of synergy together and even if you have a fairly expensive turntable (and a phono preamp with more than one input) I would really suggest getting one of these just to keep a mono cartridge mounted.

Listening to all the recent acquisitions from Classic Records that have been released in their original mono formats was a ton of fun. The Comet/Sonata combination did a great job, no matter what I played

from my old RCA classical records to the newest reissue of Kenny Burrell. Now that I have this as a permanent part of my system, I've been actively searching the used record stores for mono LPs.

THE COMET IS A WINNER

Because this turntable does so much right and offers so much versatility for such a reasonable price, we felt it more than justified to give the SOTA Comet one of the TONE-Audio Exceptional Value awards for 2006. SOTA has been a part of our industry for a long time and they offer great service and a liberal upgrade policy, should you like many other SOTA owners just decide to stay in the family and move up the product ladder. However, I would highly suggest rather than trade up; you get a mono cartridge and keep that Comet around!! ●

MANUFACTURER'S INFO:**SOTA**

10830 S. Nagle Avenue
Worth, IL 60482
608-538-3500

www.sotaturntables.com

PERIPHERALS:

Preamplifier: Conrad-Johnson Act2/series 2

Power Amplifier: Conrad-Johnson Premier 350

Speakers: Tetra 506 custom speakers with REL B2 subwoofer

Analog Source:

SME 10 turntable w/SME V arm, Shelter 90x cartridge. Aesthetix Rhea phono preamp with Great Northern Sound modifications
Cartridges used with Comet: Shelter 501, Sumiko Blackbird and Grado Sonata Mono

Digital Source: Wadia 581, Meridian 808

Interconnects: Tetra Artet and Cardas Golden Reference

Speaker Cables: Tetra Artet

Power: Running Springs Mon-goose Power cords and power conditioners. (Jaco and Duke)

Other Accessories:

Clearaudio Simple Matrix record cleaner, Finite Elemente Pagode Signature Equipment racks with Cereballs and Cerepucks

FAVORITE TEST TUNES: (all LP)

Brahms – Symphony No. 4
RCA Red Seal (mono)

Horace Silver Quartet

The Stylings of Silver
Classic Records (mono)

Aimee Mann – Lost in Space
MoFi

John Hiatt – Bring the Family
MoFi

Frank Zappa – Live at The Fillmore East – Bizarre

*Along Golden pathways electrons flow,
Photons glow and lyrics grow,
Sounds of all the chords and chimes,
All the notes from all the times,
Dancing in magnetic fields they climb,
In concert with the Grand Design.*

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The McIntosh C220

— JEFF DORGAY

Back in my day, a preamplifier was more like a control center; it had tape outputs, a phono input and a headphone jack on the front panel along with TONE CONTROLS. That's right, tone controls. Before all of us turned from people who liked hifi into audiophiles, tone controls weren't such a bad thing in the world of enjoying music. *(continued)*

I have to admit that I've always been a big McIntosh fan. Yes, it's true; I do have a slight multiple audiophile personality disorder. Half of me is on a constant quest for the edge of the performance envelope and my other half really just wants to listen to music (still at a high quality level) hang out and not worry about gear, room setup and the like. My other half now likes headphones quite a bit.

This is where the C220 comes in. Yes, you can find a couple of preamplifiers around \$3000 that will resolve more music, but I dare you to find one that sounds as good as the C220 AND has a phono section that isn't just a cheesy add on card AND has a headphone amplifier. Throw in the legendary McIntosh good looks, a killer remote control and you get the picture; the C220 has a lot to offer for \$3300.

As you can tell from the vintage McIntosh gear we featured in Kurt's column, their products stand the test of time, retaining their beauty and performance over the years. With the current gear having the latest in component as well as switching technology, some of the issues that plague our hifi

favorites from the '60s and '70s should not be an issue with the C220 as it ages.

INITIAL SETUP

I placed the C220 in my third system for the full review period, replacing my Emotive Audio Poeta. This is my "Journeyman Audiophile" system, that all told, is worth about \$15k. A lot of time on various audiophile forums chatting with their members revealed that \$7-\$15k is the level that many audiophiles have tied up in their gear, so this is something we really pay close attention to. No mega-expensive anything here, just components that offer good sound and represent good value.

Looking at the rear panel, the concept of a control center came to mind. With two sets of XLR inputs and seven RCA inputs, you should be able to hook anything up to the C220 and still have room to expand. As I have a turntable, CD player, External DAC from my computer and two tape decks in

this system, it fits the bill perfectly!

Keep in mind, this is not a fully balanced, differential preamplifier, so the balanced inputs and outputs are for convenience, but I did not notice any degradation going from RCA to XLR, so they are a welcome addition.

IT'S ABOUT FLEXIBILITY

The C220 only took a few days of continuous play to break in, so this is truly a no fuss component. I suggest reading the manual so that you can get acquainted with the most excellent remote control. It allows you the ability to set independent channel level and balance for all eight inputs right from the comfort of your Eames Lounge chair. *(continued)*




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CONNECTING YOU WITH THE MUSIC



The more sources you have plugged into the C220, the more you will appreciate this functionality and you can name each source.

Back to those tone controls for a minute. I'm not even going to argue with those of you that feel that these are a bad thing. Use the handy switch on the front panel and switch them out. Here's one more sweet tip to lure you down the path of using tone controls: when set to the center detents, they automatically switch out of the circuit. So, if you just want a touch of bass boost or treble cut, you can only have one control in the circuit. I guarantee late at night when you are listening to a less than ideal recording, you are going to give them a try. Perhaps you will never admit this to anyone, but I know you will.

For those of you that feel no shame for doing this, you will be dancing around the room like Snoopy.

McIntosh has also added external sensor inputs and output triggers so that you can incorporate the C220 into a multiple amplifier system or control it from other areas. User friendly is the key word with the C220. Both of the outputs are switchable from the front panel as well as the headphone jack. Other than having a toaster slot to make Pop-Tarts, I can't imagine what else the C220 could do for me. (Actually, variable cartridge loading, but there I go getting obsessed again...)

THE SOUND

Cool though the bells and whistles are, this would all fall down if the sound quality were inferior. *(continued)*



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TONE AUDIO

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McIntosh lovers will be very impressed and those of you that may not have considered a McIntosh in the past will be pleasantly surprised at how good this one sounds. For a tube preamplifier it is very quiet; there is no switching noise between inputs and the volume control tracks in complete silence.

YOU CAN HAVE YOUR SOUND SERVED UP TWO WAYS: NEW MCINTOSH OR SEMI-VINTAGE MCINTOSH.

The stock tubes that came with the unit sounded very good, good bass, neutral mids and a nice extended upper register. Ron Cornelius told me recently that McIntosh goes through a very rigorous testing procedure before silk-screening their logo on the outside. When I asked him about doing a little tube rolling, he said, "I don't think that's necessary."

COME ON, we're audiophiles. Knowing that there are four 12AX7s sitting under the hood, you know we have to swap a few tubes around!

Again, if you just want no fuss, no muss, leave it stock and you won't be unhappy. However, if you want a bit of that romantic McIntosh sound you grew up with, get the screwdriver out and pull the cover off. Installing some vintage Telefunken was the way to go for this writer. The midrange went from neutral to a bit more romantic and it was a nice touch. Kind of like taking a vintage Corvette, doing a frame off restoration, but adding a modern transmission, brakes and engine. A classic with a twist.

I used the C220 with a number of different power amplifiers, both tube and solid state with excellent results. Thanks to the switchable outputs, it was very easy to run a second set of cables to my Tannoy subwoofer and switch it all off when I wanted to put headphones on.

The phono section is quite good too. Unlike some much pricier preamps that just use a relatively inexpensive card featuring surface mount devices, this has a pair of 12AX7s there as well.

It is said to be designed for moving magnet cartridges, but I was able to use my Sumiko Blackbird and Shelter 501 with no problems. There was still plenty of gain, however the Shelter works best with a 500-1000 ohm input impedance, so if you are going that route, I would suggest an external phono stage. (And use the internal for a mono cartridge on a second table!!)

If you are worried about replacing those four tubes with a set of vintage NOS bottles that could potentially cost half as much as the preamp itself, only to watch the two in the phono section just burn out, no worries. I read the manual and it said that there is a tube saver circuit in the C220 that shuts off the voltage to the tubes in the phono pre-amp section when Phono is not selected. How cool is that? You can have your cake and eat it too. *(continued)*



The more time I spent with the C220, the more fun I had, and isn't that what this is all about? The sound was good enough for me to just relax and enjoy the music. If you take that restored Corvette on the race-track and romp on it hard you will be disappointed, but that's not what it's for. It's for taking a nice leisurely drive in the country with the top down. Same with the C220. For many people, this preamplifier will provide all the sound they ever need while offering major control flexibility.

And I'll bet one of Dan's expensive glasses of wine that if you call McIntosh 20 years from now and need a repair, it will be no problem at all.

IT'S A WINNER

With all of this in mind, we were very happy to award the McIntosh C220 one of our Exceptional Value awards for 2006. If there's another preamp for this kind of money with this combination of good sound, amazing flexibility and dashing good looks, I haven't seen or heard it.

Sadly for me, I had to box it up and send it on down to Steve Hoffman, who is a huge McIntosh aficionado and will be using the C220 for an upcoming review with the latest version of the MC275 Amplifier. In order to comply with the new lead-free restrictions in Europe next year, there were a few upgrades made to this classic tube amplifier. Stay tuned; you haven't heard the last of this one! ●



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MANUFACTURERS INFO

McIntosh Laboratory

2 Chambers Street
Binghamton, NY 13903
607-723-3512

www.mcintoshlabs.com

PERIPHERALS

Preamplifier: Emotive Audio Poeta

Amplifier: First Watt F3, VAS Citation

Speakers: DeVore Fidelity Gibbon Super 8, ACI Sapphire XL

Headphones: Grado GS1000, Sennheiser HD 650

Analog Sources: Rega P25 (w/Groovetracer mods and Pete Riggle VTAF), Shelter 501 and Sumiko BluePoint.

Digital Sources: Benchmark DAC-1 (computer digital output), Ah! Tjoeb 4000 CD player with upsampling board installed

Interconnects: Audio Art IC-3

Speaker Cables: Audio Art SC-5

Power Cords: DH Labs Power Plus

Power Conditioning: Running Springs Haley

FAVORITE TEST TUNES

Time Loves a Hero

– Little Feat (LP)

Van Morrison – Moondance (LP)

Fragile – Yes (MoFi CD)

Aja – Steely Dan (MoFi LP)

Court and Spark – Joni Mitchell (DCC LP)



The Lyra Argo-i

IT'S NOT JUST ANOTHER "LYDIAN BETA"

— Dan Babineau

I judge high-end phono cartridges like I judge high-end women. Are they sophisticated? Do they have finesse? Can they become engaging? Do they have class? Can they adapt to a variety of circumstances? Are they sexy? Do they have good tone in their voice? Are they musical? Can I afford them? And above all are they fun at parties?

Well, when it comes to the new Lyra "Argo-i" cartridge from Lyra the answer to these perplexing questions is a solid ten out of ten!

I'll admit that initially when I spoke with Immedia, the distributor for Lyra, I was a bit skeptical that a \$1,200 cartridge could keep up with some of the big boys that I have been listening to lately. The literature on this Lyra cartridge claimed that the "Argo" was not an upgraded "Lydian Beta", which was the previous offering in this price category (based on Lyra's older Clavis technology) but instead a simplified "Helikon" incorporating their current technology. I like things simple and here's why I like this Lyra cartridge a great deal:

Yes, it's sexy in an anodized blue kind of way. It easily mounted to my Linn Ittok arm and worked well with the LP12 side of the equation. I will admit that the instructions for mounting the cartridge had me kind of nervous as they cautioned about high body rigidity, mechanical energy, stiff, low resonance armpipe etc.

But none of these problems appeared and the minute I dropped the stylus on the LP, I knew that this new Lyra design was a winner!

The minute I dropped the stylus on the LP, I knew that this new Lyra design was a winner!

Restraint is the key here, small changes in stylus pressure, VTA and anti-skate make huge changes. After a few small adjustments the room filled with music – Joni Mitchell to be exact. Tonally correct, full of inner detail and great energy. Which is another thing I like in a high end women or cartridge – energy!

So, I played the hell out of the Argo-i. Dragged all my favorites off the shelf from Bartok to Warren Zevon (somehow I think they were related – the werewolf thing I think it was?) and things started to really open up after about 50 hours of play. This was about the time our publisher stopped by for a visit and we both agreed it had nice bloom, great bass, and amazing inner detail; yet another listening session until the late hours. This cartridge comes off fairly neutral in timbre and tracks beautifully. Yes, you can even get away with playing some of your beaters without too much fuss. *(continued)*

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This nude body, medium compliant cartridge truly lives up to its spec: it is symmetrical – nicely balanced, it is low in distortion and it does retrieve inner detail. As of yet, I haven't seen one "eddy current" floating around the room. The stylus extends beyond the front of the cartridge, which made it very easy for me to pick a groove and go. Thanks to the included hardware it was very easy to mount and has a slide on stylus guard that works well.

Output voltage is 0.45mv, which should be acceptable for most phono preamplifiers. Whether I used my ASR or Aesthetix IO phono preamp, I always had a smile on my face. The Argo-i even makes my old standby Linn LP12 look racy! Yup, this is a great place to enter the world of true high-end analog playback! And according to Norbert the Lyra's just get better as price increase – can you say – "Skala"!

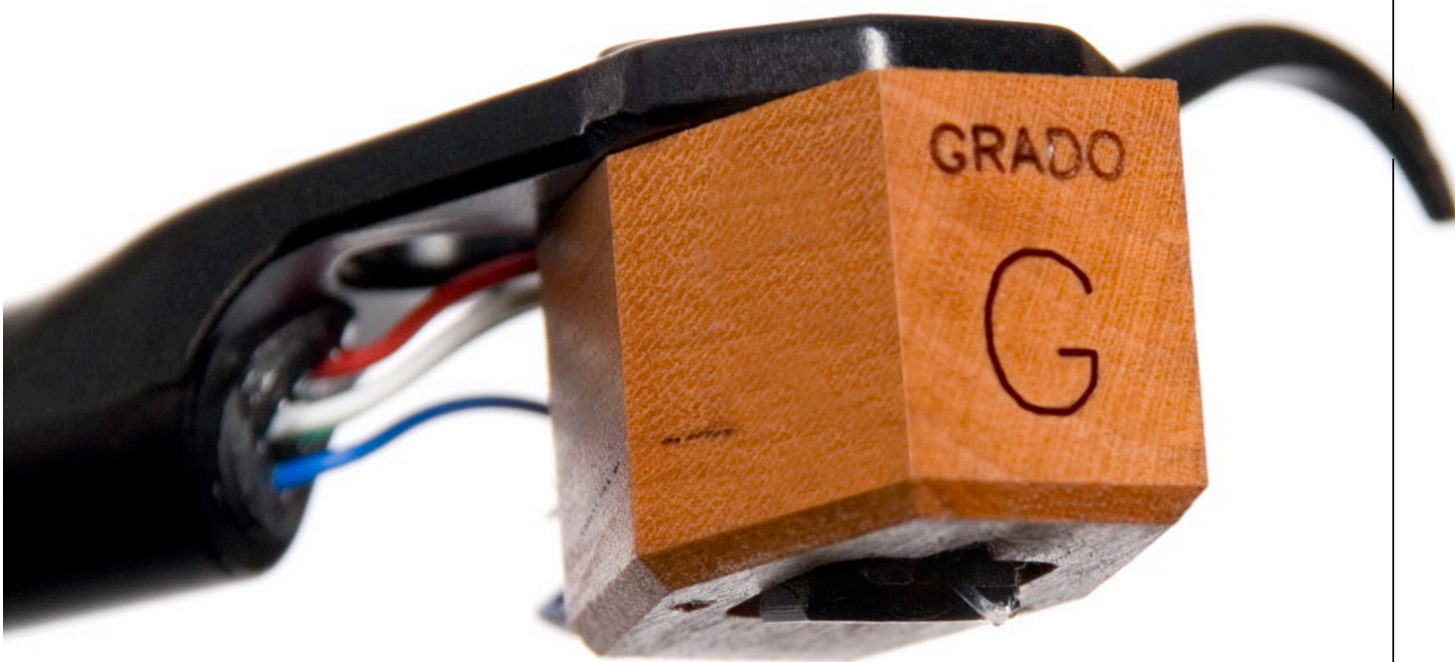
MANUFACTURER'S INFO

IMPORTER:

Immedia
510-559-2050
www.immediasound.com
Price: \$1200

ASSOCIATED COMPONENTS

Linn LP-12 w/Ittok arm, ASR Basis and Aesthetix IO phono preamplifiers, Conrad-Johnson ACT2 preamplifier, Premier 350 power amplifier and C-J UDP-1. Avalon Opus speakers, GPA racks and Running Springs power conditioners. All interconnects and speaker cable from Cardas, Running Springs Mongoose power cords.



I've Got Mono!

THE GRADO SONATA STATEMENT (MONO VERSION)

— Jeff Dorgay

Both Mr. Hoffman and Mr. Babineau have been going on and on about the virtues of Mono for some time now, and have been exposing me to some great mono recordings all year long. On my last visit to Steve's house we had the opportunity to listen to the original mono pressings of a few of the Beatles albums and it was very exciting to say the least.

With the folks at Classic Records and a number of the other audiophile labels pressing a good selection, the case for a mono cartridge kept getting stronger all the time. If you notice on the various websites that sell audio gear, there are a few great mono offerings out there, but I decided to take this slowly and purchase the Grado Sonata for my SOTA Comet. I probably own about 40 mono pressings, and I can tell you after the Sonata has come into my system, I plan to purchase as many more as I can get my hands on!

Because this is a moving iron cartridge with an input impedance of 47k and an output of .5mv (the Statement, reviewed here) or 5mv (the Reference version), it's an easy partner for any preamp and will pose no difficulty with loading, etc. Just like the Grado headphones, it features a cool, carved wood body.

If you would like a full description of how this cartridge works, check out the Grado website, it features some technical diagrams and a lot of good info. Check out the headphones while you are at it!!

The Sonata was a perfect match for the S300 arm that is on my SOTA Comet and with a little bit of adjustment was perfectly dialed in straight away! I'll tell you again, if you haven't listened to your mono records with a mono cartridge, you are in for a major treat!

If you have been listening to your mono records with a stereo cartridge, I'll bet you have been pretty disappointed, thinking they sound pretty thin and NOISY. Switching to a mono cartridge will eliminate this almost entirely and then you can experience the sound quality that mono has to offer. As a kid who grew up right at the end of the mono world, I always ignored mono records, thinking that I WANTED STEREO! Boy, do I regret that now!! *(continued)*



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www.sonnettech.com

The Sonata has a very musical, slightly warm presentation and it did a fantastic job with all of the Jazz discs in my collection. If you have never listened to mono recordings this way before, you will be pretty amazed at how big the presentation is and honestly, it sounds almost like stereo in the sense that you can definitely hear where the instruments are placed in the room. Now that I've gotten used to it, I really enjoy the presentation and especially the way mono reproduces bass, with a slightly more realistic, more organic quality to it.

For many of you, the Sonata could be all the mono cartridge you ever need, the sound is exquisite. If you have a spare turntable laying around because you just made an upgrade, stop right there before you Audiogon that baby off!! Call your Grado dealer and get your hands on a Sonata. I guarantee this is one of the most fun \$500 purchases you will ever make!

MANUFACTURER'S INFO

Grado Labs

718-435-5340

www.gradolabs.com

Price: \$500

ASSOCIATED COMPONENTS

SOTA Comet turntable w/RB300 arm and Groovetracer counterweight. Aesthetix Rhea phono stage with Great Northern Sound mods, Conrad-Johnson ACT2 series 2 Preamp and Premier 350 power amplifier. Wadia 581 Disk player, Tetra 506 Custom speakers with REL B2 subwoofer. Tetra Ar-tet speaker cable and interconnect (between amp and preamp) Cardas Golden Reference everywhere else. Running Springs Jaco Power Conditioner and Mongoose Power Cords. Clearaudio Smart Matrix Record cleaner.

AudioArt IC-3 Interconnects

— Jeff Dorgay

These snuck in under the wire. Rob Fritz was such a nice guy on the phone, I was more than happy to give his new cables a try. He came highly recommended, but I thought, “How good can a hundred dollar pair of cables really be?” Answer: damn good! Audio Arts founder Rob Fritz has chosen to forgo the traditional dealer model and sell direct to you to keep costs low.

I tried them in a number of different systems with excellent results. One of the most important things to me with a cable is that it be as neutral as possible and take as little away from the sound as possible. Granted, we all have our favorite cables to give a system a bump when necessary, or to tone things down a touch, but if I have my druthers, as neutral as possible is my favorite flavor.

The IC-3s provide way more than just a little bit of this at a price that is so inexpensive, I can't believe it. A one meter pair will set you back \$100 with RCA connectors and \$115 if you get XLR connectors. For those of you that want a bit more technical information, peruse the AA website. They feature silver coated OFC conductors and decent quality RCA plugs with an unobtrusive silver jacket. Remember, these are budget cables, nothing fancy, but very well executed.

Just to give them the major torture test, I put these in my main reference system so that I could get an instant read on what

they would do. To be as scientific as possible, I just replaced one pair, between my Wadia 581 and ACT2 Series 2 preamplifier. There was definitely a difference, with a bit lost in terms of high end clarity, a little bit of spatial information

and a touch of the timing cues. However, this is in the middle of a system that is almost worth six figures!

I played a lot of music that was very dynamic, that specifically had a lot of airness, just so I could see where they would fall down, and I was very impressed. Rob suggests that you give these cables 80-100 hours of break-in before making the final judgement. I must say that they were quite good right out of the box and settled in about 5-10% after they were in my system for a couple weeks.

I won't tell you the IC-3s blew away all of the really expensive cables, but they did an awfully good job; way better than you would expect something at this price point would do. Moving them back in to a couple of more realistic systems, they were fantastic. If you have a system in the range of about \$1200-\$10,000 (or possibly even a little more) I think spending more money than this on cables would be much better spent on room treatments to improve overall sound. *(continued)*

How good can a hundred dollar pair of cables really be? Answer: Damn good!



Ever since I started writing professionally about eight years ago, I always wanted to say "stop the presses!" (too many episodes of Superman when I was a kid...) We had this issue all ready to go and our Exceptional Value Awards had long been chosen, but I felt compelled to add one more to the list. The Audio Art IC-3 interconnects are a steal at this price.

Rob's new "signature" line of cables are on the way soon, with better RCA plugs, so we will be curious to give those a whirl when they are ready. Stay tuned.

MANUFACTURERS INFO

Audio Art Cable

619-255-6451

rfenterprises@cox.net

Price: \$100 per 1m pair w/ RCA Plugs, \$115 with XLR

ASSOCIATED COMPONENTS

SME 10 turntable with SME V arm and Shelter 90x cartridge. Aesthetix Rhea phono stage with Great Northern Sound mods, Conrad-Johnson ACT2 series 2 Preamplifier and Premier 350 power amplifier. Wadia 581 Disk player, Tetra 506 Custom speakers with REL B2 subwoofer. Tetra Artet speaker cable and interconnect (between amp and preamp) Cardas Golden Reference everywhere else. Running Springs Jaco Power Conditioner and Mongoose Power Cords. Clearaudio Smart Matrix Record cleaner.



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Style and Function from Finite Elemente

— Jeff Dorgay



GIVE YOUR SYSTEM A FACELIFT

Granted, a well-designed rack will make your system sound better if it has the proper resonance controls in place, yet many audiophiles resist this purchase for a number of reasons. For me, it was always money that could be spent on more records! But those were the early days when I did not have to share my space with anyone else and it didn't matter all that much what my system LOOKED like. Not to mention that, even five years ago, there just weren't as many choices as there are today.

Now that I have been living with the Finite Elemente Pagode Signature rack for a while, I can't imagine life without one. Matter of fact, I'm getting a second one as a Christmas present to myself! In addition to being very functional and offering good resonance control, they have an understated elegance that I enjoy. Like any good component they also offer a solid upgrade path that I really appreciate.

The rack we have here is the three-shelf model E12. It weighs about 60 lbs, and arrives in a flat carton. Some assembly is required and it will probably take 30-60 minutes at a very leisurely pace to complete. Please check back at the TONE website in a couple of weeks, when we have our new section entitled "The Lab" up. We will walk you through the assembly process, as the instructions are a little vague and lack color pictures. The bottom shelf will support about 110 pounds (50kg), while the upper shelves will support half that much weight, so plan your component choices accordingly.

The Signature racks are available in a light Canadian maple, black, or cherry as standard finishes. The light maple was the perfect fit for my components, but I have seen the black ones and they are quite stunning. Depending on the size of your components, you have a bit of adjustability in the middle shelf. The Signature racks come in a number of configurations from two to seven shelves. They also offer an amplifier stand and a very intriguing wall mount shelf. Uh oh, I see a couple more of these in the future.... *(continued)*

The Signature rack offers a definite improvement in the sound as well looking fantastic! As I have a 13 inch thick con-

crete slab in my studio, vibration is not as much of an issue as it probably is in most homes. However, I still noticed a bit of tightening up in the bass and a little bit more clarity in the mids.

The whole system got another click of focus when I put the whole rack on a set of Cerepucs after

What really took it to the next level for me was adding some Finite Cereballs under my components.

removing the spikes. For me, this made a nice compromise between price and performance. The more expensive Finite Pagode Master Reference rack already has their resonator technology built in, and an additional rail on each side for even more rigidity, but the Signature was a cost effective solution for my budget. The great news is that they look similar enough that you can mix and match without upsetting the visual effect. The Cereball effect is cumulative; each component you add them to adds a bit more focus and clarity to the sound of your system.

They say clothes make the man, and I must say the Signature racks round out the presentation quite nicely. It's like getting the perfect frame for a piece of art, or that perfect set of wheels for your Porsche, it just looks right! The Pagode Signature racks range from about \$1500 - \$5000, depending on how many shelves you need. ●

MANUFACTURER'S INFO

Importer:

Immedia

510-559-2050

www.immediasound.com

Price: \$2295

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modwright.com

360.247.6688

21919 NE 399th Street
Amboy, WA 98601



Headphone Planet

● One of the greatest things about being a serious headphone listener is that it's really easy to have more than one pair! Once you get more than two pairs of speakers in your room, life starts to get pretty wacky, but you could have ten pairs of headphones up on your shelf (we have a suggestion for that) and switch them around at will.

While I haven't met too many people with that many sets of headphones, it isn't uncommon to have four or five pairs. If you take a stroll out on the Head-fi website www.headfi.org and check out what their members are listening to, you will see what I mean. The other bonus here is that for the price of a decent pair of speakers, you CAN have six really fantastic pairs of phones. *(continued)*



THE BENEFIT TO THIS?

Every audio device has its own sonic signature, and wouldn't it be great if you did have the room in your house to have a pair of mini-monitors, giant floorstanders, a set of panel speakers and maybe some horns to boot? (And stay married...) It's the same with headphones, they all have a different personality, so if you have a big music collection, it's very nice to be able to use one headphone for one kind of music and another for something else.

Starting with the review of the AKG 701s a few issues ago and the Grado GS1000s last issue, this month we present the Sennheiser HD 650s. I'm sure that those of you who have spent a lot of time on your own headphone planet will agree that these are three of the most popular phones going. That's why we wanted to start here first, because while we want to have some interesting stuff for the headphone crowd, we also want to get some more people that haven't discovered how cool headphones are over to this side of the fence.

These are also the three sets of headphones that I own, so that I have a good reference by which to compare everything else that comes our way. (And a pair of Stax are starting to look mighty interesting as well...)



THE SENNHEISER HD 650

The first thing I need to establish at the beginning of this review is that the 650s here still have the stock cord that they came with. One of the greatest features of this headphone is that the cord just plugs in, so it's very easy to upgrade. While there are a number of ongoing debates about who makes the best aftermarket cable for the Sennheiser

650s, I think most people will agree that this is an upgrade that these phones benefit from, no matter what you ultimately end up choosing. We will explore a few options in the near future on our new website. Keep an eye on **The Lab**, as that's where we will be posting this kind of thing.

First things first; a pair of HD 650s will cost you about \$549. (msrp) They have a 300 ohm impedance and should work well with most amplifiers, but again, this will be a taste thing. I had excellent results with my Pacific Creek 300B amplifier and felt that no highs were rolled off at all, compared to the headphone section of the McIntosh C220 or the Benchmark DAC-1.

These phones only weigh a touch more than 9oz. (without cord), so they don't really weigh your head down like my old Stax electrostats or Koss Pro

4AAs, but because of the fairly tight clamp effect, you do notice that you have a pair of phones on your head. The positive result of this is a bit better bass

coupling to your head. You will notice right away that the 650s have great bass response.

Here's where it gets a bit tricky and why you need more than one pair if you are going to live happily ever after on Headphone Planet. And also why system matching is just as important. When listening to the 650s through a solid-state headphone amplifier, they had a tendency to sound just a touch dark through the midrange. However, with my 300B SET amplifier, they were just right, thanks to the extra midrange liquidity of this amplifier, especially if I broke out the Western Electric 300Bs. *(continued)*

Here's where it gets a bit tricky and why you need more than one pair if you are going to live happily ever after on Headphone Planet.

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Jeff Dorgay
ToneAudio



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If you love to fine-tune your headphone experience, I can't suggest a 300B amplifier highly enough.

Each flavor of the tube has a different sound, which can really take the sound to another level.

I listen to a pretty wide range of music on any given day, but if I had to make a call, I'd say the 650's lent themselves a bit more to rock and jazz; it's always dependent on the mastering. To be totally accurate, I'd say, these are my favorite phones for a recording that is biased somewhere between neutral and just a touch on the hot side.

I spent a lot of time listening to my old Herbie Hancock and Weather Report albums, which was a ton of fun, but the most fun I had writing this review was listening to the 2-channel version of the new Beatles' **Love**. This was a great experience that reminded me of the good old days of headphones, when your pair of Pro 4 AAs sounded way better than the 200 dollar pair of speakers you owned.

Which leads me to the last component of the 650's performance; detail. I really felt that these phones did a great job not only with the quieter details, but with spatial cues and image placement. If you are in fact a Beatles fan, **Love** may become a great headphone demo disc for you. There are a lot of very faint and trippy details in this recording to enjoy.

Whether you are about to start a headphone collection of your very own, or just buy one pair, I would advise you to give the Sennheiser HD 650s a listen. And stay tuned, we will investigate some other cable options in the near future.



HEADPHONE HANGERS AT SAFEWAY?

Yes, that's not a typo. You have to stay sharp and look for audio accessories wherever you might be able to find them. Now and then, you might find something that is really functional for a lot less than you would pay from an audio specialty shop.

As much as I'd like to take credit for this discovery, I have our art director Jean to thank for this one. She popped in with this box and said, "I bet this would work great for keeping those headphones of yours organized!" The box said Banana Hanger and the price tag said eight bucks. "Can you get more of these?"

So we jumped back in the car and I picked up four more. I have three more sets of headphones after all, and you know there will be a fifth set in the near future....

For those of you with multiple pairs of headphones without a solid storage and display solution, I submit the Saway Banana Hanger. Keep your eyes peeled. ●

Catching up with Jacqui Naylor

Jacqui Naylor just happens to be one of our favorite female vocalists here in the TONEAudio office and it's always a treat when this San Francisco based singer makes her way to the Pacific Northwest for a live appearance. *(continued)*





As good fortune would have it, even though we had missed her show the night before, she was performing at Music Millenium in downtown Portland the next day.

Music Millenium and a number of other record stores around the country sponsor these free shows to help album sales and promote artists, which is a very cool idea. Jacqui stopped by with a stripped down crew and performed a short set of six songs, which gave everyone a very nice taste of her work on the new CD! At the end of the set, she spent some time with us to answer a few questions.

STONE: Jacqui, the new CD is great and I love your original tunes as much if not more than the standards! Can we expect to see more original Jacqui material in the future?

JACQUI: Absolutely. I really enjoy writing songs and it has become a bigger part of what we do.

STONE: I just got done watching a show about Elton John and Bernie Taupin. Elton said that during most of their tenure, Bernie just dropped the songs off and he wrote the melodies when he got around to it. Later, on Goodbye Yellow Brick Road, things were more of a collaborative effort. How do you and Art work?

JACQUI: Funny, it is different every time; the lyrics and melody usually come at the same time for me...like the thing has a story all its own. Sometimes though...I do make notes of lyric ideas and they often become ideas later. *Drive On* was like that; I had made a note after someone yelled at me from a car. I thought: "What are they thinking? Does that ever really work for anyone where some cat yells at a girl and she yells back how much she loves him and gets in?"

Also, Art may just write a bass line or chord progression and I riff over it to start writing a tune or he may come to me with chords and melody like *Sit and Rest a While*. I am so lucky that Art plays so many instruments as it allows us to write from a different sound every time...sometime guitar, bass, piano even cello.

STONE: One thing I really noticed with this record, is while you have always had great recordings, this one is over the top! Did the boys in the control room do anything different that you know of this time? It really is fantastic!

JACQUI: Well I do know they spent a long time setting things "just so" to get a very warm but live sound. I think the biggest thing (that most people don't know) is that several of the tracks were part of a party/recording we had in Paul & Michael's studio for Dan Schmal's Birthday. It was really special and I think the heart and soul from that evening came through because of that. Great mikes and a nice tall room don't hurt either. Michael also did a tremendous job mastering. There will be a reel to reel version released of some of these tunes and a few extras in the coming months.

(continued)

TONE: Any more word on the reel tape version?

JACQUI: I can't wait for people to hear it. I think Paul and Dan and Michael just did an amazing job and it was such an interesting (and a bit intimidating) process. What you hear is absolutely what you get and what we got. I am very pleased with it and think it captures the music and my voice very well and very sincerely. We also recorded a few extra tracks and changed the instrumentation on a lot of the tunes, even if we had recorded them before. This is definitely its own project and something very special!

TONE: You really seem to be one of the originators of the smash format, and there are some great tunes on this record. When you perform live is there any kind of format you follow, or is it just spontaneous, given your mood? I loved it that you threw a little Allman Brothers in when you performed here...

JACQUI: I definitely plan my sets although we deviate sometimes with mood or even requests. But I think what you are hearing is the spontaneous nature of working with jazz musicians. The songs really are different every night because of solos and even sometimes the instrumentation. The idea is always there and based on the recording and arrangement but I like us all to have a lot of freedom to be who we are and see what comes out. I work with such talented cats that so far...it has always come off great.
(continued)

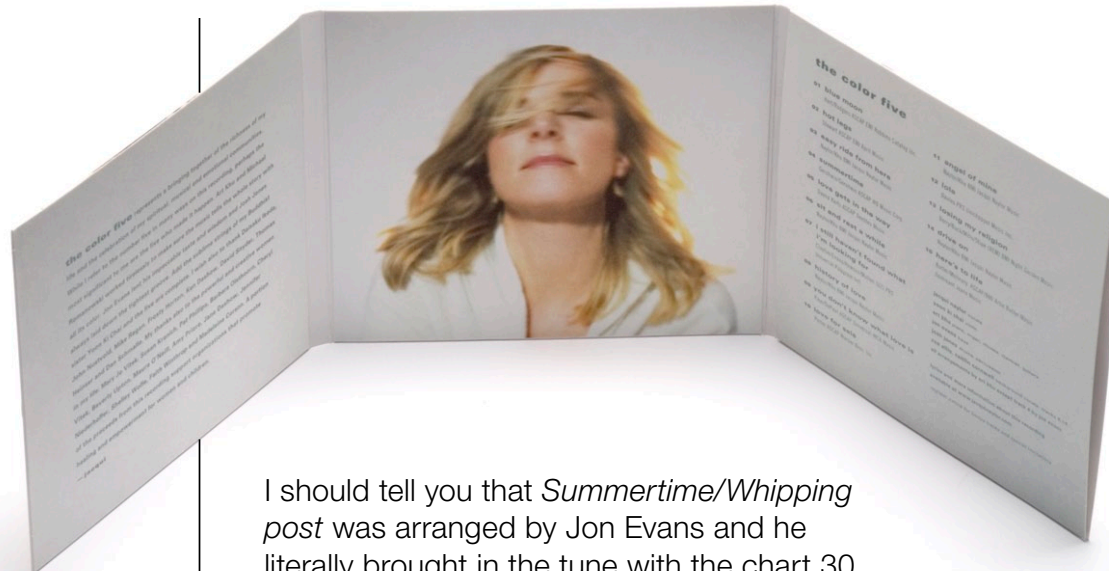


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I should tell you that *Summertime/Whipping post* was arranged by Jon Evans and he literally brought in the tune with the chart 30 minutes before we recorded it!

TONE: Speaking of the performance at Music Millennium, do you do a lot of that kind of thing, playing in record stores around the country? If so, does this kind of thing work well for you, to get the word out about the music?

JACQUI: I really enjoy connecting with people on a more intimate level than you can do at a club so the record store environment, especially Music Millennium, is really great for that...more laid back. Often during the day when I can see people's faces etc...it's really nice. It also definitely helps sales and gives the retailer the sense that we are doing all we can to promote a project when we are in town. I do a fair amount of it but usually with the larger Chains...Borders, Barnes & Noble, Tower (though not anymore).

TONE: Though you are only listed in the credits as vocalist, do you play any instruments?

JACQUI: I play a little piano and only in the shower.

TONE: Any other big Jacqui news, you would like to spread to our readers?

JACQUI: I hope I have a chance to meet them and sing for them live one day. I know your readers have great ears so it would be an honor. We are mostly touring and writing and will have a new holiday CD out in 2007...**smashed for the holidays**....holiday tunes smashed acoustically with classic rock!



Art Director Jean with Jacqui at the show.

Audiophile Recordings

— Jeff Dorgay



CLOSE TO THE EDGE OF MADNESS

It's a pretty exciting winter in the sense that the classic Yes album, **Fragile** has finally been remastered.

Definitely a cult classic for those of us that are maniacs about progressive rock. But to make life really wacky, there's not one but two versions!! Mobile Fidelity was first to market with a 24 kt. Gold CD and the folks at Acoustic Sounds have just released a copy on LP mastered by Steve Hoffman.

Fragile has definitely achieved cult like status, to many of us like **Dark Side of the Moon**. Also to many of us, it's that disc that we have more

than one copy of, in search of that perfect version. Oh, you didn't know that there are about six versions of this disc? Let the madness begin...

(continued)



LETS START AT THE BEGINNING

In the beginning there was vinyl and it was good. There was also cassette and 8-track tape and they were less than good. Actually the cassette doesn't sound all that bad and the original album doesn't sound that great. I just happened to have purchased this record back in the day and I hadn't listened to it for some time.

Revisiting the early edition of **Fragile** that I bought in the summer of 1972 was as bad as I had remembered it. This version is very compressed and has quite a bit of distortion in most of the areas where there is even a hint of dynamics. Even the opening of *Roundabout* is full of distortion. Though my copy is still in great shape, you should be able to find a good one in any used record store for about \$6.



There was a mass-market version of this album released on CD with a 1990 mastering credit. I was unable to find much out about this version and while I have to believe with the dawn of the CD player being much earlier than 1990, there should be an earlier copy of this recording on a shiny disc. However, one has not made itself yet available.

In 1994, we had a serious contender. Joe Gastwirt at Ocean View Digital did a remaster that was released as a standard Atlantic release. For those of you not familiar with Mr. Gastwirt's work, he has done quite a few remastering jobs for the likes of Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, Joni Mitchell, The Grateful Dead, The Beach Boys and countless others.

This disc is a tremendous improvement over the original vinyl. About 95% of the distortion is gone and there are definitely some dynamics in this recording. The soundstage is still a bit collapsed, but the high end is very smooth for digital. You can find one of these for about \$10 on EBay, and you might be lucky enough to find one of these in a used CD shop for next to nothing if the owner is not knowledgeable.

(continued)



Enter the realm of head-fi.



www.head-fi.org

Yet another format enters our midst in 2002. As the high resolution digital wars began, **Fragile** was remastered and released yet again on DVD-a. This disc has a 5.1 surround version that is a bit too wacky for me, but I am starting to warm up to this format as time goes by. The advanced resolution stereo is the one that I really liked and if you have a player capable of DVD-a playback, this one is quite good. Kudos to Steve Hall at FutureDisc for the mastering job.

I found the playback to be low in distortion and compression, with very solid bass response (in 2ch mode). Listening on the Meridian 808 was really a treat. If you have a DVD-a player and are not a vinyl maven, keep this one in mind. New or used, around \$25.



THE RED ONE OR THE GREEN ONE?

That's the question for these two versions released by WEA Japan in 2003. And it gets pretty wacky price-wise here. Both of these discs are in the \$40-90 dollar range and now that the new versions are out, I wouldn't be surprised if the price on these plummets a bit *(continued)*



Though the red one is exquisitely packaged and is produced in HDCD, this one is a coaster as far as sound quality goes. Yep, I might have taken this forty bucks and lit it on fire (or gone to my favorite used record store and bought something I really loved). Remastered by Isao Kikuchi, this one is bright, compressed and distorted. I also noticed a bit of hiss that I assume is from the original master tape on this version. It does win the award for best packing, however and I would suggest avoiding this one unless you are the ultimate YES collector and just HAVE to have it.



Now the green one is another story altogether. What appears to be a Japanese re-release of the Gastwirt disc, this one sounds very good. If you are a YES fan, you have to be a fan of Chris Squire's thundering bass riffs. In the other versions so far, the '94 Gastwirt disc is pretty good as well as the DVD. The LP and HDCD are very weak in the lower registers. Surprisingly enough, the cassette had pretty decent bass....

This one is much more dynamic and only a slight touch of distortion creeps in on the loudest passages. The beginning of track 4 *South Side of the Sky* is particularly tasty on this disc. If you have it, keep it; it's a very nice version of this recording. I have no idea why the red one is commanding a higher price than the green one though.



Ok, on to the present day. Reminiscent of the US and USSR space race, MoFi and Analogue Productions have come to market at almost the same time with their versions of this timeless classic; the MoFi version is on 24kt gold CD and the Analogue Productions version is on 180 gram LP.

I know the burning question you want to know is which one sounds the best? I know you are all going to scream conspiracy, because Mr. Hoffman just happens to write for us, but he's the winner and still champ. Honestly, I'm a big MoFi fan, so I feel vindicated on this one, and I think that if you are obsessed enough to buy both, you will agree with me.

But if you are an audiophile that does not spin records, you won't be disappointed with their version. Considering what all of these different, yet really talented engineers have done with this recording over the years, I have to speculate that this was probably one of the worst master tapes ever made, because even these two versions are still a little bit lacking in this department.

The Mofi CD is very good and has a lot more dynamics than the other CD versions. Shaun Britton also did an excellent job of bringing the bass line up much stronger on this version as well removing some of the "fog" in the original. If you don't have a record player, this is the one to own. *(continued)*



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Please visit [Jacqui Naylor's website](#) for information on her albums and upcoming shows.

UNLIKE MOTOWN, I SAVED THE BEST FOR LAST

If you have a vinyl rig, this is the ultimate version of Yes

Fragile. Your quest is finally over. This one has it all, as much dynamic range as could possibly be wrung out of this recording without the distortion on the peaks present in the other ones. The Analogue Productions version is very clean, having less fog than any of the rest.

Because of this extra clarity, you can really hear Bill Bruford's drum fills that much better, and a lot of the extra Wakeman keyboard riffs that were buried before. And Chris Squire's bass playing is where it should be. The storms at the beginning of *South Side of the Sky* really rumble!

There you have it folks, I just spent a whole day listening to Yes' **Fragile** and I can still type! Believe it or not, I love this record as much as I did when I started this project. I'm sure a few of you in the audience will disagree, but that's what being a music lover is all about. I would like to thank the members of the Steve Hoffman Forum for making me aware of the Japanese versions and in particular to Mr. Wes Collins for lending me the 1994 Gastwirt disc, as I did not own that one. Happy listening! ●



Classical Music A to Z

— Dan Babineau

“ONE SWEET DREAM, PICK UP THE BAGS GET IN THE LIMOUSINE”

And a limousine is what it took to get us to Disney Concert Hall on time to take in the performance of Mahler’s third symphony, beautifully played by the Los Angeles Philharmonic with the help of the Women of the Pacific Chorale and the Los Angeles Children’s Chorus.

To recap from my last installment of “Classical Music A to Z”, I was able to partake in this grandeur performance of Mahler’s longest work due to a small wager that I made with an old friend. She lost the bet which included concert tickets, a limo ride to the concert, and then dinner following the performance. The limo part of the equation proved to be most important as some rocket scientist/“Ricky Racer” put his Dodge Ram truck into two thirds of the 5 North freeway, delaying our arrival to Disney Hall. As a matter of fact we pulled up just in time to be seated and the concert began.

I wanted to get there early to participate in the pre-concert activities that include time with conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen as well as other members of the orchestra. But this was not meant to be. *(continued)*

Photo Courtesy PDPhoto.org

I did have a great conversation with our limo driver, Joachim, who like me, is a woodwind player. Joachim saved the day by performing a timely detour over uncharted freeway to get us to the concert on time. After this amazing feat, Joachim talked amicably about all the places that music had taken him both geographically as well as spiritually. We talked about the many venues that we had played and all of the wonderful and not so wonderful experiences that classical music had given us. I told him that music has always been my favorite journey and next thing I knew, we had arrived at Disney Hall!

Needless to say the concert was nothing short of amazing with exemplary performances by mezzo-soprano Michelle De Young, the LA Children's Chorus and WPC. The LA Phil has truly found its new home and leader in Esa-Pekka Salonen. As they drove through Mahler's third with such authority and grandeur I began to lose my place in Disney Hall and was swept into the music more than I have been in a long, long time.

Classical music is an adventure, a means to transcend time and travel to a variety of exotic places in your mind. This installment of **Classical Music A to Z** is dedicated to mezzo-soprano, Lorraine Hunt Lieberson who passed away this year in July. In her extensive career she exemplified this ability to use music as a vehicle to transcend time and take us to places in our soul that we never knew existed.

And travel we will, as we visit the likes of Spain, France, Russia, Norway, Germany and even the good old USA. I hope you like the journey. Oh, and by the way, the dinner after the concert was fantastic, wine choice was superb and the company could not be beat. So she'll never bet me again!



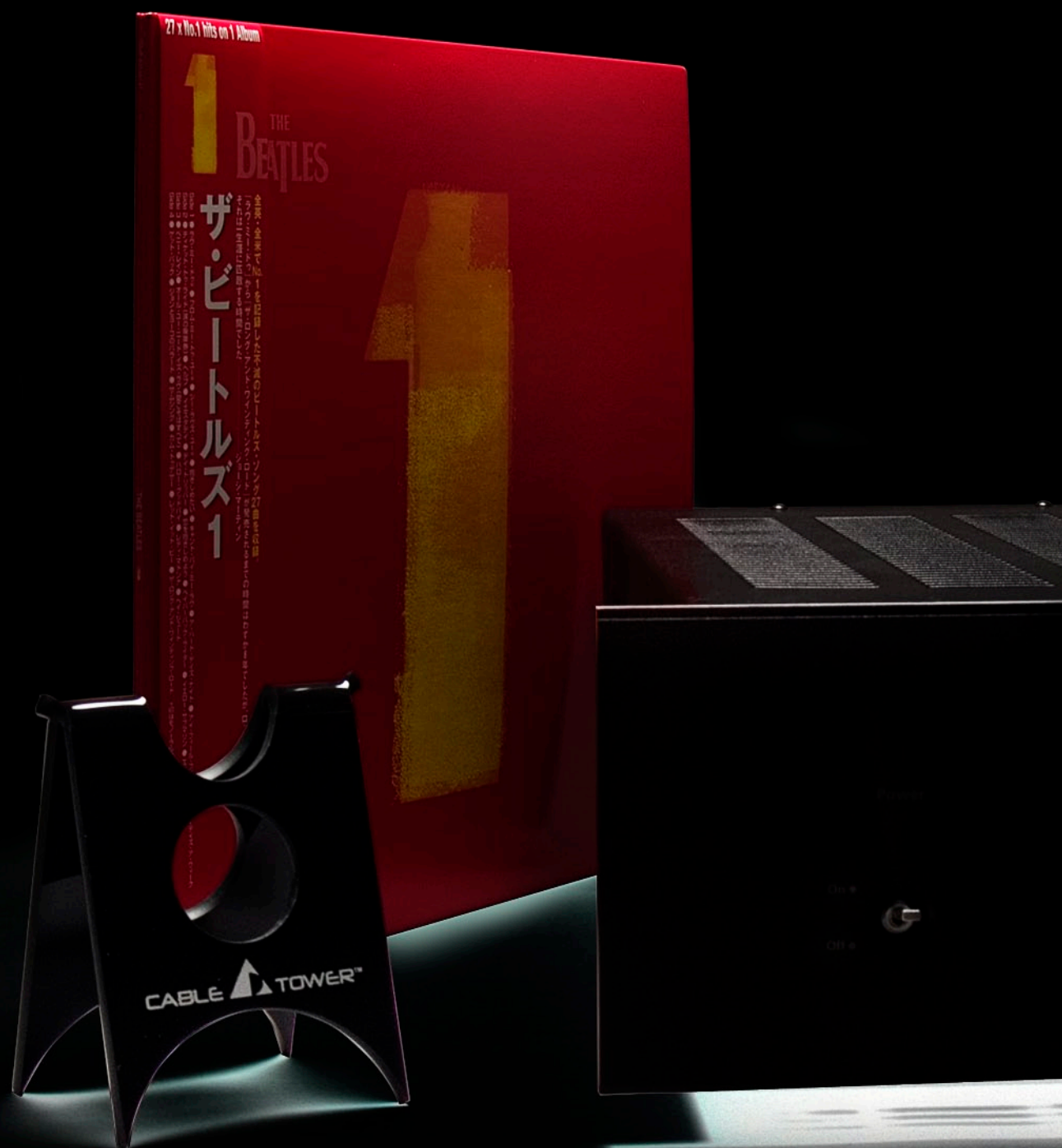
MANUEL DE FALLA: Spain will be the first leg of our journey and no composer exemplifies Spain better than de Falla. Much like Elgar in England, de Falla composed for the royalty of his Spain capturing the atmosphere of this remarkable place to the point where you feel like getting up and dancing a fandango. His music tends to be programmatic, based on delightful stories where love ends up being the supreme power and sometimes a certain Corregidor ends up naked, wrapped in a blanket. De Falla employs all of the sounds of his native Spain, with horns, castanets, farrucas, plenty of happy strings and plenty of bold vocals. There is also a mystical side to de Falla as in *El Amor Brujo* (Love the Magician). Here we are taken on a strange journey with a gypsy haunted by her dead lover who appears every time she tries to kiss her new lover. But have no fear, because with a little bit of trickery everything becomes right with the help of a kiss. And of course the most notable work from this musical chronicler of Spain is a ballet – **The Three-Cornered Hat**.

Based on a story by another Spaniard, Pedro Antonio de Alarcon, **The Corregidor and the Miller's Wife**. Here we have another one of these stories about love, with dances and festivals and singing. This time jealousy plays a major role followed by deceit. But once again things work out and always the happy ending prevails. De Falla's

music will transport you to a happy time and a wonderful place with a little mysticism throw in to make it really Spanish!

DAN'S PICKS: Go vinyl here and pick up the relatively new re-release from Classic Records, Cat# SDBR 3057 of De Falla's **Three-Cornered Hat**. These remastered Everest releases from Classic are real winners and the performance here by Enrique Jorda and the LSO can't be beat. And if you can't do the vinyl thing they also offer it on digital. Don't forget to pick up a copy of **El Amor Brujo**. My favorite is on London vinyl with Ansermet and the Swiss Romande, London Cat. #STS 15014. You can also pick up a nice assortment of de Falla's music including another favorite – **Nights in the gardens of Spain** on EMI, Cat#64746 with de Burgos and the Orchestre de la Society du Conservatoire Paris. Carlo Maria Giulini and the Philharmonic are also on this disc delivering a rousing performance of *El Sombrero* and *El Amor Brujo* from Kingsway Hall.

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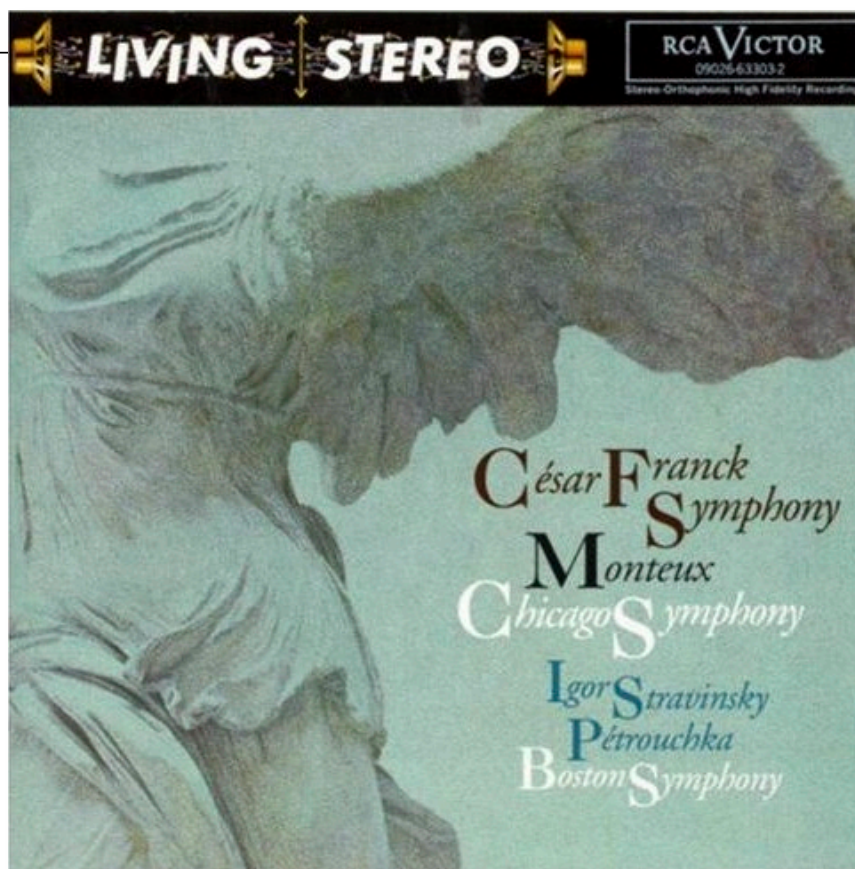
GABRIEL FAURE: Faure's music is drawn from deep within his delicate soul and you just need to jump across the border to France to find one of the finest composers of Romantic French music. Meditative, soft and full of light energy, a great deal of his finest efforts are vocal music, mostly for mezzo-sopranos and baritone.



This "Third Republic" composer's style fit in perfect for the time when France was leading the world in almost all art forms. Renoir, Cezanne, Franck, Bizet and finally Debussy and Ravel began weaving an impressionistic texture that we've never forgotten. Light strings followed by tone-rich woodwinds paint an elegant picture of life at the time. Faure's *Pelleas Et Melisande* is much more delicate and intimate than Debussy's. The chamber music is always a crowd pleaser, never too loud but certainly joyous and somewhat introverted. *(continued)*

DAN'S PICKS: You have to get a copy of the **Requiem** to start. This beautifully elegant, yet non-religious piece will bring your soul back time and time again.

Try the EMI Classic with Andre Cluytens, Cat. #64746. This landmark performance features baritone Dietrich Fischer Dieskou and soprano Victoria De los Angeles at the very top of their careers. Cluytens perfectly captures the atmosphere, finesse and delicacies of Faure perfectly in this recording. For another variation on this theme, turn to another great French conductor on Decca: Ernest Ansermet and the Swiss Romande deliver the **Incidental Music**, Op. 80 from **Pelleas Et Melisande** and the **Masques Et Bergamasques**, Op. 112. The Orpheus Chamber Orchestra on DG does a nice job of bringing home a nice variety of French music including Faure's famous **Pavane** Catalog #449186.



CESAR FRANCK: Let's stay in France just a little while longer, so that we can discuss the composer of one of the most important French symphonies of the Romantic period" Franck's **Symphony in D Minor**. Much like Bruckner, Cesar Franck was very religious and felt that his music should reflect his devotion to God. His focus and ability to pin point a central theme or cycle quickly becomes apparent when examining **Symphony in D Minor**. Franck sticks to these themes throughout the work as his music is rich with solid orchestration, perfectly aligned and balanced. This precision came under quite a bit of criticism at the time as many critics wanted composers to break free of structured musical forms and develop a symphonic formula that looked to the future rather than the structures of the previous classical era.

Franck's **Sonata for Violin and Piano in A Major**, M8 is an exquisite piece and beautifully illustrates perfect form and solid tonality. I think Franck would have liked to believe that his music was taking us closer to God and once you really grasp the genius behind

his music, it really works. The mathematically precise focus and superlative cycles will take you to a truly wonderful place.

DAN'S PICKS: For the **Symphony in D Minor**, I always go to Pierre Monteux and the CSO on RCA Living Stereo. The record is hard to find these days and if you do find it you may have to cash a bond, but the CD version is good; Cat. # 63303. You also get a great performance of Stravinsky's **Pétrouchka**, how can you not like the CSO? My favorite version of the **Sonata for Violin and Piano in A Major** is on London/Decca, Cat. #421154. This CD features Kyung-Wha Chung playing incredible violin, with Radu Lupu on piano filling in the backbone of the piece with weight and precision. I can't do the organ music but you might like it. You might want to pick up a Franck collection like the Philips Cat. #442296, that has a little bit of all of Franck's musical endeavors. Remember this is supposed to be fun, so mess around, and find your own sounds. For the price of CDs these days you cannot go wrong!

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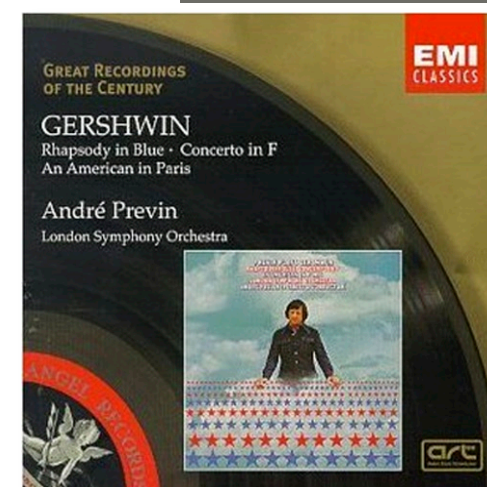
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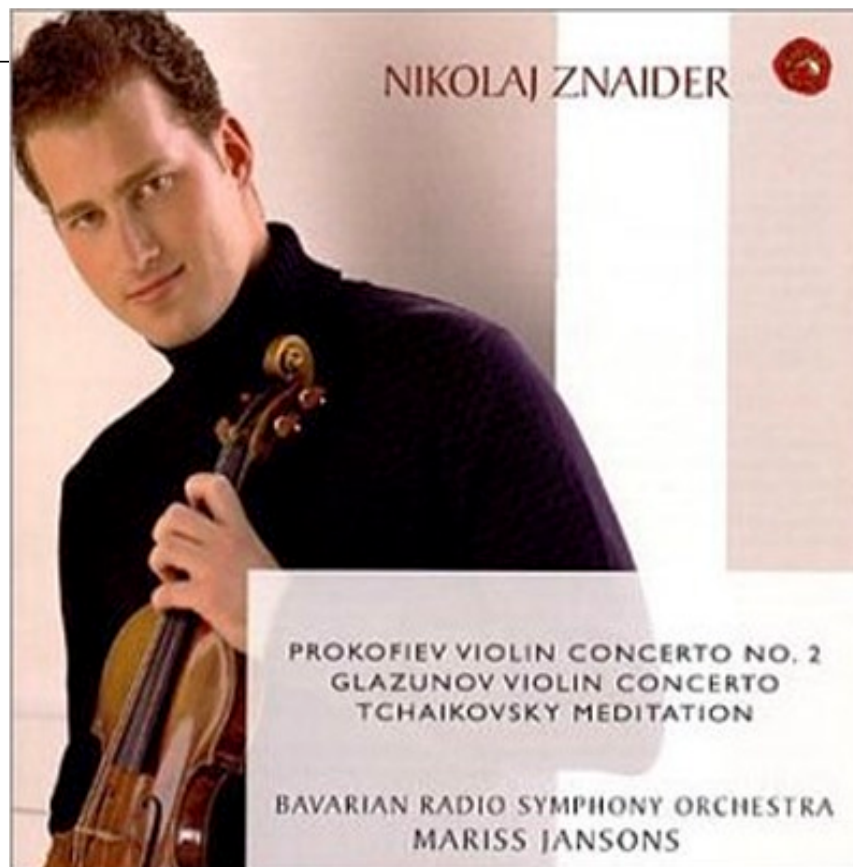
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GEORGE GERSHWIN: Now we must hop across the pond and continue our journey alphabetically through these amazing musicians and composers. Gershwin was quite an accomplished piano player. The majority of his compositions came out of his sitting at the piano, with cigar in place, banging out the sound of an America growing into the 20th century. It was brash and boisterous; upbeat jazz with a classical backdrop - this sound of a new world. There are Cuban percussives and African American rhythms. And then he takes us all the way back to Paris, but this time as an American. George Gershwin's music marked a time in the history of the United States; an atmosphere of a country that did not want to go to sleep at night. Ravel and Debussy caught the jazz bug and it turned up in their latter works, but Gershwin took it several steps forward and managed to digest the entire jazz genre. *Rhapsody in Blue* says it all, as does - *Girl Crazy* - the perpetual *I've got Rhythm* and of course, *Porgy and Bess*. How much more Americana could you want?

Latin overtones are abundant in his music as are many other pieces of American music. Witness the melting pot in Gershwin's **Cuban Overture**. You must also get the second rhapsody, or "Rhapsody in Rivets", as Gershwin gets more serious, more reflective and even more powerful here. *(continued)*

DAN'S PICKS: When it comes to Gershwin, you have to go with Leonard Bernstein; he captured Gershwin's raw spirit and exuberance and passed it on to the youth of America during some of his "Young People's Concerts". Bernstein's vitality combined with Gershwin's insane culmination of several true American roots: jazz, folk, blues, Cuban, Spanish, Mexican, African, etc. etc. made for some exhilarating performances. I listen to the Columbia vinyl release, MS 6091, which contains *An American in Paris* and my favorite rendition of *Rhapsody in Blue*. But you can find it also on CD and SACD: Sony Cat. #63086, for the CD and 89033 for the SACD. All of the chamber and instrumental music is good. Check out Richard Glazer performing a variety of Gershwin's on piano: Centaur Cat. #2271. Play *Sleepless Nights* at around 3 A.M. and see if you don't think George caught the mood. And for **Concerto in F Major** I go to the EMI Classics disc Cat. #66943 with Andre Previn, who is no stranger to jazz; he absolutely nails this phenomenal concerto with the help of the London Symphony Orchestra. Finish with **Porgy & Bess** and you are done – for now! Check out Simon Rattle, the London Philharmonic and an amazing cast: EMI, Cat. #76832.



ALEXANDER GLAZUNOV: For me, the music of Glazunov is a glimpse into what Russian classical music was to become. An incredibly prolific composer penning eight symphonies, three ballets, a violin concerto, a variety of waltzes, program music and even, - a saxophone concerto. Perhaps, I'd be better saying that Glazunov gives us a glimpse into a musical genre that remains timeless. Rimsky-Korsakov was his mentor and worked with him throughout his life on many projects. Glazunov was a very noted teacher and later became the Director of the St. Petersburg School of Music. He even went on to finish a masterful work by Alexander Borodin – "Prince Igor". Of the symphonies, Symphony #5 is my favorite but all nine have something to offer. Alexander Glazunov is certainly one of the forefathers of 20th century Russian music. His intense musical discipline coupled with incredibly diverse Russian melodies creates an astonishingly elegant yet powerful package. Always engaging, Glazunov's huge catalog of work will keep you entertained for quite a while. And then think of what came after, Borodin, Shostakovich, Prokofiev, and Stravinsky . . .

DAN'S PICKS: The multi-movement style employed in Glazunov's "Violin Concerto" blows my mind not to mention the cadenza's double-stopping technique that gives even the finest fiddle player a run for their money. For performance, I like David Oistrakh, but the recordings are marginal at best and of course – mono. But you can get very worthy performances from people like **Nikolaj Znaider**, recorded on RCA Victor Red Seal, Cat. #87454 with Mariss Jansons and the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra. With the Warner Classics Cat. # 61434, you get excellent recordings of both **Symphony #5** and **The Seasons**, opus 67, with Jose Serebriar at the helm accompanied by the Royal Scottish National Orchestra. And the deal of the century is the Naxos release, Cat. #8557063, with Glazunov's **Saxophone Concerto**, featuring Theodor Kerkezos on alto sax with Martyn Brabbins and the Philharmonic. There is other fine saxophone music on this disc from the likes of Debussy, Milhaud, Villa-Lobos and contemporary Ekaterini Karamessini.

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EDVARD GRIEG: From Russia, we spring over to Norway and Edvard Grieg who single-handedly put Norway on the classical map forever! Again we have this concept of blending or weaving folk music into elaborate symphonic works. In this case, Grieg manages to create some of most lyrical symphonic music ever written! Where would we be right now without Grieg's **Peer Gynt**? This incidental music to Henrik Ibsen's play is nothing short of a masterpiece of song, atmosphere and melody. Grieg's technique is unmistakable, largely German Romantic with a Norwegian twist. His *Piano Concerto In A Minor*, opus 16, is always a show stopper. And the *Lyric Pieces for Piano* are some of my finest childhood musical memories. Norwegian folk music is what was bred into the soul of Edvard Grieg. Even as he studied in Copenhagen he never lost sight of his homeland melodies. This folk music is the source of *In the Hall of the Mountain King* as well as in some of his other popular work like the *Holberg Suite*. And to show you Grieg's resiliency or timelessness, his music is constantly used in commercials, cartoons, by rock bands and in theme parks. Much like Sibelius did for Finland, Grieg set the tone for Norway to enter the modern world and what a beautiful tone it is! *(continued)*

DAN'S PICKS: Let's start with the **Piano Concerto In A Minor**; again I go to Radu Lupu with Andre Previn and the LSO, Cat. #466383. Incredible tonality and energy this one tops the list for me! For a great assortment of the **Peer Gynt** material try this two CD set featuring an all star line up which includes my Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and conductors Herbert Blomstedt and Paavo Berglund, EMI Cat. 86058. This set also contains a great variety of Grieg's beautiful songs for baritone and piano. And if you really want to go Grieg-crazy, pick up **Neeme Jarvi's** 6 disc set on DG, Cat. #771300.



GEORG FREDRICH HANDEL I will end our musical sojourn for now with an icon, a superstar in the world of classical music. No matter what your religion or faith Handel's music will take you up into the stratosphere with the angels and the spirits and quite possibly your God! Remember, religion is one of the primary reasons that classical music was historically recorded, performed and thus evolved into what we have today. This is the music of the Baroque period and along with J. S. Bach, Handel paved the way to the future with his elegance, majesty and power. Handel wrote for royalty with his "Water Music". It seems that King George I liked these three suites so much that he ordered the musicians to continue playing through the night as their barge floated down the River Thames.

The Royal Fireworks Music says it all. Handel spent a great deal of his adult life in England where he was treated like a celebrity, almost unheard of for a musician/composer at the time. **Fireworks Music** was commissioned by another George, this being King

George II, to celebrate the end of the War of the Austrian Succession. A prolific composer, Handel composed over 50 operas, and about half as many oratorios that include the famous *Hallelujah*. These operas and oratorios deal with fairly heavy topics: the creation of the world, the life of Jesus Christ, a variety of stories from the King James Bible as well as stories about Greek and Roman mythology. Whether they are religious or secular, no one can deny the power and grace that Handel employs to bring these stories to musical life. And at this time of year when almost all religions celebrate some form of spirituality and well being, Handel's music makes the world a better place to be!

DAN'S PICKS: Go for the ultimate, **The Ultimate Baroque** that is on DG, Cat. #000248002. This disc has a little bit of everyone baroque from Bach to Vivaldi, and the performances are stellar. For the **Messiah** try the Naxos release, Cat. 8570131, with Edward Higginbottom and the Academy of Ancient *(continued)*

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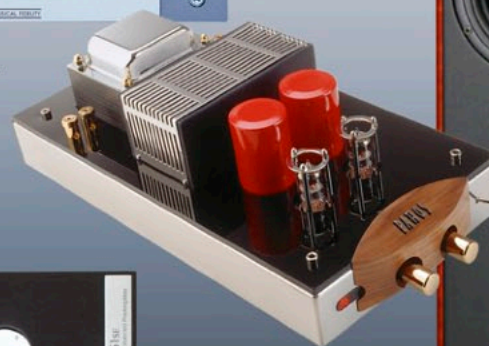
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Music with the Oxford New College Choir. Not a lot of names to drop here, just an amazing performance across the board. For the **Fireworks Music** I like Trevor Pinnock and the English Concert: Archiv Cat. #447279. And for the **Water Music** you cannot beat Sir Alexander Gibson on Chandos Cat. #6642. Go ahead and sneak in a holiday CD, like Andy Davis' **The Best of the Season – Happy Holidays** on Direct Source, Cat. #3508. It's good clean fun no matter what your religious standing. There are so many wonderful recordings of Handel's music that I'm not sure you could digest them all in your lifetime. Handel set the stage for the next era - the Classical era. With very complex arrangement and precise structure that seem to just flow naturally Handel's music is like a gift from God.

Thanks again for reading this year, I am looking forward to having a lot more fun with you in 2007, Happy holidays! ●

TOM PETTY Highway Companion



I had just returned home from Los Angeles the day before, all ready to take a week off in the middle of a very pleasant summer and paint my house. No worries about sound-staging or interconnects for me for a whole week. I was just going to plug my iPod into the garage stereo and put it on random.

That's when I got the call.

“Jeff, it's Steve. If you can get back down here on Monday, you can sit in on the final session of the Tom Petty album; the mix that's going to vinyl...”

So, what would YOU do? Paint the house or listen to Steve Hoffman master Tom Petty's new album? *(continued)*



Kevin Gray, Steve Hoffman and Ryan Ulate in the studio.

I thought so. With a bit of residual tired car ass from the week before, art director Jean and I blasted down the I-5 to California again. Ironically enough, the CD was released that day and we picked up a copy to listen to in the car on the way, but we left it on the kitchen table.

Good thing.

By now if you are a Tom Petty fan, you know what a disappointment this disc is; the levels are pushed all the way up past 11 and there is not much dynamic range to speak of. Don't blame it on recording engineer Ryan Ulate; he did a great job on the recording. But fear not, Steve Hoffman and Kevin Gray did even better than their usual great job on this one.

I just got my hands on an advance pressing in time to get our loyal readers a review and it's just as good as what I heard in the control room. It was really a treat to hear this album for the first time right off the master tape in the control room at RTI! It was also very interesting to watch these three guys, all masters of their craft, transfer the info from the master tape onto the final reference lacquers. **I used my best Jedi tricks to try and get those refs away from Ryan, but it wouldn't work....**

The mood was pretty light as these guys worked through the day and Ryan came off as being an engineer that was very concerned about how this project would turn out for the vinyl buying public. He was also good for a few good stories about working with Tom Petty and the Traveling Wilburys, George Harrison in particular.

Once the work was done, we all said our good-byes; Ryan grabbed those big reels of tape and drove off into the sunset. Another masterpiece complete. *(continued)*





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If you are as big of a Tom Petty fan as I am, you will probably love this record. Produced by Jeff Lynne, it is the least “Jeff Lynne sounding” record I’ve yet heard. I can only guess that he really gave TP a lot of room to roam musically on this one. Ryan told us that Jeff Lynne had so much fun playing one of TP’s vintage bass guitars on this record; he kept trying to talk him out of it, to no avail. I understand that pain all too well.

Rolling Stone mentioned that Tom Petty has never made a bad album and I would have to concur with that. I would say my only nit to pick is that the album starts out pretty up-tempo and gets pretty mellow towards the end. I’d probably have mixed it up a bit more, but hey, TP doesn’t tell me how to run TONE, and I’ll just leave him to his job as well. There are a lot of great songs on this record, and the sound quality of the LP is really wonderful.

Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers are out on tour right now celebrating their 30th anniversary as bandmates. I am always amazed to see someone like this still making quality music after all this time. The other thing I have always been impressed with is seeing this band live; they always put on an incredibly good show and they always look like they are having a great time doing it.

Yes, those of you lucky to get your hands on the LP version of this collection are going to be very happy indeed. Steve has definitely given this one his signature “Breath of Life”, so leave that CD in your glove box and pick this one up! ●

Fresh Holiday Friends

— Nicole Wilson

Winter brings around some of the most festive times and some of the moodiest moments for me. The older I get the more I appreciate my family because it has become difficult to make friendly connections in such a busy world. My social anxiety doesn't help either but we can discuss that another day. When I need instant friendship I run down to the record store, push through the crowds, grab an armful of music and hurry home. Ripping off the wrapping and playing the first song is like a handshake with a person you've never met. Each song acquaints you with a person's humor and talent; you hear about places they've lived and people they've dated. You hear touching stories about growing and hurting. Let me introduce you to the artists I met in the past month.



The best friend out of the pack would be Lupe Fiasco and his **Food and Liquor**. This man has the gift of storytelling and uses his talent to open up his heart and show you his perspective. The diversity in his stories make for great treasures in the album; *Kick Push* tells the story of a boy who loves to skateboard to get away from his home life and even though the circumstances sound negative the song is quite inspiring. He addresses his discomfort with certain aspects of hip-hop in *Hurts Me So* and *Daydreamin'* which Jill Scott lends her angelic voice to as well. He strings together a montage of difficult images giving you the big picture in a way that leads you to your own emotions. *The Cool* is a story where a man wakes up in his coffin and decides to go for a walk. Lupe raps about the items in the coffin and how the man got out of the dirt and made it to the train. It is really refreshing to get imagination out of a hip-hop album instead of a list of complaints about mainstream rap. Jay-Z co-produced the album and though he's not my favorite this album is so unusual compared to anything out there right now that I have to respect him for producing it.

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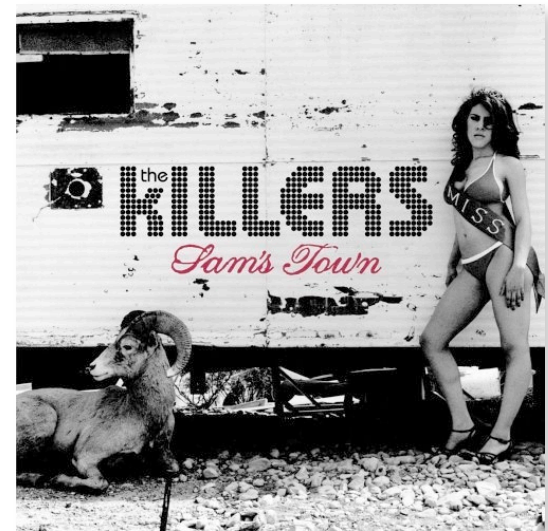
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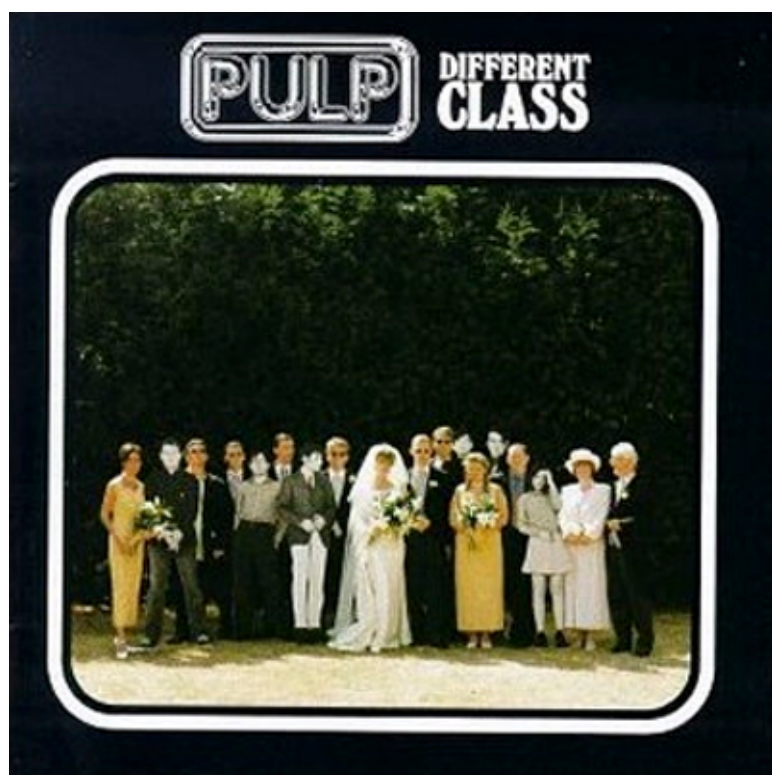
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Listening to the Killers' second album **Sam's Town** is like going with your best friends to see a great concert downtown. They brought all the energy from their first album and just built on the initial momentum; after listening to this album I kind of want to listen to **Born to Run** by the Boss. What do you think? It was recorded in Las Vegas and I bet this would be a great album to listen to while driving down the strip. Everyone wants to talk about *Uncle Johnny*, which is the tale of the cocaine-snorting uncle but I want to talk about the song *When You Were Young*. They hit the head of the nail with this song because girls are usually looking for gentleman after they've dated too many idiots. *Read My Mind* is a very engaging song about making steamy romantic connections. The sound still has the synthesizers reminiscent of the eighties yet much more stable and sophisticated. A definite score for a sophomore album. At your next party this album should get things going nicely.



Sometimes you don't want a friend; you want an adventure you are forbidden to go on. **When a good girl goes bad, she buys Pulp.** It feels sinful sliding it into my CD player but I can't help myself sometimes. **Different Class** from 1996 is a fantastic album because it is full of energy and boy/girl drama. The most popular song *Common People* is about a rich spoiled girl that he meets at the bar; she wants to do whatever common people do and so he takes her on a common adventure in hopes (of course) to sleep with her. *I Spy* is a song about the scheming "have nots" trying to get back at the "haves". Some lyrics are pretty disturbing in their suggestion yet some are hysterical. The music itself is dynamic and each song has unique qualities either by lyric content or beat. Being acquainted with Pulp is like a friend that you stay close with because they know your secrets and so you involve them in on your adventures. I play Pulp only in the privacy of my home or the privacy of a really seedy dive bar where no one expects to see you. They are deviant British hipsters that could be friends with the Killers but the Killers couldn't hack it with a hardcore group like Pulp.

John Legend has talent and class. This album is best served with great food, wine and candlelight due to Legend's passion for being in and out of love. **Once Again** has the grooves and smooth lyrics while remaining classical and gentlemanly. He even makes you want to dance in your living room, but not so much by yourself. I've never been enthusiastic about neo-soul music but John Legend is incredibly easy to listen to with a distinct melodic voice blended with gentle piano compositions. Men that can play the piano well always get my attention and I'd say this man has a good dose of soul. *Another Again*, which was co-written with Kanye West, tells the gripping tale of the women he just couldn't quit. The love and pain is so rich it is reminiscent of a song off Lauryn Hill's **Miseducation of Lauryn Hill**, reminding everyone of the consequences of loving someone you shouldn't.

Heaven and *Stereo* have a good bounce to them and the whole album plays through without a hitch.

While the lyrics of this record are personal and at times intimate (definitely track 6), I think putting this in the disc changer with some cheesy Frank Sinatra Christmas songs would be a big party hit.

Ed. Note: Though groovy sounding, this guy gets awfully close to ripping off a number of famous grooves on this record. George Harrison got sued for way less than this!



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CONTINUUM
MUSIC BY JOHN MAYER



John Mayer could be your brother or a classmate that you know is going places in the world.

He is confident without ego and it shines through his album **Continuum**. The album starts off strong with *Waiting on the World to Change*. Even a quick listen of *The Heart of Life* and (if you didn't already know) it's obvious this boy can really play guitar. He says "Down to the wire/I wanted water but I'll walk through the fire/If this is what it takes to take me even higher/Then I'll come through like I do/When the world keeps testing me" shows his optimism about the future and roads previously traveled. He does a tremendous job covering Jimi Hendrix's *Bold as Love*; it's a perfect fit. There is definitely a level of soul that I didn't pick up on his first few albums. Listening to his music makes you feel like you are in the same room talking about life while he strums his guitar.

Are you turning your back on good buddy Kurt Cobain by listening to The Polyphonic Spree? I distinctly remember when a radio station in Seattle received many angry callers one September night when they aired their version of *Lithium*. As I heard the callers rage, I couldn't help but wonder what all the fuss was about; PS took the already drug induced lyrics and added their own psychotic tones to the mix. I thought it was pretty intriguing actually, and I'm a big Nirvana fan. I tend to get upset with covers when I hear the cover first without knowing the source. All of you forty-somethings can laugh, but I was devastated when I found out that Patti Smith didn't write Gloria...

The angry mob on the phone could not really elaborate why they despised this version of *Lithium*, but they were distraught to the point of profanity. Now I understand why your generation gets pissed listening to dreadful covers of Beatles songs; it is a truly emotional thing that cuts right to the bone.

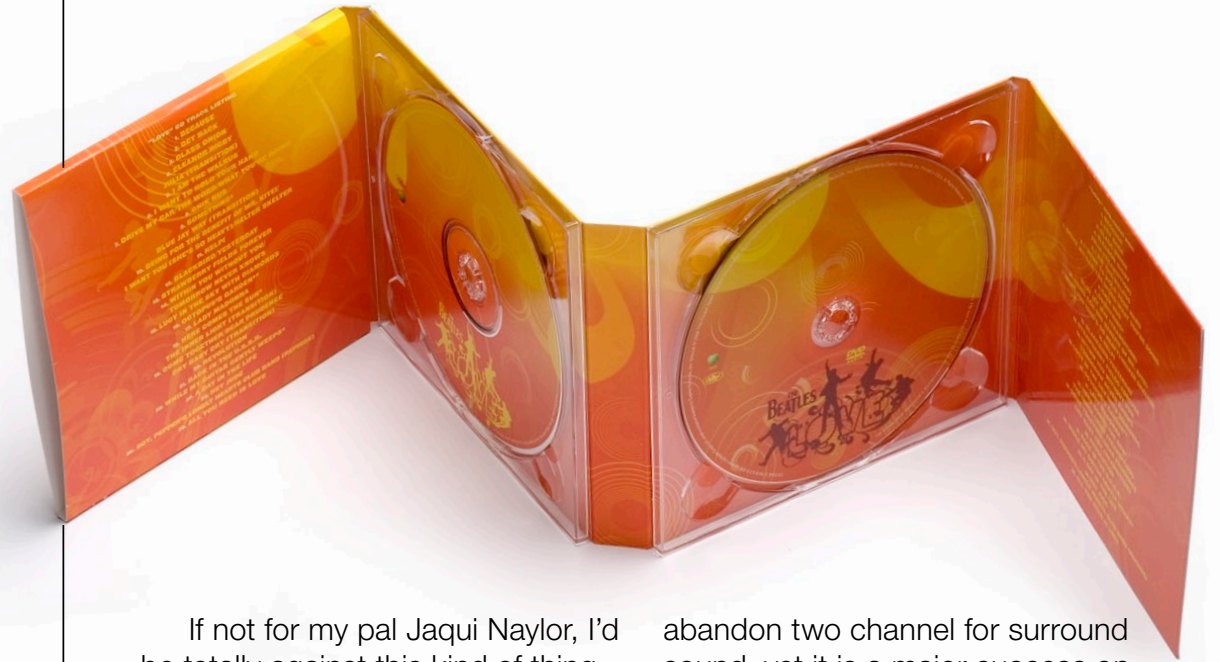
Perhaps my generation still clings to the time when grunge was cool and Nirvana was ruling the kingdom with Pearl Jam and Soundgarden, but we can often be a tough audience. Tori Amos covered Nirvana's *Smells Like Teen Spirit* and was applauded but peppy Polyphonic Spree was shot down that September night on the air. I suggest that you pick up **Wait** by The Polyphonic Spree and figure out what all the rage is about. Out of 5 songs total, there are two songs off their forthcoming album **The Fragile Army** and a cool cover of the Psychedelic Furs *Love My Way*. Think Partridge Family or Brady Bunch.



These friends don't need presents or Christmas cards from you and that is something to think about with a tight budget. Welcome these abums into your collection this season and you can be the life of the party, even if the party is just you and the dog. ●

THE BEATLES Love

Let's take arguably the most popular songs in the modern world that have a maniacal following and remix them up in a smash format with tidbits from the various original recording sessions and re-release it to just about coincide with Sir George Martin's induction into the UK Music Hall of Fame and you have the Beatles **Love**. Though you might have thought all of this to just be the music marketing machine, George Martin and his son were working of this for a couple of years as a soundtrack for the current Cirque de Soleil production of the same name, that premiered this June.



If not for my pal Jaqui Naylor, I'd be totally against this kind of thing, but she's gotten me to lighten up on the whole "smash" format. And think about this for a second; if you just happen to be Sir George's son Giles, how cool of a project is this to work on with your Dad? Beats the hell out of arguing about building a chopper, I say.

While I fear Beatles purists might freak out about this rendition of their favorites, I suggest an open mind. It was very tastefully done and it sounds great. Even at 80, my favorite Martin still has a great set of ears! If there was ever an excuse to get a 5.1 system, this is it! You can purchase it on regular CD or multi format DVD, though there are no video tracks on the DVD. I suggest the DVD if you have a multichannel player. Besides, for a couple bucks more, you get a CD and a DVD, which features a high resolution 2-channel mix as well as the 5.1.

This disc violates my two biggest hifi commandments: Thou shalt not screw with the Beatles in any way and Thou shalt not

abandon two channel for surround sound, yet it is a major success on all levels. Hmm, maybe if they did this with Pet Sounds....

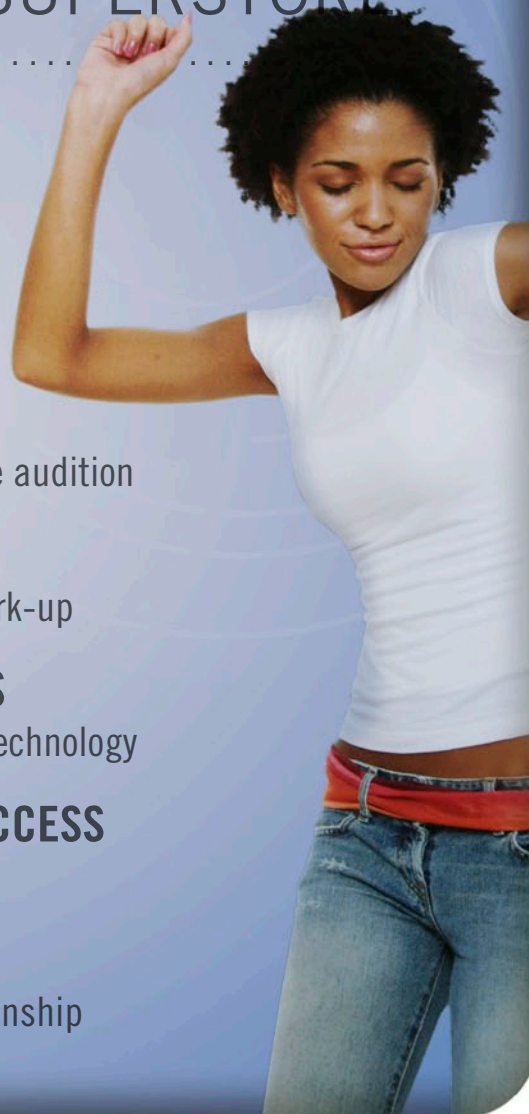
Spending a fair time with both, I still prefer the stereo mix, but the DVD will be a hit at parties. The more time I spent listening to this record, it really is a lot of fun to listen to, if you can just let go of your inner purist Beatle fan. Oddly enough, only a week before buying Love, I had the opportunity to listen to quite a few original, first run MONO pressings of my favorite Beatles albums at Steve Hoffman's house, so I had a firm reference in my mind when I sat down to listen to **Love** seriously.

Interestingly enough, some of the songs are not affected all that much, while some are really rearranged. Often there are bits from songs that were never used in the original tracks, so it's like uncovering some more Beatles treasures. Again, I think this collection was very tastefully done and was a blast to listen to. It's a very nice mix of popular and obscure songs that still sounds fresh today. *(continued)*

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Giles Martin said it best in the liner notes: “All the music was so well recorded by the EMI engineers that the attitude and the passion were frozen in time. Had the music not been so familiar, the tapes sounded like they’d been recorded yesterday.”

If you are still apprehensive about this concept, just go the www.thebeatles.com and they will let you listen to the whole album once in exchange for your email and putting a spot on a Google map letting them know where you are. Granted, it’s only MP3 quality, but it will give you a good idea of what this is all about. I wish you could buy all recorded media like this! I know I would not have taken a \$20 chance on this one otherwise.

If you are a rabid Beatles fan, check out the six and a half minute promo/interview video with the major players involved, I think you will enjoy it.

Honestly, I put this disc in really wanting to hate it, but I came away with a new appreciation for one of the best bands in history.

If you are a big fan like me, I’m sure you often ponder just which Beatles album to put on the turntable some days. **Love** is a great disc for when you are in that “I’d really like a random dose of the Beatles today.”

But I warn you, the more you listen, the more it will pull you in.

It never ceases to amaze me at just how good this music still is, even after 40 years! ●

The Torturous Sophomore Slump

— By Joe Golfen

It's a hit and you're a star. You go on TV. You meet David Bowie. All of the countless hours of work and energy you put into making a great album have finally paid off.

Now we're going to need another one by the end of the year.

This is how sophomore slumps are born. A band manages to rise above their peers and break through the seemingly impregnable skin of the mainstream, only to have a year and a half worth of touring and festivals to play. To make matters worse they are constantly hounded by the knowledge that they need to put out a new album before the first one runs out of steam. It's a tough job and the results are varied. Writing an album on the road can be a new experience for a band. While touring improves most bands' chemistry and technical ability, it isn't always the best place to glean inspiration.

This sudden rush of stardom can prove problematic to even the most established bands, especially ones that have been operating under the radar for many years and are suddenly thrust into the limelight.

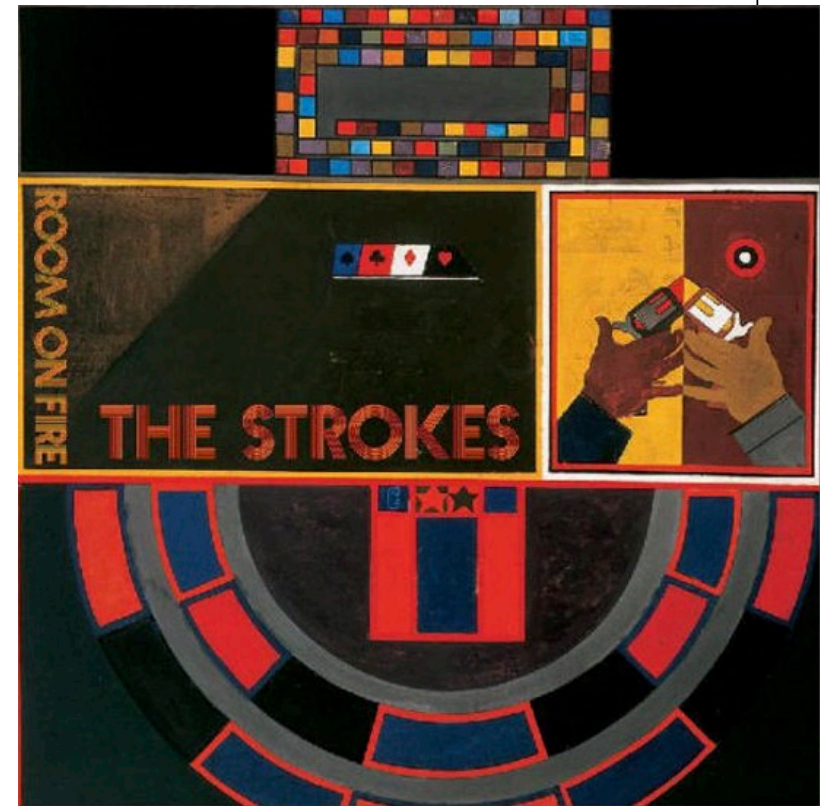
The music world is a fickle place; many bands struggle with a follow-up album knowing that what was hot on the first album might just be passé the next time around.

Musicians, like any other artists, need to evolve with time. Often feeling a sense of urgency that the world will pass them by if they stand still, many bands will make a deliberate effort to change their sound the second time around. Sure, there are plenty of bands that decide the best route for them to take would be to stay the course, which can please the radio but usually bores critics and eventually their fans. (Like Chicago, for example.)

To avoid being labeled a one-trick pony, I've identified the four most common options for a band to take on their second album. Most either take advantage of a bigger studio budget and clean up their sound or beef it up. Others use the freedom of fame to experiment with new sounds, while others strip their sound back to the core. No matter which direction a band decides to go, they have to make sure it doesn't betray the band's true nature and that whatever they do, they have to back it up with some great songs.

CLEANED UP: In 2001, The Strokes brought the raw, garage rock sound that was already rumbling in Detroit and New York into the mainstream consciousness with their debut album, **Is This It**. With a cool look and an even cooler sound, Julian Casablanca and his band of hard drinking, hard talking New Yorkers revamped the music world's interest in buzzing guitars, Lou Reed-style vocals and skinny, dirty jeans. But by the time their sophomore release, **Room On Fire** hit the shelves, pithy music fans began decrying them as one-hit wonders.

(continued)



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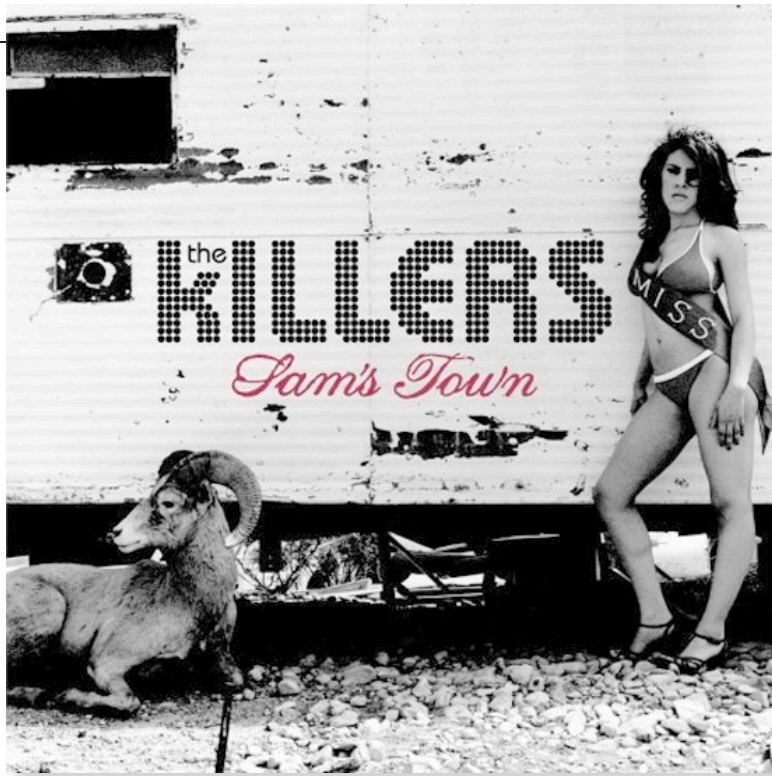
"A reference
for just how good
an inexpensive
cable can be."

-Dave Clark
Positive Feedback

Most of the bad press was coming from the most pretentious corners of the music world, people who troll the internet for the latest bands with nonsense names to rave about, and who do indeed, wear very dirty, skinny jeans.

Those who claimed **Room on Fire** and **Is This It** to be basically the same album must not have been listening very carefully. After an unsuccessful attempt to record with Nigel Godrich, the famed producer who helped take Radiohead and Beck into the stratosphere, The Strokes returned to Gordon Raphael, who had played an instrumental role in shaping the band's basement sound. Despite the same lineup, **Room on Fire** showed an obvious progression in the band's sound. For proof, look no further than the second track, *Reptilia*, one of the finest songs in the band's catalogue. This track features a sound that is brighter, heavier and far more complex than anything found on **Is This It**. This richer, yet more intimate sound shines through on *The End has No End* and *12:51*, the former showcasing Casablanca's expanded songwriting ability and the latter sporting a GREAT frolicking synthesized guitar riff. All this would have been way too bright for the washed out sound of their debut album, but **a little polish proved the effectiveness of this approach, with the tunes to back it up.**

But The Strokes found out the hard way that if people don't listen closely enough, it can really bite you in the ass.



GO MASSIVE: The Killers were the biggest band to come out of the synth-rock sound that emerged a few years ago. Hot on the tails of Franz Ferdinand's surprise new wave stardom, The Killers wandered out of the Las Vegas desert and became superstars. The quintets' debut album, **Hot Fuss**, went multi-platinum in both the US and Europe, winning over fans world wide with their danceable tunes and glamorous image.

Lead singer Brendan Flowers voiced his concern many times about the prospect of making a follow-up to **Hot Fuss**, saying that he didn't want to make any more songs like *Somebody Told Me*, for fear of being labeled a fad. So Flowers, much like John Cusack's character in *High Fidelity*, did what many music fans do when they're in trouble; he turned to the Boss.

Bruce Springsteen's flair for grandiose tales about failure and desperation is clear on the Killer's second release **Sam's Town**. U2's resident power producers Alan Moulder and Flood cause a stampede of churning guitars and pounding drums on this album, with a new makeup-free Flowers holding the reigns. *When You Where Young*, owns as

much to *Thunder Road* as it does to any New Order track, and while this testosterone-injected sound was a risky move for the young band, The Killers proved they had the skill to pull it off.

This album works so well because although a dusty, beefy album may seem like a strange step for a band of previously dapper Anglophiles, **Sam's Town** is really The Killer's going home. From the drum roll of the opening track, to cheesy brass section on "Bones," to sweeping grandeur of "This River is Wild," everything about this album screams Las Vegas. Just like the city of their youth, The Killers have created a place where beneath all the glitz and excitement, there is chaos and ruin. Flowers' lyrics follow desperate characters through drug binges, meaningless sex and other depths of depravity.

But like a ringleader at a freak show, Flowers shouts out the flaws of every character, including himself, while his band makes him sound like the king of it all. Born in the USA indeed.

GET WEIRD: When acclaimed photographer Sam Jones began documenting Wilco for his film "I Am Trying To Break Your Heart," it's unlikely that he had any idea that he was capturing a record of a changing band. Although Wilco had made a strong name for themselves in the alternative country world, both as a brilliant band and because lead singer Jeff Tweedy's previous band Uncle Tupelo was at the forefront during the creation of the genre. But the album Wilco was working on during the filming of the documentary, **Yankee Hotel Foxtrot**, was a far cry from the twangy tunes the

band usually made and it would help launch Wilco back into the indie rock spotlight, reaching a new generation of fans.

This highly experimental album mixes minimalistic instrumentation with strong, lonely melodies, and Tweedy at his raspy best. Most of the album has a feeling of flowing water to it, sweeping along with various instruments rising and fading as Tweedy's voice drifts along between them. **Yankee Hotel Foxtrot** is a truly unique and beautiful album by a band deserving of such praise.

There were two main focuses of the film. The first was the rift between Wilco and their record label Warner Brothers, who felt the album was "difficult" and refused to release it. The other showed the inner tension in the band, which finally resulted in the firing of Jay Bennett, the loudmouthed multi-instrumentalist who played an important role in the creation of *Foxtrot*. While this seems like a good move to anyone who watched the film, given Bennett's rants and freak outs, he may have been a more crucial member of the band than many previously believed. *(continued)*

Wilco = a ghost is born

HAGERMAN



Hagerman (hae-gehr-mun): innovator, prone to illogic and creativity, ingenuity; rabidly independent.

Twenty-six years ago I gave up the trumpet for engineering. It was a fortunate move, as my skills in mathematics and intuitive circuit design far surpassed any lingering musical talent. Yet the experience and years of rehearsal firmly entrenched not only an appreciation for the classics and a love for the symphony, but a permanent memory of tonality and musical truth. High-end audio reproduction is a never-ending journey in search of this truth.

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Wilco followed up **Yankee Hotel Foxtrot** with their weirdest and most "difficult" album to date, **A Ghost is Born**. This album takes all of the screeching sound and clumsy guitar work that were just right on Foxtrot, and blares them over top of the entire album. While some credit the ear-spitting discordance of songs like *At Least That's What You Said*, to the band's attempt to simulate one of Tweedy's famous migraines, it's over the top with pounding weirdness.

A Ghost is Born features none of the down to earth lyrics and lonely melodies that made Foxtrot so great, instead they are replaced with songs with titles like *Hell is Chrome* and an emphasis on Tweedy's staggered awkward guitar work. Although his wild picking was endearing on Foxtrot's *I'm the Man Who Loves You*, an entire album of it proves quickly tiresome. Bennett provided more of the guitar on previous albums, and was mostly responsible for the experimentation on Foxtrot and his absence is obvious on Ghost. This album is a testament, to a desire to push the envelope of previous success.

The White Stripes, another band that had suddenly become mainstream after years of anonymity, made a similar if more successful attempt on 2005's **Get Behind Me Satan**. While this album does retain some of Jack White's crunchy guitar work, it focus more on the piano and like Wilco, pushes the limits of experimentation a little too far, straying from what made the bands great in the first place. Both bands are due for a return to form album, and **The Racconteurs** just aren't cutting it for me.

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COLUMBIA

PETE YORN

DAY I FORGOT



STRIP DOWN: By far the riskiest move a band can make after a successful debut album is to peel back the layer of production that shaped their original sound, and bring it to the barebones of what the band is capable of.

Pete Yorn, a raspy singer-songwrite from New Jersey, arrived on the music scene with his debut album **Musicforthemorningafter**. Hailed by Rolling Stone magazine as one of the best new bands of 2002, Yorn's mix of gloomy vocals, electric drums and melodies with obvious nods to bands like Joy Division and The Smiths, Yorn set himself apart from the countless others in the "guys with guitars and broken hearts" genre. Fans of the scruffy troubadour eagerly awaited the release of the rest of Yorn's "Day Trilogy," which was supposed to follow the singer on the whirlwind day of depression and painful memories. What fun.

Yorn's second album, **Day I Forgot** felt like a serious step backwards. After proclaiming his previous sound overdone and

played out, Yorn stripped his production down to a basic mix of guitar, bass and drum. Gone are the subtle, stuttering drum machines and crunchy guitar riffs, replaced with airy vocals and shadowy instruments.

While this approach might have worked, Yorn didn't have the songs to back up the light production. With the album reduced to just his basic songwriting, the songs needed to be a lot stronger to support their own weight.

Nightcrawler, Yorn's third installment in the trilogy, keeps the same whispery quality as **Day I Forgot**. The tunes are better this time around, though nothing comes close to the anything on the first album. **This is why the stripped down album can sometimes be a BAD MOVE.** When

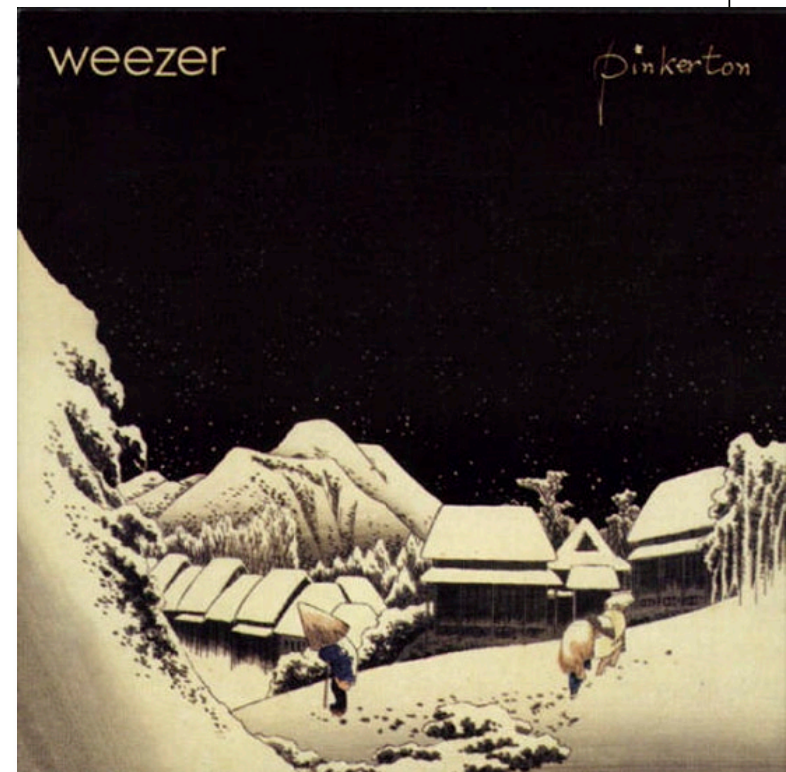
the songs aren't as strong the second time around, taking away the frills exposes what's left to be somewhat flat.

But sometimes the approach can pay off. After the success of their debut album, Weezer cast of their silly, lighthearted approach to songwriting and released an album of dark, tortured songs on **Pinkerton**. Although this album is sometimes blamed for starting the Emo genre (which the band is now embarrassed by), it captured the band at their most powerful moments.

Although they turned the distortion way up on this album, Weezer took out a lot of the shine of their debut, getting rid of the overdubbed guitars and radio friendly harmonies. Instead they took a cue from their grunge and punk forefathers, and gathered in a room to pound out an album. Weezer ditched their original super-producer Ric Ocasek, and produced the album themselves. The takes are raw, with the amps buzzing in the background, letting lead singer-songwriter Rivers Cuomo's true talent shine through.

No more funny songs about surfing and sweaters here. He injected a full dose of his off beat humour into this collection of unhappy tunes. Dark comedies like *Pink Triangle*, *Tired of Sex* and *El Scorcho* work well under the band's hard hitting sound, and truly pensive moments like *Butterfly* don't come along to often.

Pinkerton stands as Weezer's strongest album, because the minimalistic sound allows the band's true colors to shine right through. Although this album wasn't a hit commercially, it earned them a legion of fans. They would return to a more pop sound on their third album, but they avoided the sophomore slump with a vengeance, by doing nothing more than being themselves.



So remember this before you sign on the dotted line for that record contract: **Have a good second album already in the can.** That way when the royalties start pouring in, you can hand the suits the second record and go on holiday. And cut me in for 10% for giving you this great idea. ●

The Pottery Barn is not a nightclub. ‘Well, of course’, you say....and yet, they have compilation CDs available. And bar stools. The lines are blurring. Now, I’m not bagging on the Pottery Barn. Still, one has to wonder what the process might be like in putting together a CD from a retail establishment that doesn’t have a very clear connection to a music scene.

(“Wow, Ron, I’m not sure track 2 goes with those throw pillows...”)

We will NOT discuss Starbucks. Partly, because it’s a grey area and partly because I fear reprisals from the powerful Pastry/Media/Coffee cartel. Also, I think the Bank of Starbucks might actually hold the title to my house at this point.

I do, in fact, know of various organizations that predict (or control, actually) what the ‘cool colors’ are going to be for retail products – sometimes a decade into the future! I’m not making this up. You’d think in a society with such a high level of sophistication and planning, there would be some powerful (and perhaps secret) organization who’s responsibility would include deciding which retail establishments are allowed to have a CD. Maybe even to broadly regulate the contents of what those establishments are allowed to publish.

Right now, what’s to stop the ‘99 Cent Store’ from having a compilation CD? Or even Arby’s? Furthermore, what would be on those CD’s? I shudder to think.

Clearly, Something must be done.

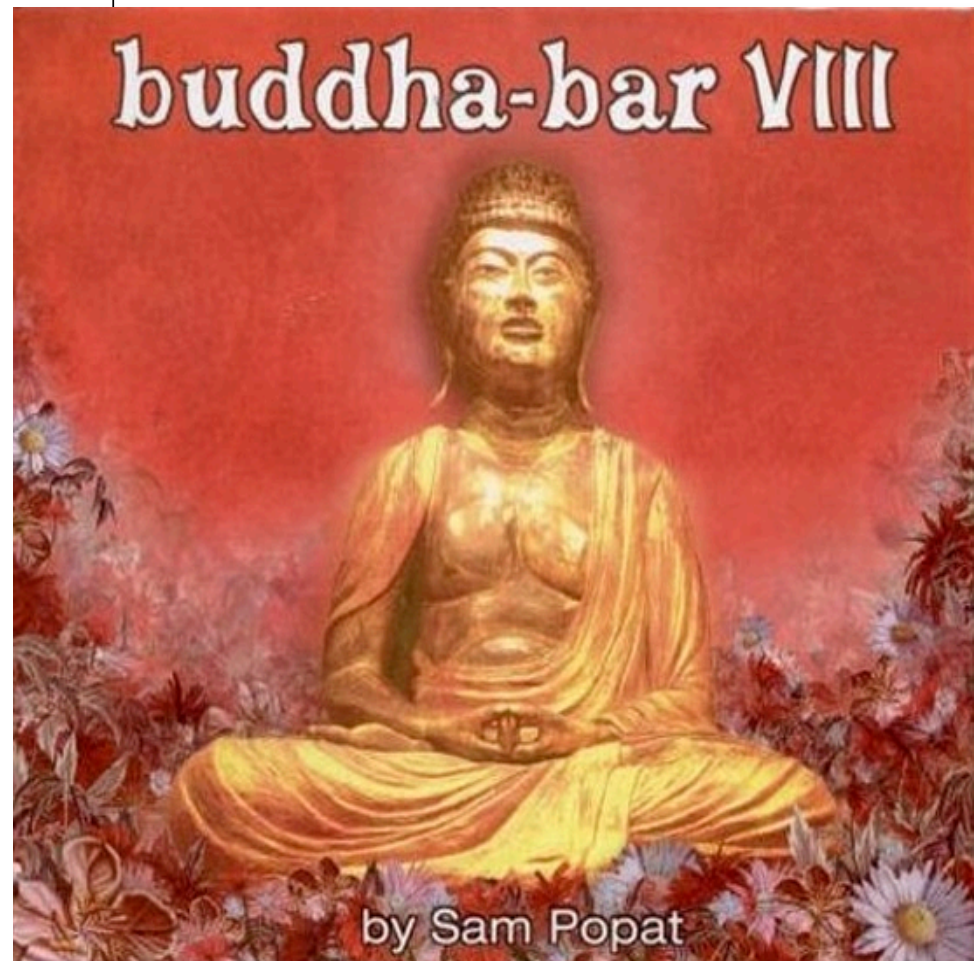
Until that time, we can take a look at some retail establishments that do have a more direct connection to the music scene; nightclubs, hotels that have nightclubs in them, and restaurants that turn into nightclubs when everyone is done having dinner.

So, this column – is a ‘two fer’. We’ll talk about a club/hotel/restaurant a little, and then the CD they put out. Sounds like fun, no?

And if you have any thoughts for my current mix project ‘Jiffy Lube: The CD’, please send them to our publisher, he knows where to find me.

Club Mix

— Scott Tetzlaff



Buddha Bar VIII by Various, presented by Sam Popat: The Buddha Bar has locations in Paris and New York (the New York location opened a few months ago). Both are beautiful, elegant spaces with giant Buddhas inside; a big plus in my book. If I’m not mistaken, they were the first for this type of east/west stylistic fusion. *(continued)*

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www.buddha-bar.com

Their choice of music is quite amazing and diverse, blended seamlessly into something even larger than it's parts. There are influences from the Far East, European opera. India, The Middle East, North Africa, and on and on... You might not love every song on the compilations, but taken as a whole, I'm sure you'll enjoy listening to the complete CDs. Currently, there are eight numbered compilation CDs and each is a bit different. However, they are all very good. If I had to pick my favorites, I would have to say the ones that were compiled by either Claude Challe or Ravin. **If you don't own any of these, and you're looking to buy one, stick with the numbered CDs (the ones with roman numerals on them) – you can't go wrong.**

On a visit to the New York location, I noticed a little area where they sell the CDs inside the entrance to the bar. I struck up a conversation with the coat check girl sitting in that area and she told me she took the job for the music. She loved the music so much, she wanted to be around it all the time. I'd say that was a pretty good testimonial for the CDs.



Hotel Costes 9 compiled by Stephane Pom-pougnac: We've talked about the 'Oh So Chic Hotel Costes' and their compilations before (Tone issue x) So, we won't spend a lot of time on this. I just wanted to put an update out there. The ninth compilation is out. And yes, it is amazing.

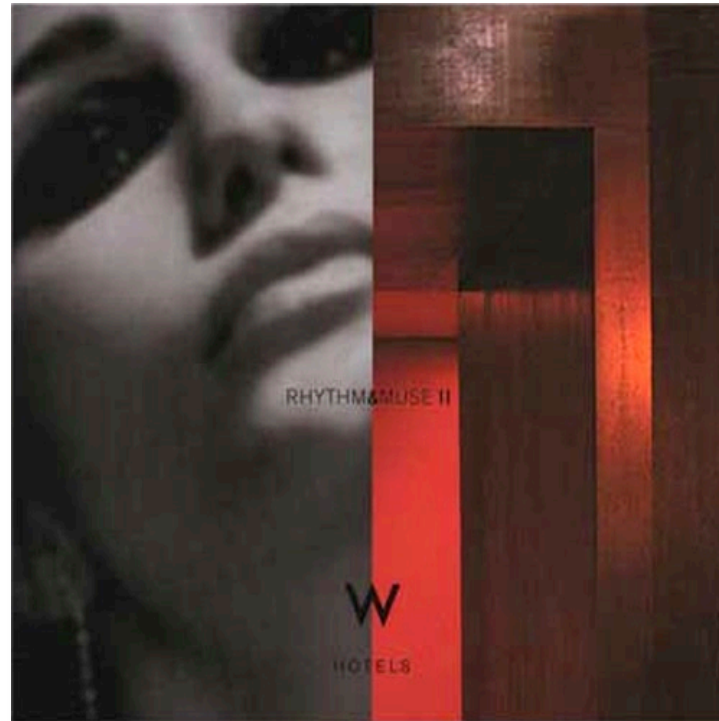
AND, SPEAKING OF HOTELS...

W Hotels **Rhythm and Muse** available from the W Hotel Store: If you haven't wandered into a 'W Hotel', you might want to give it try. As a brand, they are quietly working out a plan for world domination right now, opening hotel outposts all over the US and internationally... (explore a bit at www.whothels.com to see what they've got planned) The hotels are very comfortable and stylish. Generally, they each have a lively nightclub or bar attached to them. The sense of style spills over into the music played on premise.

As a marketing tool, they leave a compilation CD in each room that you can listen to, and purchase if you love it. I think they're up to their third or fourth CD now.

Rhythm and Muse is the second disc, and in my opinion, the best (or at least my favorite). There's a great selection and variety of lyric tunes that seem to have an almost universal appeal.

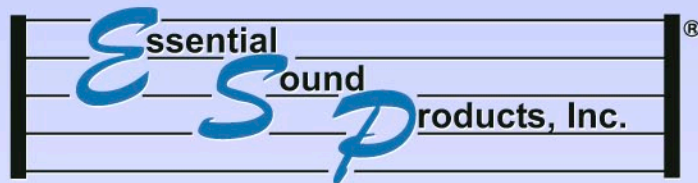
Some of them are like old friends you might have half forgotten about... tracks from Les Nubians, Soul II Soul, Beth Orton, and The Brand New Heavies to name a few. Great music for soaking in the tub!



AND YET ANOTHER HOTEL CHAIN...

The Morgan's - I'm putting the Morgan's hotel in here as an honorable mention. Partly because they have cool hotels. Partly because the 'Oxtail Spring Roll Appetizers' are really tasty at their Asia De Cuba Restaurants (even if it sounds kind of yuckie).

When it comes to music, they've done something interesting. First they had an offering similar to the afore mentioned hotels. A 'Morgan' branded CD - but mostly of 'up and coming' indie rock. They seem to have abandoned that strategy in favor of hotel soundtracks that are offered as playlists through itunes. Each hotel having a different soundtrack. Take a look at their website www.morganshotelgroup.com and pick an individual hotel. Those marketteers are pretty crafty, huh? (for extra fun, take the visual tour of the St. Martin's Lane Hotel on the website, it's sort of surreal)



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The Outernational Sound by Thievery Corporation: The Thievery Corp gets listed again because they have their own music label **www.eslmusic.com** and their own club 'The Eighteenth Street Lounge' in Washington DC (1212 18th NW). Oh, and because they make great music. The club is the premier of it's kind (and by most accounts, the one that started the whole lounge scene in DC). The club itself is low key, pretty much unmarked from the outside. Inside is big glamour chic. Imagine a party at the house of a wealthy friend with excellent taste, and you're not too far off the mark. Rumor has it the guys also had a hand in putting together the 'Dragonfly' across town. Take a peek at **www.dragonflysushi.com** Who wouldn't like a sushi bar that projects kung fu movies on the wall while you were eating?

With each outing, the duo seems to take an aspect of their music, and amplify that theme. For the Outernational Sound, they're picking up on the soul music theme a bit more than usual... plus the usual Brazilian, afro, and a dozen other influences sprinkled in, too. There's even a remix of the title track to their previous CD **The Richest Man in Babylon**. Nice touch. It pulls the two CDs together very well.

MEZZANINE DEL'ALCAZAR VOLUME 3



Mezzanine de L'Alcazar 3 by Various:
Another Bar/Restaurant combo in Paris.

The fashionable Alcazar is located on the Left Bank, in what was formerly an old industrial space. It's sparse and clean, and has a little minimalist bar for before / after dinner drinks. That little bar hosts some really great DJs and makes a good backdrop for draping yourself on the furniture with a drink in your hand.

The whole series of compilation CDs is very good with a rich selection of eclectic choices. They are all double sets, broken into two tempos (Dinner Time, and Seduction Time). There has been great care taken in mixing both instrumental and vocal tracks, making each CD a constant surprise to listen to. The fourth set of CDs (as of right now, there are four sets available) also contains a very trippy ambient video disc .. I wouldn't let that sway you either way - you'll watch it once, then put it in the rack next to your 'video fireplace' DVD.

One of my favorite tracks on the third compilation is the song *Astronaut*. It's kind of a ballad about a guy telling a girl 'if she were ever kidnapped by aliens, he would go to astronaut school and work really hard so he could rescue her'. Kind of goofy, but charming, nonetheless.

BACK TO THE CLUBS

Another cool disc from a cool club is Cielo: **Paradizo** by Various. The club Cielo is located in NYC's meat packing district. If you were an anthropologist and wanted a prime example of 'getting your groove on', this would be a good choice. It's a small, excellently lit space with a sunken dance floor. It's often chosen for launch and listen parties by record companies. The best thing about Cielo is the demographic; they are skewed a few years older, to keep the fake ID crowd out. This magically creates an environment that is both trouble free and energetic. Hats off to the management.

This CD is a booty shaking, soulful, deep house collection. It's a double CD that is broken into 'The Rhythm' and 'The Voice'. It's a party in a box. Throw these on about two hours after your house full of guests arrive. Apply lampshades to guests' heads as required.



Opium Garden Miami Beach by Various: The Opium Garden is one of the major nightclubs in Miami. It's owned by the 'The Opium Group' – check out all their venues at www.theopiumgroup.com.

The Garden is a sprawling two story Asian themed venue with multiple dance floors, a sushi bar, and a pretty incredible sound system. Populated by very pretty people from all over the world, it feels like a soundstage for an exotic movie. But it's real – well, mostly real.

This compilation CD is less dance-y than you'd think. Don't get me wrong, you could dance to it – it is a club mix, but there are a lot of Bhangra (northern India), Chinese, and other Asian cultural influences inside. The effect is an interesting combination of both high energy and relaxing musical elements.

Tantra Lounge 4 by Various: On the other coast, Tantra is an Indian restaurant/lounge in the Silverlake area of Los Angeles. There might be a few who would argue with it being called an Indian restaurant. The food is a trendy Anglo version of Indian food. If you're not a purist you will be fine eating there. The space itself is amazing, designed by a famous Hollywood set designer. It's extremely comfortable and sensuous. The crowd is eclectic. (Trust me, that's an understatement.) *(continued)*

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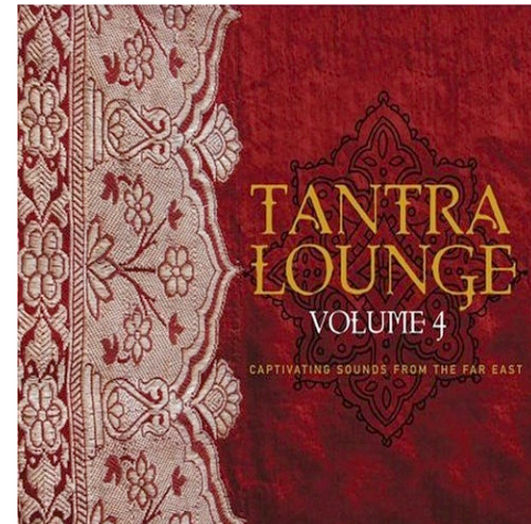
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No animals were harmed in the making of this ad.



There are multiple volumes of compilations available. They all do a fine job of staying within the 'theme' – in this case, Indian fusion type music. There are other compilations that start out 'on theme'... then start adding elements from other genres in. Not these guys. The result is a beautiful, dreamlike soundtrack.

Here's the catch though... The CDs have actually caught their stride as they've been coming out. In my opinion, if you were going to get one of these, pick either the third or fourth compilation. If you really dig what you're hearing, go back and pick up the other ones.

So there you have it readers, I've knocked myself out from this excursion. This is some of my favorite music from some of my favorite clubs all over the planet. It's gonna be nothing but Henry Mancini at my house this Christmas. ●

Slummin'

— Jeff Dorgay

It's getting close to the holidays, so I haven't had as much time to be the dumpster dog that I usually am, looking for hi-fi related goodies in all the wrong places. However, I did come up with a few fun things for you. Check these out.

NIPPER ACTION FIGURE — \$50, EBay

I debated long and hard whether to include these in this column, because fifty bucks isn't exactly garage sale pricing, but the RCA mascot is just such a great thing for all vinyl lovers to have somewhere in their midst. Keep an eye on these; they are going up, so you won't always be able to get one for \$50. I was at my favorite local record store (Music Millennium in Portland, Oregon) and they had a six-foot tall one in the window. After that, my dog felt pretty small.



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BEATLES HELP! MUG

— \$10, EBay

Whether you are a major java consumer like all of my neighbors here in the Pacific Northwest, or you just want to stuff pencils in it, no hardcore Beatles fan should be without one of these. They also had a Yes **Fragile** mug, but that was just too much after this month's exercise. Ignore the instructions and DO NOT put this one in the dishwasher.





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CHIC 45 — Free

I've been buying records from a guy in Wisconsin all year long and he threw this in the box. He said that based on my purchases, he thought I would dig this! How cool is that to have a copy of LeChic in good shape?



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