

## PREMIER ISSUE

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TONE INTERVIEWS JAZZ GREAT  
JACQUI NAYLOR

The Monogamous Audiophile:  
One Man's Continuous Speaker  
Passion

FIND A GREAT SYSTEM  
ON A BUDGET

Steve Hoffman Tells Us Why  
The EPIFANIA LINE STAGE  
Is Sweet Heaven

REBUILDING CLASSIC AMPS  
OR: An Outlet for Geek Energy

Music You Need To Discover

Amplifiers From Pacific Creek,  
Prima Luna and WAVAC



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# STAFF & CONTRIBUTORS

## 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 very 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 is currently working on 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 Cinnamon 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.

## KEITH HILL

Keith is our guest columnist this month and has defined the term "Monogamous Audiophile". Check out his story on page 10, and email him if you want a great deal on some KEF 107s.

## 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 300B's in the nice wooden boxes.

## 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.

In addition to a wealth of information, Norwood also brings his outrageous sense of humor to the TONE staff on a regular basis.

## 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.



## 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 fathers 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!

## 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 60's and 70's rock music, restores old BMW's and vintage tube amplifiers. He is the only member of the staff that does not own a TIVO.

## DAN SCHMALLE

Known to many as Doc B. at the Bottlehead Corporation, Dan is a music enthusiast that just happens to design and sell tube electronics in kit form, including a few sweet SET designs. He was kind enough to take time from his busy schedule to get us an interview with Jazz newcomer Jacqui Naylor.



# PUBLISHER'S LETTER

I can't remember the artist, but the chorus of the song was something about "the last thing the world needs now is another pop song." Maybe you feel that way about audio magazines, but we at TONE think the world does need another audio (and music) magazine.

Having been an obsessed audio hobbyist for the last 30 years of my life, I noticed at CES 2005, that there is an awful lot of gear out there that I had never heard of before. Working as a writer in the digital imaging world, I understand the limitations of a print magazine all too well. There are only so many pages to go around, and everyone on the staff has to eat. Sometimes, one has to sacrifice article length to give adequate coverage to the advertisers (so they can keep eating) and pretty soon the pages are used up. With TONE being an electronic magazine, we will not have to do this, as a PDF file can expand and contract without any sacrifice. In the end, we hope everyone will be happy.

I would like to state for the record, we ARE NOT on a quest for the ultimate sound or set up. If you want to argue about the molecular structure of cables and which \$300,000 amplifier is the best one, read TAS and Stereophile. They have been around forever and do a great job covering the stratosphere of the audio world. I still subscribe to both of them and enjoy their perspective.

That's not to say we won't cover the occasional megabucks piece of gear, but for the most part, we want to cover reasonably priced gear that lets you enjoy music. With mastering engineer Steve Hoffman joining us as somewhat of a grand pubah, he will help us stay on the path and lend two of the best ears in the audio world to our staff. As Steve is exposed to this kind of gear every day, due to his work, we are going to defer most of the really high-end reviews to him.

Deviating from the format of most audiophile publications, we want to try and expose you to a bit more music (isn't that the reason you bought all this cool hi-fi stuff in the first place?), from what's new on the horizon,



to our old favorites and great audiophile remasters. We have assembled an excellent crew of writers from the 20-something group all the way to the boomers, each with a wide range of musical interests that you will get to meet as we go.

As I started out in this hobby with a soldering iron in my hand, we will also try and discuss as much DIY stuff as we can. This issue begins a series of articles on the restoration and slight modifications of a pair of classic Dynaco Mark III amplifiers, with more to follow on various tweaks, equipment and room setup. From time to time, we will also feature some guest editorials from the designers of these products to help you get more out of your system.

But most of all, we are trying to be the fun audio and music magazine. While everyone involved has quite a bit of knowledge and passion, the main requirement to be part of this crew is a good sense of humor. The TONE staff is definitely a group of people you would want to hang out and have a few beers with, and I feel that is something that is very important.

So, sit back and relax. We hope that you enjoy our perspective.

# TONEAudio

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Not all of us need or want to spend a fortune on gear, so this column will be dedicated to equipment that is not terribly expensive yet offers exceptional value.

Now that audio reviewing is a full time job, I find that even with a great system for reference, it still doesn't do everything and sometimes it reveals a bit more than I would like. While I find this more the fault of less than awesome recordings, an entry level system is necessary to review these components in a fair context.

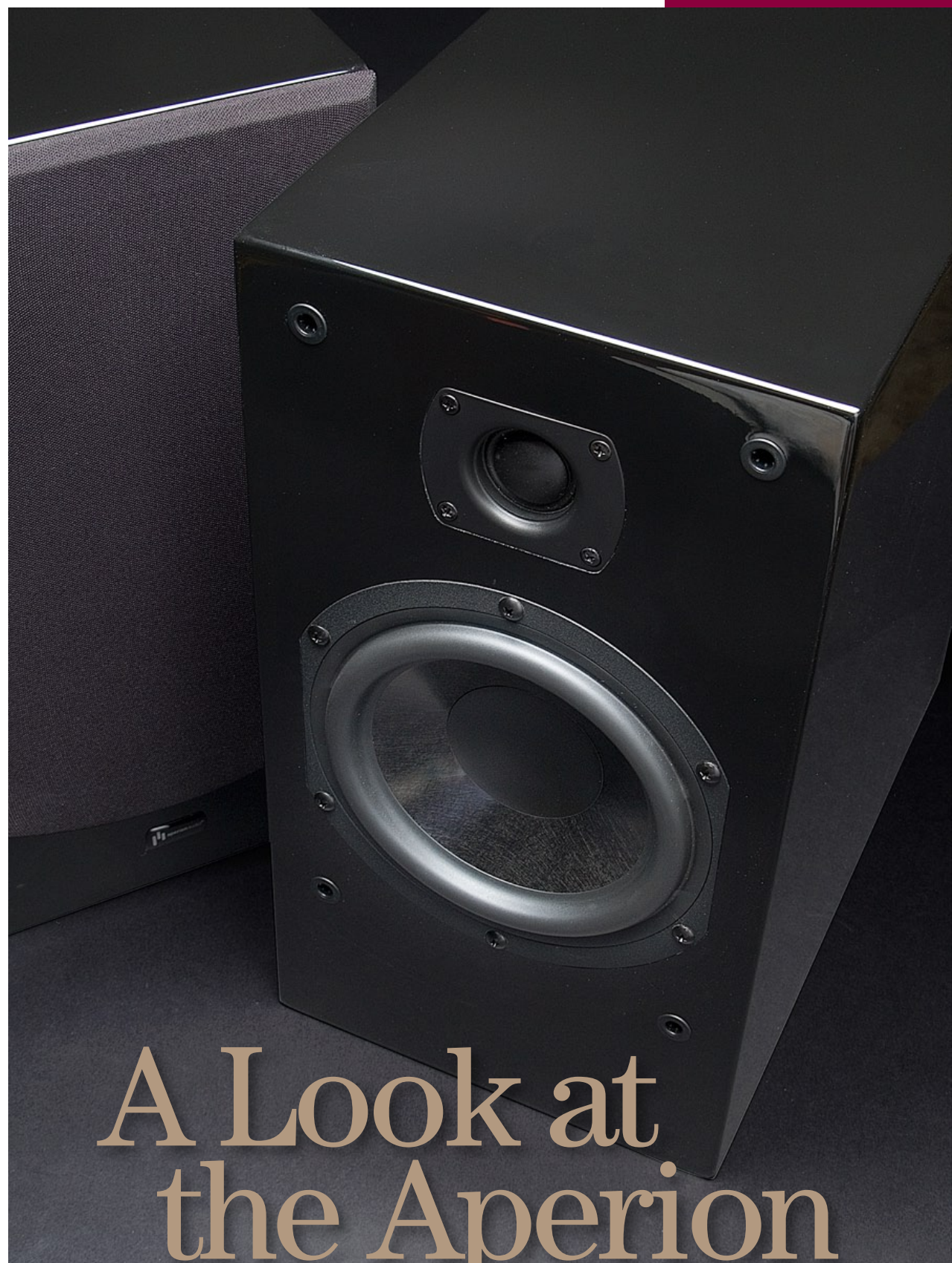
Though it is novel to hook a \$400 CD player up to a 75 thousand dollar system to see its ultimate performance, this is not a real world test of this type of gear. Richard Vandersteen said in an interview once, that it was a bigger challenge for him to make a great pair of speakers for less than a thousand dollars than a cost-no-object system.

It is always really cool to find a piece of gear that isn't very costly because it makes it that much easier to get the uninitiated to join our ranks. Many times a non-hi-fi friend or family member used to my audio excesses will be listening to my budget system and say "that's great, but I can't afford THAT kind of money for a stereo!" It's great fun to tell them that what they are listening to is well within their reach and often times can be had for less than they would have paid for junk at Best Buy or one of the other chain retailers.

I am of the mind that with a little bit of budget shopping, a musically satisfying system can be assembled for 1500 – 3000 dollars, maybe even less if you get really lucky on EBay or want to pick up a soldering iron.

**This month, we present the Aperion 632-LR speakers.**

For years, one of my favorite speakers in the under \$1000 dollar category (new) has been the



# A Look at the Aperion 632 Speakers

— Jeff Dorgay



Vandersteen 1C, but the new 632-LR from Aperion is the new class leader for me. At \$600 dollars with free shipping included, these are a great pair of small monitors that sound great, play loud and are exquisitely constructed.

Aperion Audio is located in Portland, Oregon and they do not have any dealers. All sales are done over the internet and by combining that strategy with assembly in China, they can offer a very high quality speaker at this price point. All design is done at the mothership here in the Pacific Northwest. Should you decide that the Aperion speakers are not to your liking, you can return them for full credit and they will even pay the return shipping. The speakers must be in perfect condition with all manual and packing in order to receive full credit, but John Wanderscheid, the marketing manager told me that they get very few of these back.

Rightly so, because these are great little speakers! About 15" x 8" x 13" and weighing in at 26 pounds each, they aren't exactly small in the way that an LS3/5a or ProAc Tablette is, but still small enough to easily fit on a pair of stands. My test pair came in the glossy black finish, which is very well done, or you can order them in a cherry finish. There is one set of pretty beefy binding posts on the back and they come packaged better than a lot of \$2500 dollar speakers I have unpacked. The blue velvet like bags are a nice touch, and at first I thought I had received a couple of boxes of Crown Royal, not speakers!

### What you get (and don't get)

The spec sheet lists the 632's efficiency at 86db, but because of their HD-X3 crossover design, I found that they presented a very easy load to whatever amplifier I used them with. The initial 100 hour break in was done with my trusty Pioneer SX-737 receiver that I picked up on EBay for \$27 dollars and looks like it has been in a ziplock bag since 1978. (How's that for budget hi-fi?) CD source was a Pioneer DV-563 Universal player (\$89 bucks at Best Buy's clearance section) playing through a Musical Fidelity X-10 tube buffer stage (\$100 dollars at **Echo Audio**, here in Portland) with some left over interconnects and Home Depot 12ga. extension cord. This is the best \$800 system I have ever heard and it is as good for speaker break in as it is for party time.

Once initial break in was complete, I moved the speakers to my Prima Luna Prologue Three preamp/Prologue Five power amp combination along with a



Jolida JD100 tube CD player. Interconnects were DH Labs Silver Sonic BL-1 and speaker cables were DH Labs Silver Sonic T-14, both great sounding cables that won't break the bank.

Even though I gave these speakers a lot of break in time before doing serious listening, they weren't bad right out of the box. I'd be lying if I told you they didn't sound a lot better with the Prima Luna tube gear than with the vintage Pioneer receiver, but they did sound darn good even with an old receiver. Modern electronics and cable will provide you with a speaker that is very easy to listen to and really enjoy music with.

If I had to sum up the 632-LR in one word it would be friendly. This is a pair of speakers that lack a bit of ultimate detail and resolution, but sound very musical. They do a great job with the critical midrange as well as having a smooth high end along with much better bass than you would expect at this size and price point. (Don't forget, these are only \$600 a pair!)

Having just finished the subwoofer test on the Tannoy LS10, I still had all of those discs handy, so I gave the Genesis and Mickey Hart discs a spin, with very pleasant results. The bass was fairly taut and extended down into the 40-50hz range with useable output. I got the best balance of open midrange and bass extension with the speakers about 30" from the wall on 24" stands. I have a pair of Target speaker stands that are sand filled and a pair of no name stands that are not. These speakers will reward you with more accurate bass if you do place them on more massive stands. Adding a set of three inch Fat Padz between the speaker and said heavier stand will also give you some more lower mid/upper bass clarity, but if you drop a few hundred bucks on Fat Padz, we are

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**If I had to sum up the 632-LR in one word it would be *friendly*.**



"While some companies spend a lot of money on marketing and not enough on products, Aperion is pouring its money strictly into product – and it's clear the second you listen to them."

**E-Gear Magazine**



starting to leave the budget system category. It is worthwhile knowing and a testament to their design that these inexpensive speakers will respond to a few tweaks.

The 632s are no slouch at the other ends of the spectrum either. Going through the standard Ricki Lee Jones and KD Lang discs helped to show off a very clean midrange and a soundstage that is very wide and fairly deep. Dynamic range was good, but if you really press them hard, they run out of gas a bit, but only when playing them quite a bit louder than you probably should anyway. The only thing you don't get with these speakers is the level of detail that a \$15-2500 pair of minimonitors would possess. Everything I played through the 632s was a good fit, so I wouldn't pigeonhole them as "rock" speakers or "jazz" speakers.

### THE VERDICT

Where the Aperion 632-LR really excels is at low to moderate listening levels, and they are quite detailed at low volume, which I consider a plus. While they are not the last word in resolution, the good news is that these speakers are so musical, you won't care about the little bit of detail you are missing. This is one of those magic speakers that your whole disc collection sounds good on, so you can just sit back and enjoy the music.

We are too new to hand out Editor's Choice awards, but if we were, these would win hands down. I have heard a lot of inexpensive speakers over the last 25 years, but these are the best I've run across. I can't recommend them highly enough if you are a beginning audiophile or want a second system somewhere. If you don't like them, you can get your money back, there isn't a better value than this! ☺



I have known Keith Hill for about 25 years now and we have always shared an appreciation for fast cars, Italian motorcycles and of course, hi-fi gear. One day when we were chatting and Keith was teasing me a bit about going through so much gear and said,

**“What about us monogamous audiophiles, the ones that keep gear forever?”**

This gave me great pause, because many of us in the audiophile world are viewed as maniacal creatures that change system components as often as others change undergarments. Granted, there are some of those in our ranks, but many of us have equipment that remains satisfying years after we have purchased it, whether it stays in our primary system or moves to a second system.

As I had never heard the term “monogamous audiophile” before, I hereby claim Keith Hill as the originator of the term and justifiably turn the first column over to him. Here’s his story:

## “Addiction”

The dictionary defines this as more or less the inability to wean oneself off from something that gives great pleasure. **(OK, this is more my definition).** When I think about it in regards to audio components it manifests itself in my living room in components that I know and love, yet can’t give up. I call this state of being “monogamous audio”. This happened back in 1987 after I had purchased a Conrad Johnson MV 50 amplifier and PV 1 preamplifier. After hooking these up to my then JBL floor standing speakers that hung from my ceiling with



tow chains, it was like pairing an elegant dancer with a Ted Nugent inspired pugilist. I knew I needed more.

After negotiating with my ex-wife for eons, I decided to go speaker shopping to get “a better balance” and after a few moons found an audio store in Danbury, Connecticut, that had the KEF 107s. Back then; these speakers cost \$4900, which I rationalized by not telling my ex-wife the exact truth of how much they really cost. In fact I maxed out my credit card (in my name only thank goodness) and **it took me 39 LONG payments to finally erase this investment grade debt.**

But the glorious sound when connected through the CJ equipment! I went from a hard rock aficionado to a collector of Jonathan Butler, Larry Carlton, Diane Schur, K.D. Lang, and anything else that had great guitars, vocals, pianos, etc., that accentuated the strengths of the CJ equipment. (read this as the wonderful mid range).

The KEF 107s came with a bass equalization module that at the time was pretty revolutionary. After futzing with the bass module on the 107s for months I finally realized that the CJ equipment with the EL-34 tubes were simply not going to provide the kind of bass I thought I was looking for and I didn’t care! The KEFs’ ability to play the mid range faithful to the CJ tube sound was enough for me for the next 16 YEARS.

Fast Forward to 2003. After moving to my current residence in China in 1999 and a change of lifestyle (my divorce), I decided that I needed to splurge on new audio equipment once again to soothe my soul.

The first thing I did was buy some new BAT gear. The BAT 75 SKE Amp, a BAT 51SKE pre-amp and a BAT VK5SE CD player (red book), made the KEFs sound new again, the long lost bass was there! It was love all over again, but I still needed more.

**In an act of insane impatience,** I brought home a brand new pair of KEF 207s with the new Uni-Q technology and thought to myself, this will be nirvana! The 107s have served me faithfully for so many years, the 207s must be exponentially better (just based on the number of years in between).

Somewhere along the way I didn’t get the nirvana I sought with the 207s. I tried everything I could think of in terms of set up, positioning, dampening, but nothing did the trick. At 15K, the 207s were not cheap, however, replacing the 107s sounded much better, so it was back to the drawing board. The detail of the BAT gear nagged at me, I knew there was more music to be had! My current wife calls this dementia “lusting after big boy toys, without regard for household finances.” **Naaah, I still needed better speakers.** *(continued)*





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**FEATURE**

What did I finally get to take things to the next level? A pair of Vandersteen 5As in rosewood that I have a feeling will have just as long a tenure. How I got them into China after purchasing them from **Ultra Fidelis** in Milwaukee, Wisconsin is another story for another day, but believe me it was worth the effort!

So finally, the love affair with the 107s is over. Since they have been such a big part of my life they have found a happy place in my second system, hooked up to my AirPort Express. Overkill, maybe a bit, but they are still providing me with a lot of good sound and I expect they will always be here. For now they do a great job with internet radio, especially those Green Bay Packers games broadcasted on Chinese radio! ☺

**ED. NOTE:** As Keith was in the process of moving into a new house with a bigger room for his Vandersteens, the KEFs were still in their moving cartons, so we could not get a picture.

**G**ot a piece of gear you have had forever? Send us a good digital picture (as high res as you can) and tell us your story. If we publish it, we will send you a \$100 dollar gift certificate to **Music Direct** to enjoy.

(Just for the record, yours truly still has a Rega Planar 3 that's been part of the collection for the past 23 years....)



In this column, we will take a look at significant pieces of gear from the past. Not all will be expensive, as you can see this month. I know when I saw the Art of The Motorcycle exhibit at the Guggenheim a few years ago; it was a lot of fun to reminisce about those great motorcycles of days gone by. Some of them I was fortunate enough to own, and even for those I didn't, it made for a great stroll down memory lane. Hi-fi gear is the same way, offering up a lot of great memories.

Granted, most of this gear doesn't sound as good as the modern stuff we are all use to, but a lot of it is still very musical and when firing it up still sounds surprisingly good. That's what makes them classics in the first place. As the months go by, we have a lot of these to share with you.

### THE HAFLER DH-101

Introduced in 1978, the Hafler DH-101 preamp was a giant killer. I lived across the street from a recording engineer who had a pile of early Audio Research gear and when

he listened to this little jewel that I built from a kit, he was pretty annoyed. (But a week later had purchased an assembled one for his own system...) I still have that preamp and it has been moved all over the country, taking up closet space wherever I have lived. Maybe it's because it was the first real piece of high-end gear I owned, or the fact that I built it, but I still keep it around. Maybe I'm just mental. Nope, can't be that.

According to Audiogon, the DH-101 retailed for \$450 assembled, but that really seems high to me. While my memory is fading, I could swear I paid \$179 for this one back at Audio Emporium in Milwaukee. I do remember staying up until 1 a.m. to wire it up and when finished, it not working. The following morning with a clear head, I noticed that I had a defective power supply fuse. A quick trip to Radio Shack and I was in business - a great preamp that I built myself! Back in the day, the DH-101 replaced one of those much more attractive Nakamichi 610, wedge shaped preamps. A few weeks later, there was a matching Hafler power amplifier to go with my new Magnepans, but that's another story for another day.

A very basic circuit with discrete transistors and a pretty small power supply (compared to today's gear) along with a

simple chassis, the DH-101 had some great features, and kept the tone controls out of the circuit when disabled. The rear panel featured a tape/equalizer loop with those u-shaped pins that amazingly enough are still here today. In addition to a couple of outlets there was a pretty wimpy power cord, but we didn't have boutique power cords back in 1978!

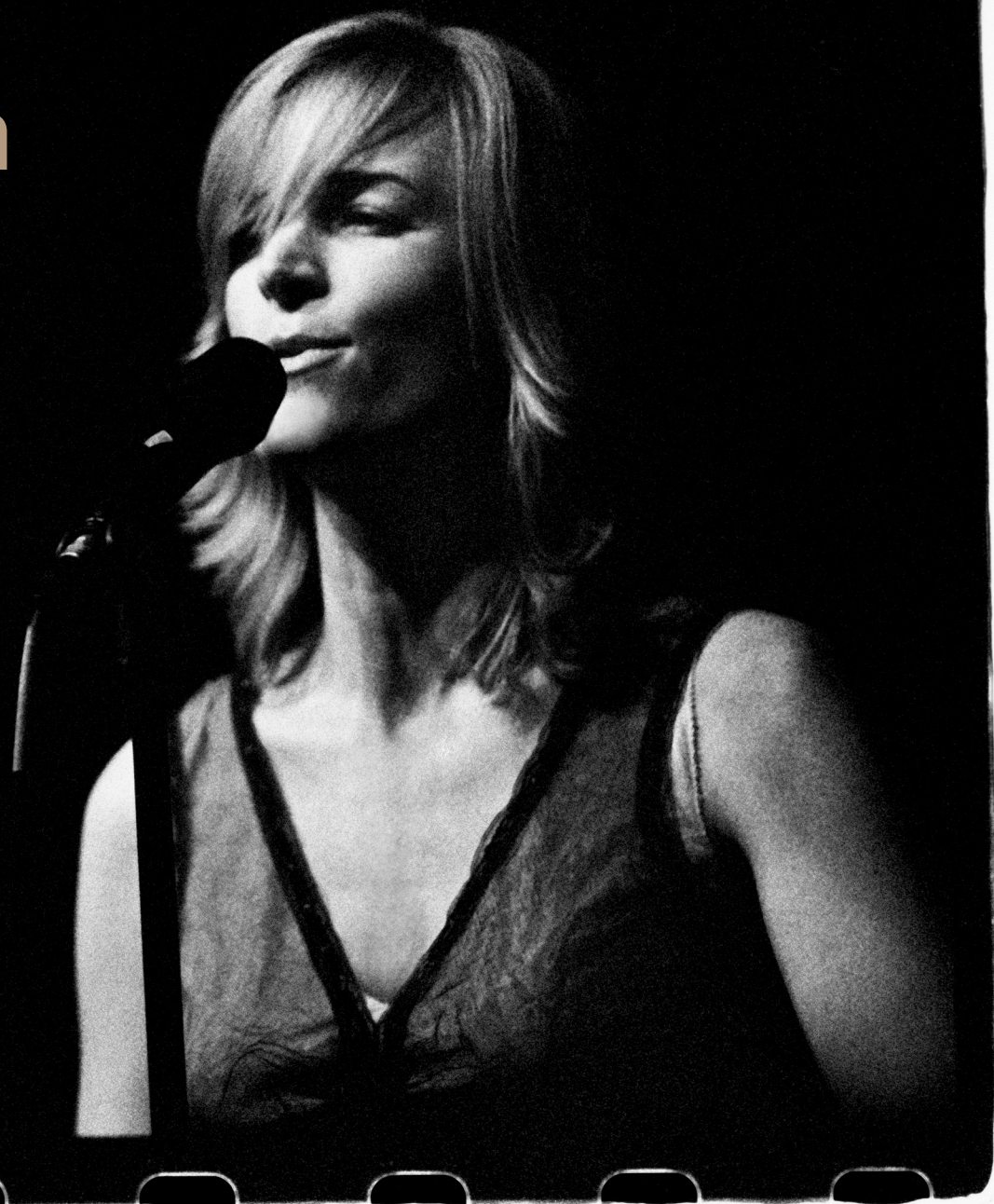
So for a year or so, this little Hafler was the cornerstone of my system until I went back to Audio Emporium and stepped up to a Conrad Johnson PV-2a and a Threshold 400A.

Just the other day, when I had all four preamps presently in TONE-Audio's office out in the photo studio, I realized I did not have a full system to listen to! There was the trusty DH-101 up on the shelf, so I plugged it into the system with a pair of Naim Arivas, Ah! Tjoeb CD player and a Monarchy SM-70 Pro power amplifier. It was good to have music again, and as it did many times before over the years, my DH-101 was the preamp of last resort when something else was in the shop. And it still sounds pretty damn good. These days, you can pick one of these up on Ebay for about 50 bucks, so you might want to pick one up just for the heck of it. 🎵



# A Conversation With JACQUI NAYLOR About “LIVE EAST/ WEST- BIRDLAND/ YOSHI’S”

— Doc B.



I have a not-so-guilty admission to make about this interview. Jacqui Naylor is a bud of mine. So when Jeff asked if I could talk Jacqui into giving an interview for this debut issue of TONE-Audio, I offered not only to ask, but to do the interview.

What's that? You just tuned in and need a little back story? Well, for starters she's fun to be around, because you get to watch guys around her running into doors and knocking things off tables. She's also hip. Her apartment over a laundromat in San Francisco's hot and happening Hayes Valley is an artistic statement of her minimalist, Buddhist

and humanitarian sensibilities. But most importantly, she's hell for smart. Smart enough to back her career as a rising jazz diva with a marketing degree and years of study with one of the Bay Area's top vocal coaches. You put all that together with a voice possessing a phenomenal tonal and harmonic range, mix in some very talented musicians and a world class recording engineer, and you have the makings of Live East/West, Jacqui's latest album - the one she considers her best work to date. But enough of my exclamations, Jacqui is quite capable of eloquent communication, and so let the interview begin...



### **Standard issue first question — how did you get started singing?**

I always loved to sing as a kid and definitely drove my sisters crazy by singing along endlessly to our player piano. I was not raised however to think that was a suitable career and so always just thought of it more as a hobby until college. I was getting my degree in marketing at SFSU but studying acting on the side at ACT. We had to do a musical and the teachers said they felt I could sing well and perhaps that might be a good focus and that I should get a show tune together. They recommended a vocal teacher (Faith Winthrop) for me and after singing a show tune for her she said “how good of an actress are you? I think you should forget the show tune and just be a singer.” I was not a very good actress. After years of studying with Faith she asked me if I would do a gig she could not take which I suspect was not the truth. I told her I did not perform in public and it was just a hobby but she really encouraged me and the rest is history. Shortly after that, I left my marketing position at my job in pursuit of a music career. I really thank Faith for her insight and encouragement.

### **What motivates you as a singer?**

Telling a story – interpreting lyrics and then channeling them through a song to the audience. That moment when you know you have brought out the emotion of a song for someone, that is incredibly motivating. Connecting with people and making a difference, even for a short amount of time is such an intense, positive feeling and being able to do that with my voice, feels like a gift, every time.

### **What makes a song great?**

What makes a song great is the ability it has to make a person look inside and go to a deeper level of emotion. We spend a lot of energy covering up our pain and forgetting, but great music makes you go to that place and feel all that you are in a new way. The melody, lyrics and musicians all support a kind of trip that we might not make on our own. Likewise if the delivery a song is truly inventive, the interpretation itself can bring a smile or chuckle inside. Great tunes make you stop, take a breath and think.

### **What songs on “Live East/West” do you think are great?**

I am really proud of the originals on the recording because I think they honestly reflect the happiness and appreciation I feel in my life. In particular, “City By The Bay”, “Thank You Baby,” and “We’ll Fly” really express this. But I also think the grittiness of tunes like “It’ll Be Fine” and “Don’t Let The Bastard Get You Down” really show that sometimes we have to struggle to become sincerely happy. I also think the “Acoustic Smashes” are pretty awesome because they are a totally new thing. I mean DJ’s are doing it with loops and samples but to actually be playing two, live, totally different tunes in their entirety at the same time, from two different genres is a blast. My favorite smashes on the recording are “Once In A Lifetime” (smashed with Weather Report’s “Birdland”) and “My Funny Valentine” (smashed with ACDC’s “Back In Black”).

### **The sonic quality of Live East/West seems very high, especially for recordings of live sessions at two different venues. Was that planned, or a happy accident?**

I’ll start by saying that the whole concept of recording “Live East/West” was not my idea. Michael Romanowski, my mastering engineer, suggested recording the Birdland show about one month before the gig. I thought he was nuts since he would have to coordinate everything from California then implement and supervise the project. Well, he is amazing and I agreed but did not give it much more thought and let him do his thing. When Art and I listened to the tracks, we were really impressed with the sonic quality of the recording, especially in an older club with older equipment. Michael had clearly done his home work, brought all the right microphones and equipment and new exactly how to place everything so we could do and sound our best. So I’d have to say....planned but not by me. The following month Michael suggested we record at Yoshi’s and make a double album called “Live East West.” I happily agreed so perhaps knowing him is the best happy accident a girl can make.

### **Define jazz**

Oh, that is a tough one! (laughing) Well, let me take a crack at it. Jazz represents a certain respect for the standards- 20’s, 30’s 40’s, Gershwin, Porter, Mercer, etc, and certainly, knowing that history, that music, has influenced me greatly. I think Jazz invites a particular approach to hearing, listening and interpreting music. This is true whether it is a standard, an original tune or an “Acoustic Smash”. I think it is one of the reasons jazz is ever changing. It’s like this universal language of interpretation among musicians and jazz lovers. I mean I could be in Japan with a musician that doesn’t speak a word of English and I can indicate a key and count one-a-two-a-1-2-3-4, and be into it. Both of us just playing the song and communicating through the music. That’s jazz.

**Are there certain musicians with whom you particularly “click”, with whom that communication is more natural and free flowing?**

*(continued)*







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Absolutely! It is a rare and beautiful thing. Of course among jazz musicians there are many players who can play very very well and can interact and improvise well also but that special something where you feel like you are working with musicians that totally get you and they are feeling that you get them. That is something and I do believe it is a gift. Working with Art Khu, my pianist, guitarist and co-writer, is a great example of that kind of synergy. In the beginning, Art was a sub for my regular pianist and it was clear from the very first tune that he was gifted at reading, comping and soloing. But the thing that got me was his ability to follow me in a way where I did not feel I was leading and lead me in a way that I did not think I was following.

## Who are your influences?

Well, of course, Sarah, Ella.... but then there are so many others: Nina Simone, Chet Baker, June Christie, Shirley Horn, Mary J. Blige, Sade, Maxwell, Astrid Gilberto. There is a certain understated coolness about all of these artists. They are not over the top in how they tell their stories and seem to rely more on being great singers who are genuine. They are wonderful interpreters.

## You have a beautiful meditation room in your home. How has your Buddhist practice inspired your music and how has your music inspired your Buddhist practice?

My life has been affected in both directions...in all that I do—I chant every morning and every evening for about an hour. It's funny;

*(continued)*

there are a lot of musicians that chant....Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, Buster Williams, Duncan Sheik, Carlos Santana, Tina Turner... maybe because it is an audible, vocal meditation. My practice has given me a sense of clarity in my life and in my music and also a sense of courage. It clears the way for me to look at my life and make the changes that I need to make everyday. I know this may sound strange, but the chanting has made me grateful for the obstacles in my life...at least now I can see them (smiles). And of course, the music has affected my Buddhist practice in that every new song, and every new adventure I have through my music brings me back stronger to the chanting. It goes something like chant-take action-chant some more. This is life. My practice encourages me to be joyful in my life.

**Do you believe that an artist has a cultural/political responsibility?**

Oh, I'm sure you know what I will say to that one!! YES. But that's not because we are artists or singers, it's because we are human. I mean, I think everyone really has a responsibility to try and make a difference no matter what they do. For me it is an obligation to myself to live my life in a consistent manner that shines through in every area of my life. Then as a singer to translate that life through my music. My activism has to do with empowering the listener with a sense of belonging and a knowing that they can make a difference in their own life and in that of others. I am involved in my community as a peace activist, AIDS educator and proponent of youth music programs. I think these are universal issues. I'm not a flower child, but I do want to live a life of integrity and bring that into everything that I do. I have a lot of respect for BONO, Patti LaBelle and other artists who really apply themselves in this way because they have a real opportunity to reach a wider audience with their message. My hope is that I bring the message to be courageous especially when life is so overwhelming and we can feel like our actions may not make a difference. They do and they can. The tune Art and I wrote called "Peace In Our Lifetime" expresses this as our greatest hope for humanity.

**What is your most important contribution?**

Encouragement and fun...always fun. We have to

laugh and smile along the way and I believe that is a contribution and a cause. Also, as an artist, I feel that I am just beginning to express who I am and what I have to contribute. As a Buddhist and human being, I believe that we all have the capacity to make a difference with our hearts and our actions. And as a businessperson, I am committed to melding the inside with the outside, bringing people's talents together to create and distribute music in a new way.

**Now there's something you don't see much these days – an artist who calls herself a business person. How do you juggle/balance the creative process with the job of running your own Ruby Star Records label and marketing yourself?**

I subscribe to the "which hat am I wearing now" policy or the "chop wood, carry water" lesson in Buddhism. I try to enjoy whichever one I am doing and focus only on that piece of the project at that time. The hope is that neither gets tainted that way. Of course I am only one person so I am sure it does sometimes but I try and separate the artist from the business person so that I can be creative and make good decisions. I also really believe in surrounding myself with amazing people who get what I do and are good at what they do. Then I let them do their job! I am glad to have help now and people I really trust on board. Having a great manager, agent, press person and distributor make my life much easier and give me more time to focus on the music. Incredible musicians, a great engineer and stellar equipment (like my Bottlehead gear) make being more musically creative fun, worry free and productive.

**What do you want people to know about "Live East/West?"**

I think "East/West" really captured something amazing. When I listen to it, I feel like I am there again playing with those incredibly talented musicians in two of my favorite clubs. They were truly wonderful nights for me, with the musicians creating the kind of synergy that made it so easy for me to do what I love and love what I do. As a result, I think we were able to capture something very fresh and alive...something even bigger than the songs themselves or the arrangements. I hope as people listen to the recording they can

experience that energy for themselves and have as good of a time listening to the music as we had making it!

**Color or black and white?**

Black and white because I think it reflects the heart of reality better. It distills everything down to its core.

**Stones or Beatles?**

Beatles for their songwriting but Stones for delivery.

**Tub or shower?**

Tub without question. Better all the way around. I do not even have a shower.

**Got any musical guilty pleasures, do you listen to KISS Alive in the tub?**

No, nothing like that, but I do listen to Blossom Dearie a lot and I really like Led Zeppelin. When I'm driving in my car I listen to a lot of old R&B and "beneath the sheets soul....ala Berry White.

**What is your favorite non-musical thing to do?**

Walk my dog on the beach, eat Japanese food and drink tea in a nearby Buddhist inspired park, but not necessarily in that order.

**With your records so meticulously produced, have you become a hi-fi nut, or do you just dig live music?**

I'm not a complete hi-fi nut yet, but I can't stand listening to a system that sounds like crap! I have to turn it off. Even worse is listening to a really good recording on a bad stereo.

**Last but not least, what's on your iPod?**

Believe it or not, no iPod yet, but as soon as I get one it will be a lot of what I listen to in the car and maybe some Stevie Wonder, Sarah Vaughn, Indigo Girls and Tracy Chapman. No KISS.

So there you have it folks, a great lady and a great singer. Don't miss the chance to catch Jacqui live if she's in your neighborhood, you won't be disappointed. Check out her website at [www.jacquinaylor.com](http://www.jacquinaylor.com) for more information, and you can purchase her CD's at Amazon. ☺



# The Pacific Creek SE3001

— JEFF DORGAY





## THE PACIFIC CREEK SE300I

I've said it before, I'll say it again – when it comes to low-powered single-ended amplifiers, audiophiles are divided into two camps: people who think a nine-watt amplifier is madness and people who think the SET amps are nirvana.

That being said, I'm a bit divided. I am open to other designs, but now that I own a great pair of really efficient speakers (the Rethm Audio 2nd, Rethms), I really dig the SET thing a lot. While I am not going to get preachy and try to convert those of you in the former camp, if you are undecided, it is worth your while to give an SET amplifier a try.

For those of you not really familiar with single-ended triode amplifiers, they usually produce from a couple watts to about 10 watts per channel, and use one big triode tube for the output (the most common tubes are the 300B and the 2A3). Because they are operated single ended, with all of the signal passing through one output device, there is none of the crossover distortion common with all push-pull amplifiers, tube or solid state, giving these amplifiers an “ease” that I have yet to hear with other models. The downside is that these amplifiers do not have a lot of power and do not have the super tight bass response of a great solid-state amplifier.

The good news is that you can get excellent high-efficiency speakers with a little searching, and many of the modern SET amplifiers do a lot better with the bass than you might think. Until just recently, quite a few were fairly expensive, but there are some more reasonably priced options available these days, which leads us to the Pacific Creek SE300I.

Earlier this year I had the privilege to audition the WAVAC EC-300B, which I consider to be one of the best sounding amplifiers I have ever

heard, if not the best. (Mastering genius and contributing editor Steve Hoffman concurs with me, and has an EC-300B of his very own.) With major high-tech goodies, like Teflon tube sockets and transformers from Tango, this amplifier resolves a ton of detail with a three dimensionality unmatched in the world of tube amplifiers.

### **That's great, but I don't have an extra \$30,000 for an amplifier.**

Here's where the Pacific Creek comes in. After being spoiled by the EC-300B for a few months, everything else sounded like I had put U-Haul moving blankets over the speakers, so I was pretty bummed out. My quest: get a taste of the WAVAC sound for a workingman's price. A few amplifiers that will remain nameless didn't really do anything for me, but one day I was at Kurt Dosl's shop, ECHO AUDIO in downtown Portland, OR, and there was a very nice little 300B amplifier sitting there with a very attractive price tag.

Kurt told me the whole story about Jerry Wang and how he had developed quite a bit of voice recognition products, most of them patented in his last life in corporate America, but his first love was building amplifiers. Now that he is retired, he has been pursuing this full time and the

SE300I is his first product. I took it home, and right out of the box it sounded GREAT. All of the things that one would enjoy in a good SET amplifier was there in spades. Great soundstaging, an excellent three-dimensional presentation, smooth highs, and remarkably tight, controlled bass from a nine-watt tube amplifier. The midrange was out of this world for an amplifier with a \$1,899 price tag. By the time the weekend was over, I had to have one. (Editor's Note: due to exchange rates, this amplifier may be going up a tiny bit in price by the time you read this.)

### **The Nerdy Stuff**

The SE300I is billed as an integrated amplifier, but it is really a power amplifier with a passive volume control and selector for four inputs. Mechanical construction is excellent, with some very beefy jacks and binding posts. My sample came with a pretty major power cord, but Jerry is not sure if he will keep this supplier, so check with your dealer before purchase to be sure. The chassis is a chrome-plated beauty, and the transformers are potted to offer a very clean look. A cage is offered to keep the tubes away from prying little hands, but if you don't have to use it, it looks much better without it. The whole package weighs about 70 pounds, so be ready to give it the heave-ho when you un-box it.

The 300SEI comes from the factory in China with a complement of seven tubes. A pair of Chinese 300B output tubes, a pair of Russian 6P6 tubes (6L6 equivalent), a pair of 12AU7's for input and a 5Z3P (5U4 equivalent). For you tube geeks, the tube rectifier is a nice touch, especially at this price point, because it acts as a natural “slow start up” for the power sup-

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# PACIFIC CREEK

ply with the high voltage building as the rectifier tube warms up, allowing for better tube life.

The 300SEI uses output transformers with a 3500 ohm primary, and that gives this amplifier a touch more damping factor than other designs that use a 2500 ohm primary. This was more than evident in the listening tests and the bass was very well controlled for this type of amplifier.

I have only had hands-on experience with a couple of amplifiers assembled in China; mostly the Prima Luna line and the Pacific Creek amplifiers. For those of you who remember Chinese amplifiers from the 90's, it's a different ball game these days. The Chinese craftsmen that build these amplifiers mean business and the build quality is excellent, with all point-to-point wiring done to a high level of precision.

## Better with Age

While this amplifier sounded pretty good right out of the box, once it had about 50 hours of break in time, it sounded better, with the highs a bit smoother, and the bass a bit tighter. More critical was that it really needs about an hour and a half to sound its best when you turn it on. Sounding just a bit lean for the first 15 minutes, it gets into a really good groove after an hour or so. My lime green lava lamp takes about an hour and 15 minutes to get gooey and this is just when the SE300I starts to do its thing.

Initial set-up and break-in was done on my desktop system – a pair of ProAc Tablettes and an Ah! Tjoeb 4000 CD player. Nothing fancy in the cable department. After a week, I moved it into the

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main listening room where it was used with the Modwright upgraded Denon disc player, and the 2nd Rethm loudspeakers. Analog reproduction was handled by a Rega P25 with RB700 arm, Sumiko Blackbird cartridge and the Whest .20 phono stage.

I have to agree with Jerry, that I have never heard an SET amp that I didn't like, but there are many flavors to choose from, so it is important to find the one you like best. Just like a musician has their favorite inspirational artists, Jerry's two favorite designers are Nelson Pass and David Hafler. (He has a mint, unmolested Stereo 70 in his listening room on a bookshelf.) Having owned a number of amplifiers from both of these gentlemen over the years, it's easy to see why he admires them.

## The Sound

First of all, the SE300I is one of the most quiet SET amplifiers I have ever heard. When Jacob George was setting up the Rethms he said the same thing; "I must meet the man who makes this amplifier, it is very quiet!" If you are a high-power/low-efficiency speaker person, you may never notice this, but when using speakers with 100db-plus efficiency, every little bit of noise is apparent and annoying.

I have been listening to the SE300I for about six months now and still can't get over how good it sounds for less than \$2,000. The only fault is what it does not do – it doesn't have the last bit of refinement of the WAVAC amplifiers, but it is very accurate, having a detailed midrange, without being overly warm like a Stereo 70 or similar tube amplifier. It has enough of the magic of tubes,

without being overly sterile like a transistor amplifier, yet lacks the "haze" that most MOSFET amplifiers possess. Either way, it gives you a great look into SET sound, and for many may be a great place to stay. Even though she is not my favorite female vocalist, on a lot of amplifiers, her voice really gets lost behind Lovett's. Not so on the 300SEI; both vocalists have their own space and you can hear the air around them. Moving on to Hall & Oates Abandoned Luncheonette (MOFI LP) had the same result, an excellent separation of vocals, with a very nice, big, airy sound. Now you might be saying, "that's foofy audiophile music" and you might be right. But putting the Steve Hoffman remaster of the first Van Halen album (DCC gold CD) in the disc player will make you a believer – this thing really rocks too! Ice Cream Man never sounded so good. The ultimate test? For me, it's Rider's On the Storm on the DCC version of LA Woman. Listen very carefully to the overdubs on Jim Morrison's vocals closely and there is a lot of texture there that many amplifiers can't discern, but the Pacific Creek did a cracking job.

Another one of my favorites is The Fairfield Four, Standing in the Safety Zone. Listening to this on the Pacific Creek was really a treat after getting done with a few solid state amplifiers. Even my Audio Research Classic 120's couldn't hold a candle to the level of realism this little amplifier was capable of. I know the skeptics will argue that SET amplifiers "don't measure well," but they really sound more like music to me. I don't want to violate the Prime Directive and tell you what to do, but don't be surprised if you get hooked on this sound!

## One Small Caution

If the review ended right here, I could look you straight in the eye and tell you that this is one of the best 300B amplifiers I have heard for this kind of money and sleep like a baby.

But because it has a passive input stage, you have to be careful with is equipment and cable matching for optimum results. While I don't know a lot about the passive preamp thing, I do know that certain combinations sound better than others, and the wrong set of cables can dampen this amplifier's enthusiasm a bit. While it sounded great with the Ah! Tjoeb CD player and the Modwright, it didn't sound particularly good with my Jolida CD player or Sumiko phono stage. My Bottlehead tube phono stage was a match made in heaven for the SE300I.

## Here's where it gets really interesting.

Another testament to a well-designed amplifier is how well it sounds with components in a much more expensive league. Most people would not hook a \$1,900 amplifier up to an \$8,000 pair of speakers or a \$2,500 phono stage, but you can – the 300SEI will not disappoint you.

If you have followed along this far, you are probably in the tube camp anyway and are always rolling tubes. Once I had spent plenty of time with the 300SEI and got to know its character, I spent some time tweaking. First step: different driver tubes. I swapped a few different 6L6 variations without a ton of change in the sound, but by installing some Tesla NOS 12AU7's, got a much

bigger soundstage without losing anything in the areas of transient attack and bass control.

The hidden magic was changing the output tubes. I just happened to have a brand new pair of

**A call to Steve, who also has a SE300I that he is fond of (and has a lot more pairs of 300B's than I do...) said, "You try 'em in your amp first and see if it blows up."**

current production Western Electric 300B tubes sitting on the shelf, so I gave Jerry a call about biasing. The 300SEI is self biasing, but I wanted to be sure before I dropped a \$1,200 pair of tubes in place of the factory-installed ones. He laughed at me on the phone and said, "I never even tried the amplifier with WE tubes because I didn't think anyone at that price point would spend that kind of

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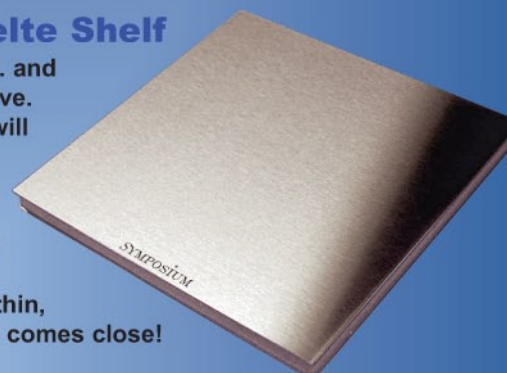


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money on tubes! The biasing will be fine, just plug them in." A call to Steve, who also has a SE300I that he is fond of (and has a lot more pairs of 300B's than I do...) said, "You try 'em in your amp first and see if it blows up."

So, I plugged in my brand new WE300B's and held my breath. I realize that this is a bit out of the ordinary, but the SE300I is a completely different amplifier with the Western Electric tubes installed. Every part of its character goes to another level. Bass tightens up dramatically, the midrange goes from great to wonderful, and I would swear it puts out a little bit more power. Swapping the power cable for my favorite ESP reference took all of this even further, but that's really madness. (But it was great!)

## THE VERDICT

Even in stock form, the Pacific Creek SE300I is a great amplifier and a great value. It will give you a lot of insight into the SET sound at a budget price. If you do not have a pair of super-efficient speakers, but don't listen to music at really loud levels, something like a pair of Vandersteen 1C's or the Naim Arivas (both 90db) will do nicely. I have been listening to this amp with a pair of Definitive Technologies P700's (92db) recently, and can achieve pretty good volume levels.

For those who want to take it a step further, you can upgrade the tubes and, should you go off the edge and shell out for a pair of WE 300B's and a good power cord, you will be pleasantly surprised at how much more sound this amplifier is capable of. As many of the best 300B amplifiers start to approach five figures very quickly, this one is still a bargain at around \$3,500 with all the tweaks.

Keep an eye on Pacific Creek for great products that are reasonably priced. In a few months we will be testing their new KT90 amplifier. The SE300I is highly recommended. ☺

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TONEA21 NO.1 2005





# ThePrimaLuna ProLogue 3 Preamplifier & ProLogue 5 Power Amplifier

— JEFF DORGAY

A little over a year ago PrimaLuna came on the scene with their ProLogue 1 and 2 integrated amplifiers that featured simple tube circuits that were well executed and flawlessly assembled in China. Regardless of whether you liked the EL – 34 or KT – 88 version, these gorgeous little amps offered a lot of sound for the money. Working for another audio publication at the time, I was one of the many reviewers that heaped a lot of praise on PrimaLuna, and Kevin Deal at **UPSCALE AUDIO** for bringing this gear to the US. *(continued)*



Today, we have some additions to the line. The ProLogue 3 is an all tube preamplifier and the ProLogue 4 is an EL – 34 based power amplifier, while the ProLogue 5 is a KT – 88 based power amplifier. The ProLogue 3 is \$1295 with a silver or black faceplate, the ProLogue 4 is \$1045 and the slightly higher

powered ProLogue 5 is slightly more expensive at \$1295. While the integrated amplifiers sounded great and offered a tremendous value, getting the components onto separate chassis with separate power supplies has its advantages. As I was very familiar with the EL-34 sound of the ProLogue One after my review and subsequent purchase, (it now resides in music editor Norwood Brown's system) I wanted to try the KT-88 version this time around.

## Technical Overview

First of all, these babies are built like tanks. Though they come in fairly compact packages (11" W x 16.5" D x 7.5"H) the power amplifier weighs in at a hefty 36 pounds and the preamp at 17.5 pounds. If you have never seen a PrimaLuna product up close, they are a treat. Elegantly understated, the chassis are finished in a very dark blue metallic finish that is all but black unless you look at it in very bright light and has the same level of gloss and smoothness you would expect to see on a classic car at Pebble Beach. A cage is supplied to keep prying hands away from the tubes, but if you are without small children or inquisitive pets, leave them off so you can see the tubes glow!!

The ProLogue 3 uses a pair of 12AX7s and a pair of 12AU7s with a modest gain of 11.5db and is subsequently very quiet for a tube preamp, especially one in this price range. The treat here is that it uses a pair of 5AR4 rectifier tubes in the



power supply, keeping the dual mono concept throughout. All the tube sockets are heavy duty ceramic and all wiring is point to point. There are four sets of inputs, a tape output and a pair of outputs so that you can use it in a biamped system or with an amplified subwoofer.

The ProLogue 5 uses the same tubes for the input stages and a pair of KT-88s for each channel of the output stage. No negative feedback is used in this amplifier and while it has solid state rectification, it does feature diodes of the fast recovery variety. As in all PrimaLuna amplifiers, the ProLogue 5 uses PrimaLunas' patented Adaptive auto bias system, so it is not critical to have output tubes that are matched pairs to achieve good performance. I have talked to a number of different designers and the jury is out on whether it is better to have auto bias or fixed bias that is adjustable by the end user. The PrimaLuna system works well and the sound quality is wonderful, so they have the right formula here. (Personally, I think it really helps the recent converts to tube world, not having to screw around with biasing duties...) There is a soft start circuit in the power supply, so tube life should be very good. We are keeping these two for a long term test, so we'll keep you posted in a later issue. Note: Along with the soft start feature,

**For those of you that produce megabucks gear, you better hope the folks at PrimaLuna don't start doing R&D at a higher level on the audio food chain, they definitely make gear that rocks!**

the ProLogue 3 does not make a loud clunk or thump, should you turn it off before your power amplifier. This is a very nice touch in a preamplifier at this price range.

Both units have detachable AC cords and come with pretty substantial power cords right from the factory. The input RCA jacks are top quality and the binding posts on the output of the amplifier are very beefy WBT-style connectors. The front panels are a model of simplicity and the power switch is a large rocker on the left side of the chassis, which adds to the clean look.

## Setup and Associated Components

If you have picked up any audiophile magazine lately, you know I love the sound of the PrimaLuna integrated amplifier, and the separates take the PrimaLuna sound to another level of refinement. Right out of the box, they sounded fine, but after about 25 hours had settled into really good sound, with a slight improvement after 100 hours. Once burned in, these two warm up pretty fast and are very groovy after about 30 minutes.

The majority of my testing was done with the Roan Audio model 5 minimonitors which are rated at 87db and have a load of 8 ohms. To mix it up a bit, I also used the Definitive Technologies P700 powered monitors that have a 92db efficiency as well as built in powered subwoofers. If you really like to listen to music loud, this was a great alternative choice. My trusty Naim Arivas (4 ohm, 90db) got rotated into the test system for a while and were not the best choice for the ProLogue 5, but when I swapped the ProLogue 5 for the Monarchy SM 70 Pro monoblocks, it was a wonderful combination with the ProLogue 3 preamp. (more about that later) Most of my source material was digital, using a combination of the Modwright Denon player and a Jolida CD100A tube CD player.

Our review of the Roan speakers is going to be in the next issue of TONE-Audio, but I can tell you that they are a very neutral sounding speak-

*(continued)*





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er and are easy to drive, so they were a nice match for the PrimaLuna combo. I also felt that for \$1500, they might be representative of what you might purchase to go along with \$2300 worth of amp and preamp. Keeping this in the budget, I used the DH Labs Air Matrix interconnects between amp and preamp as well as between preamp and disc player. Speaker cables were DH Labs Silver Sonic T-14.

### The Sound

This amp/preamp combination produces great sound and is very musical. Detail at low to medium levels is very good and it doesn't really compress until you push it very hard. Even then it is pretty polite, but like the ProLogue 1, the ProLogue 5 gets to a certain point where it just will not play any louder and the soundfield just collapses back on itself. It's kind of like my old BMW 320i, it will get up to 100mph pretty quick, but after about 110, it's out of power. For most of you though, if you choose your speakers on the more efficient side, this will occur at a level that will be way too loud for your neighbors anyway. Besides, that's not what a small tube amplifier is about, it's about warm, smooth detailed sound, not brain damage volume.

Because of the KT-88 tubes, the ProLogue 5 is a bit drier sounding than the EL-34 ProLogue 4, but it has a bit more punch and a touch more bass authority and control, so the sound you prefer is up to you. Again, system matching is important and you need to make sure you get a pair of speakers that is synergistic. There are also a few work arounds that we will

(continued)





discuss in the next section. Thanks to the adaptive auto bias, if you would like to tune the sound of your ProLogue 5 a bit, you can roll in a set of 6L6 tubes. I just happened to have a pair of Electro-Harmonix 6L6 tubes on the shelf, and the results were interesting. Not quite as liquid as the EL-34, yet not as dry as the KT – 88, but a bit less power. Depending on your taste and speakers, this may be the Goldilocks tube for the ProLogue 5! Thanks to the soft start circuitry and adaptive auto bias in the ProLogue 5, tube life should be excellent.

This combination has a very smooth sound without being rolled off or overly warm or too lush. It almost sounds more like good solid-state gear, with that extra bit of dimension that just can't ever quite be achieved with solid-state. Obviously with 36 watts per channel, you can't crank up the orchestral music or listen to Genesis at Earth shattering levels, but used within its range, the PrimaLuna combination does quite nicely.

What I enjoyed the most about this gear was that it had a very neutral midrange, smooth highs and a very wide soundstage, allowing for a lot of air in the presentation. No matter what speakers I used, the PrimaLuna pair did a great job with vocal harmonies and music that was somewhat densely packed together. How Can You Mend a Broken Heart by the Bee Gees (Trafalgar, MoFi LP) served up great separation between the individual members as did Woodface by Crowded House (Simply Vinyl, LP) and all of my Crosby, Stills and Nash discs. Again, this is the kind of sound tube lovers live for!

It wouldn't be an audiophile review unless we listened to some female vocals, so my standards (Ricki Lee Jones, KD Lang and Peggy Lee; LP and CD) all got plenty of rotation, but I really enjoyed Jaqui Naylor's new live CD, East/West. This really put the ProLogue 5 to the test, because it is a very dynamic recording. Even at a fairly high volume level, the image did not fall apart.

While the ProLogue 5 will do an admirable job of playing music with low bass, it also had very good control over the bass. This is an area where the separate components with their own power supplies really allows a much better musical presentataion

**But wait, this is only a \$1300 preamp and that's the kicker.**

than the PrimaLuna integrated. The integrated is very good, but if you can spare the extra \$1200 bucks (and shelf space) you will be glad you went the extra mile. Listening to Moments in Love by the Art of Noise (xxxx, CD) and even my old favorite, Dark Side of the Moon (MoFi LP) left me very impressed with the bass performance of this pair.

High frequency response was also very good, and transient attack was fast, but in some cases just a little bit overdamped and lacking that last bit of air that a \$5000 dollar preamp would have. But wait, this is only a \$1300 preamp and that's the kicker. The longer you listen to this pair, you would swear you paid a lot more for them. Everyone that stopped by for a casual listen were floored when I told them how reasonably priced they were. Whenever I switched back from my reference system, I was always very happy with the level of resolution I was able to achieve with this pair. I spent a lot of days with the PrimaLuna pair on for 10 – 12 hour days with no fatigue. Switching to a modest turntable provided an even more liquid presentation, this gear is definitely up to the challenge.

## The Phono option

For \$159, you can add a phono input to your PrimaLuna ProLogue 3. They make a great little module that can be installed by Upscale Audio (call them to inquire about installation pricing) or if you have good vision and reasonable soldering skills, can install yourself in about a half hour. It is a very small little board though, so if in doubt, have it installed.

I installed one in my ProLogue One and it is a great value if you are an occasional vinyl user, or aren't planning on spending a ton of money on a table. I had great results with Sumiko's Debut III, which already had an Ortofon cartridge preinstalled. This is one of the best \$300 tables I have ever heard and did a great job with the onboard phono section.

To take things up a notch or two, I substituted a Rega P3 fitted with a Shure V15, but was able to get more performance by using an outboard phono stage, in this case the Sumiko Primare R20 (\$695). Again, for \$159, this represents tremendous value and sounds as good or better than a lot of built-in phono stages I have heard, but if you are a serious vinyl enthusiast, the ProLogue 3 is so good, you will benefit from the phono preamp of your choice. Kudos to PrimaLuna for offering this flexibility.

## The Sum of its Parts

There was one big surprise here though. While I think the PrimaLuna pair is quite good, if you are just in the market for a preamplifier, don't rule out the ProLogue 3, even in a bit spendier system. Thanks to its dual mono design and tube rectifiers in the power supply, this one is a real sleeper, kind of like an Audi S4 with the badges removed. You pull up at the stop light thinking you know what's under the hood and then get left in the dust when the light turns green.

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Being from the Badger State, I'm nosier than I probably should be, but I couldn't resist dropping the ProLogue 3 in my reference system with all the tweaks to see how it would do. Granted it was not as open or accurate as my Emotive Audio Poeta, but it was really damn good and out of this world good for a \$1300 preamplifier. Believe me, the ProLogue 3 was no disgrace with a few thousand dollars worth of interconnects hooked up to it and a Symposium Ultra base under it. You could easily make the ProLogue 3 preamplifier the cornerstone of a more expensive system. Everything I heard with the ProLogue 5 amplifier was even more apparent on my big system.

## THE VERDICT

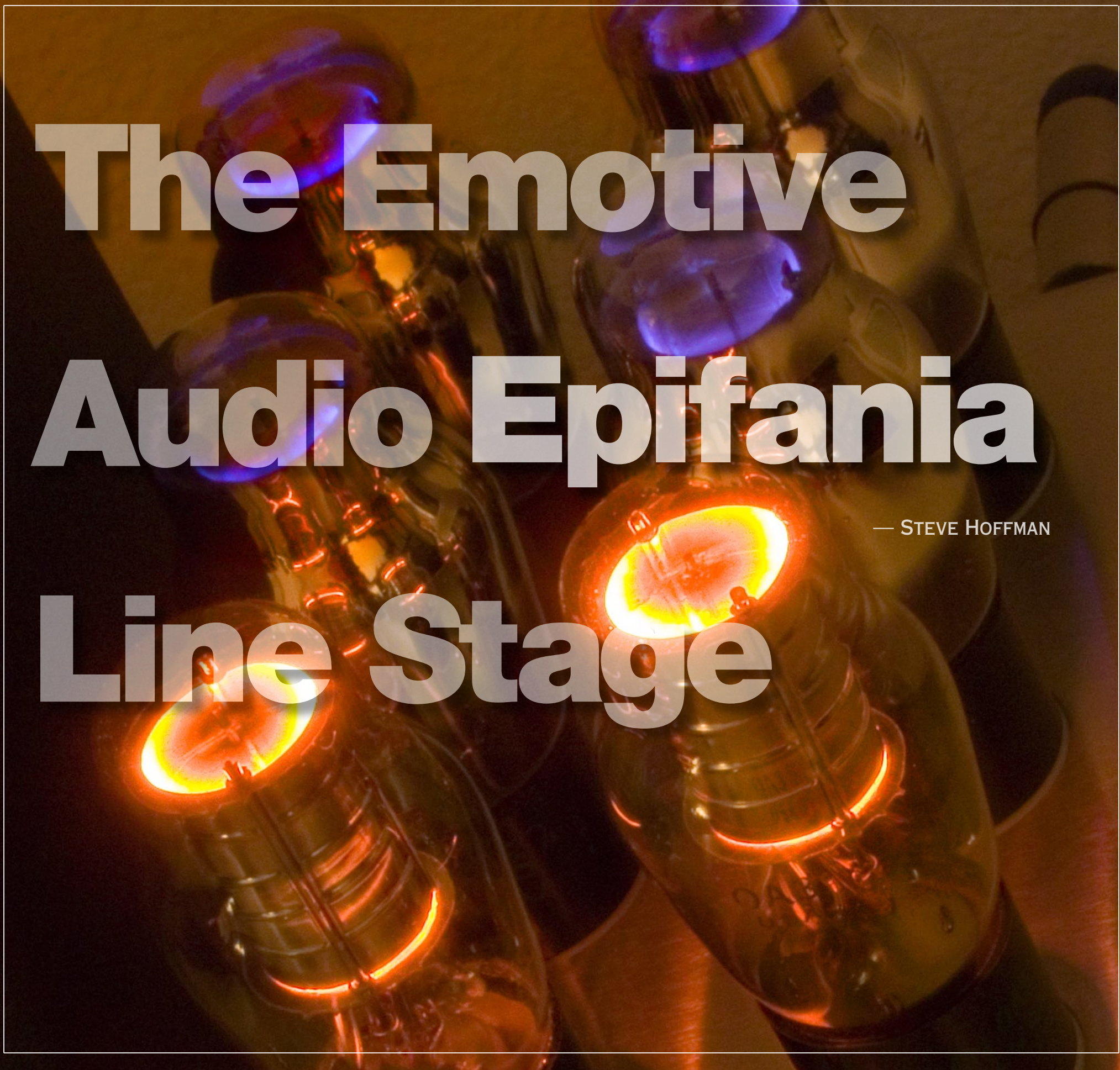
For those of you that produce megabucks gear, you better hope the folks at PrimaLuna don't start doing R&D at a higher level on the audio food chain, they definitely make gear that rocks! For those of you looking for high quality, reasonably priced hifi and want to enjoy all the things that make tube gear great without any of the hassle, look no further, this pair's for you. If I had to buy a system, keep the budget under five grand and I had to keep the system forever, this is the amp and preamp I'd buy. PrimaLuna has hit another one out of the park with great sound, great build quality and dashing good looks. Highly recommended.

As is typical, an amplifier and pre-amplifier that are designed together usually work quite well together and these two are no exception, but during the course of the test, I tried them both individually with other components to see how they would fare. They passed with flying colors. ☺



# The Emotive Audio Epifania Line Stage

— STEVE HOFFMAN





## The Emotive Audio Epifania Line Stage

I first met Fred Volz (founder of Emotive Audio of Pennsylvania) at the first Denver Hi-Fi Show in October of 2004. Immediately we clicked; our love of music drew us together. Fred was supplying the sound in the Symposium Acoustics room and I hung out there for hours at a stretch being thoroughly entertained by the music and the antics, but I was most impressed by Fred's primo creation, the Epifania Preamplifier. It costs \$16,995.00 which is a lot of kale, but this is a lot of preamp. It sounded really wonderful at the show and had these really nifty gas tubes on top along with killer build quality and finish, not to mention an unusual design which appealed to my aesthetic sensibilities.

After hanging out for a day, I realized that Fred didn't have a clue as to who I was or what I did. After he attended two of my lectures on mastering at the show he realized that when I told him I really liked the sound of his equipment, this was more than the ordinary Audiophile endorsement. On the third day (after we'd had one or two local ale samples) Fred stated: "I'm going to build you your own Epifania".

Stunned was not the word; I was really excited. Fred's good taste in sound and music really made me want to get the word out on his products and I couldn't wait to hear his gear in my home system. He sent me his less expensive Poeta line stage right when he got home and I had been using it with great results until just recently, when it found a home with our publisher, Jeff Dorgay. When my Epifania finally arrived, I couldn't believe the beautiful tiger maple finish and beautiful sound right out of the box!

I've heard many amazing pre-amps in my time; the WAVAC from Japan and Jud Barber's Joule-Electra LA-100 to name just a few, but the Emotive Audio Epifania really got my juices flowing. The Epifania line stage preamplifier features current and voltage regulation all done with gas regulator tubes, and a current production Sophia mesh plate 274B for rectification. Each channel of audio amplification is handled by a NOS 12B4.

### The Design

According to Fred Voltz, "The Epifania is fundamentally different from all of our previous linestage pre-amplifier designs. We've developed a design that offers the same low output impedance as our cathode follower designs, but with no cathode follower. The Epifania's circuit is a bit like taking the voltage amplifier stage, the cathode follower stage, and the active loading of our other designs and combining them into a single hybrid audio stage. The audio signal passes through only one tube on its path to the power amplifier." The design of the Epifania has eliminated all electrolytic capacitors from the high voltage supply. The high voltage DC is filtered with smaller value oil filled capacitors and a large choke. The filtered DC is then current regulated for each channel before being voltage regulated with gas filled regulator tubes. (that are gorgeous with the lights turned down low!)

As you would expect at this price point, all of the components used in the Epifania are of the highest

*(continued)*





quality; the power transformer is potted and a proprietary design by Emotive Audio. All RCA connectors are WBT Topline and Yamamoto machined Teflon tube sockets throughout. The chassis is 0.1 inch thick stainless and the base is available in granadillo or tiger maple wood. Except for the 274B, all of the other tubes are NOS, but Fred assured me he has plenty of tubes in stock to assure present and future owners replacements.

Just in case you were wondering about the more nerdy specs, the input impedance ranges from 100-150K ohms, with an output impedance

of 150 ohms. Because of the single gain stage, the Epifania only provides 15db of gain at maximum output, but this makes for a very quiet linestage. There are five single ended inputs, all the same and two variable level outputs and one fixed level passive outputs, also single ended.

### Listening Impressions

So, how does the Epifania sound? Being a mastering engineer, I'm in a pretty good position to judge this kind of thing. It just so happened on

*(continued)*

experience the music.....



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the day the Epifania arrived I had in my possession the master tape of one of the greatest jazz albums of all time: ART PEPPER MEETS THE RHYTHM SECTION on Contemporary, remastering it for Analogue Productions' "100 Greatest Jazz Albums Of All-Time" 45 RPM series. The Pepper album was recorded by Roy DuNann in the middle 1950's on a two channel Ampex 350 and it was that exact tape that christened the Epifania.

I set it up on a Symposium Acoustics ISIS rack (with my WAVAC EC-300B amp on the bottom shelf) and plugged in my amazing Kubala-Sosna Research "Emotion" power cord and interconnects. I plugged in the new old stock tubes, warmed her up for one hour and sat down to give a listen. I played back the Art Pepper master tape on my 1959 Ampex 351-2/P with more Kubala-Sosna wire being strung between the tape deck and the Epifania. Speakers were my Legacy Audio Focus Customs.

The first thing I noticed was that I could hear the back wall of the mailroom where they recorded at Contemporary for the first time during playback of the first song. Since there is no center channel information on the actual tape (only left and right), I wasn't expecting to hear anything out of the middle as I've noticed the countless times I've played the album. To my surprise, the Epifania clearly highlighted the fact that the sound was bouncing off the back wall of the Contemporary stockroom and coming back at me directly down the middle of the soundstage. So, resolving power was my

first thought while listening to the Epifania.

I had expected the sound to be, well, tubey, as is the case with some tube preamplifiers but this was not the case with the Epifania. It was neutral, but detailed (in a good way) and very three-dimensional, getting better and better, with the end result that after a few days of listening. I felt I had found my favorite preamp of the modern

era. The "breath of life" was there and I was grateful for it, as it makes my job of mastering music that much easier. Don't get me wrong; if something was recorded badly it SOUNDS bad on the Epifania. It does not gloss over the sound at all, in fact it is brutally honest—just like I like it. BUT, when something was recorded well, it sounds won-

derful, like real people performing, not a recording of people, which is the same thing I strive for in my work.

A word about "tube rolling". I believe in it and like to fool around sometimes. Fred Volz told me that the circuit in the Epifania is such that there won't be much of a difference in the tonality of the unit when different brands of audio tubes are switched in. He was right. I switched out the ancient Sylvania 12B4A with an ancient RCA and it sounded pretty much the same (although tube nut that I am, I think the RCA looks prettier). I think the only way to tailor the sound at all via tube rolling is by replacing the rectifier tube with a different tube type.



**The first thing I noticed was that I could hear the back wall of the mailroom where they recorded at Contemporary for the first time during playback of the first song.**

The Sophia 274B is standard with the Epifania but if you're rich you can use an original Western Electric 274B in there. (A recent Ebay search turned up a few of these in the 5-800 dollar range) I tried one and it sounded fine but not much finer than the Sophia to me. What DID make a difference was substituting one of Fred's favorite tubes, the vintage RCA 5R4GY in place of the 274B. The sonic signature changed with this tube. The unit became a tad more euphonic sounding and a bit more dreamy, romantic and lush. Still detailed, but a smidge on the warm side. I left the RCA in there to counteract the more upfront nature of the WAVAC EC-300B. While the WAVAC is probably the most unromantic 300B SET amp I've ever heard, it is my favorite 300B amplifier, and wedded with the Epifania, it's just heaven!

**ED NOTE:** *Now that Western Electric will be producing the 274B again, SH feels that there is still a bit more music to be wrought from the Epifania, so we will follow up at a future date.*

## THE VERDICT

Bottom line, if you have a spare 17k in your budget, I recommend the Epifania highly. It has a wonderful, pleasing tonality, unique looks, along with substantial build quality. Not to mention Fred is one of the nicest guys in the business!

I get sent a lot of expensive audio gear to try out, so I can afford to be pretty picky. I send almost all of it right back, because if I don't love it, I doesn't stay in my reference system. It was love at first sight and first listen with the Emotive Audio Epifania preamplifier. It has such great transparent sound and amazing ambiance retrieval, it makes my job so much easier. I realize that this unit is out of the range of many people but for those audiophiles who can afford it put the Emotive Audio Epifania on your short list of preamplifiers to audition; it will be the centerpiece of your stereo for life, and I bet you will be the only one on your block with one of these! I recommend it highly. 😊





# The ModWright Denon 3910

— JEFF DORGAY



# The ModWright Denon Player

**D**an Wright has been living here in the Pacific Northwest and modifying other peoples gear for quite a few years. His current flagship product is a modified Denon 3910 combination player that will play anything on any format of shiny disc except that video clip on my David Bowie Sound and Vision bonus disc. (Does anybody have something that will play that?)

He does a pretty dramatic modification of the player's power supplies, adding a substantial outboard supply that is tethered by a thick purple cable with XLR plugs on both ends. The tube output stage, consisting of a pair of Tung Sol 5687 tubes, only affects the 2 channel outputs, but thanks to the substantial power supply upgrades has significantly better multichannel performance as well.

As I am not a videophile and don't have a decent TV monitor to judge playback, I can't comment much on the Video playback, but when watching the Eraserhead DVD the other night on my HP projector, the blacks looked quite a bit better than my cheapie Pioneer player.

But I'm guessing that you are going to buy this one to listen to audio discs!!

I've been listening to digital playback since the day I brought home that first Denon CD player way back in 1980 something.

While digital has advanced tremendously, I have heard a couple of the 10 thousand dollar plus players that really sounded musical, but not as many in the 3-4000 dollar range. The Modwright player is by far the most musical player I have heard in this price category.

Again, I must stress that when listening, I really prefer a very relaxed, yet not overly romantic presentation, but having enough detail to not be grating. This is a difficult one to achieve, because most gear usually goes just a bit too far in either direction for my tastes. Now that you are familiar with my neurosis, let's continue.

## Under the Hood

As you would hope, for \$2500, you aren't getting your basic capacitor and resistor upgrade, but a substantial amount of parts. Along with the tube output stage there is a pair of neatly drilled holes covered in mesh to let them breath, which adds a nice glow to the player. To power this output stage, Modwright includes a separate choke based power supply that weighs about 20 pounds and is very similar to the power supply in Modwright's line stage featuring FET regulators and DC regulation for the tube filaments.

This is a separate box that is tethered to the player by a very cool purple 4-pin XLR cryogenically treated silver cable from Revelation Audio Labs ([www.revelationaudiolabs.com](http://www.revelationaudiolabs.com)) Dan said that they use this cable for all of their high-end digital work. The internal supply is also modified with FRED rectifiers and improved power supply filtering. Digital voltage regulation is also improved and a discrete regulator stage is added.

My test sample had all of the mods listed on the Modwright website except for the Bybee Slipstream filters, so this review sample would set you back \$3995 which includes the cost of a new Denon player. If you already have a Denon player, you can call Dan for quotes on your existing Denon player. Considering the effect the Bybee filters had on my Modwright Line Stage, I

would advise spending the extra \$380 and having them installed as well. We will do a short update on this player in issue three when Dan has a chance to fit the Bybees to this unit. Ed. Note: The evening before publication, Dan called me to announce that he has another set of mods that can voice this player a bit more to the taste of those preferring a bit less laid back and more dynamic sound, so

we will investigate that as soon as he can get us one of these. However, I did not find the test unit to be lacking in these characteristics.

Sometimes it is hard to tell exactly where the changes have been made to a modified player, so after living with the Modwright Denon Player for a few months, I decided to start at square one and listen to a bone-stock player for comparison. To be fair, I gave it about 50 hours of burn in before moving it to my reference system, consisting of the Emotive Audio Poeta Linestage, WAVAC MD 300B amplifier and the Rethm 2nd Rethm speakers with Tannoy subs. Tara's best interconnects and speaker cables along with the outstanding ESP The Essence Reference power cords and Symposium Ultra bases on the amp, disc player and linestage to keep everything vibration free.

## The Sound

I'll spoil the end of the movie by telling you I really like the Modwright player. It has a very open, smooth and highly musical sound without crossing over the line and becoming too warm or gooey. It is a very relaxing player that is a joy to listen to for hours on end without fatigue. Skeptical Roy was over the other night and after a few hours of going back and forth between vinyl and CD even remarked "I hate to say it, but I actually prefer the CD player!" High praise indeed. I'm not going to tell you to put your favorite LP's on EBay just yet, but the Modwright player does such a good job with digital sources that you might find yourself turntable and cartridge shopping to up the ante on the LP side.

My primary source of music for this test was conventional CD, as I have a huge collection of this software and I'm sure you do too. I have been slowly purchasing some DVD-A disks and SACD, but probably only have about 100 of those discs combined.

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**The ModWright player does such a good job with digital sources that you might find yourself turntable and cartridge shopping.**





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Playback from all sources was outstanding, and one of the nicest things about the Modwright player is it does not really seem to favor one type of disc playback over another.

One of my favorite DVD-a disks is Neil Young's Harvest. (WB DVD-A) Though I have heard this disc a lot, I was hearing a lot more music than before, again with instruments having much better defined spaces as you would expect with top-notch analog and I noticed a much smoother top end on this disc than on some other players. When listening to the Toy Matinee disc (DTS DVD-A), the opening guitar riffs just hang in the air, well separated from the vocals, which also reveal a bit more overdubbing than I could hear on other players. The new Frank Zappa SACD We're Only in it For the Money (MoFi) is just over the top; with all those little Zappa-isms projecting all over the room from different spots was extremely cool. I have a pristine LP copy of this and this was another shootout that the shiny disc won, hands down.

Hanging out with Mr. O'Brien a bit lately, has me also revisiting my favorite rock albums of the 70's and one of my all time favs is Robin Trower's Bridge of Sighs. The opening percussion on the title track (the MoFi version) has a lot of phase shifting in it along with Trower's heavily processed guitar, really moves from one side of the room to the other with a huge sound!

While the Modwright has a very relaxed, open sound, it is not at the expense of accuracy or transient speed. Drums sound like drums, not muffled drum-like things. How do I know this? I just happen

*(continued)*



to have a drum set in the studio that belongs to our art director, and while I was listening to the Rolling Stones 12 x 5 (Abko SACD) for a feature our music editor Norwood Brown is working on, I had him pound out some Charlie Watts beats for comparison. Not only could you hear great attack, but good drumhead textures as well. Same thing with the bass drum of The Sheriff on ELP's TrilogY, (MoFi Gold CD) very punchy and snappy without rolloff.

After listening to this player every day for about two months, it occurred to me that I had no idea what the original Denon sounded like that Dan starts with. Fortunately his office is a very pleasant 40-minute drive full of curves from my house, so off I headed to Modwright to see where this adventure begins. Again, to be fair, I let the stock player have about 50 hours of burn in on my other system. Right out of the box, it's pretty harsh but did smooth out a bit after about 20 hours, with a bit more smoothness after about 50 hours of play.

Putting it in the system with identical cables was a shock. I didn't have enough Ultra bases for both players, so I just compared them with stock power cords and no vibration control. The stock Denon is not anywhere near the same league as the Modwright unit.

I tend to think of reproduced sound as a cube-like field. If a decent MP3 file is a 1 x 1 x 1 cube, it goes up to about 5 x 5 x 5 for really good digital playback and a little bit further for really good analog playback.

It was really a wonderful accident that I did the review this way, because after getting so used to the sound of the Modwright player; the stock player was really intolerable. I know the 3910 is a decent player as far as it goes, but the Modwright is a completely different game. If you already own a 3910 and would like to have the same mods done, the cost is \$2500 plus shipping to Modwright. These days, turnaround is about two weeks for completion.

### Additional Tweaks

I did not get a chance to roll tubes with this player yet, for the most part because I was very pleased with the sound right the way it came from Modwright. However, Dan told me I could vary the



sound a touch warmer or a touch more analytical by changing the output tubes. You must stay in the 7119 and 5687 family of tubes and can NOT substitute 12AX7, 6H30 or 6DJ8 tubes without damage to the unit. As much as I enjoyed this player, it has even more detail to offer by using a couple of Symposium Ultra Bases and a better power cord.

I swapped power cords first and listened for about a week. The ESP reference made every aspect of the player more listenable, offering more low level detail, just a bit less grain on the high end (though there was precious little to begin with, sort of like when you are just a hair away from having perfect VTA on your turntable and then it just locks in and it's perfect...) and as with every other piece of gear I have used this cord with, the background got more black, which is really nice on this presentation.

The Ultra Bases really take this player over the top. My listening room has a 12" thick concrete slab, so we have a pretty good mechanical ground to start with, but by adding a 14" x 19" Ultra base under the player and a 10" x 14" one under the power supply, the soundfield was again enlarged. If you only feel like springing for one of these, get the small one and put it under the power supply. I would say about 60% of the gain here was from isolating the supply and 40% from isolating the player. Just to be really mental, I put a pair of Fat Padz on the top of the case cover. No excess vibrations anywhere now!!

I know this is somewhat crazy, to ask you to add a \$700 dollar power cord and almost another \$900 worth of vibration control to this player, but

if your system has the resolution, you will love the Modwright Denon player even more by adding these items to your system.

### THE VERDICT

Ok, ok, you probably think I'm nuts, judging a disc player of this caliber with a bunch of remastered rock recordings, but that's some of my favorite music and it has never sounded better than on this player. Just to stay credible, I listened to some great jazz and of course some female vocal stuff (but NO Patricia Barber), all with great results. No matter what kind of music you love, chances are you will enjoy this player. Again, I must emphasize that in my system, the playback was very detailed and accurate. Overly bright recordings still sounded overly bright and very laid back recordings kept their character as well.

Only one caveat here. Please keep in mind that this is all subjective. I have to remind you that my reference system with the WAVAC amp, Poeta preamp and Rethm speakers are (at least for me anyway) right on that edge of being very accurate and detailed without crossing over the line of being harsh in the way that perhaps a pair of Kharms would be or a system that is all solid state.

My guess is that if you do possess a system that is anywhere from accurate like mine to even somewhat on the bright side, this player will rock your world. Its presentation has plenty of detail, but is still smooth. If your system is a bit on the warm and romantic side,

I would audition this one with a few tube substitutions to make sure it is the perfect fit for you. When putting the Modwright into my second system, featuring a pair of Naim Arivas, the Modwright linestage and the Monarchy SM-70 Pro amplifier, everything was still happy. When substituting the PrimaLuna ProLogue Tube power amplifier for the Monarchy, things got just a little too laid back for my ears.

But the great thing about audiophilia is that there is a balance for everyone somewhere.

If you are looking for a disc player that will accommodate all formats, this one is well worth your time auditioning and could be the perfect fit for you too! The Modwright player has found a permanent home in my reference system. ☺





# The WAVAC MD-300B

— JEFF DORGAY



# The WAVAC MD 300B Amplifier

I have been a big WAVAC fan for some time now. If I had to sum up the WAVAC sound in two words, they would be detailed AND smooth. If I had one more word, it would be expensive, but the pinnacles of most technologies are priced above the realm of mass-market products. The obvious question that comes to mind is “Is any of this stuff really worth the high price tag?” That can only be answered by your checkbook, ears and conscience.

I’m as crazy about BMW automobiles as I am about WAVAC amplifiers and I think the same thing applies here. (JO and I agree on the BMW thing but not SET amplifiers) If you are much of a car person, you know that a BMW has a performance envelope that is distinctly different than a Porsche, Mercedes or Ferrari. All high performance cars, but each one has their own way of expressing that concept. Chances are that if you drive one of these cars, you prefer the one you drive for a specific reason and you really enjoy that feel the best. For the most part, even the most inexpensive cars from either of these manufacturers all share a similar feel, while perhaps lacking the refinement and ultimate performance of the most exotic model, but a Porsche feels like a Porsche and a BMW feels like a BMW no matter which one you choose.

The WAVAC amplifiers are the same way, with a very detailed sound that really lets you look into the music in an amazing way. When Jim Ricketts at tmh audio (The US importer for WAVAC) asked me if I would be interested in listening to the new entry level WAVAC MD 300B, I jumped at the chance, but was very curious to see how much of the EC-300B’s sound (\$27K) I would be able to achieve for \$8500. Granted, \$8500 is still not chump change, but still a long way from \$27k. Obviously, some design compromises had to be made somewhere, so the test was on!



I have really become attached to the sound of a SET amplifier and while they don’t seem to do very well on the test bench, they really sound a lot more musical and correct in the way they reproduce tone and timbre to me. This is not just me being a mental tube junkie; those of you who have heard those wonderful Pass Aleph amplifiers know what I’m talking about. In all fairness, I have heard some very good push pull amplifiers, but they never seem to have that last bit of coherence that a good SET amplifier can achieve.

Just to avoid confusion, if you go to the tmh audio website, you will notice the price of the MD-300B is listed at \$7500. However, this is with Chinese 300B tubes. If you want a pair of current stock Western Electric 300B’s, the cost is an extra \$1000, saving you approximately \$200 off the cost of a new set. If you are not familiar with the Western Electric 300B’s, they have a claimed life of 40 thousand hours. When you look at it that way, \$1200 bucks for a PAIR of tubes isn’t that bad. I used to have to put a palette of 6550’s in my ARC Classic 120’s every two years (3000 hours) at about \$800 a throw and then spend an hour or two rebiasing, (The WAVAC features auto bias) so this isn’t as bad as it seems.

A rather compact package, the MD-300B is only 10 ½” wide and 16 ½” deep and 8” tall, but it weighs in at almost 40 pounds. Single ended triode designs tend to be pretty simple, so it appears that most of the weight is in the transformers. As in the rest of the WAVAC line, the MD-300B has custom output transformers from TANGO in Japan. The circuit features a 12AT7/ECC81 in the first stage with

no coupling capacitors, feeding a GE NOS 6Y6 (6L6 derivative) as a driver through an interstage transformer for the 300B output tube.

## Danger Will Robinson!

There is one thing to be VERY careful of when setting up any WAVAC amplifier that you must be aware of. Those cool glass shrouds for the tubes will break if you sneeze on them! These things are works of art and must be treated as such. Here’s the deal; once you have gently removed your MD-300B from its packing, put it where it is going to stay. Then, get out some gloves, remove the thick plastic wrapper, hold your breath and gently put it in place on the amplifier.

You probably think I’m being obsessive, but almost every other review I have read on these amplifiers has mention of how the glass got broken. Like a black car that has just been washed, the glass cover looks awesome when in place. Due to paranoia, I only used mine for the photo shoot and then packed it right back up for all of the listening tests. It’s like that guitar of Nigel’s in Spinal Tap, “don’t even look at it!”

## Initial set up

The WAVAC got here right on the tail of the Pacific Creek amplifier, reviewed earlier in this issue, so it has been fun to listen to a couple of great SET amplifiers this summer. I was very impressed that the MD-300B sounded very good out of the box, as did the EC-300B at Steve’s house. Within about 25 hours this amplifier settled into a sound

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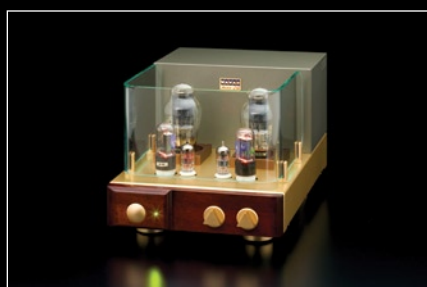
**Those cool glass shrouds for the tubes will break if you sneeze on them! These things are works of art and must be treated as such.**



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## MD-300B

*"... open, detailed & pure – simply, the WAVAC sound...."* – **Jeff Dorgay**,  
Tone Audio

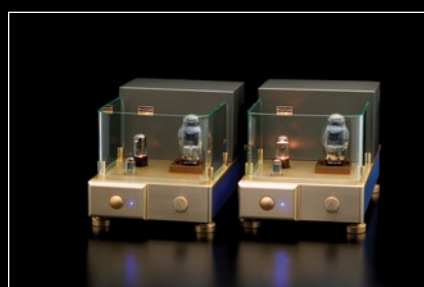
- 10 w/ch
- Use as stereo or integrated with 3 inputs & volume control
- \$7500



## MD-805m

*"...tight, fast, holographic WAVAC Audio SET sound..."* – **Steve Hoffman**

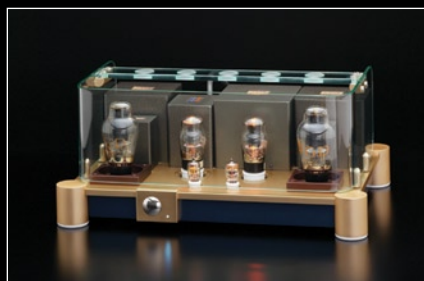
- 55 w/ch monoblocks
- 20-50 khz
- 10mm top plate for superb rigidity & sonics
- \$19k/pr.



## MD-300Bm

*"...extraordinary..."*  
– **Art Dudley**, Stereophile 8/05

- 10 w/ch monoblocks
- 20-75 khz
- 10mm top plate for superb rigidity & sonics
- \$20k/pr



## EC-300B

*"The EC-300B sounds frickin' awesome up in my mastering room. I think I've found my dream amp."* – **Steve Hoffman**

- 10 w/ch
- 20-100 khz (-3db)
- 10mm top plate for superb rigidity & sonics

# Argento Audio

*reference quality silver cables!*



*"I was amazed with the super exquisiteness and analytical capability of Serenity."* – **HiFi Review**

- Serenity
- Serenity Reference
- Serenity Master Reference
- Reference quality copper AC cords, too!

that did not change until I switched the output tubes to the Western Electric 300B's.

The MD-300B has a passive attenuator and three inputs, so with the right sources you can use it without a linestage. For the review period, I used it alone and with the Emotive Audio Poeta Linestage. When using it with a linestage, I had the volume control to maximum, taking it out of the circuit. Speakers were the 2nd Rethms, with 100db efficiency, and I used the Modwright Denon player for digital sources. Analog was provided by my heavily modified Rega P25, Sumiko Blackbird and the Whest .20 phono preamplifier. Tara Labs "The One" interconnects were used between amplifier and linestage as well as between the Modwright and linestage. Tara Labs RSC speaker cables were used between the WAVAC and the Rethms. Essential Sound Products The Essence Reference power cords were used in my complete system and the MD-300B was used with a Symposium Ultra base.

Once familiar with the sound, a set of Western Electric 300B's were substituted for the stock tubes and because this is a factory option, I felt it made sense to use these for the rest of the review. While many people will argue about which version of the 300B is really the "correct" one, I will go on record to say that I prefer the WE tube. Though it is more expensive, the new WE 300B's are beautifully made and have a much longer lifespan than the knock offs, and considering that they invented this tube in the first place, I think they probably know best how to make it.

According to Mr. Charles Whitner,  
*(continued)*





the president of Western Electric, they still have a number of proprietary operations and materials that their competitors do not possess, along with better quality glass and some other top secret stuff that can't be revealed or the tube ninjas will get all of us.

That being said, different flavors of 300B will sound different and if your system needs a bit of a push in one direction or another, it is worth investigating. What is right for me may suck for you. However, I did have the same experience with the WE tubes in the WAVAC as I did in the Pacific Creek amplifier; more taut, defined bass (and more of it), bigger soundstage and a smoother high end. Again, this could just be the match with my Rethms, so do a little research before you settle on the final tube for you. Jim from tmh tells me there is even more sound to be had by substituting the input tubes for NOS varieties, but so far the sound has been good enough that I haven't made the time to investigate.

### The WAVAC sound, defined

As I mentioned at the beginning of the review, the WAVAC sound is extremely detailed, yet smooth. At first listen, Skeptical Roy thought a bit TOO detailed but after going back home to his system and listening to the same music came back and bowed to the WAVAC in reverence. (Which always gives me a great thrill)

I spend anywhere from 8-14 hours a day listening to music, auditioning components and writing for our other publication, TONE-Photo, so I manage to get a lot of seat time listening. Sometimes I get a little too much seat time, but that's another story for another day.

The good news is that with speakers possessing 100db efficiency, a 10-watt per channel amplifier will play amazingly loud. Though the MD-300B will do this with no problem, it offers up a ton of detail and resolution at low to medium volume levels. Because the background is so silent, I never really feel the need to crank the volume as I do with other amplifiers.

I hate to use audiophile clichés, but the MD-300B really lets me see further into the music than anything else I have heard, except the EC-300B, regardless of source material.

When listening to music with a number of overdubs and harmonies, there always seems to be one or two more tracks there than I have heard before, or the individual vocalists have more of their own space, instead of blurring together. I noticed this quite a bit with the Pacific Creek amplifier, and on the same Lyle Lovett tracks it got even better. Now Emmylou Harris sounds like she is five feet away and about a foot to the left of my couch and Lyle Lovett sounds about four feet away from the couch.

You are probably thinking I've lost my mind and that there is no way this amplifier can be worth this kind of dough. But it is and once you have had the experience, it is hard to go back. I have always been very sensitive to midrange colorations, and often times feel that the push pull sound is a bit cloudy, lacking life. An over extended high end as is common is just that, over emphasized and pushy. This amplifier gets it right on the money. Everyone that heard this amplifier made the same comments, that music sounded very real, like the performers were right there in the room between the speakers. This is the WAVAC magic, unbelievable tonal accuracy.

The piano is always a great test and after having a Steinway in the house for about 12 years now, I have become very accustomed to the Steinway sound. When you listen to George Winston or Liz Story, you can hear that signature resonance that only a Steinway possesses. Put on a record using a different piano and it's not quite the same. Check the liner notes, sure enough; they are playing a Yamaha or something else.

This amplifier also does a great job at defining acoustic space. Where many other amplifiers do a reasonable job at expressing a three-dimensional sound space, the WAVAC goes a lot further. When I listened to the Jacqui Naylor East/West live recording, you can really hear the difference between the two

venues. When I listened to this on my other system consisting of a few different push pull tube and transistor amplifiers, it sounded good, but it all sounded like it was recorded in the same place. On the MD-300B, I was able to hear when she changed MICROPHONES. Damn, I've been hanging out with Steve Hoffman too much!!

One aspect I did not touch on yet is the passive volume control. As I mentioned with the Pacific Creek amplifier, this can be magic or somewhat below average. It just depends on your other components and cable choices. I preferred the sound with the Emotive Audio Poeta, with the volume control

(continued)

**You are probably thinking I've lost my mind and that there is no way this amplifier can be worth this kind of dough.**





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turned up all the way. Should I end up purchasing the review sample, I will end up bypassing the volume control and input selector completely, to get just a bit more detail. Again, this is one for careful auditioning. If you are one of the lucky ones not needing a preamplifier, the cost of this amplifier is much more reasonable.

**THE VERDICT**

The WAVAC MD-300B is a great single ended amplifier possessing a level of detail and accuracy that should keep most listeners happy for a lifetime (unless you get the itch to buy an EC-300B). There are only a couple of concerns; if you are new to the SET world you need to find a pair of high efficiency speakers that you love before jumping in this boat. Even using a pair of 90db speakers will not give you enough oomph to really enjoy the amplifier. All of your friends will tease you mercilessly when they tell you to turn it up and you shyly remark that “it’s up all the way”. It’s much more fun to have it turned up and say “check it out, this is only like, half a watt!”

I remind you again, that this amplifier will reveal a lot of detail and is merciless with everything connected to it. If you choose your other components carefully, you will be rewarded with some of the best sound you have ever heard. If not, the magic will not happen.

If you are already a fan of the SET sound and it’s associated requirements, or if you are in search of a different grail than the one you are currently pursuing, I urge you to give the MD-300B a listen. Highly recommended. 🎧



# You Can't Always Get What You Want, But If You BUY Sometimes You Can Get What You Need!



## A brief treatise on the value of jewelry shopping.

—Jeff Dorgay

One thing you might notice that is a bit odd when flipping through the pages of TONE is that we have an ad for a jeweler amongst all of the hi-fi and music ads. I thought a little bit of explanation is due as I don't want you to think we will turn into another Robb Report. I assure you we won't, but we have been approached by a number of people that want to cross-promote with us. The logic is that if you have spent a ton of money on hi-fi gear, you have a lot more money to spend on other luxury items. I keep trying to tell them that audiophiles spend almost all of their money on expensive

power cords and rare vinyl LP's, but here is one I think is worthwhile: an occasional trip to the jewelry store.

Nothing says "I really need that new pair of speakers" like a new Rolex, string of pearls or diamond something. If you are one of those fortunate people, like Mr. Hoffman or myself, who have a life partner that really digs music and audio, this may not be an article you need to read. For me, it was a Steinway that opened the door. When Jean and I first met, I encouraged her to take advantage of a great deal on a beautiful new, black, upright Steinway piano. A few months later, when I was carting in a new pair of black, upright Martin Logans for a demo listen, she said "but we don't need another pair of speakers."

*(continued)*





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Not that I am the manipulating sort, but I quipped, “we don’t need a \$15,000 piano either, hon” The Martin Logans stayed.

All kidding aside, here’s the bottom line – regardless of your gender, buying hi-fi is a very selfish thing to do. Unlike a sports car, which you can rationalize by saying “it could get us to the emergency room,” hi-fi is something you buy strictly for your enjoyment. So, to be fair, you need to do something equally selfish for the person in your life that doesn’t share your obsession. Now before the women in the audience write me off as a sexist jerk, I have a friend in Manhattan who could care less about music and his wife is a serious audiophile. Same deal – every now and then she has to show up with a gift-wrapped watch to keep her audio habit in check. Fine jewelry is the great equalizer.

So think about it.

You might call me crazy, but I guarantee that the next time you buy a really expensive piece of audio gear, leave it covered in the garage until you take your significant other out to dinner with a present, it will be an easy transaction. Just don’t call David Trout and ask him about turntables, he’s not an audiophile. ☺



# DIY Project:

## Rebuilding the Classic Dynaco Mark III Power Amplifier

—Jerold O'Brien

As I am the one in the group that is stuck in the 60's and 70's, it made perfect sense to JD that I was the man for this job. My listening room is full of a few versions of the Stereo 70, but no working pair of Mark IIIs. While some pooh pooh this amplifier, the transformers were the soul of these simple designs and even though they were not the last word in resolution, were still quite musical. Ask 10 audiophiles about the Mark III and they will all give you a different answer, but they usually love it or hate it. (SH thinks that all Dyna stuff sounds like crap, so there you go.)

Keeping with the philosophy of TONE-Audio to help you find reasonably priced gear and have fun while you are at it, the Mark III is a good candidate, because like my trusty BMW 2002, there is a whole cottage industry around the Dynaco line.



Whether you want to restore it to original condition or tweak it to infinity, there are lots of goodies available.

In addition to step by step photos, we will give you all the links to find what you need.

If you have a pair of working Mark III's, all the better, because then you know that the transformers are working properly. In 40 years, resistor, wire and capacitor technology has come a long way, so we will be gutting these, and rebuilding the

**...there is a whole cottage industry around the Dynaco line. Whether you want to restore it to original condition or tweak it to infinity, there are lots of goodies available.**

circuits to the original design, along with a fresh pair of circuit boards. If you are considering buying a pair of these to restore, they are typically in the 200 – 300 dollar range for each

one. As we have found a great source for reproduction chassis and cages, our suggestion is not to pay a premium price for one with perfect cosmetics.

For this project, we are going to make a few small mods, both electrically and cosmetically that make good sense and will bring this classic amplifier a bit more into the 20th century. Dan Wright from

Modwright has offered to put in his two cents worth and keep us from straying too far and there may even be a few other guest monsters joining the party.

When finished, we will tally up the costs (or not) and compare the rebuilt amplifiers to a pair of pristine originals for a listen-off. We will also bring the PrimaLuna ProLogue 5 to the dance to see if you are just better off to write a check for \$1300 and call it a day, for a great sounding 6550 based amplifier that doesn't require bias adjustments.

But this is not about the destination, it's about the journey. As we say in the car world, "there are two types of people, check writers and wrench turners." Same thing here, if your idea of fun is spending a couple of weeks to restore a classic and listen to something that you built yourself, you will really dig this.

At the end of the project, the amplifiers will be auctioned on EBay, so you will actually know just what was done to these two. As much as this will break my heart to see them go, there just isn't much more room around here for more electronics. If I ever want to get a steady girlfriend, I have to get rid of some of this stuff!

So, stay tuned and enjoy. We hope you pick up the soldering iron and join us! ☺



# Symposium Acoustics Fat Padz

-Jeff Dorgay

2 for \$99, 3 for \$149, 4 for \$199

[www.symposiumusa.com](http://www.symposiumusa.com) 973-616-4787

**E**veryone on the staff has been raving about these things since CES, so I wanted to give them a try for myself (JO even uses two of them on the microwave and swears the chili tastes better). A miniature Symposium platform at two by three inches, they are finished to the fanatical level of the other full sized Symposium products.

As with many vibration control devices, the level of effectiveness is not quite as dramatic with components that have more robust mechanical construction, but I found a set of four Fat Padz to help every component I used it with, enhancing soundstaging as well as lowering the noise floor somewhat. Surprisingly enough, three Fat Padz under my cheapie Pioneer 563 combination player, with an additional one on the top made a dramatic difference in sound quality. Using them underneath my inexpensive Klipch sub-woofer in my garage system gave a one-note boom box a fair amount of bass definition.

To get the maximum effectiveness out of your Fat Padz when using them between your equipment and whatever rack or shelf you have it on, be sure to get the pad on a flat part of the chassis bottom (not underneath the rubber foot) and if possible, right next to any screws protruding out of the chassis. This will offer the best mechanical grounding for spurious vibrations in your component.

According to Peter Bizlewicz at Symposium, you can use a Fat Pad wherever you

were using spikes before, with much better results and all of us at TONE-Audio concur. No matter where we swapped out our spikes and cones with Fat Padz, better tonal balance was achieved, with tighter mid-bass and more accurate imaging. Again, I found the Fat Padz to work very well under minimonitors, doing a much better job than anything I have tried with my Quad 12L's.

The only place I couldn't discern a difference was in the chili taste, so I'll leave that one up to you. (The Fat Padz did however, do an excellent job of damping the tinny feel of the microwave's cabinet) I would liken the difference to that of buying a much better set of interconnects between your preamplifier and amplifier in terms of magnitude, but because the Fat Padz really help out with midrange and upper bass bloat, they do more for your system's ultimate resolution.

The bad news is that if this is your first experience with Symposium products, you will want more. Watch for our review on the Ultra Base next issue. The Fat Padz are keepers. ☺



## Apple iPod Nano

-Jeff Dorgay

\$199 – 2gb, \$249 – 4gb

[www.apple.com](http://www.apple.com) 1-800-MY-APPLE

**A**ny negative iPod letters over this will be immediately flushed from our mailbox. YES, we know the iPod isn't a serious high fidelity digital player and YES Mp3s are not high resolution, but when you want to carry your music with you, the iPod is the coolest way to do so. As someone who already owns four iPods, the last thing I needed was another, but this one is so cute I couldn't resist. Apple seems to have learned something from past releases and you can actually buy an iPod Nano, which is a good thing.

Those of you using your iPod in the car either with a factory hookup or one of the current Alpine decks with the iPod interface,

*(continued)*



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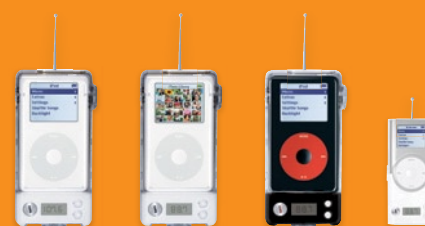
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your Nano will feel right at home, possessing the same interface connector as any of the current generation iPod or iPod Photo models. The downside is that you will need another dock for this one. If you are very careful and cheat, you can put it on your iPod Photo dock, but one solid bump and it's toast, so only try this at your own peril. (Hey, what's one more iPod accessory between friends?)

The sound quality was undistinguishable from the current iPod Photo. Again, one of the nicest things about the iPod family is that you can put uncompressed audio on one of these, giving you reasonably good audio playback. Now if someone would just come out with a great cable to interface between the audio outputs (instead of the headphone jack) possessing a great pair of RCA plugs on the other end, this would be all you need to drag to audio trade shows with your favorite tunes.

Last but not least, it is extremely small. Smaller than a standard business card in area and only .27 inches thick, this is a device that you will need to keep close track of, so you don't lose (or sit on) it. Because the Nano features standard flash memory similar to what is in your digital camera, there is no more hard disc and associated hard disc issues. Expect the Nano to be quite a bit more impervious to knocking around than the current hard-disk based iPods.

While the iPod Shuffle is handy and has its place, the Nano really steps up to the plate to make this a more useful device. Giving you the same control flexibility as the iPod Photo and the ability to store photos along with music, this one is hard to beat. ☺

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# The DH Labs Revelation Interconnects

-Jeff Dorgay, with some help from Mr. O'Brien

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**S**ilver interconnects are tricky, as they can sometimes sound a bit bright and sterile. Depending on the amount of system tuning you are trying to achieve, this might not always be to your advantage. The Revelation interconnects from DH Labs are anything but, offering an extremely neutral tonal balance.

Granted, equipment impedance and other factors can affect this to a degree, but after trying these cables on quite a few different systems, they had a similar sound (or actually lack of their own sound) quality. You can read more about the manufacturing process on the DH website, but to give you the short version, they use six pure silver conductors in an interleaved helical array. The strands are individually insulated

in a similar manner to the DH Air Matrix cables.

With a lot of questions in the industry about point of origin, the folks at DH take the high road and spend the extra money to build these in the US, so if that is a point of contention for you, this is another plus. All cables are hand terminated with their new HC alloy "Ultimate RCA" plug or XLRs.

As the resident build quality junkie, these cables are very impressive, from the cool little wooden box to the assembly quality. If I didn't know better, I would think I was holding a thousand dollar interconnect in my hands. But good looks don't mean much if the performance isn't there to back it up. Again, DH delivers in a supreme fashion. All of us at TONE-Audio have been using a number of different DH cables, so you will be hearing a lot more in the months to come.

The WAVAC MD-300B is very detailed and revealing of the most minute system changes, so it is a great cable tester. My reference cable in that system is The One from Tara Labs. A great cable that is very neutral and open, without being harsh, but has about a \$2000 price tag to go along with that sound. The Revelation was able to capture an awful lot of that sound for a lot less money, which was very impressive.

Moving to our second system, consisting of the Prima Luna amplifier and preamplifier, with the Roan Audio speakers, I could not hear enough difference between the DH cable and the mega expensive stuff to justify spending \$4000 more on cables. When I substituted the Poeta preamplifier for the Prima Luna, the difference between preamps was very apparent, so these

cables offer a lot of resolution for the money. My advice to a potential purchaser is that you could upgrade your system a long way until you outgrow these cables and in all but the most expensive systems, I would just start with the Revelation interconnects and spend a bit more money on source components. (Or records!)

In a very wide range of test listening, with every kind of music, the Revelation kept things in order, with a smooth presentation that was not lacking in anything. My hot button is graininess in the mids and highs and I was very pleased with these cables ability to do so well in this area. The highest compliment I can pay the Revelation interconnects is that once I installed them, I didn't think about them again. I was just able to enjoy the music and not ponder what if I swapped those cables for something else...

Upgrading cables can be part quest for the Holy Grail, part madness, and part braggadocio. If you want great sound without the premium price, the Revelation is tough to beat. As always, I suggest a demo with your system to be sure, but I think you will be very pleased. Highly recommended. ☺



# The Rega Planar 3 Motor Upgrade

- Jerald O'Brien

\$179

[www.amusicdirect.com](http://www.amusicdirect.com) 800-449-8333

If you just happen to have an older style Rega Planar 3 that you still enjoy, but would like a touch more refinement, with a minimum of skills, you can update the motor in your table to the one from the current P3. All you need is a screwdriver; a soldering iron and a little bit of shrink tubing (to do the job really tidy, otherwise some electrical tape will work nicely). The whole job should only take about half an hour.

This new motor has substantially less noise and vibration, thanks to trickle down research from the P9 and is now fastened to the plinth of your table by an adhesive instead of the old screws, acting somewhat as a gasket. Rega claims less wow, flutter and rumble with the new motor and I must concur. Doing the swap on my 22-year-old Planar 3 was a no brainer, nothing squirrely came up and it was back to playing records almost instantly.

The table with the new motor definitely has a better speed accuracy. Where my old Planar 3 always seemed a bit fast (a known Rega characteristic), the new motor seems spot on. The difference in sound quality is definitely noticeable, with the backgrounds being a bit quieter and the soundstage a bit larger. Overall, a bit more musical sound almost as if you bought a better interconnect or new tubes.

For \$179, it is definitely worth the price. Be careful though, once you start tweaking the loyal P3, you can get carried away! Music Direct has a lot of goodies for this table! 🎵





## A Somewhat Different Approach to Music Reviews

While we hope that TONE-Audio will appeal to your equipmental sensibilities, the main reason I started pursuing this passion many years ago was to facilitate the enjoyment of music. My take on the music vs. gear debate sides with the music and when it does side with the gear, I have to agree with David Chesky about going for the tone. That's why we named the magazine as we did!

But my music writers are music lovers and musicians, not audiophiles, primarily. Mr. O'Brien and myself are the audiophiles and Joe, Nicole and Norwood our music editor all play instruments and have large musical vocabularies but are not really audiophiles (not yet, anyway). Together we are having a lot of fun as we share our various guilty pleasures about music while I am teaching them how to assemble and set up a decent hi-fi system. We have a few other guest writers that will pop in from time to time that all have large collections of music as well as a large mental filing cabinet for things of this nature.

I have encouraged all of our music writers to talk about the music they enjoy most. We will obviously talk about some new releases, but will be throwing in a lot of our favorites as well. Hopefully, we will help you find more great music to listen to and perhaps send you down a few new paths.

As this is our introductory issue, I want you to know that we will be expanding our music coverage significantly in the year to come, so pardon our dust as we build! For you analog lovers, don't despair, between getting the magazine launched, turntable setup had to take a back burner this issue, so our reviews are mostly digital this time. There will be plenty of vinyl to come. 🎵

### HUNTING FOR GOOD TUNES

By Joe Golfen

I went to a party the other day, which is a bit of a change for me. Usually my friends and I just wander the streets of Phoenix, AZ looking for obvious signs of life amid the quiet ranch houses; we usually don't find any. But that night we did, and after mingling for a brief while, I found a few new friends to talk to. We were having a great time, laughing and getting to know each other, when somebody asked it. The big question.

## “So what kind of music do you like?”

I was hoping I could go the whole night without dealing with the difficult task that was now set before me. I looked at group I was talking to trying to gauge their level of musical knowledge. Their every-guy clothes – shorts and semi-ironic t-shirts – gave me no clue as to what they were into. So I went with my usual response; “indie rock, stuff”

## Blank stares.

Then one of the guys said “India rock? Like from India? That's weird.” You'd be surprised how often that happens. Then I have to explain what I mean, rattling of commonly known indie bands like Franz Ferdinand or Modest Mouse, but that doesn't always work. Then I have to switch to the “alternative rock” response which usually sparks a glimmer, but they still look at me blankly for a little while. People often give the obligatory “cool, man” response and move on. I'm glad when they do.

This is why I hate small talk. This question kills it for me, because I never know what to say. This seems strange for a man who lives with an encyclopedia of lyrics and music trivia dominating the central part of his brain. (I used to know what this part of the brain was called, but I replaced that knowledge with facts about the new Bright Eyes album.) Or maybe that's exactly why I stammer through my response every time.

*(continued)*





If I were a more casual listener I might be able to live with a generic response. You hear people respond to this question all the time. They just rattle off genres like Rap, Rock or Pop, or get a little more clever and say the always-colorful “anything but country” line.

But I can't. I like a lot of little genres and I feel the neurotic need to say all of them when describing my tastes. But I won't do that to you. I'll just tell you my favorites, which are indie rock, post-punk, new wave, singer-songwriter, punk, brit-rock, adult alternative, alt-country and old-fashion rock and roll.

In this column I will focus the most on these genres, since I don't think you should review what you don't enjoy because you'll almost always give them bad reviews. But I will try to be eclectic and pick albums out of categories like jazz, hip-hop and pop, which are not my favorites, but are totally valid and creative. There are great artists in every genre, and I'm going to try to cover all the bases.

## So that's the kind of music I like. Now, aren't you sorry you asked?

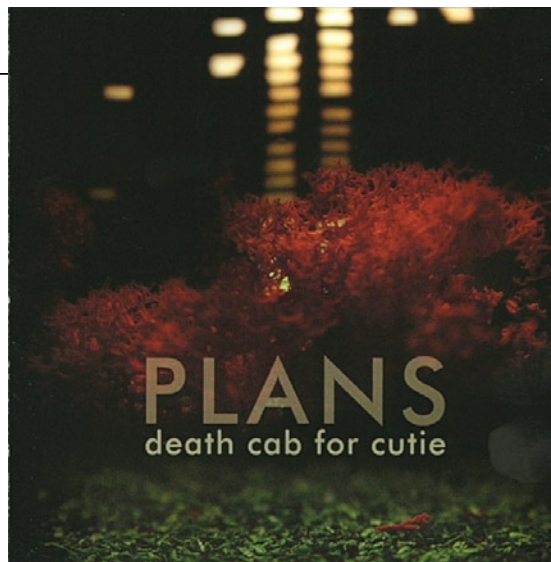
### Death Cab for Cutie

#### *Plans*

After being shoved into the limelight over the past two years – with a hit album, a fantastic side project, a major label offer and, of course, being name-dropped on The O.C. constantly – Death Cab for Cutie needed to escape it all. So they holed up in an old barn in the rural section of their native Washington state and wrote and recorded an album that is as lush and flowing as it is muted and mournful.

Success seems to have changed front-man Ben Gibbard's perceptions slightly. On *Plans*, he spends less time mulling over the lost loves of his life and turns his attention instead to higher things. The subjects of birth and death are at the center of this album, making for songs that are simultaneously dark and hopeful.

On the album's first single, *Soul Meets*



*Body*, Gibbard wishes he could break free from the shackles of his physical self, and be reborn anew, a thought he repeats on the sadly sweet *Summer Skin* and *Matching Bands* of New York.

The highlight of the album, though, comes in the fifth track with the quietly beautiful *I'll Follow You Into the Dark*. This richly layered tune features Gibbard alone on the acoustic guitar, telling someone he loves that no matter what awaits them in the afterlife, heaven, hell or only darkness, they will always be together.

Although Gibbard takes center stage on this album with both his songwriting and airy vocals, the other members of Death Cab make *Plans* feel richer than any thing they've ever done before. They're playing has never sounded so complete unique, managing to add profound yet subtle overtones to Gibbard's songs.

*Plans* even manages to turn what was once the weakest part of Death Cab, the piano-based songs, and turn them into works of beauty. On the band's previous efforts, these songs would drag and never reach any level of greatness. But here, on songs like *Brothers on a Hotel Bed* and *What Sarah Said*, the piano playing is accented by complex drumming and atmospheric instruments.

Producer/guitarist Chris Walla really shines through on this album as well, finally managing to smoothly layer the band's melodies with electronic beats and clattering

synthesizers. On albums like *Transatlanticism* or *The Forbidden Love EP*, Walla's production sometimes created a hollow and mechanical sound, leaving Gibbard's falsetto vocals echoing in the empty halls. But on *Plans*, Walla masters the sound he was always going for, without losing any of the organic playing of the band.

*Plans* stands as a shining example of how to make a follow-up to your breakthrough album. Death Cab manages not to simply recreate *Transatlanticism*, instead continuing to explore their artistic and lyrical possibilities, without going over the edge and losing their original sound. Not an easy task, as bands like Wilco and The Strokes will attest too, but Death Cab for Cutie manages to continue to prove why they got pushed into the spotlight in the first place.

**ED NOTE:** For those of you that are vinyl enthusiasts, just say no to the LP version of this collection; the quality is pretty poor, compressed and sounding like a Columbia House close out. If you love DCFC, stick with the CD.

**FINAL TAKE: KEEPER**

### The Click Five

#### *Greetings From the Imire House*

Since the likes of Ashlee Simpson and Good Charlotte have all but faded off the radar, the big-wigs over at Atlantic Records must have decided that they needed a new group to make pre-teens run to the record store. They had to have the looks and, most of all, they had to have the hooks to rope the kiddies in.

Their prayers were answered by The Click Five, a power-pop band from Boston with boy-band faces and melodies that won't leave your head. They wear matching suits and have the synth-rock sound that is all the rage nowadays. They even have a guy who

(continued)



rocks the keytar.

But it's a shame that The Click Five had to be so obviously marketed, and that their album had to be so overproduced, because they are actually pretty good. They also had plenty of help along the way. Someone spent big money bringing in some serious 80's muscle, guests like The Car's guitarist Elliot Eston, who plays for two tracks on the album, including *Angel to You (Devil to Me)*, which was co-written by former KISS member Paul Stanley.

Adam Schlesinger, the songwriting genius behind Fountains of Wayne, was also called in to write two songs for the album, including the first single *Just the Girl*, as well as *I'll Take My Chances*. These songs never quite sparkle with the same wit and wry humor Schlesinger usually employs, but they do stick in your head and manage some great lines, such as the pathetically sweet, *She laughs at my dreams, but I dream about her laughter*.

While the guests add an interesting spark to the album, The Click Five soar the highest when left to their own devices. The album kicks off with *Good Day*, a pop gem you'll be singing for days. Strangely enough, it's keyboardist Ben Roman who manages to write the best songs on the album – the Beatlesque *Time Machine* and the angular retro-rocker *Pop Princess*. The band gets the sound just right on these songs, making them fun and surprising cool.

But on occasion, The Click Five veer dangerously close to the line that separates the worlds of punchy Power Pop and generic, overblown Emo Rock. Tunes like *Friday Nights* and *Lies* sound too beefy and the lyrics aren't clever enough to make the songs work, drifting away from bands like Fountains of Wayne and into the territory of Fallout Boy and Yellowcard. The chorus of the third track, *Catch Your Wave* even shares the same melody as The Used's *Blue and Yellow*.

Part of this genre-jumping can be blamed on the album's producer, who instead of going for the fuzzed out 60's sound the band deserves, decided to make them slicker, heavier and more easily digested by the masses.

The Click Five deliver a solid performance, despite their obvious, and at times detrimental, marketing strategy. Hopefully next time, The Click Five will be allowed to show what they can do, rather than being molded into someone's idea of a trendy band, while missing the point entirely.

#### FINAL TAKE: KEEPER

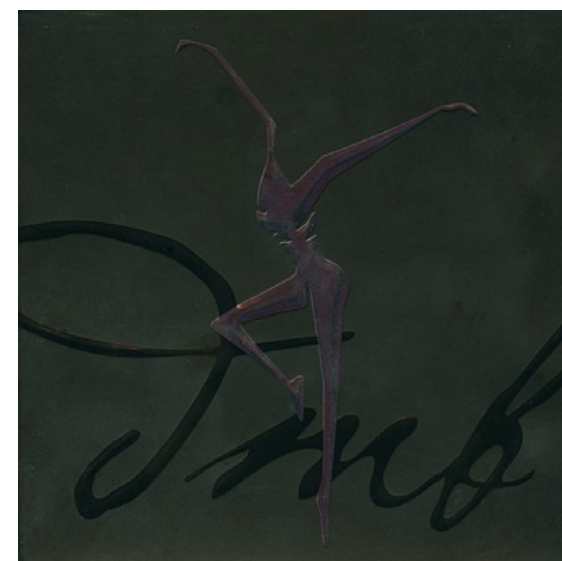
#### Dave Matthews Band

##### *Stand Up*

A mid-life crisis can be tough. Some people (mostly men) reach the point where they say "What am I doing as an accounting attorney? I should be living like a rock star!" Then they usually get a Corvette or a boat and everything is settled. But what do you do if you're already a rock star?

That might have crossed Dave Matthews' mind when he went into the studio to record *Stand Up*, his first album of new material with his band in over four years. He's done more than most musicians ever dare to dream in his 12 year career, going from a jammy college radio act to international supergroup, touring sold-out arenas around the world.

But even with his success, Dave might have felt a little bored doing the



same old DMB fodder. So he hired a new producer, Mark Batson, best known for his work with Seal, 50-cent, the Game, and Eminem, to offer a new perspective to the group.

This trick worked before on the 2001's *Everyday*, in which Alanis Morissette producer Glen Ballard managed to electrify and streamline the band's sound, without taking away from the core energy and flow of the group.

But on *Stand Up*, Batson's ultra slick production creates a stifled album. The band is never allowed to do their thing and play to their full potential. Batson instead slows everything down, turns down the guitars, violins and woodwinds, and cranks up the bass and airy piano. This wouldn't be so bad, if bassist Stefan Lessard and drummer Carter Beauford were playing their usual jazzy fare, but here they sound like dull studio musicians, just there to keep the beat.

The first half of *Stand Up* plays out this way, making good songs like the album opener *Dreamgirl* or the singable *Everybody Wake Up (Our Finest Hour Arrives)* sound flat and lifeless, a rare occurrence on the rest of the DMB's catalog.

The first time the band seems like

(continued)





WELCOME HOME

they're playing as a whole is on the album's first single *American Baby*. While this is not one of the better songs the band has ever done, it does feel more like they were in the same room when it was recorded.

Even the lovely piano ballad *Out of My Hands* feels hollow and could have made good use of violinist Boyd Tinsley, who could have added some warmth to the song's cold exterior.

It's not until the ninth track *Hello Again* that the producer seems to loosen his strangle-hold on the group. This track offers a fun country flare, reminiscent of songs like *Two Step* from albums past.

The last four songs on the album turn out to be the best. *Stolen Away on 55th & 3rd* and *You Might Die Trying* rise to the top as some of the strongest and most beautiful songs the DMB have ever recorded. And not surprisingly, they suffer the least from Batson's over-production and let the band members play their hearts out. The album ends with the sexy *Hunger For the Great Light*, which finds Matthews making his most elicited come-ons since he asked someone to hike up her skirt and the world to him.

If *Stand Up* can teach us anything, it's to always be true to who you are. When the band relaxes instead of trying to reinvent itself, the results turn out to be something worth standing up about. Hopefully Dave Matthews will learn from his mid-career crisis and ditch the producer, buy himself a nice Porsche and go back to being a great musician.

**FINAL TAKE: KEEPER**

## iCub : Hi-fi for the iGeneration

iCub is a "amplifier-subwoofer" with no less than three BASH amplifiers: two 100 W amplifiers to drive a pair of loudspeakers and one 200 W amplifier to drive the subwoofer. It is a very simple solution that brings a "big" sound for your new digital sources. Connect an iCub to your Sib & Co speakers.... Connect your iPod or Wi-Fi hub... Raise the volume.... Listen....

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**FOCAL**  
the Spirit of Sound



## CHOOSE YOUR BEATS RESPONSIBLY

By Nicole Wilson

**W**e love the beats of hip-hop, but too many artists are rewarded with money and air time for sending out messages without consequence, and simply cater to our culture's obsessive consuming habits. We spend billions of dollars on fast food and consequently we are the most obese as a nation; in the same regard billions of people are listening to the radio and watching MTV which slows our sense of imagination.

If the FDA created the four food groups in hopes that we will eat nutritional foods then perhaps we should adopt a four music groups concept to help everyone weed out the music that will harm your health. Mine begins with a solid abundance of classic rock. **People that can't tell the difference between the Beatles and the Rolling Stones should have their stereo equipment revoked on the spot.** Next, a healthy dose of pop and alternative rock; this is where I get my helpings of Björk, Radiohead and PJ Harvey. The junk group is the thousand-calorie music you indulge in occasionally; the stuff you don't dare tell anyone you enjoy.

The fourth and final group would be the influential world of hip-hop: beats are crucial; it's the lifeline of music altogether. It is this group where we begin to have problems. All, however, is not lost. There is good hip-hop out there, if you are willing to look. Here are some albums that I enjoy that bring forth incredible music, oddity and humor, but most of all produce a good time that stimulates the imagination.

### Feeling And Sounding Good

The music of the Roots is exceptional because they incorporate a full band and produce rhymes that give you something to think about. After the release of *Things Fall Apart*, the Roots went back to the studio in 2000 and worked on material for 2 years, emerging with the album *Phrenology*. Songs like *Water* with lyrics about protecting yourself from the streets and preserving your creativity and sanity, take you into the danger of the water by keyboard, percussion, and, my favorite, the thermion. *Break You Off* is another great with vocal arrangements that begin with smooth beats and end with strings that speak to the sensitivity of attraction. Guests include Nelly Furtado, Jill Scott, Talib Kweli and an awesome jam with Cody ChestnutT on *The Seed* (2.0). The rhymes are interesting and the music overall is just beautiful.



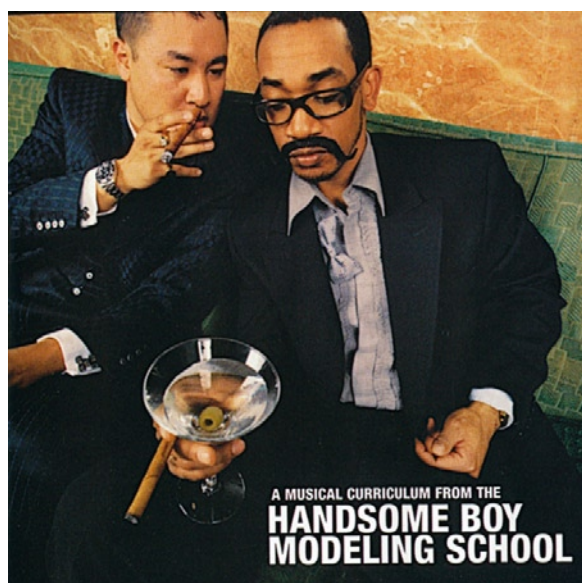
Leela James's Music came out earlier this year, and her urban sound is fun and her topics varied. You hear her musical influences throughout the album, which is slightly distracting but her voice pulls it all together. When Leela sings, she is not so much a voice of wisdom or reason like Erykah Badu or Lauryn Hill; hers is the voice of experience. She sings a sorrowful cover of No Doubt's *Don't Speak* that is admirable, and the song *Mistreating Me*, although nothing lyrically groundbreaking, speaks to your heart. Her moods have an excellent range, but they do seem to dwell on subjects being produced by many female artists as of late.

### The Rare Jewel

For those who enjoy albums in which obscurity and anonymity are exciting, then explore the world of Nathaniel Merriweather and Chest Rockwell, and the creation of Handsome Boy Modeling School. I bought this album when it came out in 1999 and the beats were innovative and

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laced with humor. Dan the Automator (Dan Nakamura) and Prince Paul (Paul Huston) collaborated with Grand Puba and Sadat X of Brand Nubian on *Once Again (Here to Kick One for You)* with a lazy beat mixed with a sample of *Old Fashion Love Song* by Three Dog Night. Roisin Murphy and J-Five does the vocals on *The Truth* that lay over a great jazz piano. Her voice is sultry and you can smell the smoke in the club as she sings. Dell (Dell the Funky Homosapien) brings the food for thought in *Magnetizing* and shares the mic with Dave of De La Soul on *The Projects*. *The P Jays* brings a light-hearted, quirky gaze on the ghetto, and the record *Get a Life*, performed by Chris Elliot and Bob Elliot, is sampled numerous over the album to include the ups and downs of male modeling.

Dan the Automator went on to collaborate with Blur's ex-vocalist Damon Albarn and created the Gorillaz. Cartoonist Jamie Hewlett created these animated characters that are the visual presentations of the group. The anonymity of the group enables Albarn and crew to explore and produce music on a whole different page. *Demon Days* came out this year and was produced by Danger Mouse; the beats

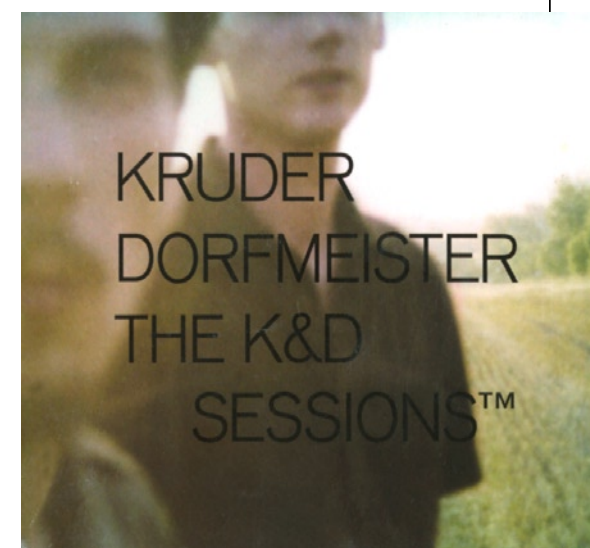
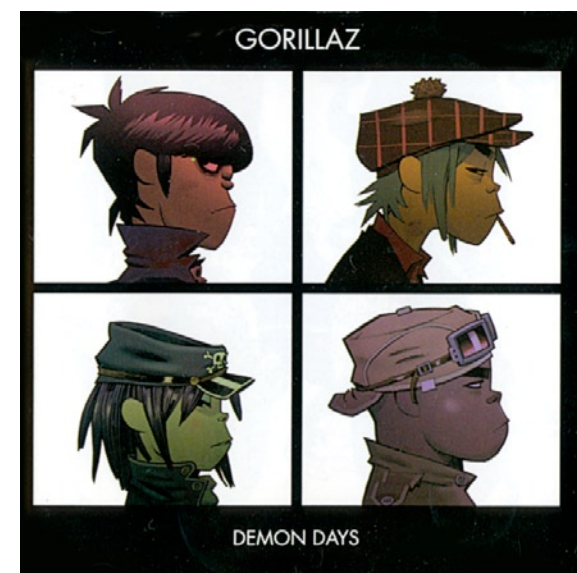
are simple but have an eerie quality to them that draws you into another world. The most popular track is *Feel Good, Inc.* with guests De La Soul because it just flat out rocks. The whole album has a definite shape and it's a long, winding road in a scary forest where the shadows could be monsters. Dennis Hopper reads *Fire Coming Out of the Monkey's Head* which tells the tale of a town's sacred ground being invaded by strange men. Between the incredible beats and relaxed, yet out of place, sound, the album speaks to the fear and unease of the world we see today.

Just to kick it old-school for a minute, publisher JD suggested I revisit a favorite of his from Kruder and Dorfmeister, *The K&D Sessions*. Both of these guys have gone on to new projects but this is a great disc with a wide range of styles from the hip-hop style remix of Bone Thugs and Harmony's 1st Of The Month to the eurodisco remix of the Alex Reece cut, *Jazzmaster*, sounding a lot like a precursor to Supreme Beings of Leisure.

Both discs are really engaging, and my favorite track is *Bug Powder Dust* by Bomb The Bass, having a nice mix of beats along with some very ethereal sounds as well. None of the rhymes on this disc are terribly deep, but it is reminiscent of when hip-hop was a bit more light hearted and even good for a laugh or two.

### Good Options

So many people think that rap sounds all the same and hip-hop is dangerous to listen to at all. Sadly, so much of the creativity and talent is drowned out by the big names that make the big bucks. But just below the surface there is creative and positive work going on, rejuvenating the culture with excellent beats and spreading the message of knowledge and humor.



## A FEW OF MY FAVORITES

By Norwood Brown

Publisher JD gave me an easy one for our first issue.

# “Hey, you’re a drummer, tell me about a few of your favorite drum/percussion albums.”

The four selections that I pulled from my current catalogue are as follows: Babatundi Olatunji “Circle of Drums,” the “Charlie Watts Jim Keltner Project,” “At the Edge” by Mickey Hart, and “Planet Drum” by Mickey Hart.

This is a whole lotta rhythm for any CD player to handle. I do not expect any of you to play these CD’s back to back, but being a trained percussionist, I settled in as one might cozy up to a warm fire. Before I comment on them, though, I would like to clarify some musical concepts that run concurrently through all four. The reason for producing a percussion CD can be found in many of the same reasons a visual artist paints. In our four cases here, rhythm is about space and time, with a choice. Space is the size of your canvas, time is the “where” you are on the canvas, and the instruments are the color choices and shapes that define the subject.

Now, on to the reasons many of you may want to have one or more of these CD’s added to your collection.

The first offering, *Circle of Drums*, is from Babatundi “Baba” Olatunji, who is considered the father of African music in the United States. With this weighty title in my head, and recalling the countless contributions he has made to the world of music in the last sixty years, I can merely graze the surface of this musical ambassador’s body of work. Babatundi’s 1959 Columbia Record release *Drums of Passion* sold over 5 million copies and for many, including yours truly, was the first time we heard authentic African music. In 1964, Baba was a huge musical hit and draw to the World’s Fair in New York. Shortly thereafter, he opened the renowned Olatunji Center for African Culture in Harlem.

His *Circle of Drums* is a wonderful exercise in allowing all the percussive voices to sound like unique characters in a universal musical opera. Most of the songs offered here carry many base line and polyrhythmic voices that enable this project to start and end with several unexpected twists, e.g. the “back beat,” which is so intrinsic to rock, pop, blues, and jazz. Thanks to Chesky’s purist recording, this one transports many one-of-a-kind African sounds into your livingroom, and

the drum tones captured are perfect! The instruments are too numerous to mention here, but are worthy of your own musical expedition.

Both the second and third discs are works by Mickey Hart of Grateful Dead fame. What some readers may not know is that Mickey was first a rudimental drummer, which is to say that his formative years were spent in drum and bugle corps. Before joining the Dead, though, Mickey was wholly absorbed with poly-rhythmic music and especially the music of Babatundi. His *Planet Drum* CD won the 1992 Grammy for best world music album, and he went on to produce several of Babatundi’s recordings, including *Drums of Passion*, and *The Beat*, by Carlos Santana. Mickey has long been in the media forefront as a champion of ethnic percussion music and the universal drum circle and believes, as do I, that music and the sharing of it is the highest and purest way to communicate between cultures and individuals.

This fella can really get into the zone and be all things musical. To discover new sounds, rhythm twists and themes, you need to dive into the musical pool and swim where the current takes you. Mickey Hart, like the other artists reviewed here, went into the studio with the expectation that he would be

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surprised by those wonderful accidents that simply happen when all the musical elements assemble in one place. Great rhythm and great time will occur together only under such circumstances.

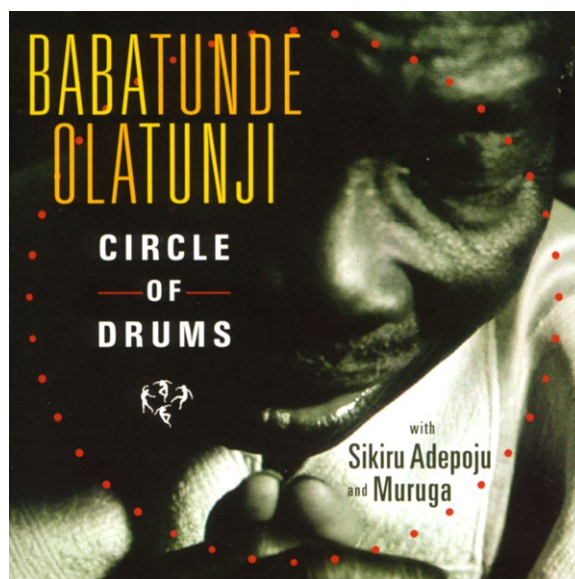
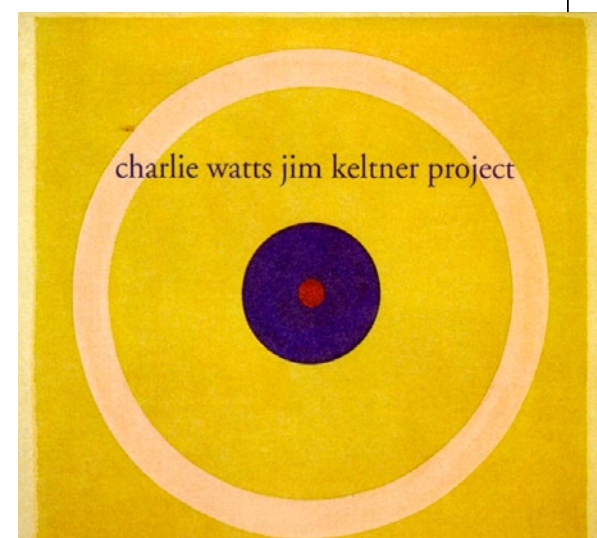
The last CD is the Charlie Watts/Jim Keltner Project. These two drumset percussion artists have had outstanding music careers, Charlie with the Rolling Stones, and Jim a studio legend. Their longstanding friendship and desire to perform together resulted in this 2000 project, which is a tome to nine great drummers of the 20th century. Each song title is simply the artist's name: Shelly Manne, Art Blakey, Kenny Clarke, Tony Williams, Roy Haynes, Max Roach, Airtio, Billy Higgins, and Elvin Jones/The Elvin Suite.

What is unique here, is that so many of the tunes were assembled using digital samples, which in 2000 was like an artist emailing licks, soundbites, and riffs to each other. Although common now, it was groundbreaking then. The insights Jim and Charlie laid down on these tracks make this old veteran reflect, laugh, and listen. This CD is one I pull out whenever I want to simply mix things up and be inspired.

These guys were able to really capture the feel of each one of these great drummers, yet it still allows a lot of their own personalities and styles creep through. Unfortunately, ProTools takes a bit of its toll on this one, not nearly the richness of tone that the *Circle of Drums* recording possessed. (I am slowly turning into an audiophile!)

As we go to press, I've been made aware of another new percussion CD offering, titled *Ritmo y Canto*. Drummers from bands all over the roots map get together to play Cuban folk rhythms on this one. Watch for a future review, when I visit this music again.

Give every one of these CD's a listen and then go beat something good.



## THE BASTARD MEDIUM

By Jerold O'Brien

# Here are two things most audiophiles find really offensive, pre-recorded cassette tapes and Ted Nugent.

But let me tell you, when you are on the outskirts of Tulsa, out of music and patience (I had a steady girlfriend then...) and forced to choose between Ted Nugent, Air Supply and Loverboy, it had to be the Nuge. If you have read the magazine serially, you already know that I no longer have a girlfriend, I like 60's and 70's rock and I can always distract our publisher by talking about vintage BMW's. So for this first column, here are a few of my favorites I'd like to share with you.



### **Ted Nugent** *Super Hits*

Of course the sound quality of this tape sucks in a major way, but I have a number of the albums that comprise this group of super hits and most of them aren't bad, especially the first, self-titled *Ted Nugent*, on Epic. All of Ted's other big hits are on this tape, including *Cat Scratch Fever* and my personal favorite, *Wango Tango*. By the time we got home, this one actually got played about three times along with Cheech and Chong's *Big Bambu*, which ceased to be funny about halfway through the second listening. Shut up!

### **Tommy Bolin** *Teaser*

Though Tommy Bolin was a hot guitarist that played in a number of bands including the James Gang and Deep Purple, he managed to release two very

good solo studio albums before his uneventful passing away from a heroin overdose in December of 1976, shortly after I started college.

*Teaser* was his first effort and was released on Nemperor records, a division of Warner Brothers in November of 1975 and featured guest appearances by a number of heavy hitters in the business including Jeff Pocaro, Phil Collins, David Sanborn, Jan Hammer and Prairie Prince. In case you didn't hear it the first time, most of the tunes consisted of a lot of great guitar work that had much more of a funky, almost fusion jazz/prog groove than when Bolin played with the JG or DP.

One of my favorites and a staple of live shows was *Wild Dogs*, featuring one of Bolin's best solos ever. A year later he followed *Teaser* with *Private Eyes*, another rock classic and then he was gone. If you enjoy music from this era and don't have these two, they are a must.

### **The Tubes** *Young and Rich*

One of the most exciting bands to see live in the 70's and well into the 80's (though they never got much airplay) was The Tubes. I saw these guys many times and on *The Young and Rich* tour, I happened to have a friend that worked at the local record store, scoring us a pair of front row seats.

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Because all of the members of the Tubes were such great musicians, their brilliance on stage always translated to record. Of all The Tubes records, *Young and Rich* is the pinnacle, because the songs were incredibly witty and the recording is killer. Ah, the old days of vinyl, when they used record liner space telling you how many Neumann microphones were in the studio and that NO compression was added to this record.

If you can find an early pressing of this record, they sound great. Nice, smooth highs and a big sound, with a lot of very cool textural stuff happening, especially on *Slipped My Disco*. While The Tubes will always be known for their anthem, *White Punks on Dope*, my all time favorite Tubes tune will always be *Don't Touch Me There*. The Tubes went on to record a number of other great albums, but *Young and Rich* deserves a spot in your retro-record collection.

### Queen

*A Day at the Races*

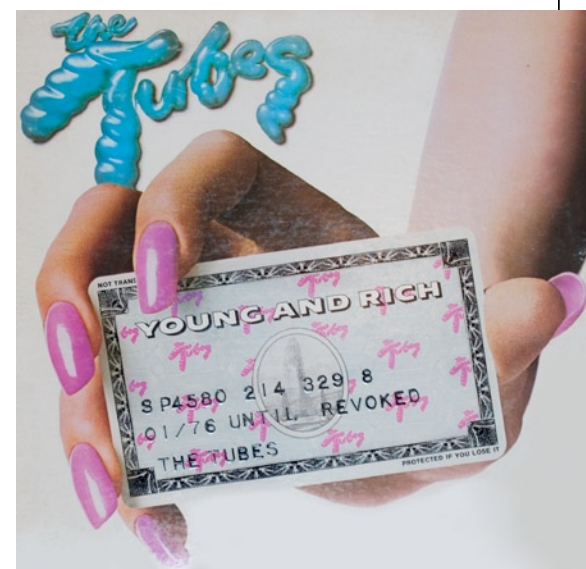
Leave it to me to be just a bit off the mark. I know *Night at the Opera* and *News of the World* really rock, but *A Day at the Races* rocks more. Why? Two reasons; *A Day at the Races* has *Tie Your Mother Down* on it, which is possibly one of the greatest rock songs of all time. There is a great 24kt remaster on DCC, but it will cost you dearly on the web to find one.

I always loved the Queen sound, with Brian May's outstanding guitar work and those awesome layered vocals, that Queen could never quite seem to pull off live because back in 1976, sound reinforcement was not the advanced science it is today.

If you are stuck with the vinyl pressing of this it is highly compressed and better off played on a low resolution system, at extreme volume, but if you can find the DCC version, it is a real treat and leaves you even more in awe of this groups talent. For those craving more of the high quality

Queen experience, MoFi also remastered *Night at the Opera* on LP and a few others on 24kt CD. Not to be missed.

So, before I start talking about records that will really annoy you, it's time to go for now. If you still have these records and they are in good shape, give them a spin. Hopefully, they will bring back some good memories. If you are thinking about visiting this part of the music world, these are a few of my favorites to check out.



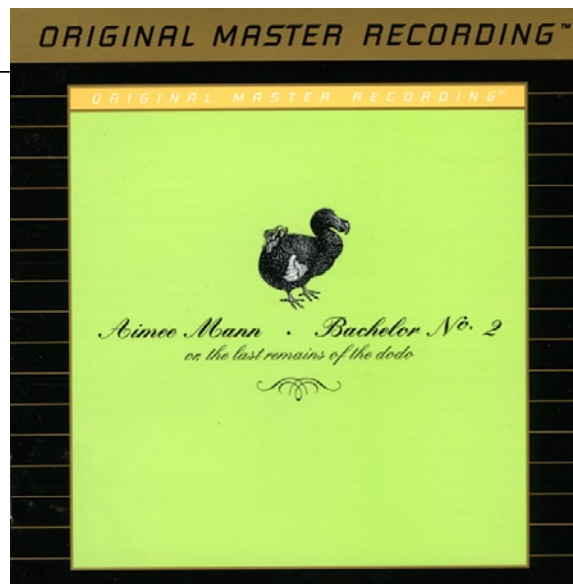
## AUDIOPHILE DISCS

By Jeff Dorgay

# Just like speech class in high school, I always waited to go last—hoping I could wear the audience down.

One of the main reasons we started this little enterprise is my love of music. All kinds of music. Sometimes too much music for family and friends, but that's the way it goes when you are obsessed. Everyone on the TONE – Audio staff has a pretty wide range of taste and we will key in on different areas from time to time.

Let's move right along to audiophile records for a minute. Every remastering engineer has a specific way they like to get the job done, but for me the main criteria is, does it sound better than the original? (Or at least quieter?) I have heard many audiophiles argue about whether a remastered album is right or "good enough". While you may not always agree with the way they do what they do, some of those older albums are in pretty bad shape, so I'm usually pretty happy to see the new ones. Here are a few I've been listening to recently.



### Aimee Mann

*Batchelor No.2*

Mobile Fidelity SACD

I'm a huge Aimee Mann fan, and this is one of my favorite discs of all time, period. The crew at MoFi did a great job on this one, preserving everything I love about the original, while keeping the treble balance just right.

Aimee Mann's vocals come through with a layer of grunge absent from the standard disc, but there is still just a touch of muffled highs. I am assuming that this is much more a result of having to deal with a heavy dose of ProTools on the master tape, not any wrong doing by Mobile Fidelity. Their SACD sounds worlds better than the original.

This songs on this disc have been reviewed to death elsewhere, so I'll keep this one brief.

*Batchelor No.2* was Mann's third release and by far a big step forward from her last record; *I'm With Stupid*, showing some real growth as a songwriter. Even though it's very cool that she has Elvis Costello co-write one of the songs, it's not like she needed the help. The songwriting is what really makes this one of my favorite records of all time; no

one captures angst and trepidation quite like Aimee Mann. Every time I listen to the refrain in *Ghost Town*, it makes me think of how much I hated living in the Sim City world of suburban Phoenix and how glad I am that I escaped.

While this is not a perfect recording, it passes the audiophile disc test with flying colors, having significantly better sound than the original. If you like this one, pick up the MoFi version of Aimee Mann's next album *Lost in Space* on LP. It is also quite good.

### Montrose

*Montrose*

Musical Fidelity Gold CD

I know, I can't possibly be an audiophile and enjoy this kind of thing. Well, why are they making a gold CD of it then? In case you aren't familiar with guitarist Ronnie Montrose, this was the band that gave Sammy Hagar his start. He's listed on the album as "Sam Hagar". JO and I saw these guys in college with this line up and they ruled. After Sam left the band (with most of the members of this band) to go solo, Ronnie Montrose formed a number of different bands over the years, one of the more famous being the Gamma project.

Gamma started him down the fusion path, but here the original record is just straight ahead rock & roll. Because it is so clean, this one begs to be turned up loud. You just can't beat the original version of *Bad Motor Scooter* or *Rock Candy* on a system capable of major dynamic range.

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Keep in mind, this record was originally produced by Ted Templeman and recorded by Donn Landee, the geniuses that would later be behind Van Halen. This is one kick ass recording.

### Frank Zappa

*We're Only In It For The Money*  
Mobile Fidelity Gold CD

Frank Zappa is definitely an acquired taste. I couldn't get behind this guy through most of my college years, but happened to have a photo assistant that listened to nothing but FZ and Prince (and I wasn't crazy about him at the time either), so after a while I gave it a fair shake and really got hooked.

When I still earned part of my living photographing concerts, I had the rare privilege to sit in on a Frank Zappa show while he was doing the final soundcheck. It was just me front row center, FZ and his band and the sound guys. I was treated to a live version of half of the songs on *We're Only In It For The Money* while waiting for the show to start.

Shawn Britton did a stellar job on this one. If you are a major Zappa fan, you are going to love how much more musical detail is on this disc, allowing all of the Zappaisms to come through. I swore it never sounded

this good back then, so I dragged out my old LP (that is still in excellent shape) and it's not even close. What was dark and recessed is now nice and clean. There are just so many great little music bits to enjoy on this disc; I guarantee that if you love Frank Zappa, you will freak out over this disc.

I forgot how much material Frank Zappa pulled from this record over the course of his career, especially the deep, dark voice that would become the Central Scrutinizer, later on in the *Joe's Garage* series. My favorite track on this disc is the two part *What's the Ugliest Part of Your Body?* As any good record will do, this one will have you going back to your music collection to enjoy some other Frank Zappa treasures and reminiscing what a wacky guy and musical genius Frank Zappa was.

Write in to MoFi and tell them you want more of the Frank Zappa catalog. They couldn't make me any promises when we were chatting on the phone about this, but if we all pester them for more, it can't hurt.

### Peter Gabriel:

*Shaking the Tree*  
Classic Records Double LP

As I had great luck with Classic Records vinyl copy of Buena Vista Social Club, I was anxious to sample this sampler of Peter Gabriel's work. I have all of the original albums featured on this record, but I wanted to dip my toe in the pool to test the sound quality.

My original thinking was that an unofficial greatest hits compilation would be all I needed to keep me happy.

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ORIGINAL MASTER RECORDING™



Classic has remastered all of the other Peter Gabriel albums on their Quiex SV-P (super vinyl profile) vinyl and it is very quiet indeed. The first track on side four had some pops, but a quick visit to the Nitty Gritty had it right as rain again. In a future issue we will all argue about the merits of record cleaning, so stay tuned. As they say with Lay's potato chips, you can't just eat one and so it goes with this pair of records. Classic did a wonderful job with the Peter Gabriel catalog, and the earlier albums that have been remastered from analog are the best.

*Sledgehammer* got played to death back in the MTV days, and I couldn't pick up SO for years after that. But like an old friend that pissed you off, a punch in the shoulder and a few beers later and you are enjoying each other's company once again. *Sledgehammer* and *Solsbury Hill* are both like that here.

My initial advice would be to not buy this record, not because of any lack of quality, but because once you do buy it, you will want the other ten records in the Classic catalog. Just buy all ten and take the \$44 you were going to spend on this record for an LP copy of Buena Vista Social Club! Don't say I didn't warn you.

Well folks, that's all for now. We were a little bit rushed getting issue one to press, but look for more music in the next issue of TONE-Audio.



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