

# TONEAudio.

The e-journal of analog  
and digital sound.

*no.2*

2005



## **BLUES YOU CAN USE**

JEFF NEUMANN'S  
RICH ENCOUNTER  
WITH "MAGIC SLIM" HOLT

## **JOURNEY TO HEADPHONE PLANET**

Steve Hoffman's  
Passion For The  
JOULE ELECTRA LA-150  
LINE STAGE

## **OLD SCHOOL**

Find the Magic of ROGERS  
With Kurt Doslu

## **VINYL SHOPPING IN SEATTLE**

REVIEWS, MUSIC AND  
SO MUCH MORE.

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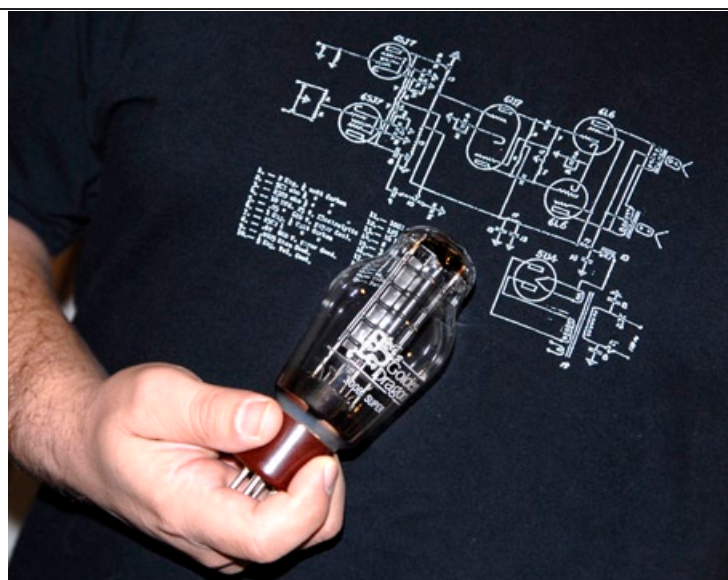
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# STAFF

## JEFF DORGAY

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

Having spent the last seven years writing about photography and digital imaging for a number of publications, he also had a 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.

## STEVE HOFFMAN

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

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

## 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.



*Todd Rundgren at Riverside Theatre  
Milwaukee, WI 1981*

## JOE GOLFEN

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

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

## 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 BMWs and vintage tube amplifiers. He is the only member of the staff that does not own a TIVO.



# CONTRIBUTORS

## LIZA DONNELLY

Liza Donnelly comes to **TONE** from the *New Yorker*, where she has been a staff cartoonist since 1982. She has also worked for quite a few other publications including *American Photographer*, *National Lampoon*, *Cosmopolitan* and *The New York Times*.

She has written a number of children's books and has shown her work in numerous exhibitions around the country. She lives in New York with her husband and two daughters. More information about Liza, her work and appearances can be found at: **[www.lizadonnelly.com](http://www.lizadonnelly.com)**

## KURT DOSLU

Another Pacific Northwest resident, Kurt owns Echo Audio just outside of the chi-chi Pearl District in Portland, Oregon. He has been in the audio world most of his life and in addition to being one of the friendliest audio salesmen you will ever meet, knows more about Nakamichi tape decks than just about anyone on Earth.

If that isn't enough, Kurt is an outstanding chef as well. If you need to find a great piece of used gear, check out Kurt's site at: **[www.echohifi.com](http://www.echohifi.com)**

## AARON KOVICS

Born and configured in Long Island, New York, Aaron brings his advice and expertise from being a reviewer and moderator at the dedicated headphone forum, Head Fi. He has a degree in computer/electrical engineering and when he's not enveloped in his music, he is also passionate about scuba diving, mountain biking, and writing. His motto is: "Music is my recreational drug, I need a dose of it, everyday". Aaron also loves motorcycles. You can find Aaron on the forum at: **[www.head-fi.org/forums](http://www.head-fi.org/forums)**.

## JEFFERY NEUMANN

I have no idea where Hillsdale, New York is, but that is where you can find our blues columnist, Jeffrey Neumann. A lifelong blues guitarist, Jeffrey has finally escaped corporate cube world to pursue his career as a fine artist full time. He has been written up in a number of fine art magazines, including a recent piece in *Art Business News* and is currently showing at a number of galleries around the country. You can view his visual skills at:

**[www.neumannfineart.com](http://www.neumannfineart.com)**

## MEG SILBERSTEIN

Meg Silberstein lives in Seattle (but not for much longer) with her husband and has studied music since age nine. She has attended Seattle Central Community College and the Cornish School of the Arts, where she studied music and photography.

After a detour as a flower shop owner, she has returned to her original passions. Just turning 30, she loves to listen to music, photograph, travel, sing and play bass.



*Deep Purple at the Clark County Fairgrounds  
Vancouver, WA 2004*

# PUBLISHER'S LETTER

**F**irst of all, I would like to thank all of our new readers for subscribing as well as those of you that have posted good feedback about **TONE**-Audio on various boards all over the world. We really appreciate your support! I would also like to thank our advertisers for their support, as now we can all eat for the next six months!!

We have a number of new things to share with you in the upcoming months, and will be adding a couple more music writers as well as a correspondent in the UK, to help us out with gear that doesn't make it across the pond for our European readers. Our newest music writer, Meg Silberstein is featuring an article on where to buy vinyl in Seattle, so if your travels take you there in the future, you'll know where to go. Next issue, Patt Naul will have a list of where to shop in Hawaii. Whenever I am traveling, I always look for a good record store, so we hope this will help.

Meg has a very big musical palette, but is a jazz lover at heart, so we can expect more music reviews in that direction in the months to come. For those of you that love the blues, Jeff Neumann brings us a column on "Blues You Can Use", concentrating a bit more on living blues players.

Our newest section, Headphone Planet, is written by Aaron Kovics, who is a moderator on the HeadFi board. While my headphone experience stopped a while back, these folks are just as passionate about hifi as those of us with speakers and are doing some pretty cool stuff. I encourage you to check out [www.headfi.com](http://www.headfi.com) for another source of good audio information.

Just to show you we are responding to your feedback, we have had a lot of people ask me to bring back the old tradition of the Rodriguez cartoon from the *Audio Magazine* days. I always loved those cartoons myself, but none of the **TONE** staffers have the cartooning gene.

Fortunately, we have been able to enlist the services of Liza Donnelly, the esteemed cartoonist from *The New Yorker* to give us a hand. Liza told me she has a couple of friends that are audiophiles, so she has plenty of experience to draw from.

For those of you that were nervous that we were going to just be an SET-oriented magazine, fear not, we have two great transistor amplifiers for you to read about this month. We feel that there are a number of different ways to a great audio experience and we will help you to find them. These days, there is a lot of great gear in both camps, so no matter what side of the fence you are on, it's all good.

Again, thanks for tuning in. We hope you enjoy this month's issue.



*"Wife Acceptance Factor be damned!"*



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

# TONEAudio

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# The Bottlehead Seduction Phono Preamp

Jerold O'Brien

Now that he's so busy with publisher duties, JD doesn't get to spend as much time with a soldering iron as he used to, so I'll be picking up some of the slack. That's the great thing about being a reclusive introvert, plenty of time for hobbies! As the resident vintage tube guy, I was very enthused about building the Bottlehead Seduction phono stage.

For those of you not familiar with Bottlehead products, "Doc" Dan Schmalle is the man behind Bottlehead that puts the kits together as well as the R&D. He's also another cool guy from the Pacific Northwest. I'm still waiting for parts for the Mark III project, so this seemed like something fun to do in the meantime.

Bottlehead offers a number of kits that are extremely reasonably priced, look pretty unassuming yet offer a lot of value for the money. (however, some of the folks on the Bottlehead forum have really done some interesting visual upgrades to their gear) If you just want some great sound and are handy with a soldering iron, this can really be for you. JD has a pair of their 2A3 amplifiers that he is very happy with. The Seduction kit will only set you back \$279 and they also offer a C4S upgrade that operates the pair of 6DJ8 tubes in a constant current mode along with a couple of other tweaks for an additional \$79. You can add this at a later date, but considering how excited everyone on the Bottlehead forum was about this, I decided to go for the whole enchilada and add the C4S stage right away.

**...considering how excited everyone was, I decided to go for the whole enchilada...**

The kit arrived in short order. Bottlehead claims a few weeks delivery, because they sell their kits in batches. I got lucky because I was on the tail end of the batch and got mine in a few days. The manual is well written and there are some good color pictures to show you what the finished one should look like when it is done. There are also a number of people out on the Bottlehead forum that have published their take on how to build one. I highly suggest keeping this portion of the Bottlehead site on your computer when building, because the close up photos are invaluable.

## In the box

This is DIY gear at its finest, because you can just follow the instructions, solder it up and have a working phono preamp in about nine hours, or you can go into the forum, get some hints and tweak to your heart's content. For the sake of this review, I just built it straight to see what to expect right out of the box. There might be another article later this year, once I have taken it into my secret Batcave and made some changes though...

*(continued)*



As I mentioned, the manual is well written and very easy to follow. You will need a good soldering iron, a needle nose pliers, standard screwdriver, digital multimeter and a diagonal cutter. Ok, I did make a few small tweaks, some Cardas solder and a bit of DH Labs silver cable to go from the input and output jacks for a little bit more oomph. Two things will make your job easier- go to your local drug store and get a pair of weak reading glasses. When bending those little components with a needle nose, you will be able to see much easier. Most importantly, ignore the urge to get this all done in one sitting and do it in two sessions. Also, ignore the urge to get the really strong reading glasses to get super soldering vision. This was a serious bad move and I found myself pretty dizzy after a few attempts. I exhibited exceptional maturity, took two days (ignored the urge to NOT measure voltages and just fire it up) to build the Seduction and it worked perfectly the first time!

Just don't forget to glue the wood base together first so that when you are done soldering, you can assemble it straight away. My favorite glue is Gorilla Glue from Home Depot, but Elmers will do if you are in a pinch. As Home Depot keeps the glue pretty close to wood finishes, you might want to consider a cool color for the base. I got some nice Minwax dark blue, but got too excited building the darn thing to waste another day on finishing the base!

## The Sound

While it is a ton of fun to just write a check for a piece of gear made by a major manufacturer (with a warranty), it is a blast to put something together with your own hands. There are no adjustments to make on this preamp, so once the measurements check out, you plug in the 6JD8s and a power cord it's ready to go. With no sexy capacitors inside requiring 300 plus hours to break in, a couple of days later, your Seduction will be seducing you with great sound. My favorite break-in ritual is to use my old Dual 1229 turntable on repeat with an old crappy Einstein's Riceboys album on repeat for a few days before serious listening.

As I am not a big vinyl guy, I hooked up my trusty Rega P3/Shure V15 combo up to the Seduction to hear the fruits of my labor. Keep in mind that before this, I was using an el-cheapo Sumiko Phono Box. Even though I am vinyl challenged, I wanted to make a few steps up. To see how my labor compared to "real gear", I went over to JD's house to compare it to a couple of other phono stages. Because I am Dynaco Budget Boy, I wanted to see how my creation compared to the store bought ones with a bit fancier packaging.

**How did my 325 dollar phono preamp do?**  
**Damn good!!**

## Moment of Truth

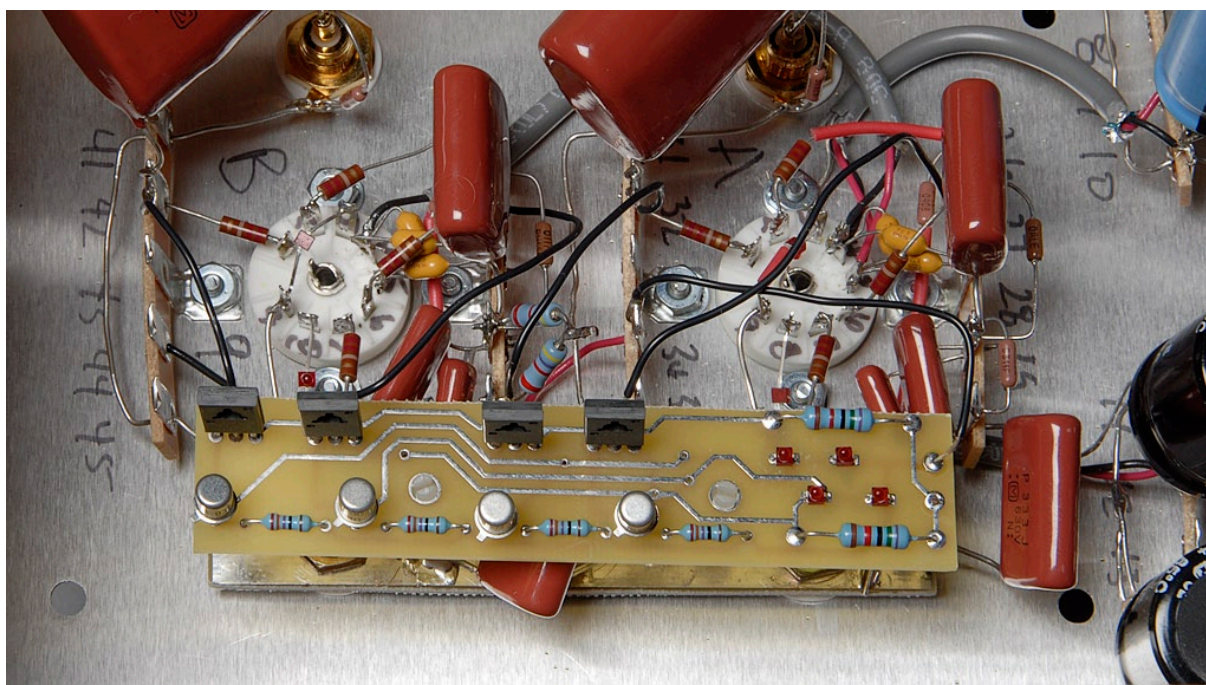
To make it interesting, we compared it to the \$699 Primare I12 solid-state phono stage and the \$2000 BAT VK-P5 tube phono stage. A number of people have written on the Bottlehead forum that this little preamp just creams a bunch of Stereophile's Class A phono stages, but I have to say that this is just Beranek's law. (This law paraphrased means that anything you build yourself always sounds way better than something store bought, regardless of measurements)

The rest of the system consisted of the Mod-Wright 9.0 SWL linestage, McCormack DNA-500 power amplifier and Penaudio Serenade speakers, so there would be more than enough resolution to hear the difference between the three. DH Labs Revelation interconnect was used on all three phono stages to keep things equal.

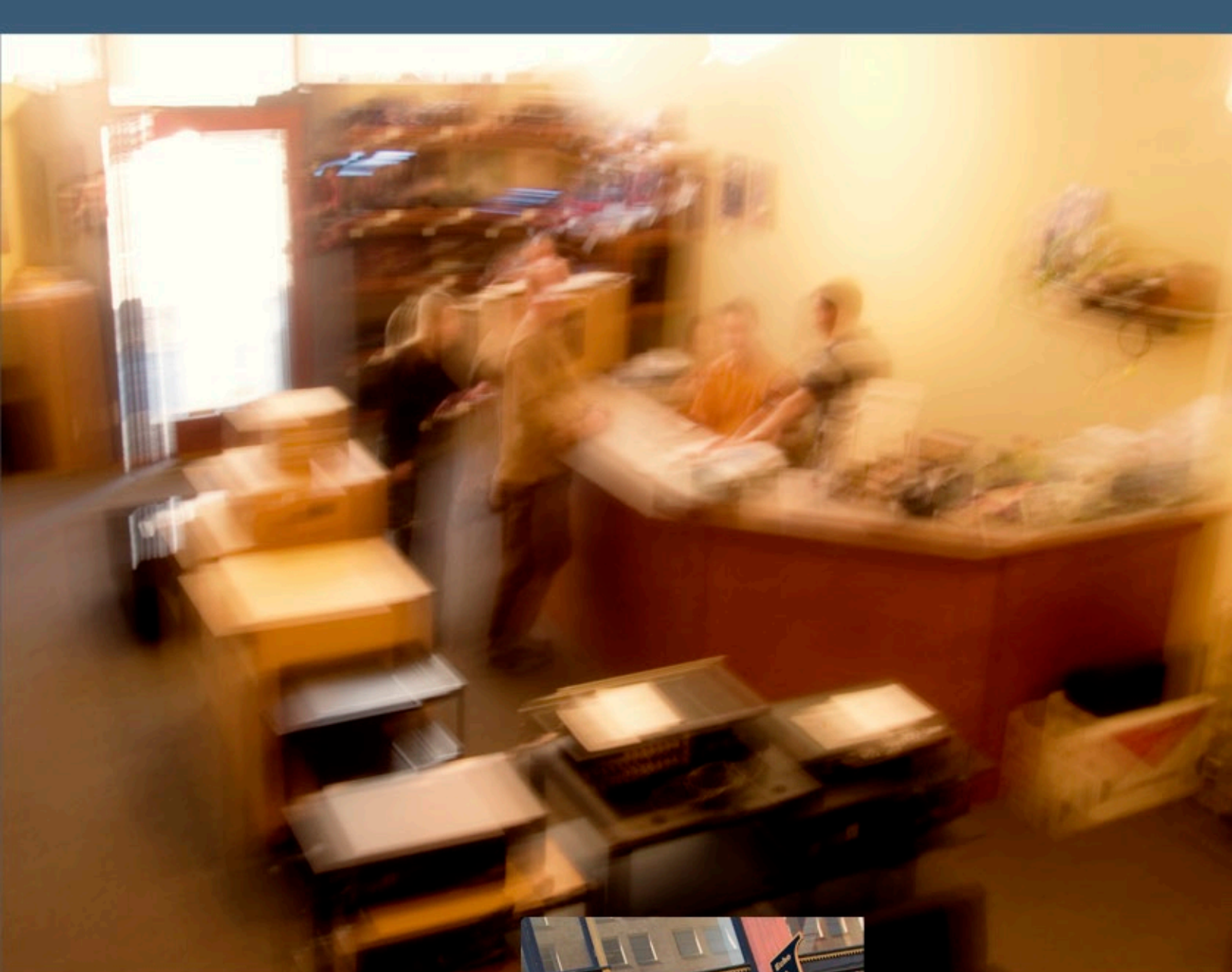
Well, nail biters, how did my 325 dollar phono preamp do? Damn good!! As much as I would like to tell you that it slayed the BAT, it did not. But it DID really give the Primare a run for its money. While the Primare came in a much more attractive case and had a lot more flexibility when it came to cartridge loading and gain settings, the sound of the Seduction was very pleasant indeed. The Primare had a touch more bass slam and was a bit quieter, but the Bottlehead had a bit more of a tubey, three-dimensional sound. And hey, I built it!! (there goes xxxx law again)

## The Verdict

Bottom line, if you have a modestly priced system, a MM or high output MC cartridge, you can build the Bottlehead Seduction over a weekend and save a few bucks to put elsewhere in your system. Back home with my Dynaco gear, the Bottlehead fit right in with the rest of my system just fine. Unable to resist the urge to tweak, I put in a pair of NOS tubes and my favorite DH Labs power cord for even better results. I know, it's madness, but it really does take the sound a few more clicks, but that's a review for another day. Now if I can distract JD long enough to swipe one of those small Ultra platforms, I'll be set. Fire up the soldering station and enjoy this one! ●







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[www.bottlehead.com](http://www.bottlehead.com)

## PERIPHERALS

**Preamplifier** Prima Luna ProLogue 3

**Power Amplifier** Ridiculously over  
modded Dynaco Stereo 70, Prima  
Luna ProLogue 5

**Analog source** Rega P3/Shure V15

**Digital source** Jolida JD-100A CD  
player

**Speakers** Vandersteen 2Ce Signature

**Interconnect** DH Labs Air matrix

**Speaker Cables** DH Labs Q-10  
Silver Sonic

**Vibration Control** Symposium  
Svelte Shelves on all components

## TEST TUNES

**David Grisman** Hound Dawg LP

**Dave Grusin** Discovered Again! LP  
(Sheffield)

**Steely Dan** Aja LP  
(MOFI)

**The Pretenders** The Pretenders LP  
(Nautilus)

**Heart** Dreamboat Annie LP  
(Nautilus) Shut up!

**The Doobie Brothers**  
Best of the Doobies LP



# THE MONOGAMOUS AUDIOPHILE:

This month's Monogamous Audiophile column has two winners, both from Connecticut!

Our first, Mr. Nathan Rosen has had his Rega Planar 3 for 20 years and our second, Andrew Grathwohl has had his Pioneer receiver and Ohm speakers for almost 30 years!

While the Pioneer receiver doesn't really qualify as audiophile gear, back in the day Pioneer and Marantz made pretty good stuff and Andrew's attitude is definitely what I'm talking about when it comes to hanging on to gear that you love.

So, Mr. Rosen receives a \$100 dollar gift certificate from Music Direct and Mr. Grathwohl gets one for \$50. Happy listening gentlemen! Here are their stories:



**Got a piece of gear you've had forever? Send us your story (and a high res digital photo if you can). If we publish it, we'll send you a \$100 gift certificate to Music Direct to enjoy.**

## MR. NATHAN ROSEN

I've had the Rega now for so long (actually about 20 years now) that I can't remember which cartridge I had installed in it when I bought it, but it was an Ortofon of some kind. I had just finished college and the first thing I did after landing a "real" job was buy a decent stereo for my apartment. I bought it all at once, a NAD 3020, a pair of Polk Audio speakers (with Monster Cable of course) and the Rega.

**I think the whole thing set me back about a thousand bucks, which was a lot of money back then.**

I ditched most of my albums from my days in the dorm and started over. Pretty soon I had a decent collection and before you know it, CDs hit the market. By now I had upgraded to some NAD separates and a pair of B&W floorstanders. The Rega was starting to get more and more dust on the dust cover, while my three crates of albums moved to a closet.

About three years ago, I picked up a copy of Stereophile and noticed my Rega still in recommended components, so I decided to shake the dust off and head back down to the hifi store for a new cartridge, this time a Sumiko Blue Point Special. The phono stage in my NAD preamp was not bad, so I was back in business and really enjoying vinyl again! I had since purchased some of my albums on CD and was amazed at how much better the vinyl sounded, even on a modest system like mine.

Today, I'm still buying used records wherever I can. The Planar 3 is still here, but while all my friends are moving into home theater, I am going to upgrade the two channel rig and along with the rest of the gear. And the Rega is going on EBay, as I still have the original box, but fear not, I'm replacing it with a P7!

## MR. ANDREW GRATHWOHL

I've kept two vital pieces in my stereo system for thirty years: Ohm Model E speakers and a Pioneer SX-450 receiver. They started out belonging to my Mother, purchased at the local "Mom & Pop" stereo store in Norwalk, CT. The system also included a Micro-Seiki MB 15 Turntable. The system stayed in her living room after she met my Dad and I joined the family.

A few years ago, my interest in music was growing rapidly and I started buying vinyl. Being a headphone junkie, I was just going to use the receiver and speakers for an occasional listen. After a while, I was thinking about upgrading the system and started with a Goldring GR-1 table and a Grado Platinum. While I was thinking about a new tube preamp and a solid-state power amplifier, I hooked everything up with a Sumiko phono preamp and gave it a good listen before I started spending more money. **While I have heard a lot of high-end systems over the years, I ended up not upgrading the system at all!**

Listening to music is more than background noise to me, it's like taking a nostalgic trip into a generation that I wasn't even alive in, so the Pioneer is just fine.

This gear got good praise in its day and has more of a lush sound that isn't present in today's budget gear. I can leave this thing on for hours on end without a problem! I love the system so much, I am thinking of sending the speakers to Ohm to get restored and may even have some of the components updated in the Pioneer as well.

This system has survived thirty years of use, and by not upgrading has allowed me to focus on what is really important in the scheme of things, enjoying music! ●



# Rediscovering the Magic

Kurt Doslu

**U**sed stereo shops are fun. You might see that old Marantz receiver which served you faithfully throughout college, admire the patina on a mint Marantz 8B tube amp or spin the dial of an Accuphase tuner\* you regret not buying years ago. It's the endless variety and absence of having to sell certain brands that makes it a fair playing field to subjectively compare products.

And every now and then there is something spectacular, a product that easily bests the competition and stands the test of time, keeping pace with emerging technologies desperate to kick it off its pedestal. This column is dedicated to those types of components and to take you down memory lane, just to reminisce or point you towards your nearest used hi-fi store to get reacquainted with an old friend.

## An Unexpected Visitor

As the owner of a primarily used, high-end shop for over 14 years, I have heard just about every make, model, myth and exaggeration that hi-fi has to offer. That said, allow me tell you about an unusual transaction that occurred last month.

A fellow came in and said "I've been out of the audio market for quite some time, but I love music and play it as well - so I've got this pair of 1970's speakers that have served me quite well but I think it may be time for an upgrade, can you help me?" I felt like pinching myself because the stereo gods rarely choose to pitch underhand to me like this.

I quickly told him, "I should think so," and proceeded into an oratory about how far speaker technology had come in the last 30 years. Paralleling it with computer technology and going into the different materials and

cabinets, throwing out words like Kevlar, Esotar and Cardas as if they were household names.

Either I heard his eyes roll back in his head or just the sound of my own silly voice talking about NASA-approved resin cabinets and linear excursion, but I shut my trap and asked "bookshelf or floor standing?" He says

**"Well I've got these old puppies out in the car, can I bring them in so you'll know what I've got?"** In

this case I envisioned myself removing some smoky beige grill cloth to reveal rotting surrounds and didn't want to hurt his feelings because he seemed like a nice guy, but still I said "sure, bring 'em in." I was coming back from the water bubbler as he had just placed two small walnut boxes on the front counter. Those couldn't be, I thought. Not in that condition. Not the.... They were.

*(continued)*



## First Encounters

You see, in 1976 we audio junkies would go into our local shop and buy these great sounding 3-4 ft speakers that hurt our back to move around. Dahlquist here, JBL & AR there, you know the king pins. One day we walked in and the store owner had most assuredly pulled a joke by sticking a \$600 price tag on these weenie little walnut book ends that said “Rogers” in the corner of a thick black grill cloth that none of us could get off easily with our stubby fingernails (knowing it’s rule #1 the handbook). After a 10-minute huddle wherein we concluded that these overpriced jobs couldn’t produce any bass with a 5-inch woofer, we broke and cornered the owner to ask what was going on.

He claimed they were some British BBC monitor used in recording studios. Apparently Rogers was commissioned to produce this LS 3/5a model using a KEF B110 woofer and T27 tweeter in a two-way air suspension system housed in a damped, braced cabinet. The owner grew more animated and went on about some 26-element, computer-tested network (big words back then) and culminated by saying that the Beatles used these to master the Sgt. Pepper album, but I think he lied about that. (SH concurs, saying that they did not use Rogers speakers at Abbey Road) Nevertheless, we weren’t convinced about this 12-inch high, 7-inch wide monitor that weighed just 12 pounds so we asked him to hook them up.

All three of us bought a pair.

## Facing Off

The customer looks at me and says “You know these?” “Oh yes” I said “used to have a pair myself. Let’s do a shoot-out!”

We head to the back room where I happened to have a nice selection of used high end monitors including the B&W Nautilus 805, ProAc Response 1SC, Totem Model One Signature, Sonus Faber Concertos and JM Labs Micro Utopia. We set the Rogers up on the shelf along with these newer tigers and by now I am more excited than he is to hear which one is going to win this race. I begin fumbling through my CDs looking for that Madeline Peyroux disc with the cool bass line and wonderful imaging. “I brought a disc” he says. Damn. “Great” I say. It’s some classical piece that’s quite complex at first and then goes into this two minute violin solo.

I’ve got it on the ProAcs first and the sound is rich and detailed with noticeable high end transparency and coherence. I can tell that he is immediately impressed and listening closely as a musician would - and with the aid of our handy dandy speaker switch box I can just click my way through the various models with no break in the action or hint of which pair is playing.

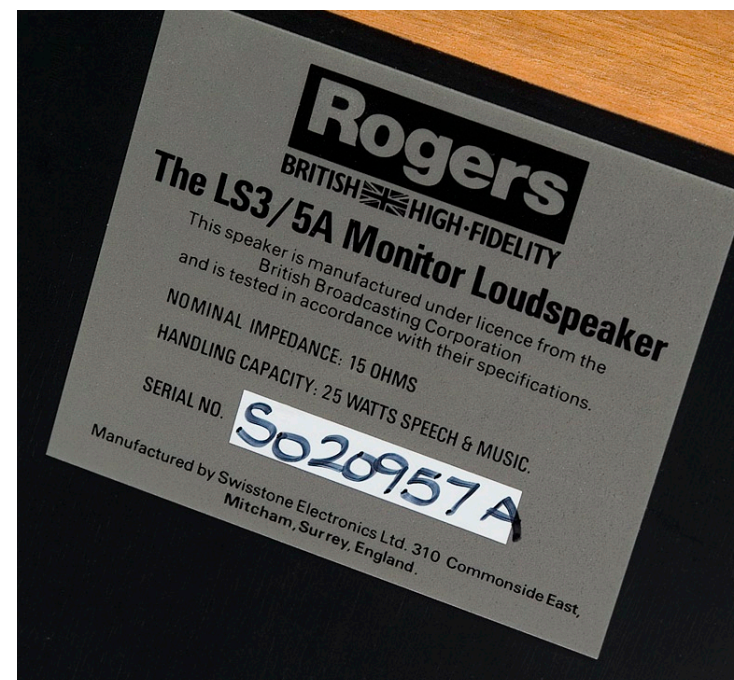
“**CLICK**”, the sound gets louder with faster pace and tight bass, obviously Totem. **CLICK**. The Sonus Fabers sang romantically with sweet highs and rounded notes that held their finish like a good chardonnay. **CLICK**. Big midrange and very British high frequencies bellowed from the oval cabinet of the Nautilus 805s. **CLICK**. The JM Labs shocked us with shimmering highs and noticeable everything, like a speaker with acrylic shoes and breast implants dancing the hi-fi fantastic.

Then **CLICK**. Suddenly a violin was being played with deft easiness; gently singing without the steroidal boost of hi-fi magic.

A mid-range liquidity that imparted the “ahhh” feeling and just enough detail to discern that was definitely a gut string, not steel. “I like that one” he says. Maybe it was familiarity that drove him to choose his old friends, but I was also taken aback by the effortless way those Rogers allowed the music to flow unencumbered. No boxiness or bass bulge. No extended highs or visceral lows, just comfortable, like a cashmere sweater.

## The Choice

Sharing a laugh over his choice, we ran through the speaker gauntlet again with several other recordings. Each time the Rogers weren’t the utmost in transparency, air, low-level detail or bass slam, but they were continually the most organic and disappeared in the room as well or better than the others. Now I’m not saying that they were clearly the best of this illustrious group, and definitely not the choice if you want to hear what kind of burrito the conductor had for lunch, but



(continued)

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clearly the most romantic.  
If you can't get lucky playing  
Barry White through a set of  
these things, forget about it.

My new hi-fi friend (Tom)  
left the store with the same  
speakers he walked in with, a  
new appreciation for them and,  
oh yeah, the amplifier that I had  
devilishly chosen to run through  
them. Maybe next time I'll tell  
you what is was.

Now you're asking, how  
do I get a pair? As an expert  
in the used market I can tell  
you that it isn't easy. There are  
several incarnations by Spendor,  
Chartwell, Harbeth, Swisstone  
and others, in 15ohm, 16ohm  
and 8ohm. My advise it  
to get the 15 ohm-  
version manufactured  
by Swisstone. Why?  
Because they have the  
magic. Others sound good,  
but not legendary. Don't worry  
about the 15 ohm impedance,  
or baloney on the back about  
handling just 25 watts of speech  
and music,. They like a good  
high current amplifier from 25 to  
100 watts. Last time I checked  
the Internet for a pair, they  
were going for between \$800  
and \$1,500. To own a pair is to  
cross one of the rubicons of hi-fi  
history.

And maybe they'll cause you  
to take off those hi-fi goggles and  
appreciate the music again. ●

*\* Note: Every time I go into  
Kurt's shop and see a Marantz  
150B tuner, Jean has to drag  
me out screaming, so I can  
personally vouch for this!!*



# The Rocky Mountain Audio Fest & The Vacuum Tube Valley Show



I love going to hifi shows, but I'll warn you right away, there will be no "best of show" awards here at TONE-Audio. Here's why: all of these people work too hard just to get to the damn show in the first place and often time are confronted with gremlins to set up their wares. I know; I've done my share of trade shows and it sucks. Besides, our online colleagues at 6 Moons and Positive Feedback do a way better job at going room to room than I ever could, so if you want this, by all means check them out.

## The Rocky Mountain Audio Fest In Denver, Colorado

**"Nice shirt" came from across the hall and I turned around to see none other than Lew Johnson, of Conrad-Johnson.** (I had my favorite C-J t-shirt on) I knew it was going to be a good day. While we are talking about nice shirts, even though we won't hand an award out for the best sound of the show, I can give an award for the snappiest dresser at the show. Hands down the winner is Collie Brice from Mobile Fidelity. He was by far the most stylish guy there!

The Rocky Mountain Audio Fest has not set their date for next year, but for the last two years has been the last weekend in September at the Denver Technology Center. Double the size of last year, there

were over 100 rooms worth of gear from a very wide range of manufacturers. Because booth space is less expensive than the big shows, there were a lot of the mid-sized manufacturers there; with a lot of gear you won't get a chance to see at CES.

With all these new rooms to see, even with twice as many people attending the show, it actually seemed less crowded than last year, making it easier to get around and actually listen to more music. I was very happy to see a lot wider range of music being played than you normally expect at this kind of thing!

At least for now, you can attend this show and stay at the Technology Center Marriott too, so this means no waiting for shuttles or taxis! (And no walking between

*(continued)*

buildings in the rain...) Very convenient after a long day of looking at h-ifi gear and buying records. Speaking of records, Music Direct and a couple of other vendors had a lot of music there to peruse and buy. **I came home with a few of MOFI's latest and a used audiophile pressing (hahaha) of In-Na-Gadda-Da-Vida for \$18!! This show rules!**

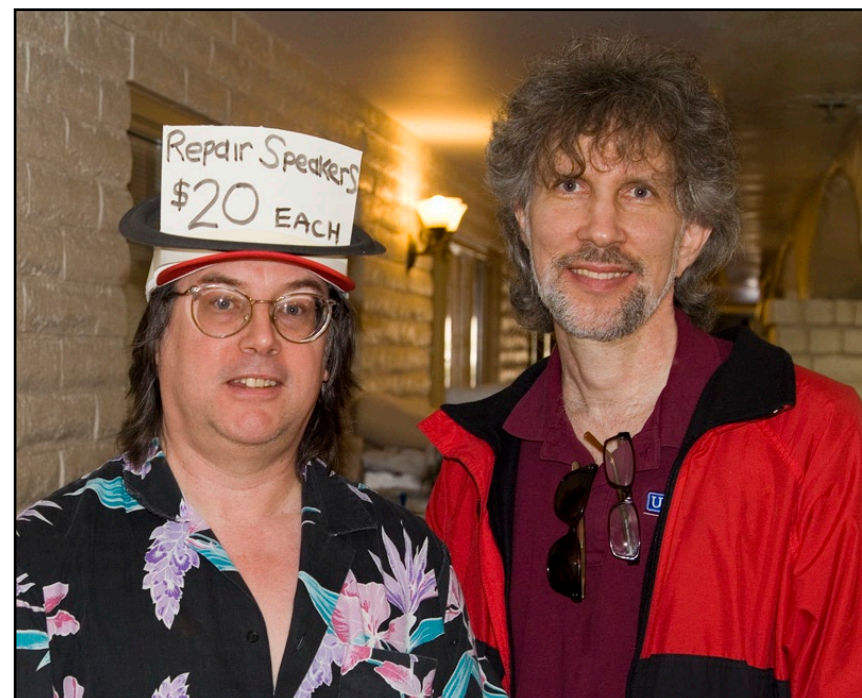
I saw a lot of great gear in all shapes and sizes, but because of the sheer size of the event, could not get to see every single room, and I apologize to those manufacturers. We will bring reinforcements next year! I was very happy to see gear in many different configurations and of course my favorite, a lot of cool SET stuff.

But by far the greatest part of this show is that it features a lot of gear combined with a very relaxed atmosphere. The show's presenters and their assistants were extremely helpful and friendly, but come to think of it, I've never met anyone in Colorado that wasn't. If you can spare a few days next year, try and make it to the RMAF, you will not be disappointed.

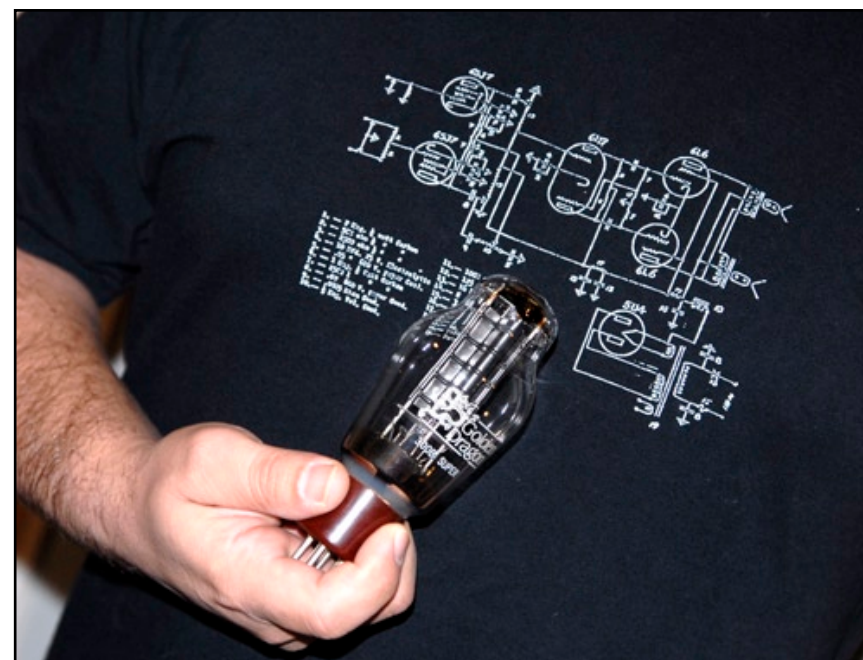
Show information for 2006 will be available at: **www.audiofest.net**

### **The Vacuum Tube Valley Show In Pasadena, California**

Charlie Kittleson, the editor of *Vacuum Tube Valley* magazine threw a great show at the Embassy Suites hotel in Pasadena and the weather was great. This was a bit smaller show than the Denver show in terms of demo rooms, but the spirit was also great. There were some very interesting products there as well as a swap meet type of area in the main hall along with some guitar goodies. My award for best tunes played at the show goes to the nice



*The Speaker Repair Man poses with SH.*



*Great tubes and tee's at the show.*





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folks from Emille Audio for playing “Kung Fu Fighting.” I guarantee you will never hear this song at CES!!

For now, this show featured primarily tube gear (hence the name) from a lot of boutique manufacturers and some great high efficiency speakers too. If you enjoy SET amplifiers as much as I do, you will be in heaven at the VTV show! I saw at least three 1 watt per channel amplifiers that were all very groovy. Ron Welborne at Welborne Labs gets the “biggest pair of speakers at the show” award, for featuring the Cogent Field Coil Horns.

Charlie was a great host and there was a ton of activity. I really liked the tube and parts vendors, because it was a blast to talk to some of those guys and find some parts for our DIY projects right here at **TONE**-Audio. SH and I went there on Saturday and it was packed! If you live anywhere within a couple of hours of Pasadena, I would highly suggest checking this one out next year. It had a great crowd and a lot of fun tube stuff. There will also be a VTV show in May in New York. Our man on the East Coast, Aaron will be providing show coverage of this event. Be sure and support these guys if you are on either coast, so we can see more of this kind of thing!

Stay informed on the VTV shows at: **www.vacuumtube.com** ●





# The Running Springs **Jaco**

— JEFF DORGAY



# The Running Springs Jaco

While I am not against the concept of a power conditioner in theory, in practice, I have never heard one that lives up to its claims. A few have come close, but ultimately they end up being some kind of tone control or they restrict dynamics in one way or the other. As you can well imagine I was about as interested in going to the dentist as listening to another power conditioner.

This story actually goes back to CES 2005, when I was still writing for the other guys. At this year's Rocky Mountain Audio Fest, almost all of the rooms that had sound I enjoyed had one thing in common – the Running Springs Power Conditioner. It's an unassuming black box that's pretty easy to miss. But poking around behind everyone's gear, there it was.



Now this was getting interesting and, true to my badger-like nature, I found Dan Babineau, the creator of the Jaco and the other power conditioners in the Running Springs line at the show. When I told him I was interested in reviewing their product, he reminded me that at CES I gave the ESP/Pathos room my vote for best sound of the show and that they, too, were using Running Springs. I named a few other rooms I liked there (because I wasn't paying attention to power conditioners then) and sure enough, they all used RSA boxes.

The Jaco features eight outlets and will pass through 2400 watts worth of power if you have a 20-amp outlet to plug it in to. In the event you only have a 15-amp outlet, you can only connect 1850 watts worth of gear to it, or the circuit breaker will pop. You can't fight the laws of physics. When I wired our studio, I made sure to have three dedicated 20-amp outlets for the hi fi, so I was fully prepared. It comes with a five-foot Running Springs Mongoose power cord and is also available with an eight- or ten-foot cord at your request. The price from your Running Springs dealer is \$2,199.99.

## Behind the Black Box

Mr. Babineau is a member of the IEEE, AES, holds a PhD in Physics from the University of Wisconsin and is a classically trained

wood-wind musician

to boot. His partner, Lenny "Catfish" Mayeux, a blues guitar fanatic, is working on a book about Roots & Blues music genealogy and a passionate audiophile. He has worked in the audio industry since the early 90s in design and retail. So, it's pretty safe to say these guys know a bit about how music is supposed to sound.

**So, it's pretty safe to say these guys know how music is supposed to sound.**

With lousy power coming to his door, Mr. Babineau was pretty fed up with the situation, and set out to design his own power conditioner for the same reasons I've always been skeptical about buying one. "A couple years and a lot of prototypes later, I finally had what I wanted," he told me, as we chatted when he checked to see that the Jaco had arrived safely. I was trying to cut the conversation short so I could hook the thing up and he said, "play something that sounds crappy, put Back In Black on and tell me what you think." So I hung up the phone and dug out all three copies (CD, DVD and LP) of Back In Black and got busy-

*(continued)*





## Set-up and Installation

As I was in the middle of a review of the ESP Bodhrans and the McCormack DNA-500, I was anxious to put the Jaco into the system. Even though these two items were not part my normal reference system, I had been listening to them for a month straight, so I felt comfortable enough to hear a difference, if there was one. This particular Jaco had just come from the RMAF, so it was ready to be put in service right away. Running Springs suggests about 20 hours of break-in to get the full effect for fresh units.

---

**And Back In Black  
kicked major butt, so I  
was ready for some  
serious listening.**

Evaluating any kind of system upgrade can be a tense situation, because when you insert that mega-expensive power cord, interconnect or whatever, you want results right now. With no disrespect to the folks who make this stuff, that's not always the case. More often than not, there is no change, or you are stuck with the tone control effect. Sometimes you get a great cable that takes your system a bit further down the path to audio nirvana, but sometimes even the best cables are only a subtle – yet valid in my opinion – upgrade.

*(continued)*

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## Proof in Listening

I could give you paragraphs of audiophile clichés about how great the Jaco is, but I'll spare you and get to the bottom line: this is the real deal. No tone-control effect, no restriction of dynamics, no bullshit. This was like buying a whole new system, and the effect was anything but subtle. The noise floor isn't lowered, it's gone. Dynamics are much bigger and, even feeding a monster amp like the DNA-500, everything had a lot

more impact. I threw all the favorites in my record collection at the Jaco, listening for it to limit the amp. I listened at a much higher level than I normally do, but could not hear any dampening of transient attack. The size of the sound field got a lot bigger as well. This one doesn't go to 11 on the 1-10 scale, it goes to KAPOW! As far as I am concerned, the RSA claims of no current limiting are valid.

What about detail? I moved the (very heavy) ESP's and the (pretty heavy) DNA-500 out of the system and replaced them with my reference WAVAC MD-300B and second Rethms to see how the (also pretty darn heavy) Jaco would do with an SET amplifier and some efficient 100 db speakers, as this is usually where

**This one doesn't go to 11 on the 1-10 scale, it goes to KAPOW!**

power line noise is a huge problem. Those of you with Avant Gardes or some other ultra-high efficiency speakers know what I'm talking

about; 100 db speakers just seem to be like a big Shell Pest Strip for system noise.

While the improvement with the DNA-500/ESP combination was outstanding, the effect on all three of my SET amplifiers was even more amazing. Again, all the noise was gone and the amplifiers took on much more of a three-dimensional quality with no detrimental effects to dynamics. For those of you that prefer the low power SET/high efficiency road to audio nirvana, you will be in for a real treat with the Jaco; it will open a whole new world.

Excited about the Running Springs experience, I tried it in my other two systems and had the same results, with the same improvements. Even using it with the Prima Luna amp and pre-amp was a breathtaking improvement, though I'm not sure someone with a \$2,500 amp/pre-amp combination would shell out almost that much on a power conditioner. (But you would be very happy with the results if you did.) This is what really impressed me about the Jaco: I got

the same results with everything from an entry-level system to a very serious system. One thing I did notice was that it was now easier to hear the difference between power cords, with the power adequately cleaned up. To make sure I wasn't letting my brain just fill in the blanks, I pulled the Jaco back out of the system and the music just collapsed.

## Back to the Mothership

I had to spend some time at casa Hoffman photographing gear for upcoming articles, so I gave Mr. Babineau a call to see if I could chat with



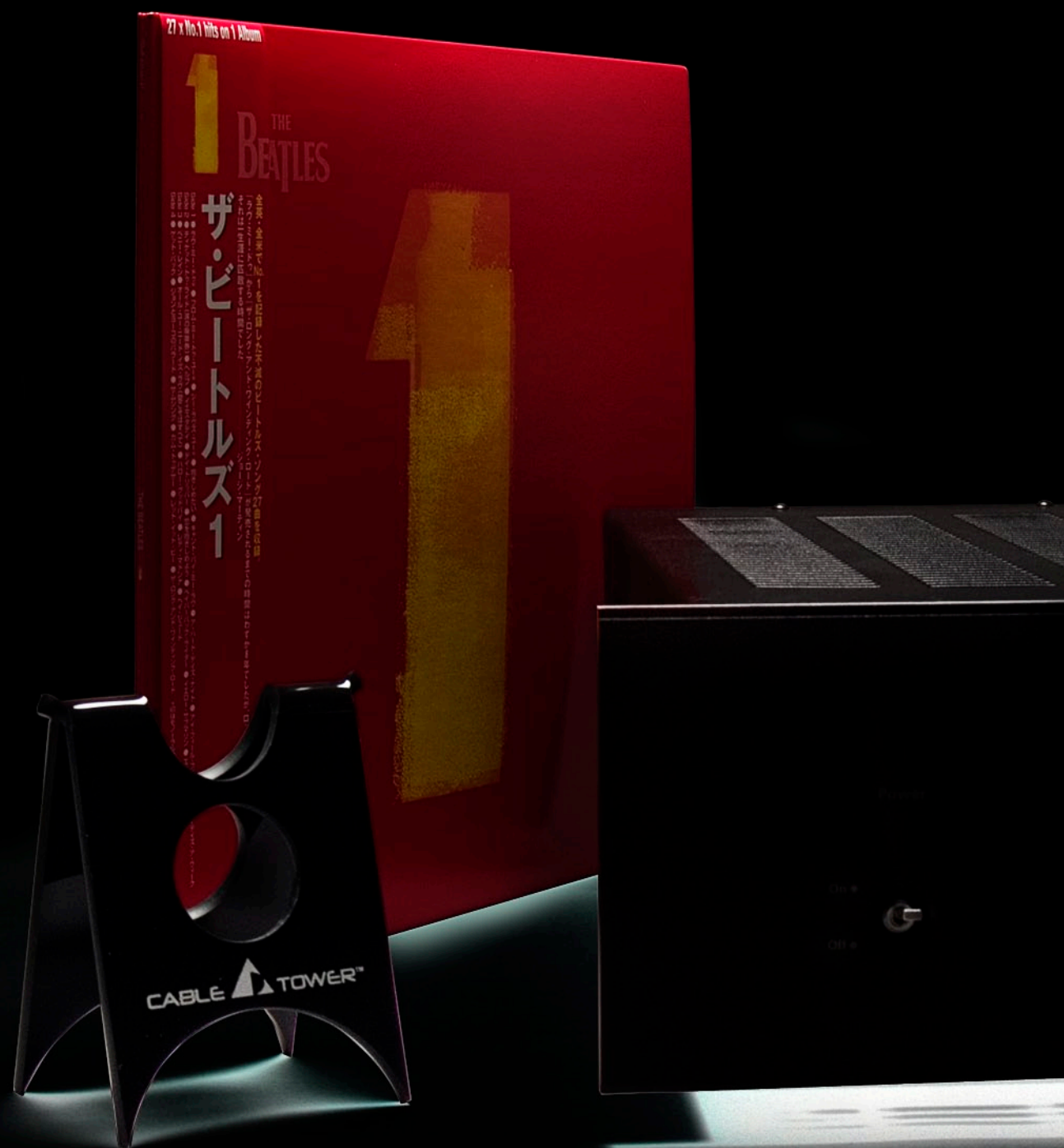
him in person and see where the Jaco is made. He gave me a quick tour of the factory and explained that none of the Jaco's internals are outsourced – it's all designed and produced in-house. Seeing the high level of dedication and precision was very inspiring. "Military spec is where we start," said Mr. Babineau, who also does his fair share of defense work in another life.

This concept of "micro engineering" as Mr. Mayeux refers to it, explains how RSA achieves this level of performance, creating components around a design, rather than the way many other designers must do it, designing a circuit around already-available components. This is what really gives the RSA conditioners that extra push over the cliff.

*(continued)*



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## The Verdict

No matter how much you have invested in your system, you aren't hearing what it's capable of until you plug it into a Jaco. If you want something that will really make you freak out, go to the nearest Running Springs dealer and listen to a Jaco. Better yet, take it home for the weekend, if you have some room on your credit card. Once you hear it, you won't be able to live without it. I'm buying the review sample, and a second one for my other system. I won't review another piece of gear without it. ●

## Running Springs Audio

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Mission Viejo, CA 92691  
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www.runningspringsaudio.com

## PERIPHERALS

**Line stage** Emotive Audio Poeta

**Power Amplifier** McCormack DNA-500, WAVAC MD-300B

**Digital Sources** Denon 3910 universal player with ModWright modifications

**Analog Sources** Rega P25 (modified) w/Shelter 501II, Ray Samuels Audio Emmeline XR-10B phono stage

**Speakers** ESP Bodhrans, Rethm 2<sup>nd</sup> Rethm

**Cables** Tara Labs The One Interconnect, Tara Labs RSC Vector Speaker Cables, Essential Sound Products "The Reference" power cords

**Vibration Control** Symposium Ultra platforms on amplifier, linestage and disc player. Symposium Svelte Shelf and Rollerblock Jr. on P25



# The Rethm 2nd Rethm Speakers

— JEFF DORGAY

As you know, I'm a big fan of SET amplifiers and single driver speakers because of the coherence they offer. I realize this is not everyone's vision of audio nirvana, but it is one of mine. For those of you who share my vision, I have something interesting for you.



**A**t CES 2005, I saw the 2nd Rethms for the first time, powered by a pair of Art Audio 300B amplifiers producing wonderful sound and a pretty fair amount of bass without a subwoofer. Because I was pretty new to the SET thing then, I had never heard a Lowther driver and was unfamiliar with the anomalies surrounding that speaker. I talked for a while with Jacob George, the designer of the Rethms, and immediately hunted down SH. When I told him what I had found, he made his hand into a megaphone and went “Lowthers sound like this!”

I assured him these were different and dragged him to the Rethm room. After a few minutes, he changed his mind and agreed that these were indeed different.

In addition to being a speaker designer, George is an architect in India. Even if you aren't in need of a pair of speakers, you might want to give him a call if you are thinking about building a new home - he has impeccable taste! But back to the speakers, they too have a very intriguing look and will not leave you with a lukewarm response. Everyone who has come to look at them has either fallen in love with their appearance or hated them.

What's so different about these speakers?

The Rethms exhibit none of the “squawking” I've heard out of many other Lowther-based designs. George designed his own unique phase plug made of hardwood and in combination, and added two more auxiliary cones to the Lowther driver, with the middle one being perforated. This took “about 150 tries” to get exactly what he wanted.

The enclosure is also unconventional, with a compression chamber-approach that looks like

a folded horn that exits to both sides, making the speaker easier to place compared to other horn or vented enclosures I've encountered. Because the horn is cylindrical, much of the associated reflection and resonance problems in a conventional horn design are eliminated.

Part of what makes a single driver speaker so coherent is the lack of a crossover. I am a big fan of the simple approach, as there is much less coming between you and the music to slow it down or distort it, not to mention woofers, tweeters and midrange drivers fighting each other at the critical crossover areas. The Rethm team took this further, using solid wire between the speaker and terminals, with-



out soldering the wire to any binding posts. The speaker terminals are the bare wire coming out of the cabinet (shielded with loose fabric insulation), using Delrin screw posts, so your cables touch the speaker output directly, eliminating one more joint. This fanatical attention to detail is what makes the 2nd Rethm a delight to listen to.

*(continued)*





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## Set up and Initial Listening

Jacob just happened to be in the U.S. when I called and inquired about a review, so he shipped the enclosures, then flew out a few days later to install the drivers. Even though he warned me the speakers would take a few hundred hours to settle in (common with all Lowther drivers), they did not sound bad out of the box. As with any brand new speaker, they were a touch bright on top and did not have quite as much bass warmth as I remembered at the show.

As my Wavac MD-300B had not been delivered yet, we did initial listening with my Pacific Creek amplifier and my pair of 2A3 Bottlehead amplifiers I built myself. With the Rethms having an efficiency of over 100db, even the 3 watt-per-channel Bottleheads would pretty much rock the studio. By the end of the day, the speakers had settled in quite well and after a week of 24 hour continuous play were just fine. I did notice a touch more smoothness at the 300-hour mark, but it was not a substantial change.

We moved the speakers all over the studio, and finally found a placement that would allow decent bass extension down to about 45hz. I verified this after I took Jacob to the airport with my trusty Stereophile test CD. My only dilemma was that they had to be 12 feet away from the walls on the long 36-foot wall of the studio, and my listening position was about another 12 feet from the speakers, which was pretty similar to what I heard at CES. Our initial position was a bit closer in the room, but we could not quite get as much bass as Jacob liked.

*(continued)*



## A Step Further

While this was a great position for the speakers, I had to compromise my entire office for them, and I couldn't work that way forever. However, if you have a good-sized room, you will be rewarded with an open, fast, transparent sound that you will be hard pressed to find anywhere else. It's a sound very much like a pair of early Quads, but with more punch and dynamics.

Having used the Rethms now with a few different 300B amplifiers and my Bottleheads, I can say this speaker is revealing, and will change character with your source components. Because of this, you can easily fine-tune the sound. Personally, I like a neutral sound, and the Wavac amplifiers really do a great job here, as do the Art Audio amplifiers I heard at CES. My Bottleheads have less detail and are a bit warmer, making a nice combination for a bit more of a romantic sound. The speakers

will also reveal the differences in your cables. I found the Tara Labs RSC Vector 1 cables to be a neutral choice, offering extended highs without being grainy. To mix things up a bit, I tried them with the Monarchy SM-70 PRO solid-state amplifier, with great results as well. The Monarchy had more bass extension and power, but a drier sound overall. If you prefer silicon to tubes, this is another great possibility.

I felt that the 2nd Rethms excelled at tonal accuracy. When listening to acoustic music, drums sound like drums and the piano is very lifelike. I was listening to a new ECM recording of John Cale's early piano works and was taken in by how real the piano sounded.

Another area that I was excited about was the level of detail these speakers possessed at low levels. This is a speaker you can listen to at moderate volume and hear a ton of detail, without the need to crank it up. I love to listen to loud rock music as much as anyone, but because these speakers reveal so much information, it isn't necessary to have brain damage levels to enjoy the music.

### If You Really Like to Rock...

I know what you are thinking, "these sound like a great choice for female vocals and small scale music, but I can't rock out with them." There is a two-sided answer to this question. If you are like me and like Led Zeppelin as much as Miles Davis, and every now and then want to put some Kraftwerk on the turntable, I have a solution that will take you to 11.

**I bought the review pair, which will become part of my permanent collection of reference gear.**

As I mentioned earlier, I had to put the speakers back in the first layout so that I could reclaim the studio, but in this position I definitely needed a bit more bass. Jacob has mentioned that there is a subwoofer for in the works, but he isn't sure when it will be finished. My solution was a pair of 8-inch Tannoy TS-8 subwoofers. These are reasonably priced at \$499 each, and they feature a lot of adjustability, making them easily integrated into the room.

I let the Rethms roll off naturally and adjusted the TS-8s to pick up the slack. This gave me great bass down to 30hz, and gave the whole system that last bit of impact.

It also eliminates putting another crossover in the signal path. However, I would suggest that if you are interested in a pair, see how they work in your room with your gear first. You may find that you don't need the subwoofers, and I would suggest starting there first. The nice thing about a pair of subwoofers is that you can fine tune the room positioning to get the best bass response, which is much harder to do with just one sub.

## THE VERDICT

Unfortunately for Rethm, we haven't been publishing long enough to hand out awards, but the highest compliment that I can pay the 2nd Rethm speakers is with my checkbook - I bought the review pair, which will become part of my permanent collection of reference gear. These speakers, in combination with the WAVAC amplifier, really offered me a path to audio nirvana I have been seeking for some time.

Whether I played large-scale classical music or my favorite rock records, the 2nd Rethms were able to hit 110-112db peaks with ease. So much for the rumors that this type of speaker will not play loudly!

To those who will argue that SET amplifiers and single-driver speakers "don't measure well", I invite you to give the 2nd Rethms a serious audition. These are the speakers I listen to when I just want to enjoy music and take the reviewer hat off. ●

*(continued)*





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### PERIPHERALS

**Linestage** Emotive Audio Poeta

**Amplifiers** WAVAC MD-300B,  
Pacific Creek SE300I, Bottlehead  
Paramour (2A3), Monarchy SM-70 Pro

**Subwoofers** Tannoy TS-8 (pair)

**Digital Sources** ModWright Denon  
3910 (modified)

**Analog Sources** Rega P25 (modified)  
with Shelter 501 II and BAT PK-5

**Interconnects** Tara Labs The One,  
DH Labs Revelation Silver

**Speaker Cable** Tara Labs RSC  
Vector

**Power Cords** Essential Sound  
Products Essence Reference

**Power Conditioner** Running Springs  
Jaco

**Vibration Control** Symposium Ultra  
Platforms, Rollerblock Jr.

**Other Accessories** VPI 16.5 record  
cleaner, Stylast, Dedicated Audio  
Cable Towers

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Come Out at Night, SACD (MOFI)

**Charlie Hunter Trio** Shango!, CD

**Little Feat** The Last Record Album, LP

**Kraftwerk** The Mix, LP

**Miles Davis** Relaxin With The Miles  
Davis Quintet, CD (DCC); Cookin With  
The Miles Davis Quintet, CD (DCC)



A close-up photograph of the control panel of a Monarchy SM70 Pro Amplifier. The panel is dark grey with a fine, horizontal brushed metal texture. On the left side, there is a black rectangular master volume knob with a red rectangular indicator window. To the right of the knob are two gold-colored screws. A vertical, polished metal handle is positioned to the right of the screws. The background is a solid grey.

# The Monarchy SM70 Pro Amplifier

— JEFF DORGAY



## The Monarchy SM70 Pro Amplifier

One of my favorite amplifiers from the old days was the Mark Levinson ML-2. They were giant, Class-A monsters only 25 watts each and, depending on who you talked to, were one of the best-sounding early solid-state amplifiers. The bad news was that they were expensive, heavy and threw off enough heat to warm the room in those cold Wisconsin winters. For those of you who had the good fortune to hear these through a set of the early Magnepan Tympanis or a pair of Quads, the sound was out of this world for 1979.

Fast forward to the present day; the Monarchy SM 70 Pro retails for \$980 and looks like you took an ML-2 and put it in a shrink machine. Don't let the tiny size fool you, this amp weighs in at 24 pounds. It is simple, but beautifully finished in black, with small handles on the front to help you move it from place to place.

Until just recently, Monarchy used to offer the SM 70 as a single-ended version with a smaller power supply for \$725 with only 25 watts per channel. Now they are only offering the pro version.

I was introduced to these amplifiers at Jeff Connors' house, the man that designs the Roan Audio Model 7's we are reviewing next issue. I couldn't get over the big sound from those tiny amplifiers! Though they have MOSFET outputs, they are surprisingly free of the grain and haze that usually accompany



that design. Initial break-in only took about 50 hours, but even after that, this amplifier needs to be on for about an hour and a half before the true magic comes out. Though I am contributing minutely to global warming, I leave them on all the time.

A quick pop of the top cover reveals decent quality components and a big power supply, with a giant toroidal transformer and 60,000 uf worth of capacitance on tap. Remember, this is a 25 watt-per-channel amplifier.

### Initial Set-Up

Being small enough to put in your kid's backpack, set up is quite easy. The SM-70 Pro comes with a beefy power cord and hard rubber feet on the bottom. The back panel features a pair of single ended RCA jacks and a single XLR connector along with the standard speaker binding posts and an IEC power socket.

While I had only requested a single amplifier, Mr. Poon sent me a pair for review. Puzzled at first, I noticed a number of other reviewers had



(continued)





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# “Performance without obvious limitations - completeness.”

Marc Mickelson, *SoundStage!*, November 2005

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raved about how much better the combination sounded, so I was intrigued. As I wanted to stay true to the test, I used one amplifier first, and this was interesting for a couple of reasons. A few of my “on the fence” audiophile friends make fun of me when I discuss how a piece of gear will change character (sometimes dramatically) over the course of break-in, and say “that’s just bunk,” or “you’re just hearing what you want to hear.” Not this time; I had two identical amplifiers, one with 200 hours on it and one, fresh out of the box. The difference was apparent, even to the uninitiated, so this argument was finally put to bed.

**“you’re just hearing what  
you want to hear.”**

I wanted to use this amplifier as a low-power opportunity to a small tube amplifier, so that a budget minded audiophile wouldn’t have to bother with the hoo-hah of swapping (and replacing) tubes. I am a confessed tube lover, especially in a lower-priced system, feeling that the somewhat more romantic sound of tubes goes a long way with inexpensive speakers, but nonetheless I am always on the look-out for alternatives.

## The Sound

To evaluate the sound in a budget context, I started with the Roan Model 5 Monitors, the stock power cord and my trusty Home Depot 10 ga. speaker cable, along with DH Labs Air

(continued)



Matrix interconnect. I started with the Prima Luna Prologue 3 preamplifier and my trusty Ah! Tjoeb 4000 CD player. Even after break-in, this amplifier provided a powerful sound that always seemed much bigger than its 25 watts-per-channel rating would suggest.

As usual, I played a wide range of music to see how it would perform, and was not disappointed. Even with some of my favorite records, like the Mickey Hart drum records, Little Feat's The Last Record Album and numerous Kraftwerk records, the bass was tight and well controlled, without being over-damped as some solid-state amplifiers can do. Switching back to traditional Jazz favorites from Miles

Davis and John Coltrane revealed very good imaging abilities and a smooth high end. On an efficient speaker like the Naim Arivas (90db), the Monarchy never sounded small, but with the Roan Audio 5's (86db) they needed just a bit more juice to really sing.

However, if you listen to music at modest levels and are on a budget, go get yourself a decent \$1,000 preamp and call it a day. You could live with this little amp forever and be perfectly happy.

### The Magic

But being an audiophile isn't about being happy, is it? It's about being on a quest for more. If you want to really rock, here's what you need to do, and of course, it requires getting your checkbook back out (and it shows what a wise man Mr. Poon from Monarchy is) and buy another SM-70 PRO. That's right: you need a pair of these to really make some noise.



**With all this power on tap, the Roan 5s really rocked the house, so I wanted more.**

You can run the SM-70 PRO as an 80-watt monoblock in single-ended or balanced mode and that's where the big fun begins. Even in this mode, you are still under \$2,000 for a pair of 80-watt, class-A amplifiers that are so small you can run them on bases right next to your speakers and save another \$1,000 on speaker cables. More money to buy records with!

Switching to mono operation is not a subtle difference; as monoblocks, these amplifiers possess a lot of authority and add much more impact to the sound. Everyone that had a chance to give them a listen was shocked to see that sound coming from a tiny pair of amplifiers! You have two options for mono operation – single ended or balanced – and if you have a preamp with balanced capabilities, this is the ticket, allowing the SM-70 PRO to operate in full differential mode.

With all this power on tap, the Roan 5s really rocked the house, so I wanted more. The 80 watts-per-channel brought the ability to play loud, and for those of you who like larger-scale music like Metallica or Shostakovich can still lead productive lives. (With the right speaker of course.) Now that I had more volume, it was time to see how these amplifiers worked with my favorite audio enhancements. I happened to have a pair of small Symposium Ultra platforms that are the perfect size for these babies. Power cords were swapped for the DH Labs Power Sonic cords, in-

terconnects were upgraded to the DH Revelation and of course, everything went into my Running Springs Jaco power conditioner.

Now we are talking serious sound. I know it is somewhat mental to plug a pair of \$300 power cords, \$300 Ultra platforms and \$400 interconnects into a pair of \$900 amplifiers, but it works well and it takes them to another level of refinement. I auditioned this pair with a number of different speakers to see what they would do. The ultimate test was with the ESP Bodhrans, which they passed with flying colors. Actually, the ultimate torture test was to hook them up to my Apogee Calipers, known destroyer of amplifiers great and small; they even did ok here! Granted, with the 82 db Calipers, they couldn't really play loud, but they sounded great and did not turn into puddles of goo from the stress.

As you know, I like a bit of warmth, so I found the best balance with a tube linestage. Because the absolute best sound these amplifiers are capable of delivering was in balanced mode, KD was kind enough to lend me an ARC LS-3 (which I used to own and was familiar with) to explore the balanced option on a platform that offered both sets of outputs. Mr. Poon also makes a great solid state linestage, that I have not had the pleasure (yet) of auditioning, but I have heard good things. The SM-70 Pro was neutral enough that it revealed the character of whatever preamp I hooked up to it, so again, you can probably do some system fine-tuning this way.

### The Verdict

**The Monarchy SM-70 PRO, especially when considered as a pair in monoblock operation, goes down in my book as one of the great solid-state amplifier values of all time. Granted, these little amplifiers don't have the pedigree of some of the great names in audio, but if you just want great solid-state sound on a budget, I can't recommend these highly enough. By itself, one amplifier offers great value, but the real prize is buying a pair. I hope we will have the opportunity to sample more of Mr. Poon's work next year. ●**

*(continued)*



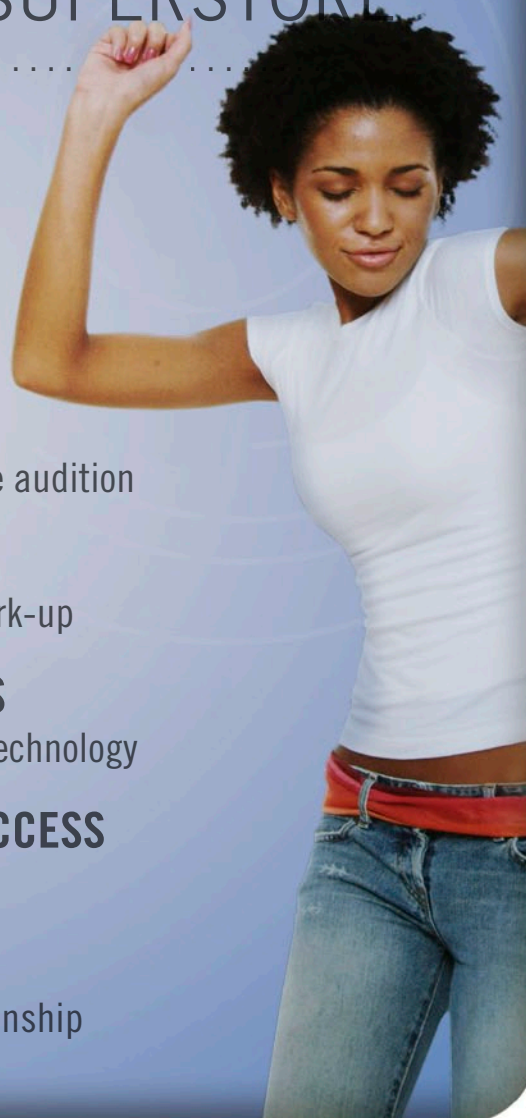
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## PERIPHERALS

**Line stage** Modwright Instruments 9.0 SWE (with Bybee upgrade), Audio Research LS-3, Prima Luna ProLogue 3

**Digital Sources** Denon 3910 universal player with ModWright modifications, Ah! Tjoeb 4000 Super tube player

**Analog Sources** Rega P3/ Shure V15/Bottlehead Seduction, Rega P25/Sumiko Blackbird/ Whest .20, Nakamichi 600 series II cassette deck

**Speakers** Roan Audio Model 7, Naim Ariva, Rethm 2nd Rethm, Apogee Caliper, Penaudio Serenade

**Cables** DH Labs Revalation silver interconnect, DH Labs Q-10 speaker cable, DH Labs Power Sonic power cord

**Vibration Control** Symposium Ultra platforms on amplifier, linestage and disc player.

## FAVORITE TEST TUNES

**Genesis:** Trick of The Tail, LP (MOFI)

**Led Zeppelin:** Led Zeppelin, LP (Classic Records)

**Aimee Mann:** Lost In Space, LP (MOFI)

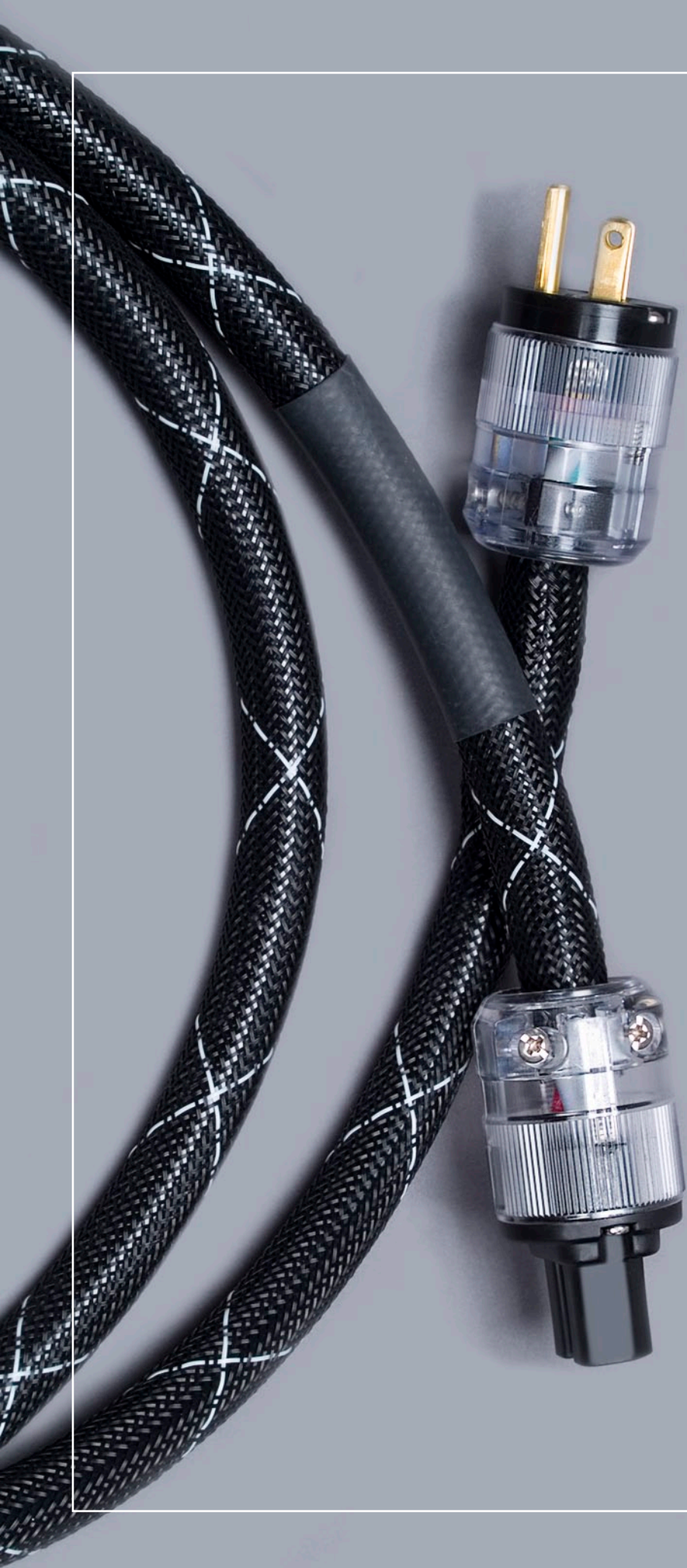
**Frank Zappa:** Sleep Dirt, LP

**Joe Jackson:** 4, CD

**The Beatles:** Revolver, LP (Apple)

**Miles Davis:** TUTU, LP





# DH Labs Power Plus

— JEFF DORGAY

If you would like a good replacement for your stock power cord, but are not quite ready to jump off of the cliff for 500-1000 dollar power cords, the DH Power Plus is a good alternative. For some of you, this may be all the further down the upgrade path you want to go, choosing to stop at the \$200 price point. This is a very respectable power cord and I wouldn't call you a bad Smurf if you told me this was the choice for your system.



**T**he Power Plus cord features two twelve gauge conductors and a twelve gauge ground. DH claims a very low inductance and resistance and mentions that their custom insulation acts as a noise shield. I can't vouch for the resistance and inductance, but using the Power Plus with a few different power amplifiers on my high efficiency 2nd Rethm speakers, I could definitely notice a bit less grunge coming through the power line, especially when I bypassed the Running Springs Jaco and went direct from the AC line. To be fair, I used this AC cord with a good share of my own reference gear as well as numerous test gear in the studio, with good results.

my tastes. Again, system tuning is important and for some of you, this may be just what the doctor ordered to make your system perfect.

So, here's what you get and don't get for \$200: First off, you don't get super fancy packaging, but that's ok with me, I want the money to be put in the cable anyway. Second, no expensive cryogenic treatment or super state-of-the-art connectors. Last, you don't get the same degree of neutrality that you get with the big boys. Besides, there better be some difference between this and the cables approaching a thousand bucks per, right? Either way, this is still a huge jump in

On modestly priced gear, the Power Plus is an instant step up, offering lower noise and a more dynamic sound than the stock cable can provide. It was an excellent match with the Monarchy SM-70 Pro monoblocks. As I moved up the resolution ladder, I did notice a bit of a smoothness in the high frequency response and just a touch of bass warmth when compared to my Essential Sound Products "The Essence" cords. This one is just a bit of a tone control and will definitely calm down an edgy component a slight bit, so make sure and give it a listen with your gear to be sure. It also did a great job with my ARC LS-3 linestage, that has always been just a touch too bright for

performance between whatever it is that your component came with stock.

### The Verdict

**What you do get for \$200 (2 meter), is a very good sounding power cord that is robustly built and made in the US. I would highly recommend the Power Plus for systems on a modest to medium budget without hesitation. Again, I would like to stress that for those of you not wanting to buy a lot of spendy power cords, the DH Power Plus is one of the best values on the market today. ●**





# Joule Electra LA-150 Line Stage

— STEVE HOFFMAN



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SELECTOR

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## The Joule Electra LA-150 Line Stage

Let me start off by saying that I have been aware of Joule Electra since the beginning of time (way back in the ancient 1990's). I remember sitting in Elliot Midwood's ACOUSTIC IMAGE store in Los Angeles when the first Joule Electra piece came in the door via the UPS man. This would have been around 1996 or so I guess. We uncrated it and all of us sort of "gasped". It was the original LA-100 line stage and it was so striking and understated looking with that black front and those gold knobs that we "willed it" to sound good.



We shouldn't have worried, it sounded wonderful after a few weeks break-in; rich and full with not a hint of glare. I immediately wanted one so I got Elliot to put me in direct touch with company founder Jud Barber and I ordered one to use in my mastering work. I had Jud add a few things on there (like two "tape" stages so I could monitor with and without room EQ, etc.) and when it arrived, I was pleased to see that it had my name inscribed on the back. A classy touch from JE. At any rate, that was my introduction to Jud Barber and Joule Electra.

At the Consumer Electronics show in Las Vegas every year I always wander (stumble, actually) into the Joule Electra suite at the Alexis Park hotel to see what Jud has cooked up. His room always sounds wonderful and Jud and wife Marianne are just so darn friendly that I can always unwind in his room and bask in the great sound the always manage to put together.

When JD mentioned about a month ago that he received a new LA-150 (which judging by the serial number was made on 9-11-05) I asked if I could review it. He agreed and after some break-in time at TONE HQ and the necessary photo session, the new version of his flagship line stage arrived at my door. The LA-150 is Jud Barber's ultimate statement of line level magic. I call it a "super LA-100", because it is so different in sound from my original LA-100 that for me it's a whole new ball-game.

### Circuit Design and Initial Set Up

First the basics---This is an all-tube point to point wired hand-built beauty which uses Jud's mu- follower circuitry with a nifty new Russian 6C45-P which is a single triode designed tube and is used the with mighty 6350 as the mu-follower. Jud says the 6C45-P has the gain and power of 15 12AX7's in parallel. That's it for each channel. This is a

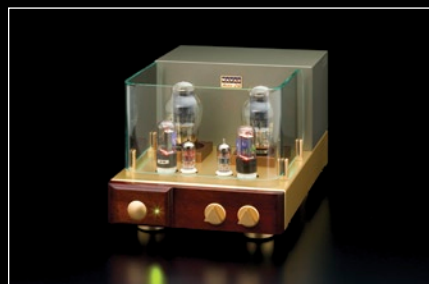
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## MD-300B

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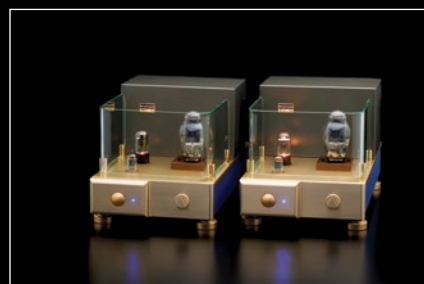
- 10 w/ch
- Use as stereo or integrated with 3 inputs & volume control
- \$7500



## MD-805m

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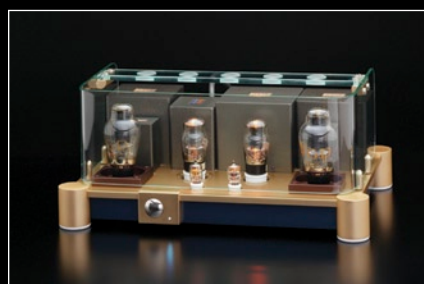
- 55 w/ch monoblocks
- 20-50 khz
- 10mm top plate for superb rigidity & sonics
- \$19k/pr.



## 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

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*"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!

simple yet effective design for this dual-mono preamplifier. The build quality inside this baby is wonderful. When you open up the top and take a look-see inside you can see what you are spending your music dollars on; the circuit boards are mounted on a tri-flex suspension system along with ISO-DAMP material and EAR vibration bushings. Everything inside the LA-150 is top notch!

What about the power supply, you ask? Well, just like on my old LA-100, the power supply is pure DC implemented with two batteries directly under the signal boards on a separate level. The 6EM7 regulator tube and an OA2 voltage reference tube are used for each channel in this adjustable bias circuit and insure that pure DC exists on the signal grids of the gain stage.

## Tube rectification rules, dudes!

One thing to keep in mind is that the LA-150 has a relatively low amount of gain, which should not be a problem for most users. Should you need more gain, you can set jumpers inside the unit to get more. JD mentioned that he did have a slight problem using the LA-150 with the McCormack DNA-500 power amplifier, that has a very low input impedance and requires a healthy amount of drive to achieve full output. Jud confirmed that the alternative settings will take care of this condition.

*(continued)*





## The Sound

So, what does this sound like you ask? Dead cold from the box it sounded very nice, authoritative, with great dynamics and pleasing neutral tonality. Warmed up for an hour or so it sounds even better. However JD told me it really needed about 150 hours to start sounding that way and didn't completely settle in until 300 hours. So be prepared to do some serious break-in before you do any critical listening. It would be nice to have all of my components broken-in before I get them! Makes my life so much easier.... So, when I turned on the LA-150 I noticed right away that the bass was tighter than my old LA-100. Also the shimmering sound combined with the amazing resolution that the Joule Electra products are known for was even more apparent on the new LA-150.

I have a trick (silly actually, but it works for me) for judging the resolution capabilities of a component. It's this: I find a disc to play that has a certain amount of echo on it in a certain place and I use this to judge how well a component resolves. Two discs I use in particular, not because these are the best recorded albums on the planet (they are not) but because

they have useful echo, heh. The first is Creedence Clearwater Revival's **Willy & The Poor Boys** album on SACD that I mastered for Chad Kassem's Acoustic Sounds/Analogue Productions label and the song is *Fortunate Son*. I listen to just the intro of the song. The drum thwacks have a certain style of echo on them and after each thwack the echo recedes off into the distance in a unique manner. (If you want to check resolution between the SACD and CD playback of your digital machines that is a helpful track to use, just switch back and forth between layers of the SACD; you can really hear the difference).

**You can hear right into the soundstage and even though that is not my priority when judging gear (tonality is) it's a nifty perk.**

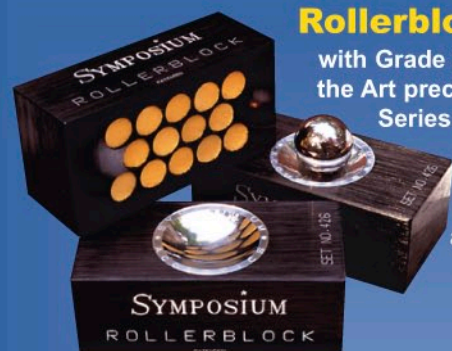
The second song I use is from Donald Fagen's **Kamakiriad** album; it's track 5 *Tomorrow's Girls*. At 23 and 27 seconds in there is an extra echo "snap" on the snare drum that is hard to pick out unless you are listening for it. This makes a GREAT way to test equipment resolution.

If you can clearly hear this echo snap you are in great shape. Well, the Joule Electra LA-150 passed the echo test with flying colors. It's a machine that resolves nicely. You can hear right into the soundstage and even though that is not my priority when judging gear (tonality is) it's a nifty perk.

## THE VERDICT

As mentioned above, tonality for me is the most important aspect of a piece of electronic gear. If it's not neutral it is of no use to me as it would throw off my mastering work. I'm glad to say that the LA-150 is quite neutral sounding while still retaining the lifelike sound of tubes that makes recordings sound like the real deal. The "breath of life" is intact with the Joule Electra LA-150. Be warned though, because of this neutrality it will reveal sonic problems in less than wonderful recordings. It won't gloss over anything (nor would I want it to). It reproduces what you give it exactly, and in really good recordings it adds an excitement and panache that makes listening to music a truly pleasurable experience. I give the LA-150 a big thumbs up!! ●





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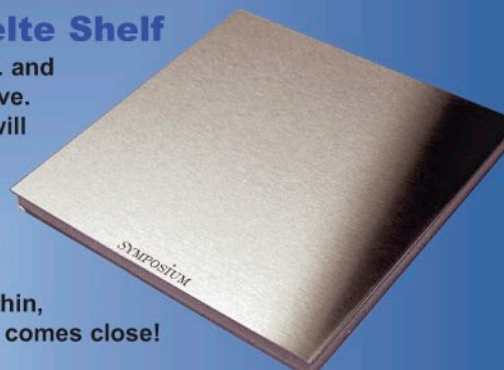
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## PERIPHERALS

### Analog Source:

Ampex 351-2-P Tape Deck

**Digital Sources:** Sony  
SACD-777, Fostex DA-10

**Power Amplifier:** WAVAC  
EC300B

**Speakers:** Tetra 506LTD  
Custom

**Cables:** Kubala-Sosna  
Research Emotion Speaker  
Cables, Interconnects and  
Power Cables.

### Vibration Control:

Symposium Isis Custom rack,  
Rollerblocks

## FAVORITE TEST TUNES

### NAT "KING" COLE

Love Is The Thing  
DCC Compact Classics  
24 Karat Gold Compact Disc

### RAY CHARLES AND BETTY

**CARTER** (self-titled)  
DCC Gold Disc

### BOB DYLAN

Highway 61 Revisited  
DCC Gold Disc

### CREEDENCE

### CLEARWATER REVIVAL

Willy & The Poor Boys  
SACD

### DONALD FAGEN

Kamakiriad





# Naim Nait 5i and n-SAT

— JEFF DORGAY

---

I enjoy Naim audio gear for the same reasons I like BMW automobiles; stylish, understated and high performance. But what I like best about Naim products is that if you do not want to be a tweekaholic, you can go down to your Naim dealer and get great hi-fi that all works together (right down to the rack and cables), take it home and be done with it. This isn't to say that Naim gear won't respond to a mega expensive power cable if you get the urge, but right out of the box you can have great sound.





**N**ow I mean no disrespect to our readers, because I am one of you. I love to find the latest power cord or room setup tweak and the journey is maddening and rewarding all at the same time; yet sometimes (and you know you have said this too...) I just want music without all of the fuss. But because I love hi-fi and have become spoiled with having great gear at my disposal, it can't be just ANY hi-fi.



The other parallel between Naim and BMW is that whether you buy the cool little 1 series (available to our European readers only) all the way up to the flagship 760iL, you get the same core engineering and feel. The further up the ladder you go, the more performance you get. You can go to your Naim Dealer, spend a few thousand dollars and get some very good sound. (or you can spend six figures if you want to.) This is what I present to you here, the newest speaker from the Naim line, the n-SAT. Because Naim voices all of their gear to work together, they were kind enough to send me a Naim Nait 5i integrated amplifier and their flat speaker cables to accompany the speakers, so I could get more of a feel for the Naim synergy.

### Initial Set Up

The n-SAT uses the same tweeter as the floor standing Ariva and one slightly smaller woofer (130mm vs 180mm) and only one of them. Like the Ariva, the n-SAT is optimized for positioning fairly close to the back wall. I put the speakers about a foot from the room corners, slightly toed in giving a good balance between bass weight and midrange neutrality. If you are not able to dedicate your room to sound and put speakers 3-

6 feet out in your listening room, you will really appreciate this part of Naim design!

My test pair came in a very stylish black and silver gloss finish that looks like it would be perfectly at home on a Wilson product and the optional n-STANDs. The n-SAT speakers in this finish are \$1600 and they are also available in a light wood finish for \$1350. The n-STANDs are \$350, the n-BRACKETS (for wall mounting) are \$170 a pair. The Nait 5i is a steal for \$1425, with remote included. For those of you considering home theater use, the n-Sat speakers are shielded.

The TONE studio is a 1200 square foot office conveniently located 15 steps behind my house and is a working listening room and art studio. Fortunately for me, the wife acceptance factor out there is zero, because it is a dedicated listening room. I can run cables till the cows come home without a problem, but in the house, it's a different story. I live in a small house and there is no room for big speakers or gear. Until the Naim goodies arrived, there was no hifi in my house. The living room was to be used for initial break-in of the Naim gear only and then back out to the studio for serious listening. Just so you know, this was not a rule imposed by my wife, I just don't have a lot of space for this stuff in the house!

*(continued)*



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The good news is they fit so well into our living room, that is where they stayed for the duration of this review.

## Listening

The smaller woofer of the N-sat took less time to break in than the Arivas and in no time at all there was great music coming from the system. For the review period I used an Audio Refinement CD player (solid state) along with the Nait as well as my faithful Ah! Tjoeb 4000. Both worked well, with the tubed player offering a bit warmer presentation. Again, if I were starting from scratch, I would just add the Naim CD-5i (about \$1700) and be done with it.

If there was ever a case for the system concept and components being voiced to work together, this is it. For those of you not familiar with Naim, their trademark sound is one that is very accurate, with an emphasis on transparency, speed and pace. This is immediately apparent at first listen. One of the things we all agonize with is component matching, and this system allows you to just unbox it and enjoy the music, confident that you won't find a better way to configure your system. (Doesn't that make you rest easier?)

*(continued)*





This isn't to say these Naim components don't sound great on their own as part of other systems, or respond to some of the usual tweaks, but I am getting more fond of this concept all the time. I like knowing the system in my living room sounds great and I don't have to worry about it any more.

The Nait 5i is rated at 50 watts per channel into 8 ohms, and it is a very beefy 50 watts. Our small living room is only about 12 x 16 and we were never at a loss for plenty of volume and clarity. Again, the hallmark of this system is clarity and accuracy. If you are a tube lover like me, initially you might consider this gear a bit less romantic, but after living with the presentation for some time, it is also a flavor I find interesting. The Nait combo gives you the music and effortlessly does its job with no fuss.

I have a very wide taste in music, so I was very happy that this amplifier and speakers were equally at home with whatever music I played on it, but it was particularly good with anything that really revealed musical detail. Recent non hi-fi visitors to my house really enjoyed how great this gear sounded and commented positively on the smart good looks, but all liked the simplicity best.

I listened to a lot of different music from all over the spectrum for very long periods of time and I forgot how great it was to have good music in my house! You might think that after listening to gear all day, silence would prevail in the house, but the Naim gear was a treat. The n-SAT's provided ample bass down to about 55hz when placed in the corners of the room and were adequate for everything but the lowest registers of classical music and my favorite Genesis albums. A quick check with the test tone generator revealed output all the way down to 40hz, but it was fairly rolled off at this point.

### Breaking up is hard to do

After all this talk about Naim synergy, I had to hook the speakers and the amplifier up to some other things, just to see what happened when I mixed it up.

The n-SAT speakers have a bit of an up front presentation, more like sitting in the 5th row, compared to the Aperion speakers we tested last issue that feel like about row 30. This is a very

musically engaging speaker, that images well and is not grainy at all. Like my Naim Arivas, the n-SAT lost some of its character when driven

by some of the low powered tube amplifiers I tried it with, however it was also quite good with the Monarchy SM-70 Pro monoblocks which are also solid state.

The Nait 5i by itself is an amazing little integrated amplifier. The essence of simplicity, it has four inputs and a volume control, along with the signature Naim logo, backlit in lime green. The Nait 5i would look right at home in an upscale art gallery or loft apartment. The folks at Naim told me that they sell a lot of gear in Manhattan and I can see why.

The older Nait was only 30 watts per channel, but the current 5i is rated at 50 watts per channel into 8 ohms and a peak output of 500 watts into one ohm. While not really stepping out of the Naim realm, it sounded fantastic with my floorstanding Arivas, providing excellent bass extension and control. The Nait did a great job with everything I hooked it up to, providing a very detailed, neutral sound with excellent tone and pace.

And yes, it rocks out; the Nait does not lose its grip on the music at high volume, nor does the sound quality deteriorate. Just to really punish them, I matched the Nait up with my Apogee Calipers and they did a respectable job. I dare you

to try that with any other 1400 dollar integrated amplifier!!

### The beauty is in the fine details.

What really makes Naim gear stand out at this price point aside from the sound is the build quality and attention to detail. What we have here is entry-level gear that shares the same level of build quality as the top-shelf Naim gear. The volume control is well damped, the switches have a very positive feel and the Nait 5i weighs as much as a palette of receivers from Best Buy.

The stands for the n-SAT are a bit expensive, but they are designed to be a perfect match for the speaker and are elegantly designed. They have allen wrench adjustment so that you can easily level the stands and set the speaker rake. And though they look fairly svelte, are pretty massive. So you could go buy some less expensive stands but they wouldn't be perfectly matched to your n-SAT's, they wouldn't look as cool and you would probably

*(continued)*







"It's kinda heavy, but when I couldn't find my Walkman . . ."

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waste a lot of time trying a few things that didn't work.

If you add a Naim CD player to the system when shopping, you can take advantage of the DIN connections between your gear and use Naim interconnects. If you already have a CD player, the Nait does have four RCA style inputs as well.

### The Verdict

So, what have we learned here? The Naim n-SAT speakers mated with the Nait 5i integrated amplifier sound great, look fantastic and work well together, which is more than I can say for some of my friends. But seriously, if you are looking for equipment in this price range, I highly suggest spending some time at your Naim dealer. You may just come home with a whole system and be done shopping for hi-fi! ●

### MANUFACTURER

#### Naim Audio North America

5675 West Howard St.  
Niles, Illinois 60714  
847-647-2293  
www.naimusa.com

### PERIPHERALS

**Digital Sources** Audio Refinement CD player

**Cables** DH Labs Air Matrix interconnect, Naim NACA5 speaker cable w/Naim Dual Plug termination

### FAVORITE TEST TUNES

**Little Village:** Little Village, (CD)

**Aimee Mann:** Batchelor no.2, (CD)

**Miles Davis:** Kind Of Blue, (CD)

**Genesis:** Trick of the Tail, (CD)

**Johnny Cash:** Live from Folsom Prison (CD)

**Richard Thompson:** The Old Kit Bag, (CD)



# The Essence Reference Power Cord

By Essential  
Sound  
Products

**A** few months before I got the Running Springs Jaco in my system, I was also on the lookout for a power cord I could live with, but I had the same dilemma. So much of what I had listened to in the past was more of a tone control, and that's too much work for me to keep track of, with so much different hardware moving in and out of the studio.

For many of you, if your system is just a smidge one way or the other, a specific power cord or interconnect may be that last little tweak that makes your system perfect. (At least for now...) But I was on a quest for neutrality.

— JEFF DORGAY



My reference system stays pretty much intact, but in the course of reviewing I wanted something that was a significant upgrade to the stock power cords shipped with everything, yet was ideally neutral. After a lot of evaluation, I still hadn't found "the cord." Granted, there are a few power cords in the \$2-5000 each category that I did not get the chance to audition, but even at the good guy reviewer discount; I couldn't afford six of those for my reference system.

Another good friend in the industry who knew I was looking for power cords called and told me about the ESP

Reference power cord.

This particular friend is much fussier about sound than even I am, so I knew we were on to something.

Michael Griffin, the man behind Essential Sound Products was extremely helpful on the phone and asked me more questions than I asked him. He explained that some of his inspirations came from his work as a product design engineer the auto industry, as well as being a lifelong audiophile.

With outstanding results, I might add!

## Listening

A few of my friends are scientists and they pound me all the time to get quantifiable, repeatable results. This was very easy with the Reference cable. Where I did cheat at first was plugging all six of them into my system to get a composite view.

Would this box of cables that are worth more than a nice used Ducati motorcycle make much overall difference in how my system would sound, and what would that be?

Happily, the difference was not subtle. No tone control effect here, it was more like I peeled a blanket off the system. Highs were neither exaggerated nor rolled off and bass was more defined as well. My initial impression was that of moving up about 5 rows in the hall with no change in tonality at all. Once the cords had some time on them, I felt as if I gained a couple more rows. Backgrounds also became more silent which was a bonus. Overall, everything felt much more musical and correct, with a much bigger sound than I had before installing the Reference power cords. To make sure that my brain wasn't making all this up, after about two weeks with the cords, I went back to all stock cords to double check and the sound collapsed dramatically.

**"Wow, your system sounds a lot better, what did you do?"**

My peripherals list would take up two pages, so I'll just give you the short version. I probably tried about 40 different components with these cords and then did it one at a time, to see if they had more effect on one type of component over the other. If you had to buy only one, start with your preamp or phono stage. Then work your way backwards in the system, but it's still a pretty close call. With all of my components, this was where I heard the most improvement and every piece of gear that had an outboard power supply responded quite well, with the least improvement on CD transports. Just as with the RSA power conditioner, the benefit of improving power delivery was more noticeable on my system with the WAVAC amplifier and 2nd Rethm speakers, because of the noise issues being magnified here.

My pal skeptical Roy had been by listening the evening before the cords arrived and we stayed up fairly late spinning records. The next day he came over and said, "wow, your system sounds a lot better, what did you do?" When I pointed behind the rack to all of the new power

(continued)



# PACIFIC CREEK

cords, he told me I was crazy. (That's why he's Skeptical Roy, after all.) I parted with one of them, knowing I was going to be at the RMAF for a few days and told him to live it up.

---

**It didn't take long. About two hours later, I got the call: "Dude, this thing is amazing, how much are they? I need a couple!"**

Rather than go into molecular detail here, a quick peek at the Essential Sound Products website at [www.essentialsound.com](http://www.essentialsound.com) will reveal a pretty thorough explanation of the construction process. The cables are terminated and then the plugs completely sealed before the whole cable assembly is cryogenically treated. The presentation is outstanding as well. The finished cords are bagged in plastic, with red rubber covers on the plugs and then the whole thing is put in a grey zippered bag with the Essential Sound Products logo on the outside.

## THE VERDICT

Personally, I don't care if they dunk these things in the French fryer at McDonalds to make them do what they do. I want neutral sound for my reference gear and that's what the Reference cords deliver. If you want something to fine-tune your system a bit, this is not the cable for you. However, if you really want to get more music from your system, without affecting the tonal balance at all, I can't recommend the Reference high enough. I'll be using them in my reference system from now on! ●

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# Headphone Planet

— Aaron Kovics

I would like to introduce Aaron Kovics to our **TONE**-Audio readers as one of the moderators of the Head-Fi forum on the web, one that deals with headphones and associated components. Having lost touch with headphones in college, with a pair of Koss Pro 4aa's, I was blown away by how much this segment of the audiophile world has grown, with a level of sophistication that is truly amazing.

Many of you already in this arena know of Aaron, but for those of you that do not, you are in for a treat. Here is a guy that is just as excited as the rest of us, but in another area to explore: headphones. That's why we have called his column "Headphone Planet". I invite you all to visit [www.head-fi.org](http://www.head-fi.org) and pay this group a visit. They are just as obsessed as those of us with speakers as a primary listening source, if not more. Here's Aaron's tale of how he got to this point in audiophilia, and a bit of what he has in store for us in the months to come. Enjoy! — JD

I was delighted to join the **TONE**-Audio team and write about something that has been a passion of mine since the early 1970's - listening to music that through headphones, during times when my hormones were raging and I thought I could right the world's wrongs. That passion is as strong as ever now, where music is my recreational drug, and I need a dose of it every day.

Like many of you back in the day, I built my first pair of speakers. Consisting of a pair of Jensen Tri-axial car speakers (the expensive ones with the 40 oz. magnets) screwed into the lids of the best Styrofoam coolers known to man, with hotel hand towels for enclosure packing. I used high tensile paper clips to connect the speaker cables to the drivers.

*(continued)*



These “head speakers” were powered by a Kenwood receiver and my program sources were a Teac 2300 open reel deck, (I believe JD still has one of these...) and a Technics SL-Q3 direct drive turntable. Factory stock interconnects and some lamp cord from the hardware store rounded out the picture and I was on my way.

My dedicated listening room had shag carpeting on the floor (don’t ask) where I would put my head between my creations and rock out to “Bohemian Rhapsody” and “Remember the Future”. Passing commuter trains would cause mistracking (no isolation platforms in those days) which I eventually solved with a 3 gram weight on the tonearm. I think my Mom was saying “turn that crap down”, especially when I was spinning Black Sabbath and then it hit me.

I needed a pair of headphones, so I could be the master of my domain. Never again would my air guitar solos be interrupted. A pair of Koss Pro 4AA’s changed my life forever.

Headphones have come a long way. Through the upcoming months, I will attempt to review current headphones as well as some vintage models. Whenever possible I will try to get future models and offer impressions based on my experience over the last 30 years of intense headphone listening and the drastic changes the world of audio has offered. In time, I will have something for all of you, from the iPod users to the most expensive models.

I would like to kick off by touching upon the newest technology that is making a big hoopla in high-end, headphone-listening world.

### **Fast Forward to the 21st Century**

This niche of the audiophile world was started by some very enthusiastic people. Five years ago, they worked day jobs, started designing circuits of their own, built amps by candlelight in the wee hours of the night and went to audio meetings around

the world. They introduced their headphone amps at meets, where everyone would bring their equipment. Everyone brings something to the party, and each member is allowed to hear other people’s set-ups, break them down, and form other setups using various combinations of each other’s gear. This gave the attendees the chance to hear a lot more than they could at their neighborhood brick and mortar hi-fi store and the race was on.

The bigger headphone amp builders have since been selling their designs with enough success that many have been able to quit their day jobs and build amps full-time. Three companies that have a large presence at the head-fi.org online meets are

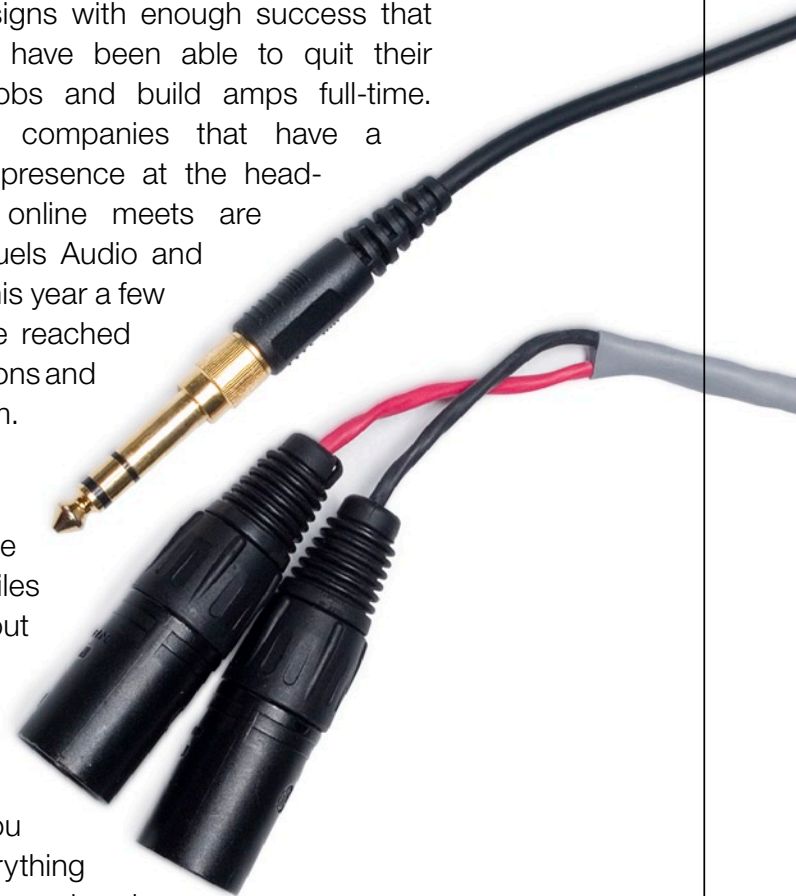
Headroom, Ray Samuels Audio and Singlepower Audio. This year a few of their products have reached the major hi-fi publications and received major acclaim.

### **It’s About Balance**

For about the last 10 years, audiophiles have been excited about components with balanced connections, but in order to take full advantage of this technology, you really need to run everything balanced. If you have a headphone system, you might be able to whittle this down to two or three components. Until recently, headphone listeners were content to run this all through a ¼” jack to a set of headphones.

Just recently, two companies have produced headphone amplifiers with balanced OUTPUTS. The bad news is that you need to re-cable your headphones so that the channels are completely independent, with no more common ground path.

*(continued)*





Now, each of the balanced paths have their own dedicated power supply, and dedicated tube or solid state circuitry for the left and right channels. This approach improves sound-stage and distortion, because both sides of the coil are receiving a signal, instead of just one side, and that doubles the slew rate (which is the speed of the signal getting to the drivers), and can cut the load of the drivers, in respect to the power supplies.

Headroom's Balanced Max amp is solid state, and offers quarter-inch unbalanced or XLR balanced outputs for headphones, so it can be used either way. If you are using balanced components throughout the chain, it is a shame not to use modified, balanced headphones. There are also options to use the amp's internal DAC if you have a digital out on your CD player. It retails for \$3,999.

Singlepower Inc. has a couple of offerings for balanced output, but goes the tube route, with separate power supplies, gain tubes and rectifier tubes for each channel, some with separate volume controls for left and right channels. They start at \$3,000 and go up, depending on upgrades.

I am lucky to have both the Beyer Dynamic DT 880 headphone, which is the newer version with a single straight cord, and a pair of re-cabled Beyer Dynamic DT 880 cans that have aftermarket Cardas, balanced XLR cables for this review. The Cardas cable is used by a lot of audiophiles to improve the Sennheiser HD600 family as well as the Sony Qualia 010 headphones. The cost is between \$150-300 (remember, you need one for each channel) and is like getting a new pair of headphones. That's the good news.

### **You Don't Know What You've Got Till It's Gone**

I must say, that after 30 or more hours of listening to the Beyer DT 880's and the re-cabled, balanced 880's, it took all of 20 seconds to realize the benefits

the balanced option brings to the table. With a balanced amp and source, the unit has a soundstage that envelopes you from the tip of your nose to the back of your ears (even Mr. Spock's ears), and allows instruments and vocals in the midrange frequencies to have more distinct placement.

Returning to the unbalanced version, the soundstage tightens up in front of you, with a great deal of congestion.

Do these offerings sound better than the non-balanced versions? You bet they do. Are they worth the time and money? Yes they are, if you can justify the expense. As always, the big question is "how good is good enough?" If you are only an occasional headphone listener, you may not want to bother, but if you are a serious listener in pursuit of headphone perfection, I think you will want to check this out. See you next month. ●

---

**...the unit has a soundstage that envelopes you from the tip of your nose to the back of your ears (even Mr. Spock's ears)**

*(continued)*





**PERIPHERALS**

**Headphones:** Beyer Dynamics DT880 stock, Beyer Dynamics DT 880 balanced with Cardas, Neutral Reference aftermarket cable

**Amplifier:** Headroom Max Balanced Amp with balanced DAC (dac not used)

**Sources:** Meridian G08 CD Player VPI Aries 2 Turntable w/ JMW Memorial 10.5 tonearm and Benz Ruby 3 cartridge, Ray Samuels Audio XR-2

**Interconnects:** Cardas Neutral Reference Balanced XLR

**Power Cord:** Kimber Kable PowerKord 14

**TUNES**

**Ernest Ranglin** - Modern Answers to Old Problems -(CD) -TelArc

**Diana Krall** - The Girl in the Other Room -2 channel (SACD) -Verve

**The Anthony Wilson Trio** - Our Gang -2 channel (SACD) - Groove Note

**Derek and the Dominoes** - Layla -(CD) -Polydor

**Ray Brown & L. Almeida** - Moonlight Serenade -(Direct-To-Disc 180 gram LP) - Jeton

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**E**veryone knows that in the sea of Linn people, I'm a Rega guy. I've had them since the beginning and one of the things I liked about them in the old days was that they were pretty tweak-proof. You put in a cartridge and called it a day. No fussing with VTA or any of that stuff and the music that came out was awfully good. Today, there are so many Rega tables out there and so many imaginative minds, that you can perform a lot of upgrades to your Rega tables, (particularly the lower end P2, P3 and P25) that a whole cottage industry has grown up around these tables.

This month we have a couple of simple things that you can do to your Rega to extract more sound from it that are just plug-and-play; unbox, attach and better sound! If only all of audiophiledom could be this simple.

Don't get me wrong, I like the Linn LP-12. It's a great table, with a good upgrade path. But if you too, have chosen the Rega for your vinyl spinning, we are going to help you find the goodies. I'm sure that one of us will take the plunge for an LP-12 too, so we will charge down that path when the time is right. We also have a few other fun things for you!

# The Locus Design BasiClamp

\$99 [www.locus-design.com](http://www.locus-design.com)

I found this jewel at RMAF. Lee, the man behind the clamp was in the midst of severe trade show fatigue, yet was extremely personal and took a lot of time to show me all the other cool stuff that they made (cables, outlets, etc. that we will review in the future). This is their lighter clamp, selling for \$99, and they also have a larger one that is twice as massive for

\$199, but may not be suitable for low-torque motors.

Exquisitely machined, it looks like something you would see Jesse James put on one of his 100 thousand dollar Harleys, so it will look right at home on your turntable. By adding a bit of mass to the platter, it adds a little flywheel effect, but most importantly holds the record

*(continued)*





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down better. This will give you a bit better mechanical connection of record to platter and also helps a bit with warped records.

Bottom line, for a hundred bucks, it makes your Rega sound better. You will notice a bit more open sound, with your soundfield getting a bit larger as well as somewhat more precise imaging. Spatial cues will also be a bit better defined as well. Now please keep in mind that this is a subtle upgrade, but worth it. We're only talking 100 dollars here, so this isn't going to turn your P3 into a P9, but it will give you a bit more sound. I had great luck with this clamp on my P3 and P25, so I will be buying a second one. The only thing you have to pay attention to with the Locus clamp is that you need to get to the stylus straight away at the end of the record, or your arm will lightly bump the clamp.

As I have a new P9 on the way after CES, we are going to see how far I can hotrod my P25, how it compares and what it ends up costing me in the long run, so stay tuned. ●



# Symposium Svelte Shelf and Rollerblock Jr.

[www.symposiumusa.com](http://www.symposiumusa.com)

**M**any consider the lack of suspension to be one of the Rega turntables biggest faults. I am a big fan of Symposium products and noticed that SH has all of his components on Rollerblock Jr.s when the LED went off. Why not put a set of these babies under my Rega and suspend it? When using the Svelte Shelf under a turntable, you can order it without the Symposium Precision Couplers for \$30 less. (the only time you want to order one without the couplers is when using Rollerblocks or Jr.'s between them and the component)

A quick call to Peter at Symposium and a Svelte Shelf along with a set of Rollerblock Jr.s were on the way. This too, is another 5 minute fix that will have your Rega swinging big time. It will probably take more time to unbox it all than it will to set up, but this too will give your Rega (or other unsuspended table) a big dose of increased resolution for a reasonable fee.

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cable can be."*

-Dave Clark  
Positive Feedback

Just make sure to get the three RB Jr.'s as equally spaced in a triangular pattern under your table and that's it! You can get two different types of Rollerballs (chromium steel standard and optional Grade 10 tungsten carbide).

The tungsten carbide balls are significantly harder and will affect the sound similarly. Experiment to see which sound you prefer. I have a very thick concrete slab in my studio, so I was just fine with the softer ones on the floor rack holding my P25. With a wall mount, the harder ones were more to my liking.

Installing the Symposium goodies made a very dramatic difference immediately. A good quick test is any Crosby, Stills, and Nash record. Once you install this stuff, you can hear the differences between these guys a lot better. Any thing that is fairly densely packed with musical information (prog and fusion fans rejoice) will seem less crowded. This upgrade puts the Rega tables in another class, increasing the resolution significantly, but is a much costlier upgrade, yet still way less expensive than that P9 in the window.

Highly recommended. ●





## Naim iSupply

\$169 [www.naimusa.com](http://www.naimusa.com) [www.naim-audio.com](http://www.naim-audio.com) (Europe)

**N**aim seems to have an upgraded power supply for everything. If you think the iPod is evil read no further, but if you are like me and not only enjoy your iPod but find it somewhat of a guilty audiophile pleasure, here's a tweak for you.

Considering the iSupply costs almost half as much as a 60gb iPod, you might think this is a little crazy, but we're audiophiles, right? We buy \$5000 power cords, right? So this isn't really madness and it does work. When you aren't using it to power your iPod you can also use it to power a Naim phono stage or headphone amplifier.

I know, I know, iPods sound crappy. But at 320kb/sec, they don't sound that bad and with uncompressed music (still about 150 albums on your 60gb iPod) it is a passable digital source. If you are this type of iPod user, you will definitely be intrigued by the iSupply. Granted, one loses the portability aspect of this device, but when you are using the cradle to jack your iPod into your stereo, you lose that anyway.

I did some tests at various compression levels and at lower quality settings was pressed to hear a difference, but at 320kb/sec, things were improving and when playing uncompressed music, there was much less grain in the playback. Again, this will not turn your iPod into a Levinson, but it does help.

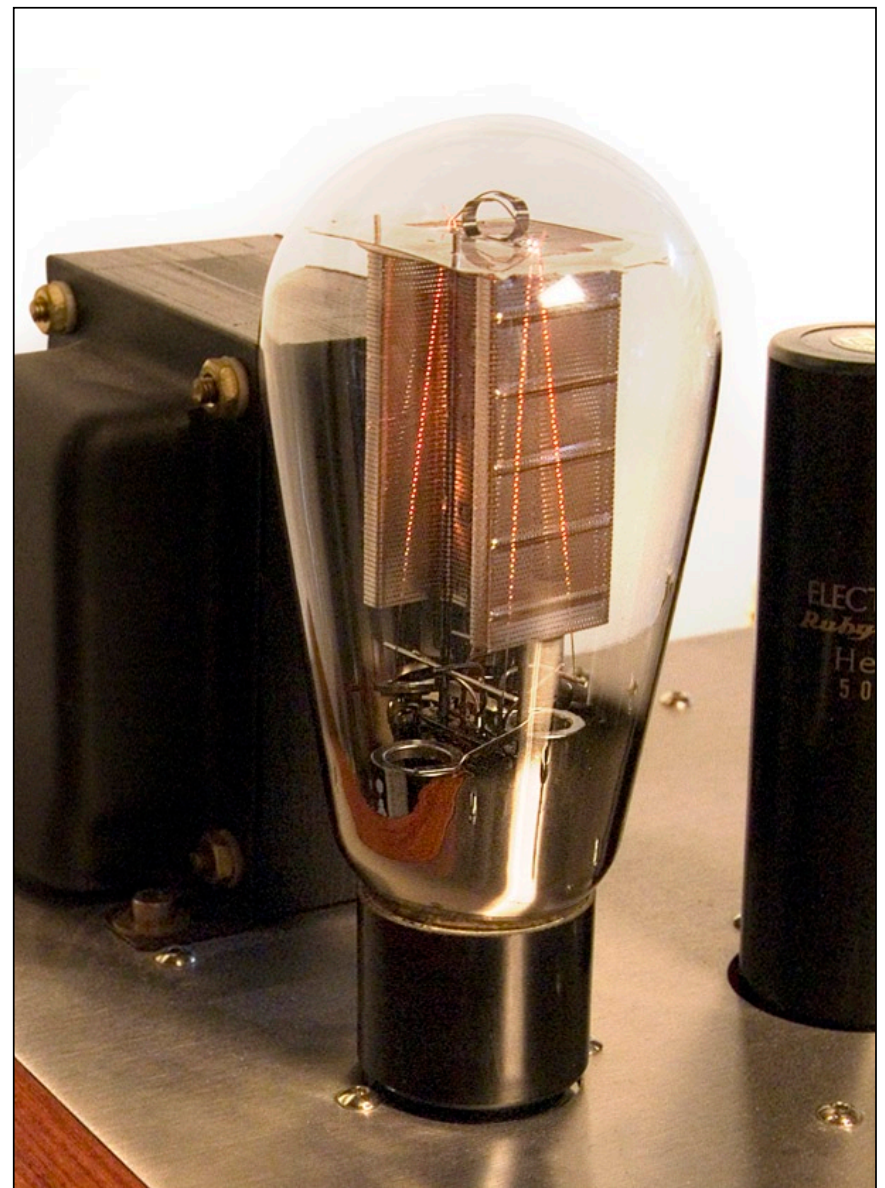
For those of you that are on the iPod boat, see if your local Naim dealer will let you take the iSupply for a test drive. I think you will like it! ●

## Sophia 274B Rectifier Tube

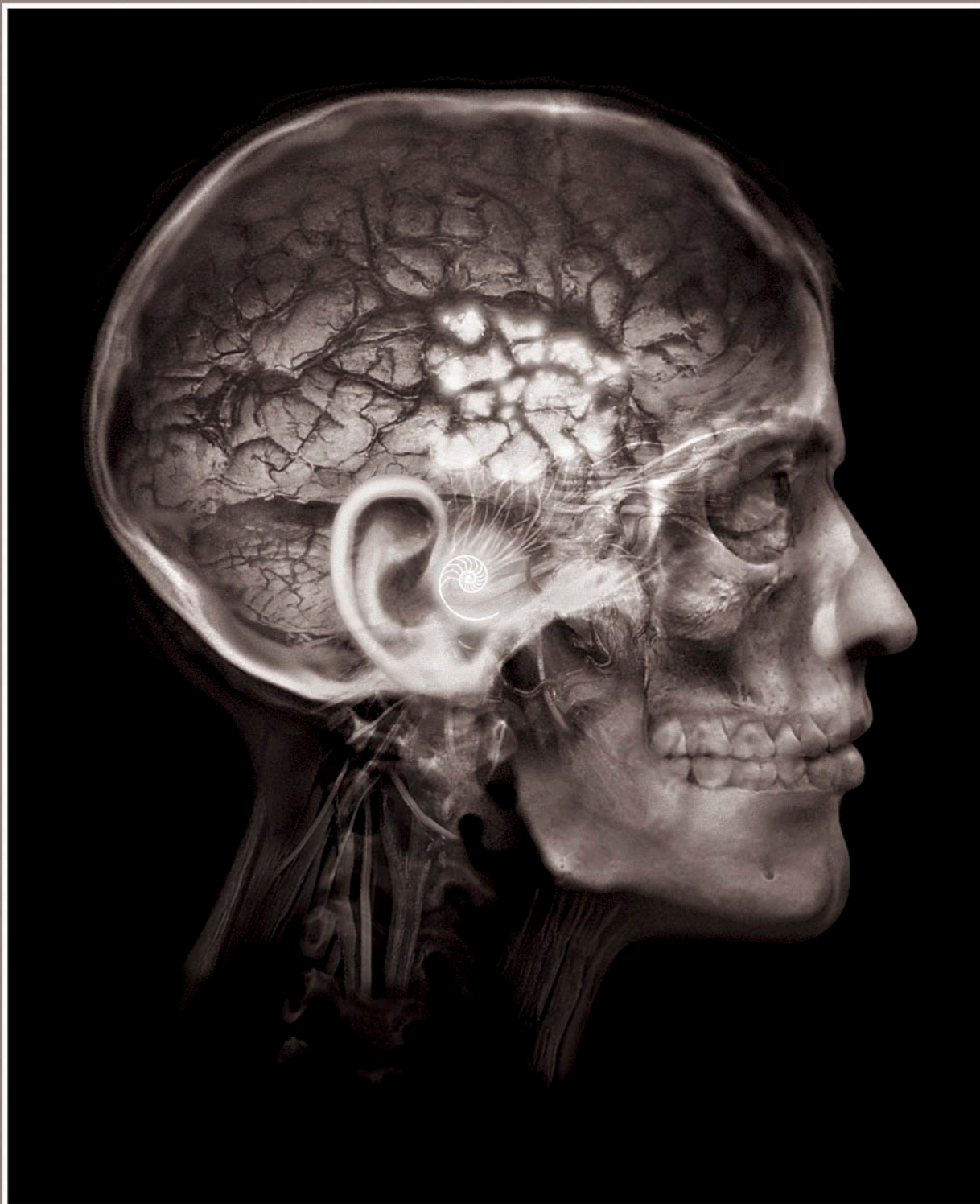
\$279 [www.sophiaelectric.com](http://www.sophiaelectric.com)

**N**ow a lot of us like to swap tubes from time to time, but if you are a hard core tubeophile, you take it all the way to the rectifier tube. I noticed that SH wanted a Western Electric 274B in his

*(continued)*







*Let sound be your guide.*

*cardas.com*

Epifania preamp and got to thinking about that 5U4GB in my Poeta. He told me that WE rectifier would add that “last bit of magic” that he craved.

Unfortunately, no one could give me a solid reason why an upgraded rectifier tube would improve the sound, but I figured replacing a garden variety tube with a very high quality tube had to make a difference, right? Well it did, and though another subtle improvement, I did seem to get better quality bass, with a bit more texture. My logic is that it is a power supply upgrade, and that’s what I’m sticking to.

Even if I didn’t hear any better sound, I would buy this tube again, because it looks much cooler than the standard EHX tube that was in my Poeta. This is one beautiful tube!! Sophia makes a lot of variations on the 300B and 2A3 tubes, so look for some reports there as well. We will also be reviewing a few of their amplifiers next year. ●



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Even if you never use any of the other tools that it comes with, it's worth it just for the light. Besides, if you have to get off your listening room couch, why not go to Home Depot? (Mine has a Krispy Kreme Donut Shop in the parking lot, bonus!!) Ignore this one at your own peril. ●







**T**his month we have some new things for you in the music section. Our roving reporter Meg Silberstein is a trained jazz musician, who in the middle of find-

ing us fun jazz to listen to will

be searching out great record stores in her travels around the country. This month she starts out in Seattle with a few places for you to check out should your travels take you there. A passionate blues player, Jeffrey Neumann starts our ongoing series aptly titled “Blues You Can Use” focusing more on living blues artists that are a bit more accessible than some of the really old-school blues. Hopefully, this will make it a bit easier to find some of these records as well! Our headphone guy, Aaron pitches in with his take on some of his favorite music to listen to through headphones.

The rest of the usual suspects have our take on things, so I hope you enjoy that too. Mr. O’Brien has been exceptionally busy, so we will hear from him next month. Watch for our new classical music editor this spring, stay tuned! – JD

# Searching Seattle — Meg Silberstein

I have begun a search for the best record stores in the country, places where good music and good listening come together. I will explore cities and what they have to offer to the music connoisseur, and share those experiences with you. My ultimate goal is that, between all of us at **TONE**, we can cover the entire U.S., so no matter where you are on the road, you have a place to feed your soul. *(continued)*







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My passion is music. I love to sing and play bass. I find inspiration from listening to Muddy Waters, Keith Jarrett, Mingus, Monk - all the greats. When listening to vinyl, I can hear fingers move down a fretboard, every breath, foot tap and groan. Their acoustic space mixes with mine.

Although my library features many compact discs, I still gravitate toward records. Vinyl makes you to stop, invites you to slow down, listen and enjoy. Even with MP3s, iPods and compact discs becoming the tools for young DJs, this format is still revered by musicians, older DJs and audiophiles.

Music is about exploring and sharing, not \$17 dollar discs, renting access to songs or single-use restrictions. Remember the days when no one got into trouble making taped copies of their favorite songs? How many of us received romantic mixes by eager suitors? What about personal soundtracks made for a long drive?

Finding records these days is not as easy as it once was. A store with the word "record" in its name does not guarantee a vinyl selection beyond a few dance cuts, if any at all. You can try flea markets, estate sales and thrift stores, and if you are lucky you may score something that has avoided abuse and overplay. It's a bit more work than downloading from the iTunes Music Store, but well worth it. *(continued)*



## Exploring Seattle

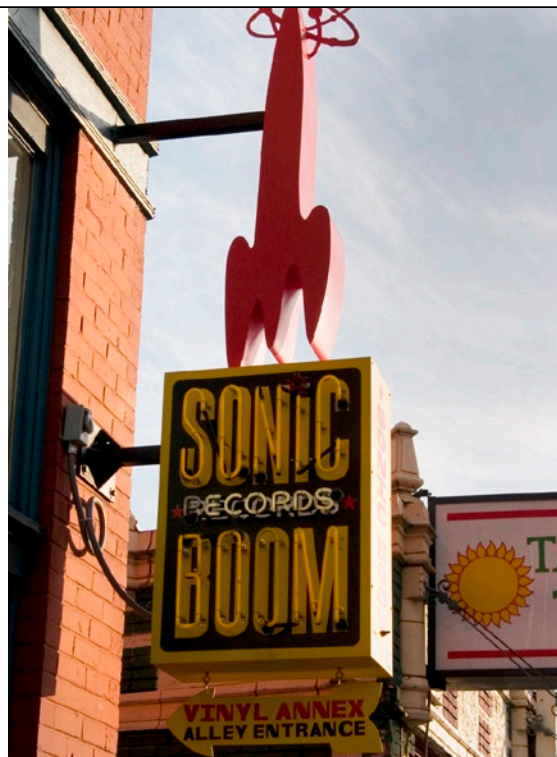
I had a blast searching for record stores in Seattle, with each store I visited offering up its own specialty and personality. This is the city known for Grunge, Quincy Jones, Queensryche, The Wailers, Jimmy Hendrix, Ernestine Anderson and the 1962 World's Fair, and it is a great place for finding music on vinyl. Surprisingly enough, Seattle has a good number of record retailers. You can build a serious collection without having to travel to a larger city.



Using Google and the phone book I was able to make a list of potential places: Bud's Jazz Records, Everyday Music, Easy Street Records, DownLowMusic, Tower Records, Sonic Boom, Silver Platters and Gruv. After calling them, I discovered that four had what could be classified as serious vinyl offerings.

## Gruv Records

Because of a friendly phone voice and promise of unique record offerings - not to mention the cool name - I made my way to Gruv first. It is located on Capitol Hill, known for an eclectic mix of museums, historic homes and hip shops. Unfortunately, Gruv was a big disappointment when it came to records. I counted a total of twenty or so unique offerings, though the friendly sales woman mentioned that they want to grow their vinyl business. However, it is challeng-



ing, since record distributors are reluctant to take a chance with a small shop specializing in compact discs.

## Down Low Music

Also on Capitol Hill, the door to Down-LowMusic was wide open. A young man stepped out from behind a beaded curtain. He introduced himself as, Jon, one of the owners. Jon specializes in, "Definitely, dance and techno with an expertise in house," and he sells more 12-inch domestic records than anything else.

His favorite format is vinyl, a medium he got into when he decided he wanted to become a DJ. DownLowMusic was founded 3 years ago. The main bread-and-butter comes from locally active DJs and serious collectors, as well as international sales on eBay. Listening stations encourage potential customers to explore before they buy; Jon, tells me this is one of the benefits of his store. "You can listen to the record through and through verses a small snip of it online," he notes. Special orders aren't a problem either, even if it's a rare European import. As long as the distributors have it in stock, you can

get it in three to four days. If it is not available, Jon and his staff will attempt to track it down for you.

"It's definitely a labor of love," he said. "My reward is that I get to take home new vinyl, which helps me stay on top of my game. You just do something that you love to do and hope that it works out."

## Bud's Jazz Records

"What we do here is not just vinyl. What we do here is jazz! We do jazz vinyl. We do jazz CD, video, DVDs, and we have some cassettes left, and that kind of thing. But it's not vinyl. It's jazz."

That was my introduction to James, a long time employee who bought Bud's from Bud two years ago. Bud's has been in its historic, downtown, Pioneer Square location for 25 years, a few blocks south of the bars and clubs that make up Seattle's night life.



According to James, the store attracts a mix of clients. "It's like when you walk into a night club. You don't see older people or younger people. You see a mix of people. People with good taste."

Mainstream jazz is the bulk of what they sell, with postbop, 40's, all the way to today and earlier mixed in, although no avante garde or adult contemporary.

New reissues are available; however, a majority of the vinyl is used. Special orders can be accommodated, and customers can

*(continued)*



preview choices over the store's stereo system. If you are unhappy with your purchase, bring it in for exchange.

"With us down here, we'll give you suggestions. You can tell us what you like and we'll say okay. Well, there are five other artists very similar to what you like. Let us do our job," James noted.

### Sonic Boom

If you don't know what genre of music you are in the mood to buy, Sonic Boom is the place for you. The store has three locations, at Ballard, Capitol Hill and Fremont. The eight-year-old store specializes in Indie Rock and under-the-radar alternative music.

The mint green room transports you into the seventies, and vibrant 45's dangle from the ceiling. With a wide variety of new, used, classic and alternative rock, reggae, jazz, electronica and even country, there are plenty of options. The biggest supporters are tourists and DJs, and they will let you preview any open vinyl, just don't scratch. Sonic Boom will special order anything; if it's in print you can get it.

### Easy Street Records

People told me that Easy Street Records, my last stop on this trip, didn't carry vinyl. However, the large signs reading, "Wilco, Bruce Springsteen on sale," and, "Brandi Carlile live in store," drew me in. Immediately I saw t-shirts, magazines and CDs – and I was shocked to find the entire back area full of vinyl. They carry new, used and collectable records, from rock to dance. I had no idea "Wilco on sale" included the vinyl version. I even walked out with a limited-edition, high-quality colored record: "The Velvet Underground & Nico," was mine for under \$12. ●



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# Blues You Can Use

— Jeff Neumann

**W**hen **TONE**Audio publisher Jeff Dorgay asked me his favorite musical question: “Beatles or Stones?,” I said Muddy Waters. Why? Not just because I like Muddy’s music and consider him the father of modern blues, but because without the blues there would be no Elvis, no Rolling Stones, no Beatles, no jazz, no soul music, no R&B and no hip-hop. Everyone knows, or should know, that the blues is the root of rock-and-roll, but it always surprises me how many rockers, rappers and “roots music” aficionados have little more than a vague awareness or appreciation for

the indigenous African-American art form called the blues.

Let me get a few things straight before you write me off as an old curmudgeon with an axe to grind. First, I am not a blues scholar or historian. If you want a scholarly treatise on the blues, read Alan Lomax’s “The Land Where the Blues Began.” Nor am I a blues purist. I enjoy many other forms of music and I don’t mind when the lines between genres becomes blurry.

My aim is to turn you on to great music that just may not be reaching

your tender ears. I’ll also try to illuminate the music with insights from my personal experience. I will focus mostly on contemporary blues artists simply because these are the hard working musicians keeping blues a vital and evolving art form. That is not to say that I will ignore the last 80-some years of recorded blues history. One of the nice things about blues is that it withstands the test of time. Classic recordings can sound as fresh and exciting today as they did 40 years ago. *(continued)*



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**Magic Slim** is a towering inferno of electrifying raw blues power. This CD is straight ahead, hard-rockin' Chicago blues. If you're into smooth sophistication and mellow tones, Slim is not your man. If, however, you enjoy some hip shakin', badass electric guitar-driven blues, you need to check Slim out.

Magic Slim (Morris Holt) is a blues archetype - born in the 1930's in rural Mississippi, he moved to Chicago, part of the great black migration which started after the Civil war and continued through the 1970's. Currently residing in Nebraska, Slim's huge sound is delivered with a voice that defines the meaning of delta soul, supported by the grinding rhythms and searing leads flowing effortlessly from his fingerpicked guitar. To say that Magic Slim rocks would be hopelessly understated. This is rough-hewn, heavy blues.

I first saw Magic Slim & the Teardrops live at B.L.U.E.S. in Chicago on a snowy, sub-zero night in the early 1990's. It's a funky old club, and that night it was packed to the rafters. Through the blue smoke and human kaleidoscope I was able to witness firsthand why they call him Magic. Commanding his four-piece band of ace players from the postage stamp stage, Slim had the crowd in the palm of his big hand.

There is no duplicating the feeling of live blues in an intimate club setting, but "Blue Magic" is so well done that it doesn't take

*(continued)*



much imagination to put yourself there. The CD is produced by New York bluesman Popa Chubby, a formidable guitar slinger himself, who also contributes some killer guitar work on a few tracks. One is not a Magic Slim original – it is *Today I Started Loving You Again*, the Merle Haggard/Bonnie Owens gem. The spare arrangement with just Slim's guitar, his wonderfully expressive voice and the aforementioned Chubby solo is perfect. Yes my friends, Slim can play country music too. I've heard him romp with conviction through at least one country tune each of the three



**Magic Slim & The Teardrops**  
**BLUE MAGIC**

Blind Pig Records, 2002

times I've seen him. Magic Slim's bluesified version of this one deserves a spot right up there with the George Jones hit.

Another of my favorite cuts also features some great work by Chubby. He plays guitar, bass, drums and even adds some sampled loops on the deep funk tune *Chickenheads*. This is a whole different deal. Blues has always had plenty of songs about sex, but the message is usually delivered in metaphorical form, which this writer finds a whole lot sexier. If this song's urgent thumping groove doesn't hit you below the belt then maybe you'd better check for signs of life down there. When Slim sings of a need too strong, you believe him.

**BLUE MAGIC** is an enhanced CD, containing a video that will play on most computers. The song chosen for the video is *Going to Mississippi*, a call- and-response shuffle Slim often closes his shows with. Recorded in a makeshift studio with monitors propped on cardboard boxes, this is definitely a no-frills production. The intimate feel of hangin' out in the basement as Slim and the Teardrops record while Popa Chubby shoots pool in the background is charming, and Slim's power still comes through.

The second time I heard Magic Slim was in radically different surroundings. Le Club Jazz at the Meridian Hotel in Paris is a swanky nightclub with an ample theatre style stage overlooking a small sea of white linen tablecloths, glittering with polished silverware and monogrammed ashtrays. The French audience was respectful, but it struck me as weird

*(continued)*



**Le Club Jazz**

The Meridian Hotel in Paris



that no one was moving much to the music. Of course, the club is primarily a jazz venue and is not really conducive to dancing.

Before he took to the stage I had the opportunity to chat with Slim. His open manner, humility and soft-spoken persona belie his large physical presence. We talked about how he enjoys playing in Europe. The money and the accommodations are good and "the French treat us real nice." He is a man utterly without pretense. He didn't know me from a hole-in-the-wall but appeared genuinely interested in what I had to say. I must admit that for a moment I was a bit nervous talking with one of my blues heroes. Out of respect I addressed him as Mr. Holt but he soon put me at ease, saying simply: "You can call me Slim." ●



Jeff with Magic Slim

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# Out of the Comfort Zone

— Nicole Wilson

**T**his month I was totally stoked to get my hands on new music; some of it a complete gamble where I lost my money, and others a lucky find. So many times I get myself into a cozy genre and don't feel like waking out of it, so I thought I would head into the grey areas of rock and see what surfaced.

Some of what I found came from word of mouth, while some was chosen on a good hunch. You can really get to know your friends by the music they recommend – sometimes they have ridiculously bad taste and sometimes they are onto something good.

## Rock/Folk Blends

**Tegan and Sara** came highly recommended through a friend of mine, and I had not listened to a good girl-band in ages. These twins formed their act in 1998 in Canada and toured with bands like Neil Young and the Pretenders. The sisters also toured in the Lilith Fair, which makes them certified chick-rock. The album **SO JEALOUS** is a simple folkish rock with catchy tunes and simple lyrics. It reminds me of Liz Phair, minus the sex drive; it's catchy but not incredibly introspective. Tegan and Sara make a great team, their voices are complimentary, but the simple folk/rock sound mixed with the "I love you-I miss you-I hate me" lyrics is a bit tiresome after awhile. Tegan and Sara would make good car trip buddies.

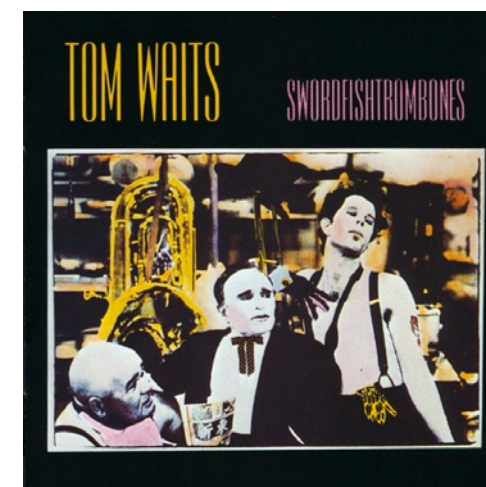
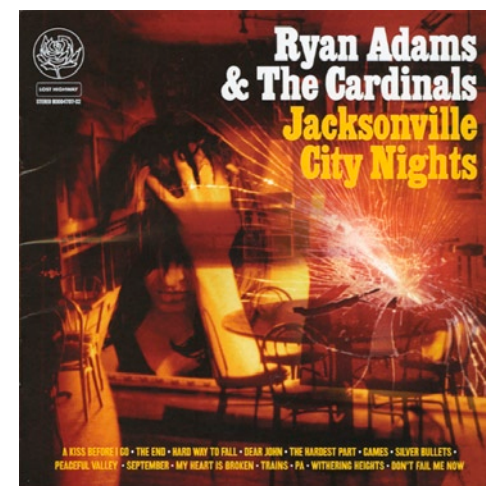


Since we are talking about guitars and folk, why don't we bridge over to **Ryan Adams and The Cardinals**. **JACKSONVILLE CITY LIGHTS** is the sequel to **COLD ROSES**, and will be followed by a third album to finish a trilogy next year. Adams is defined as alternative country, but this album is mixed classic country and alternative. I've been listening to this album a great deal lately, and it could be due to the fact that it has some intimate heartbreaking lyrics; the duet on *Dear John* with Norah Jones is beautiful for example. **JACKSONVILLE CITY LIGHTS** feels like a downhearted fellow hitting the sauce and thinking about the past. Ryan lays out all the emotions with no shame, and his style is thoughtful and earnest. The media never seem to be ecstatic about his work, but when I listen to this album it sounds like he could be someone you know. It makes for good listening in my book.

## New Discoveries

A few years ago I worked at a place that sold a ton of **Tom Waits**; one day I asked my boss what was so great about this guy and he told me to start with his early stuff. I bought **EARLY YEARS VOL.1** and it seemed like a boy-and-a-guitar thing. I got anxious and went straight to **MULE VARIATIONS**, and the difference blew my mind. Since then, Tom Waits is my sinful pleasure. **SWORDFISH-TROMBONES** was released in 1983, and it showcases his transition from the story teller to the composer, to the ominous stranger who witnesses the dirty deeds of others. The

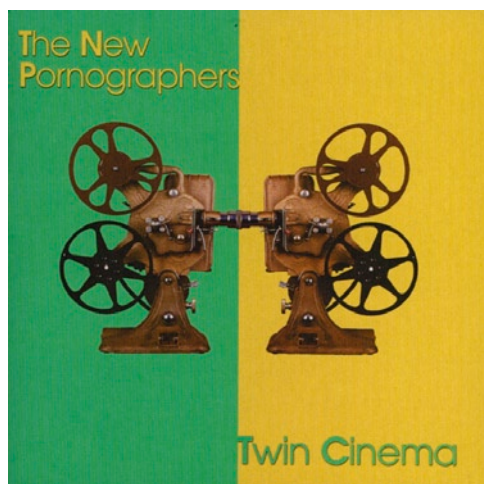
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detail in *Frank's Wild Years* lets you into Frank's home, finances and his grocery bags. The texture and rasp in his voice makes it possible for a listener to really see the characters and feel the emotions.

He uses more horns and percussion than previous albums and in *In the Neighborhood* he uses the music to give you a patriotic small town feel and matches it with lyrics that complain about the usual gripes of a small town. There is so much depth, with some songs bringing out a creamy soul, while others create dark soiled imagery. His honesty is commendable and you trust him, even though his character is at best a bit shady. **SWORD-**



**FISHTROMBONES** is delectable and satisfying.

### Great Indie Rock

I picked up on **The New Pornographers** when I was living in Seattle. They had a great indie rock sound that was quirky and theatrical. When I heard Neko Case and Carl Newman harmonize, I was sold. **TWIN CINEMA** is the follow-up to their 2003 **ELECTRIC VERSION**, and still has the bounce that sold me in the first place, but the music seems neither here nor there. The songs are nice and the melodies are similar but there doesn't appear to be anything that stands out as amazing or interesting. Since Carl Newman, John Collins and Dan Bejar all have other groups with whom they perform, it dilutes the power of the New Pornographers sound. I would love to hear Neko Case have more of a lead, and the band have more of an identity. **TWIN CINEMA** isn't a bad album by any stretch, but your money may be better spent elsewhere.

In the same genre but with a different sound is the Scotland group **Sons and Daughters**. I had never heard of this band so I took a chance – and oh what a find! Adele Bethel, David Gow, Scott Paterson and Ailidh Lennon formed the band in 2001. Each song from **THE REPULSION BOX** has a unique tune. *Dance Me In* is a sexy, swanky song loaded with a catchy beat. Lead vocals are distinguished and borderline angry, especially in *Monsters*, which sounds like love gone bad. Intrigued? Give it a listen!

Between these five albums, I would say the best finds were **THE REPULSION BOX** and **JACKSONVILLE CITY LIGHTS**. ●

# Honoring the Songsmiths

— Joe Golfen

**R**emember when Ashlee Simpson got caught lip-synching on Saturday Night Live, and people gave her no end of grief about it? I don't think that was fair. Sure, Simpson doesn't really sing her own songs, but everyone already knew that. So what was the big deal? When I thought about it later I realized that what bothered everyone so much was the fact that Ashlee Simpson presented herself as a rock star, and rock stars were supposed to be genuine. A truly talented songwriter and performer should be able to sit on their bed with an acoustic guitar and write a great song. One that didn't need anything else, because the music was so unique and the lyrics so captivating that anything more would just seem gratuitous. Simpson made it clear that night that she was not one of these people, because she not only doesn't write songs like that, she doesn't even really perform songs like that. She was ridiculed for not being genuine.

The whole thing got me thinking about modern songwriters. Are there people out there writing songs that stand on their own, free of excessive studio tampering and punched up production? Artists like that usually fall into the genre of singer-songwriter, meaning the songs are mainly about the singer.

(continued)



I looked through my pile of CDs, searching for the modern Bob Dylans and Leonard Cohens, people who could match the greatness and innovation of these classics. I found six albums recorded in the last ten years that really fit that bill. Each one has the hints of folk, rock and poetry that define the singer-songwriter genre. The records are must-have's for those looking for great modern songsmiths.

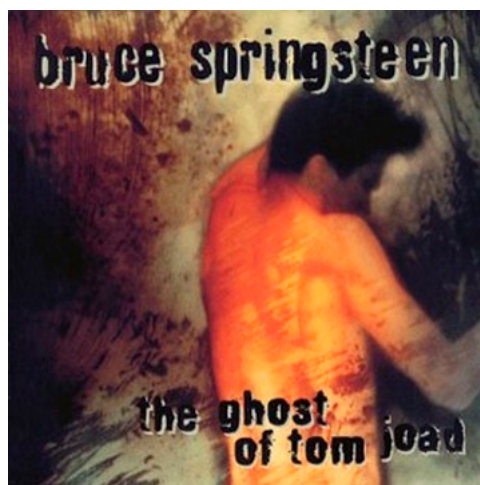
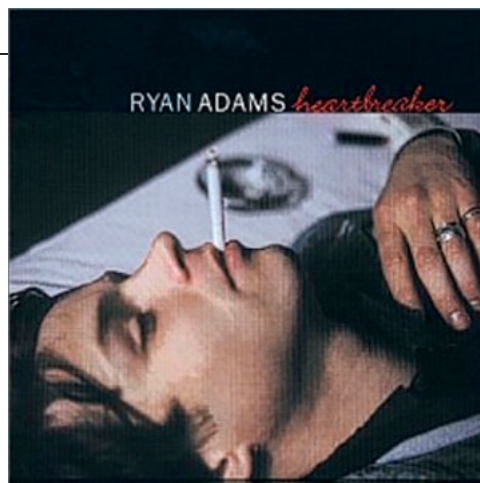
#### Ryan Adams – **HEARTBREAKER**

This is Adams' first solo album, although Heartbreaker does include a number of his former Wiskeytown band mates. It is his greatest work to date; while the first two tracks are deceptively up-beat, a recorded conversation about Morrissey and the playful *To Be Young (Is to Be Sad, Is to Be High)*, this record takes a sharp turn by the third track, dipping into the soulful Americana that Adams does so well. Written and recorded in less than two weeks, this record resounds with a sense of loneliness and the windswept melancholy of middle America. Adams offers up songs about praying for rain, praying for death and then praying for life again. He is both broken and hopeful, retracing his steps through battered relationships and the hard life of a poor country kid. Adams has never topped this record, despite his other solid albums, but it should be enough that he made it in the first place.

Key tracks: "Winding Wheel," "Oh My Sweet Carolina," "In My Time Of Need" and "To Be The One."

#### Bruce Springsteen – **THE GHOST OF TOM JOAD**

Listen to this record and you'll forget it was written by a man who can sell out Madison Square Garden in 15 minutes. Springsteen strips his songs down to their core on this album, and dives head-first into subject matter so deep and dark that only the most



skilled and talented songwriters could pull it off with any authority.

The Ghost of Tom Joad is haunting, with Springsteen's detailed and colorful narratives about every kind of person that gets exploited and trampled echoing off of his subtle guitar playing. There are songs about illegal immigrants from Mexico, about abandoning the cotton fields of California for a life as meth cooks, songs about racism in the Gulf of Mexico and murder in south. This album is one of Springsteen's finest, and certainly the best of his three solo acoustic albums.

Key Tracks: "Highway 29," "Sinaloa Cowboys," "The Line" and "The Ghost of Tom Joad."

#### Elliott Smith – **ELLIOTT SMITH**

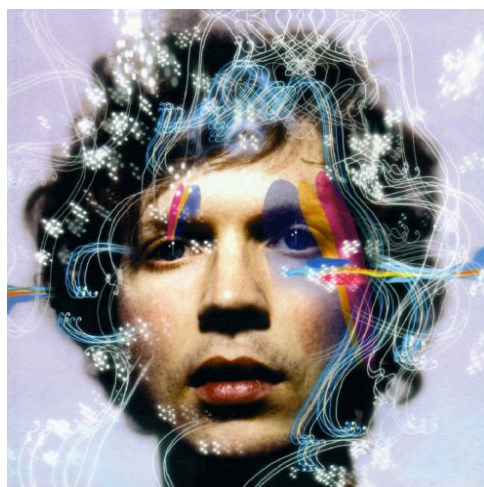
This was the second album for this brilliant songwriter, and by far his most sparse and mournful. Released just before Smith received major attention for his contribution to the soundtrack for the movie Good Will Hunting, and before he signed to Dreamworks records, this release captures Smith at his deepest and darkest.

From the opening track *Needle in the Hay* it is clear he has hit rock bottom, and it is surprising he ever resurfaced again. Each song is a strung-out tale of drug use, alcoholism, abuse and loneliness. Not exactly a pick-me-up album, but full of the quite genius that made Smith into the indie-rock hero he is today. This album is my favorite among his works, because his raw song-writing greatness shows through clearest on this record. Although this album has become almost painful to listen to in light of Smith's suicide two years ago, each song stands as a testament to a man who could create beauty out of nothing but his guitar and whispered voice.

Key tracks: "Needle in the Hay," "Christian Brothers," "Southern Belle" and "Coming Up Roses."

*(continued)*





### Beck – **SEA CHANGE**

Known mostly for his party-guy persona and eclectic mix of rock, rap, funk and craziness, Beck tones everything way down for this aptly-titled album. Recorded in the wake of a breakup with his long-term girlfriend, Beck has never sounded so tired, but his knack for innovation turns that exhaustion into one of the finest albums he has ever produced. Although backed by heavy orchestration and other ambient noises, it is really Beck's vocals and guitar picking that comes to the foreground on this album, offering an insight into the mind of this self-described loser.

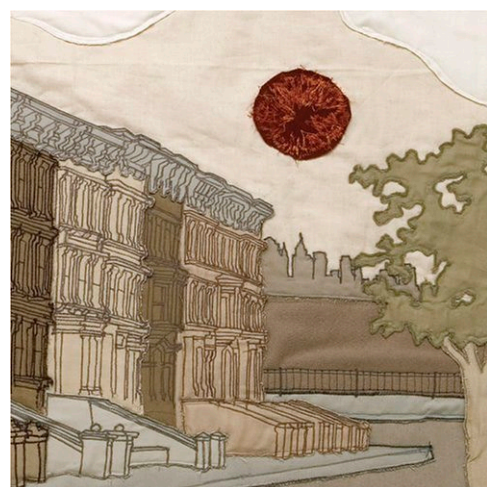
The album has a few weak spots, and it does tend to crawl at a snail's pace, but it is best listened to with headphones on, to hear every trickle and chime as it flutters behind Beck's dazed baritone voice.

Key Tracks: "The Golden Age," "Lost Cause," "Little One" and "Paper Tiger."

### Damien Rice – **O**

Although this album goes a little crazy on the orchestration, Rice is one of the best singer-songwriters to come along in quite a while. Hailing from Ireland, where this album went triple-platinum, Rice's take on the genre is as strained as it is endearing. He whispers words at you from underneath an avalanche of strings, making you listen to what he has to say, which is mostly not happy. But the best songs feature him alone with his guitar. Songs like *Cannonball*, rich in both lyrics and instrumentation, are the kinds of songs other musicians kick themselves for not thinking of first. Rice's voice is often augmented by the lovely crooning of his female cohort Lisa Hannigan, whose siren songs always call Rice back to earth when his intensity has blasted him too far off the ground. Although Rice hasn't really done anything since this album, it stands as a testimony to this intimate and unique songsmith.

Key Tracks: "Volcano," "The Blower's Daughter," "Cannonball" and "Cheers Darling"



### Bright Eyes –

### **I'M WIDE AWAKE, IT'S MORNING**

Conor Oberst, a.k.a. Bright Eyes, was only 24 when he recorded this album, but his talent and originality far surpass his years. Oberst's tales of lust, drugs and self loathing have won him many fans, and although many point to his previous record as his masterpiece, *I'm Wide Awake, It's Morning* is his most honest and endearing work to date. The songs are more structured, and the musicianship simpler, making the lyrics all the more poignant. Oberst spends the album painting the picture of a young man, poised on the verge of greatness or failure, and not really knowing which he would prefer. With lines like "I'm making a deal with the devils of fame, saying if you walk away, I'll walk away," Oberst expresses a period in life that everyone come to, when we must choose who we want to be and how we want to become that person. These universal themes, accompanied by Oberst's clever wordplay and bombastic vocals, make this album a must-have in any collection. ●





# Audiophile Discs

— Jeff Dorgay

It's been a somewhat wacky time since issue one, so this month's collection reflects that a bit. I try not to get too far away from my classic rock roots if I can help it, but my palette keeps getting bigger. This month I have a few I liked, one I didn't think I would and one that's just plain silly. Here we go!

Edgar Winter –

## **THEY ONLY COME OUT AT NIGHT**

Mobile Fidelity SACD

I have something special to share with you; this is the first record I ever bought! The folks at Mobile Fidelity have decided to remaster Edgar Winters classic, *They Only Come Out At Night* on SACD no less!! I can't tell you how cool this is, because I remember the day I bought this record at Radio Doctors in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in fall of 1972.

I had a bunch of Beatles and Led Zepelin 45's (along with a few things I won't admit to), but this was the first ALBUM I ever bought because the song *Frankenstein* was getting massive airplay. I still have the vinyl copy and it is even in pretty decent shape, but the SACD copy is excellent!!

If 70's pop rock is your cup of tea, this will be right up your alley. The players include Chuck Ruff, Ronnie Montrose, Dan Hartmann and of course Edgar Winter, with a guest appearance by Rick Derringer. This record produced a number of hits, including *Hangin' Around*, *Free Ride* and of course the classic *Frankenstein*. The inside includes liner notes from Edgar himself, reflecting on the time period that are extremely cool. This was rock and roll the way they did it in the old days, with analog consoles, good mikes and expensive fashion photographers (Francesco Scavullo) shooting the cover!

Shaun Britton did an outstanding job on this one, with smooth highs and a BIG, BIG sound, especially on the SACD layer. I love vinyl, but the SACD is far superior to my original copy. We took full advantage of the McCormack DNA-500 to hit 120db peaks on *Frankenstein*! (The song length of 4:46 kept us within the OSHA spec of 5 min exposure to a sound pressure level of 120 db).

*(continued)*





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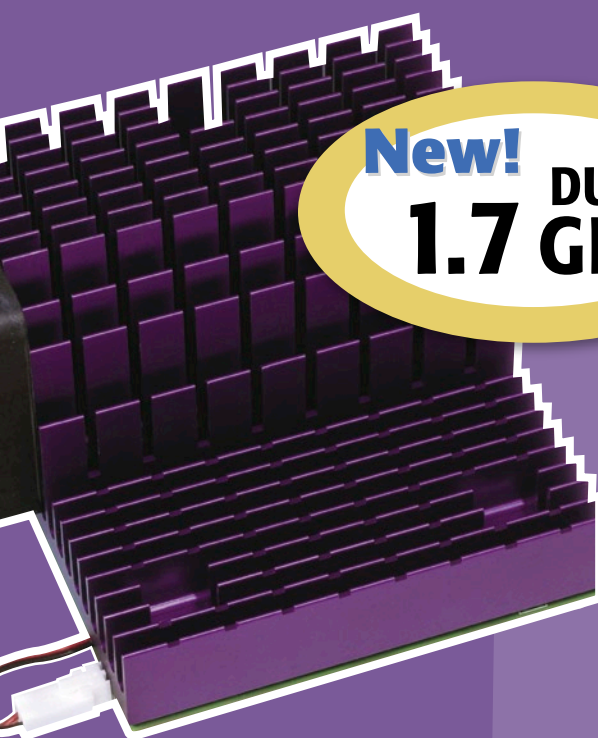
Genesis —  
**NURSERY CRIME**  
Classic Records LP (200g.)

While some of you may argue with me that you have a better copy of this from an ancient time and pressing, my rule stands; this one from Classic sounds better than the one in my record collection.

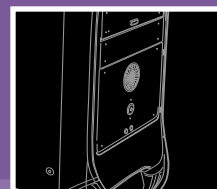
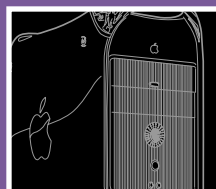
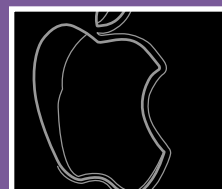
Thanks to the Classic Quiex SV-P vinyl, it's true to its name and is very quiet indeed. Overall tonal balance is good, but a touch recessed, as is my original, so they were probably being pretty close to the master used.

Classic Peter Gabriel Genesis is either something you have a taste for or not, so if you do, you will really dig the chance to hear these songs again on a pristine piece of vinyl. My favorites on this album were *The Magical Box* and *The Return of the Giant Hogweed*. Yes folks, this was from the days when Genesis was a cool art band, not top 40 fodder. Definitely a great trip down memory lane. I would also like to commend Classic Records on doing such a nice job on the jacket printing as well, as this was a big part of enjoying these records.

(continued)



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Music From the Movie  
**MASKED AND ANONYMOUS**  
 Classic Records LP (200g)

The folks at Classic records surprised me with this one, and it came unannounced in the mail a few weeks ago. When I looked at the album cover, I saw that this record is comprised of Bob Dylan songs, mostly sung by people other than Mr. Dylan. However, on the Bob Dylan songs, Larry Campbell and Charlie Sexton are featured players and that's always good stuff. The record jacket is so beautifully printed; it really makes you long for the good old days when LPs were the only way you could buy music.

I have to be honest with you, I usually never go for this kind of thing, but I had to hear *Like a Rolling Stone* in Spanish. (Not that I can understand a word of Spanish, mind you)

Honestly, this one grew on me after a listen or two and if you are more open-minded than I am, will probably love it right away. The recording is great and just the way I like it, with a full, warm sound and full-bodied bass.

It's always great to hear Bob, but my favorite track is Shirley Caesar's rendition of *Gotta Serve Somebody*. I was a big fan of the original *Slow Train Coming* and this is a really soulful arrangement. Definitely worth your hard earned cash. The only odd thing about this double album set is that they packaged these great records in hard paper sleeves.

Paquito D'Rivera –  
**THE JAZZ CHAMBER TRIO**  
 Chesky Records

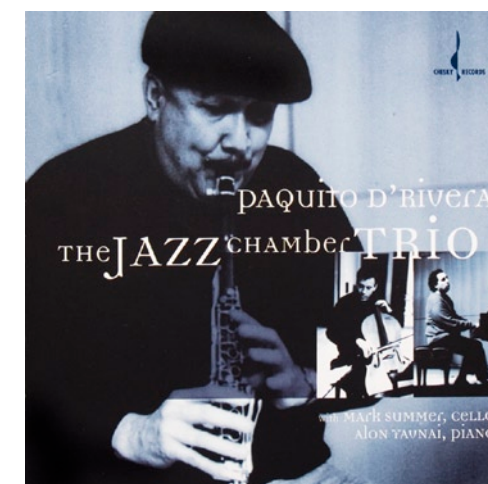
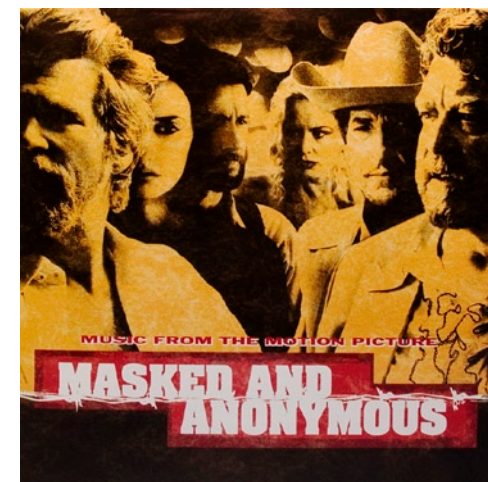
This CD was particularly hard to get, as they were out of stock for a little while. After a good listen, I can see why. Nominated for a Grammy, this is one fine jazz record. Extremely mellow, this is a great record to listen to actively or passively.

It's always a pleasure to listen to musicians that play this well together. Paquito is joined by Mark Sumner on cello and Alon Taonai on piano. I don't mean to cop out, but every track on this CD is great. Thanks to Chesky's high-resolution digital recording system and attention to detail, this is as good as it gets in the realism department. The name of the group, The Jazz Chamber Trio is accurate, yet intriguing; they sound like a mixture of chamber music and traditional jazz with some interesting Latin rhythms gently mixed in. My favorite track was #2, called *Difficult*, with track #9 *Improvisation* (saxophone solo) a close second, but really they are all quite enjoyable. This one calls for your comfy chair and a good glass of wine.

Iron Butterfly –  
**IN-NA-GADDA-DA-VIDA**  
 Nautilus (now out of print)

I picked this up at the RMAF for \$18 bucks and am listening to the drum solo from the title track (at about 110db) as I write this. Just like AK's mom would tell him to "turn that crap down", my parents would always scream "stop playing that funeral music" whenever I would play In-Na-Gadda-Da-Vida. Even more so when the meters of my Phase Linear 700 were pegged.

But I digress. This album rules and if you have a chance to pick up a clean copy, the Nautilus guys actually did a pretty good job on this one. A touch more bright than the original, but a LOT quieter. Album cover art is the original. JO swiped the Nautilus copy as soon as I brought it home but he'll need help adjusting the fuel injection on his 2002tii sooner or later, so I will get it back then! ●







### **Marantz 104 Tuner**

Echo Audio — \$70

As I haven't really listened to the radio in a long time, with no good stations in Phoenix, Ariz., my last home, my fellow North-Westerners assured me there was some good radio to be had here in Portland. Being cautious, I did not want to shell out for a 10B just yet, but one day at Echo, this little tuner was crying out to be taken home. Sound quality was much better than expected, and I can start listening to some classical music! Very retro.

### **Nakamichi 600 Cassette Deck**

Garage Sale — \$50 for a pair

These were originally priced at \$50 each, but I came back at the end of the day to find them both still there. They were cosmetically in good condition, and the owner assured me they both worked just fine. He also reminded me "these things were around \$1,200 each new." Now you and I both know they didn't work, but at this price, I had to have them. Fortunately, KD's expert repair shop at Echo made one good one out of the pair, and the repair bill was reasonable.

Once fired up with a fresh box of Maxell XLII's, I made some great mix tapes from some of my favorite LP's I don't want to put a ton of hours on. Granted, I could just rip a CD and dump it on my iPod, but this just feels good.

# Slummin'

— JEFF DORGAY

As much as I appreciate getting a mega expensive piece of gear to audition, I love a good bargain too. We aren't talking thousand-dollar Chinese-integrated amplifiers here; we're talking garage sales and flea markets.

Here's what I rounded up recently.







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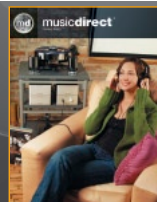


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That's right, 25 cents for a two-LP set! How can you not want a copy of *I Got You, Babe* on vinyl? Well, there it was staring me down at the checkout counter in a big pile of records on the floor. Funny thing, after two passes with the VPI 16.5, didn't even sound that bad. iTunes Music Store be damned!

So there you go, proof that you can have fun in audio for less than a hundred bucks. The bad news is that you may end up collecting more stuff than you planned on. That's what eBay is for. ●



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