

toneAudio.

The e-journal of analog
and digital sound.

no.4

2006

FRESH GEAR
BAT AND CJ'S
NEWEST


MUSIC NEWS:
CLASSICAL
HAS ARRIVED

FINNISH BEAUTIES
The Penaudio
Serenades

HEADPHONE
MANIA IN NYC

25 Years With
MGIIBs

REVIEWS, MUSIC &
SO MUCH MORE



Mikey
Cuts Loose
Confessions of a
Vinyl Man

CONTENTS



- 4. STAFF
- 5. CONTRIBUTORS
- 6. PUBLISHER'S LETTER
- 8. TONE TOON
— *Liza Donnelly*

● FEATURES

- 9. **THE BUDGET SYSTEM**
The Onix SP3 Amplifier
— *Jeff Dorgay*
- 13. **THE MONOGAMOUS
AUDIOPHILE**
Magnepan MG-III's
- 15. **OLD SCHOOL**
Marantz 10B Tuner
— *Kurt Dosl*

-
- 18. **INTERVIEW**
Mikey Cuts Loose!
*A Casual Interview
With Stereophile's
Michael Fremer*

● SHOW REPORT

- 25. East Coast
Head Fi Meet



● PRODUCT REVIEWS

- 27. Balanced Audio Technologies
VK-42SE
- 34. Sonist Concerto 2 Speakers
- 37. Sophia Music Baby Amplifier
- 41. Understated Elegance From
Finland –The Penaudio
Serenades
- 48. High Performance –
ModWright's SWL 9.0SE
- 53. Music Hall MMF-9
- 57. The Uber Cool ZU Druids
- 62. Conrad-Johnson's CA 200

CONTENTS

• HEADPHONE PLANET

- 67.** The KOSS Pro 4AAT Headphones
— *Aaron Kovics*

• SHORT TAKES

- 71.** Cable Towers from Dedicated Audio
- 72.** Cardas Golden Presence Cables
- 74.** Piano Dolly and the Music Hall Radio
- 75.** BIG SPACE with Maxtor
- 76.** DH Labs Budget Cables and the ICE CUBE

• MUSIC

- 77.** Buying Music at Target
— Jerold O'Brien

-
- 80. CLASSICAL HAS ARRIVED**
Classical A to Z
— *Dan Babineau*

- 87.** Audiophile Discs
— Jeff Dorgay

- 93.** Club Mix
— Scott Tetzlaff



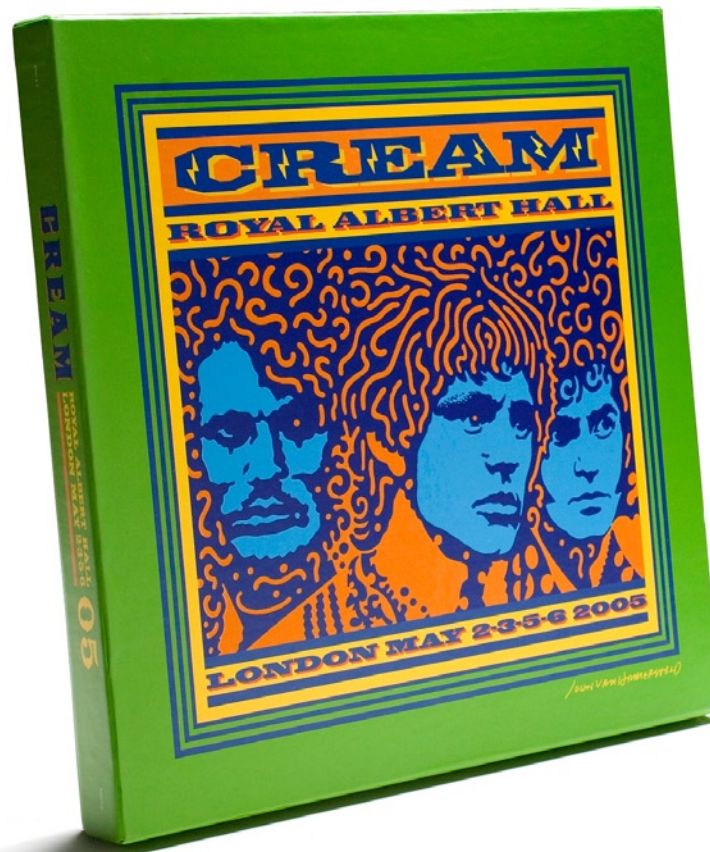
• BOOK REPORTS

- 101.** A Few Fun Reads
— Jeff Dorgay

• SLUMMIN'

- 104.** Audio on the Cheap!

• MANUFACTURES INFO



STAFF

JEFF DORGAY

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

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

TONI MCQUILKEN

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

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

JEAN DORGAY

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

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

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 Dachs-hund named D.C. and enjoying double short cinnamon non-fat lattes with a bit 'o whip on top.

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.

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

CONTRIBUTORS

NEW IN TONE THIS ISSUE

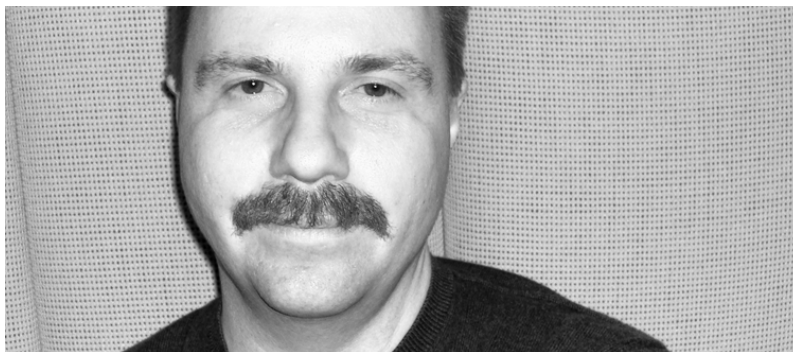


Dan Babineau joins TONE as our classical music authority. Much more than just another opinionated audiophile, he brings a wealth of knowledge playing classical music (oboe and bassoon) for a number of well known orchestras and has more equity in his record collection than most people have in their homes.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

Paulo Filgueleras is a Brazil native, transplanted to New York City, whose fashion photography is well respected. He is also a consultant to Olympus Camera as a member of their Visionaries Group. Paulo is a maniac on a set of rollerblades; so if you frequent Central Park, stay frosty. Paulo was kind enough to take some time out of his busy schedule photographing beautiful women (and arguing with JD who the next Formula One World Champion will be) to shoot Michael Fremer for the cover and interview starting on page 18.



Photo by Greg Kinch



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

PUBLISHER'S LETTER

WHAT THE HELL IS MICHAEL FREMER DOING ON OUR COVER?

Well, funny you should ask. As some of you may or may not know, I'm on a mission. A mission to bring the fun back to this industry. Granted all of the other h-fi magazines have their unique voice, but I have always admired some of the writers at Stereophile for willing to be fun, even a little bit silly at times. (Especially, my hero Corey Greenberg. No one would ever accuse that guy of having a pole up his ass!)

As I said to my brother-in-law the other day "You love your Harley and I will always love the Italian bikes, but the bottom line is, we both love to ride and that's what it's all about."

Same thing here. We all like music and we all like hi-fi gear, in all shapes and sizes, so what's the big deal? I'm here to tell you that Mikey gets it. He's a wacky guy in his own right, having owned a SAAB 96 for a long period of time (And being a car guy, I don't mean this as a jab, I've driven five SAABs of my own a few hundred thousand miles over the years) as well as still having one of Harry Pearson's cats. Bottom line is anyone that has 12 thousand albums is ok with me, no matter what gear they own.

I always see Mikey at the shows but he always seems pretty busy, so I have never pestered him. I always read his column, so I thought, why not let our readers see the other side of him? A few emails and MF was on board. Fortunately, my good friend and world renowned fashion photographer Paulo Filgueiras lives in NYC these days and had a little time in his frantic schedule to capture Michael cutting up.

So we present another side of Michael Fremer that you may have not caught in Stereophile. I think you will agree that he's a funny guy, but most of

all, he GETS it. Here is a man that not only loves analog, but also loves MUSIC. He attends a lot of live performances and has a mega-expensive turntable, but he also rocks out on his iPod. Sounds like he's a pretty good cook, so who knows, maybe the next time I head back to the East Coast, I'll get a dinner invite...

I hope you enjoy the interview and I encourage you to visit his website www.musicangle.com for a lot of great music reviews and other content. I also urge you to pick up his new DVD, 21st Century Vinyl, Michael Fremer's Guide to Turntable Setup. It's quite good and if you are like me, a relative beginner to turntable setup, will gain a lot of knowledge. He talks you through the setup of three basic arm combinations and injects a good dose of humor as well. You can buy it from Music Direct and a few of the other music and gear retailers. Next issue, I'll use it to set up a REGA Table and let you know just how well it works.

As for someone having too much fun with their stereo system, my daughter Monique just got her first system for her birthday a couple of weeks ago. I came in from the studio to see water gushing down the hallway, heading for the living room and found her in her room bopping away. A quick inquiry on the status of the bath made the color run out of her cheeks and remember what was going on.

While I encourage a bit more responsibility when monitoring running water, when it comes to hi-fi, live it up! Forget about cables for a while and enjoy your system; invite some friends if you can.



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

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The ONIX SP3

Jeff Dorgay

It seems like the market for inexpensive integrated amplifiers is ever expanding, so you might think “oh no, not another \$1,000 tube amplifier!” You also might think these would sound more alike than different, but you couldn’t be more wrong. I have been listening to a lot of these over the last couple of years and I must say that, remarkably, they all have very different personalities.

The Onix gear follows the current trend of online-only retailers, and is not available through dealers. You can buy one from the friendly folks at AV123.com for \$999. Currently, they offer a special with their XCD-99 player and REF One LE speakers for under \$1,600, which makes a great entry-level system (watch our new column on the TONE website called **No Brainer**, coming soon, for a full report), but there is more to this amp than being part of an inexpensive system.

It’s About Simplicity

Granted, this is an entry-level piece of gear, so for the first part of this review, I broke the SP3 in with my new pair of ACI Sapphire XLs to get a good handle on their sound. The Sapphire XLs are not really an entry-level set of speakers at \$1,500 a pair, but I felt that using high-quality speakers for initial listening would not only give me a bit more accurate vision of the SP3s character, it would reveal if this amp had enough of a pedigree to consider upgrading the components around it somewhat.

I can happily tell you it is. Even though it only has a rated power of 38 watts per channel, the SP3 packs a solid punch. At 56 pounds, it is solidly built as well. The Sapphire XLs are somewhat inefficient at 85 db, but still played plenty loud with the SP3 in a pretty good-sized room, so I suspect this amplifier could possibly be underrated in the power spec.

Built in China for ONIX, the SP3 has decent parts quality, as well as good attention to detail in assembly. The key to this amplifier’s success is simplicity. There is a set of beefy speaker binding posts on the back for common, 4 ohm, and 8 ohm, along with two inputs and that’s it.

For the first week I used the supplied power cord, but got a major upgrade in detail and a less grainy presentation by switching to the DH Labs Power Plus AC Cord. I know this is heading a bit out of the budget category, but I felt it was well worth the \$180 this cord would set you back. Another good upgrade was to roll the tubes a bit. Switching out the 12AU7s, 12AX7s and the 6922s will yield quite a bit more sound than the stock Chinese tubes are capable of.

(continued)

If you just want to get the damn thing out of the box, enjoy music, and forget about all that monkey business, you can stick with the stock tubes and power cord without disappointment. However, if you live with the SP3 for a while and decide you would like a little more performance, it's there for the taking.

A Few Nice Touches

There were a few details that set the SP3 apart from some of the other budget amps. I really liked the stepped attenuator as opposed to a volume control; it had a nice, beefy feel. On the bottom of the amplifier, there are three steel spiked feet instead of the standard rubber ones, which will save you another tweak down the road.

As for the design, you will either love it or hate it, as it is definitely a bit on the funky side, finished in a dark silver-grey metallic with steel highlights and a solitary blue LED power indicator. For the record, I think it's pretty interesting, but that's just me. I think it would be very cool if ONIX produced a CD player in a similar case, so they would look great on your shelf. The only problem with a piece of gear that doesn't look like anything else is that when you are integrating it into a room, it looks a little bit wonky.

The SP3 comes supplied with a big, bulky tube cage and spring-loaded metal covers over the six low-level tubes. Again, I understand the safety reasons behind this, but they went back in the box right away, and the amplifier was a lot more fun to look at with all those tubes glowing! While we are on the subject of tubes, the output tubes in the SP3 need to be biased manually. The folks at AV123 told me the amplifier came from the factory correctly biased, but I had to check their work just to be sure.

Fortunately, they were right on the money. I got out my trusty multimeter, re-biased a touch after a couple weeks, and again after two months. My experience with other amplifiers has been that after the first couple of months, the tubes break in and only need to be checked every few months after that, until they start to fail.

...the amplifier was a lot more fun to look at with all those tubes glowing!



The Sound

The sound of the SP3 was quite a bit better than I expected. I think the key is that this is a true integrated amplifier with a gain stage in front of the power amplifier circuit. Unlike the offerings from Prima Luna, Pacific Creek, and a few others, which are merely power amplifiers with a passive volume control inserted, the SP3 has a bit more dynamics in its presentation.

The passive configuration of the others (and even the \$6,500 CJ CA200 suffers a bit from this problem) makes source component matching a bit trickier. If you get it wrong, fidelity and dynamics suffer. If you get it right, you eliminate a gain stage and get a bit more magic due to fewer components in the signal path.

I listened to a wide range of music with the SP3, and it did a fantastic job with the moderate efficiency Sapphire XLs, providing big sound with a lot of width, but only moderate depth. Keep in mind though; I was comparing the sound to the combination of the new BAT VK-42SE preamplifier and Pass Aleph 3 power amplifier (a ten thousand dollar combo), so this little integrated does a pretty good job indeed. What it really excelled at was a luscious midrange. Considering a lot of people are going to mate this amplifier with a \$300-\$700 dollar pair of speakers, they probably won't be quite as picky as I was. *(continued)*



Now I've Really Lost My Mind

Just to make things wackier, I went for broke and hooked the SP3 up to the Tetra 506s we have for an upcoming review. Just as I was getting used to the sound, the test amplifier I was using to evaluate the Tetras ate a tube, and I had to wait for a couple days for a replacement, so I thought what the heck? I wired up the SP3 along with my new ModWright Jolida CD-100, and gave the little bugger a shot.

Now I know you think I'm mental hooking up a \$1,000 tube amplifier to a \$10,000 pair of speakers, but it serves two purposes. Many so-called audiophile speakers are fussy about what you feed them with, and personally, I think it's bull that you can't match an inexpensive amplifier with pedigreed speakers. What I feel you really gain from hooking up inexpensive source components to a good pair of speakers is that you can hear just how much detail they are capable of, and what kind of bass response they can really muster. While it is noble to just partner an amplifier like this to a \$400 pair of speakers, you can't see just how good or bad it is until you hook it up to the big boys.

The result: great sound! I'd be lying if I said things like "this little integrated is all you need for major high-end playback", or "this amplifier knocks on the door of the new Krell amp for 1/20th the price!" However, it did provide musical playback with surprisingly authoritative bass response. The Tetras go down solidly to a bit below 30hz in my room, and the SP3 did a

great job on *Fly on A Windshield* from Genesis' **Lamb Lies Down on Broadway** disc. It also did well with the upright bass riffs at the beginning of Rickie Lee Jones' *Easy Money* from her first album.

The treble presentation was smooth, and vocals had a real sense of tone. I listened to all the prerequisite female vocal records (but no Patricia Barber), and my favorite Johnny Cash CDs. Skeptical Roy was over when I had the SP3 on the rack by the Tetras. I had the \$40,000 Red Rock Renaissance amplifiers powered up to trick him, and he took the bait. "Those amps don't sound that great for \$40,000," he was quick to announce. When I revealed that he was listening to the SP3, he changed his tune. "Wow, that little amp is awesome!" Maybe David Wilson is on to something.

When I revealed that he was listening to the SP3, he changed his tune. "Wow, that little amp is awesome!"

THE VERDICT

If I had to compare this amplifier to a speaker, it would be the Vandersteen 2 Ce. A touch on the warm side, but the SP3 doesn't do anything wrong. The ONIX SP3 is by no means the last word in detail or resolution, but what it does give you is very enjoyable. Thinking of it in terms of powering a \$1,500-\$4,000 system, it is very musical indeed. Whether you are new to the audio game, or looking for a great second system, I suggest you put this one on your shopping list. AV123 offers a 30-day in-home trial period, so if you hate it, send it back! But I don't think you will.

(continued)

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-Dave Clark
Positive Feedback

Post review note: As I was finishing this review, AV123 has started offering two system deals with the SP3 amplifier. For \$1199, you can get the SP3 with their REF-1 Speakers (normally \$1500/pair) and for \$1549, they will throw in their XCD-99 CD player. This is the deal of the century for an entry level system, so if you are starting from scratch or need a second system, check out the av123 website!

DISTRIBUTOR

AV123

2150 W. 6th Ave. Suite L
Broomfield, CO 80020
877-543-7500
www.av123.com

PERIPHERALS

Amplification

Naim Nait 5i, Pacific Creek SE300i,
Sophia SET Baby

Digital Source

Onix XCD-99 CD player, with and
without Benchmark DAC-1

Analog Source

Rega P25/Sumiko Blackbird/Whest
.20 Phono
Teac A-4300 Open reel deck

Cables

DH Labs Power Plus AC Cords,
DH Labs Revelation interconnects

Vibration Control

Symposium Svelte Shelves and
Rollerblock Jr.

FAVORITE TEST TUNES

Tony Bennett I Left My Heart
In San Francisco, 4-Track tape
(Columbia)

Dionne Warwick Valley of the
Dolls, 4-Track tape (Scepter)

Emerson, Lake & Palmer
Tarkus, LP (Cotillion)

Miles Davis Cookin' With The
Miles Davis Quintet (DCC)

CCR Cosmos Factory, CD (DCC)

John Coltrane Lush Life, CD (DCC)

THE MONOGAMOUS AUDIOPHILE:



Terry Rossen works for DH Labs cables and is still a very enthusiastic audiophile after all these years. He also keeps really current on music for a guy that's pushing 50. Terry sent me a picture of his listening room with a pair of the ACI Sapphire XLs that we are reviewing this issue and while we were talking I said "Hey, isn't that a set of MG-IIBs back there?" So, here is Terry's story:

MAGNEPANS

Why do I still have my 23 year old Magnapan MG-IIBs sitting in my music room? They are behind my current ACI Sapphire XL speakers, looking more like an acoustical treatment panels to other than audiophile visitors in my music/demo room. Editor JD spotted them in a photo and asked if I play them anymore. He nailed them. He knew they were Maggie MG-IIBs! He asked me why I still hung onto them.

My answer is the usual: I don't play them as much as I did in my old house, 17 years ago! Even though they look like acoustic treatments to most, I can never get rid of them. Several visitors have offered me good money or them too! Every-so-often I will drag them out from the front wall about 5 feet and move them as far apart equally with the tweeters on the outside.

I even had the guys at DH make some special jumpers out of our T-14 speaker cable to replace the brass bars that originally came with the speakers. This made for a nice tweak and gave them a bit more midrange resolution. (I have since turned a lot of MG-IIB lovers to this tweak!) I always remembered them as a very transparent, super-realistic speaker.

But I'm moving too quickly into my story.

My MG-IIBs were made 23 years ago, one year before my daughter was born. I bought them from Myer-Emco, the premier high-end stereo dealer in the Washington, DC metropolitan area. I drove them (very slowly) to my town home carefully strapped down in the open trunk of my Malibu Classic. That evening the young medical student who sold them to me came over after work to set them up correctly. He made it just in time for a great baked chicken dinner. Afterwards we carefully opened the boxes in the family room where they would be set up.



One of the original T-14 jumpers, check out what's in the background!

We attached the black bases to the oak frames; put them with the tweeters on the outside about 6 feet or more from the front wall. They were separated more than 10 feet apart. I moved the Sony XBR2 out and moved in the stereo rack with a Bedini 801 amp (with the red logo lit!) and Lambda CD drive/UltraLink II combo. Back then I used a Denon 57F to play my LPs with a Van den Hul tipped Boston cartridge. I moved our sectional comfy sofa into the middle of the room. With everything connected and warmed up, we played music and the speakers disappeared. **To this day, when I play the MGIIbs, my non-audio-ophile friends can't believe where the music is coming from...those doors?**

The Magnapan customers are the most loyal customers in the speaker world. Once a Maggie fan, always a Maggie fan. Most have upgraded to the Quasi Ribbon MG-1.6s or to their bigger brothers the full ribbon MG-3.6s or the flagship model 20s. They still are the speaker bargains of this decade if you have the room and current to drive them!

I had them positioned carefully; I had added a pair of pure silver speaker cables that were made for me by the now-defunct cable and amplifier company Electrophile Systems of Canada. These cables have six pure silver conductors inside each jacket and are twisted to prevent RFI like a Kimber Kable. But the spades are different than most. These are made from small squares of pure silver with a notch cut out with a jewelers saw. I had to add bananas plugs to them! They are light weight but heavy hitters with my MG-IIbs. They are lost somewhere in my current house.

Here are a couple of real life stories from a year before my daughter was born:

My wife liked to tape TV shows back then and she had one show programmed to tape very late at night. I accidentally left the amp on and when the show started to tape, the speakers jumped alive: We heard plate glass breaking and people moving around downstairs from our bedroom 3 floors up! **They were talking about robbing us. I grabbed my gun and yelled down stairs "I have a gun. Get out of here."** Then I heard nothing as the TV program cut to a commercial. Wow we were scared! It had sounded so real my wife was dialing 911 as I crept partway down the stairwell. Whew.

Another time, we were playing Trail of Tears from One by One by Peter Buffett. It was on the Narada Collection Two CD. There we were, eating, one floor up in the kitchen. We heard thunder coming. We stopped eating and shut all the windows. Again we had been fooled. The sound of the thunder was so real coming through my Maggies! Articulate and deep with no distortion! They have realism. My daughter was lucky. She grew up listening to music with these speakers and she continues to love music today.

About 5 years ago I removed my Merlin VSMs out of the room. I set the Maggies up where the VSMs had been. I popped Linda Ronstadt **Heart Like A Wheel** into my Metronome T-2 Signature transport and her voice was right there in the room. I freaked out and made everyone else in the house sit down and listen. Actually, my wife sat down, smiled and listened to the rest of the CD!

I know these are not the same Maggies as the older Tympanis with the Ribbon Tweeter or even any of the new quasi-ribbon like the MG-1.6 and full ribbon designs like the MG-3.6 and the top of the line MG-20.1s. **Everyone sets them up differently; I know a few friends that have them only 2 feet from the wall and 4 feet apart, while others suspended theirs from the ceiling by chains!** (Saw that a number of times back in the day... Ed.)

I took them out from the back of the room today while writing this article. They are lightweight at 45 pounds each and I can lift them and put them anywhere. Right now, they are in front of my Sapphire XLs, hooked up to a PS Audio HCA-2 amplifier with DH Q-10 cable. A lot of gear has come and gone, but my MG-IIbs remain.

Crystal clear highs, mids and plenty of bass. Wow. Awesome. Uncanny. Quality is timeless. I can hear stuff that I have not heard in years. Godsmack is playing live in my living room. All the tracks are great. I have been missing that "total" experience. I think I'll leave them there until my son or I want to play the piano! We will have fun over this weekend! When my wife gets home, she'll have Linda Ronstadt for company. There is too much great history with my Maggies. That's why I still have them. ●

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.



The Definition of Classic

THE MARANTZ 10B

Kurt Doslu

FM Radio is critical to the sanity of an audiophile. And I'll tell you why in a moment. If you don't know the real story of the Marantz 10B tuner, you need to.

You see, a long, long time ago (for you fledgling audiophiles) a man named Sol Marantz trapped a man named Richard Sequerra into a room with 21 tubes and ordered him to spin straw into gold. Oops, wrong fairy tale. And it IS a fairy tale. One that's been propagated among the audiophile community for decades. Even for you experienced audiophiles, the rumors surrounding the Marantz 10B have made it a subject of many discussions.

To discover the truth I decided to call up Sequerra himself. Within minutes I realized that I was speaking with one of the most brilliant (and modest) audio legends in hi-fi history. His list of SIGNIFICANT technical achievements is twice as long as my professional resume (which

includes three summers as a camp counselor, two lawn mowing gigs and a paper route).

Affable and diplomatic, Dick insists that most of the 10B credit goes to Sid Smith, Marantz' head engineer since the early 1950s. Originally, Sequerra was hired for a 6-month stint at Marantz -- a stint that he himself knew would be fatefully erroneous. And with radio design under his belt for the likes of Telefunken and Pilot, it was just serendipity that Marantz chose to develop a cost-no-object tuner during that time. "It takes a team of people to develop a product like that, not just one man," Sequerra avows, though his work in the RF and IF sections are the stuff legends are made of. Breaking 'spec records' in more events than Mark Spitz -- selectivity, channel separation, total spurious rejection, phase-linearity and the 200m backstroke. The model 10 was truly an engineering masterpiece.

(continued)

Considered oppressively expensive at \$650 to \$700 (in 1964!), this was a tuner destined for the privileged few audiophiles who wanted the very best money could buy. After less than one year of production, the Model 10 tuner underwent changes, Sequerra confirms, that were financially necessary for Sid Smith to produce a product that Marantz would find profitable; denying claims that it was solely done to solve magnetization or alignment problems. Hence the 10B.

And then came the Model 11. That last sentence just raised the eyebrows and produced a grand “pshaww” from Marantzologists everywhere...

However, the Model 11 DID exist, if only for a brief time on Mr. Sequerra’s test bench. The Model 11 was a custom antenna explicitly designed for the 10B tuner. Only two prototypes were ever produced; one motorized and one manual. I’ve been lucky enough to see one of the single page manuals written by Sequerra himself, but if anyone out there has actually seen the model 11, we’d love to hear about it!

There you go. It’s not quite Rumpelstiltskin, much for like Sleeping Beauty. With Sequerra as the Prince given credit for that timely kiss which transformed the Princess. Let’s give credit where credit is due. But remember, Sid Smith and his team was already there and the 10B stands the test of time, offering exemplary performance even by today’s standards.

So why is FM so important to audiophiles?

It became clear to me while helping ‘one of our own’ integrate a new piece into his system. The scene was familiar. Two out of shape men on the floor struggling with stiff cables that were beginning to sweat, with the radio playing sweetly in the background. Without provocation, he said meaningfully “You know, it’s just nice to have

someone talking to you every now and then”. I presumed he was talking about the DJ’s silky voice as we were only occasionally grunting. I dropped my binding post wrench and said, “You’re right. I never thought about it that way”.

I started thinking about how methodically removed we are sometimes. Clinically examining a system’s merits like a forensic pathologist. How lonely. There’s nothing like hearing a good DJ introduce us to some new music (or old, for that matter). Telling us a story about the rigors gone into its making and the enumerable years of talent behind each instrument. It’s like phone sex for an audiophile. We don’t have to think too much, just listen to the voice and follow along with a blind appreciation of what will come next.

The tuner he had, was of course, a Marantz 10B. No wonder it sounded so good. Apart from sheer bragging rights, anyone who has owned (or reviewed) one of these tuners will immediately agree upon its unsurpassed naturalness. This overbuilt conduit of

sound somehow creates a sense of space; when fed a good signal it allows one to often hear actual ambience in the recording. It is truly thrilling when a low noise floor (often rare) and excellent dynamics combine to allow us to be in the hall with an orchestra listening to the radio!

Audio gunslingers (you know what I mean) will often shoot down the selectivity specs of the Marantz 10B, complain of ‘birdies’ (outside noise) and tout its unreliability as reasons to avoid ownership. To this, I agree and disagree. Sure other solid-state tuners such as the McIntosh MR-78, Yamaha CT-7000 and the Magnum Dynalabs, of course, have better bass resolution and low-level detail, but **the sublime, gorgeous, vanilla-like smoothness of the 10B is heretofore unmatched.** The reliability is a non-issue if you get one from an expert who knows that the opto couplers are easily repaired or replaced (insuring stereo) and that alignment has been patiently checked. Hell, it’s
(continued)



series 9

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FEATURE

only real shielding was a walnut box. If we compare apples to apples, the 10B was eons ahead of its time -- giving us a template from which to create all other great tuners.

Although the price tag has skyrocketed to above 2K on the used market, I'll still encourage anyone to own one if you can. No other piece of stereo equipment offers the same tactile satisfaction as dialing in a radio station under the guide of a huge, 3-inch scope. It's like landing your first 747 into O'Hare. Then sit back and listen to the sultry sounds of a good announcer taking you through their favorite musical memories. **Forgive the noise, occasional birdie or limited dynamics and simply appreciate the companionship.**

In case you feel inclined to keep your 10B or other tuner aligned, here is a great resource:

http://dummyload.com/marantz/Docs/fm_alignment.htm

Last but not least, here is Mr. Sequerra's site:
www.sequerra.com



ED. NOTE: For those of you still intrigued by that cool oscilloscope and the legendary Marantz feel, (but don't want to spend 2500 bucks on a tuner) consider the 150B. These were solid-state tuners with the same dial as the Marantz receivers from the '70s that still spec'd out very good. The tuner purists will still argue that the 150 is chicken feed, but I had one in the '80s and it was almost as wonderful as the 10B in terms of sound.

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Confessions of a Vinyl Man

**Photos of Michael Fremer
by Paulo Filgueiras**

Most of you know Michael Fremer as Stereophile's analog expert. His column focuses on LP playback and usually involves reviewing the most exciting (and sometimes unaffordable) goodies that are turntable related. If you have seen him at any of the audio shows, he's usually running around in a suit and tie, so you might be misled into thinking he's uptight or perhaps unapproachable. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Mikey was kind enough to give us a major interview and reveal his fun side. I had a blast talking to him on the phone and as you can see from the copy that follows, he answered ALL of my questions. He gave us a good look at his life, background and how his career has progressed up to the present day. Love him or hate him, anyone with a 90 thousand dollar turntable is my hero! You certainly can't accuse this guy of not being committed to analog playback.

He is a character for sure, and I mean that as the highest compliment. Not just another audio nerd, Michael Fremer is a fun guy with an interesting story. Here's part of it.

(continued)

TONE: I was reading your interview from the 80s with Greg Calbi and it brought back a lot of memories, especially you talking about your Saab 96s. I had a couple of 99s, my favorite being a bright lime green one that my father hated. What do you drive these days, and do you still have time to turn a wrench or two?

MF: I just got a new Saab 9-3 Aero. I've driven nothing but Saabs since 1972. When I lived in L.A. my license plate read: BMW5 UGH. I liked the cars but hated the drivers. They were so arrogant and smug. Still are. The last car I had was a 2003 9-3 Vector, a real screamer, with the 4 cylinder 2.0 liter, 210 HP turbo and a 6 speed manual box. My favorite Saab so far. This new one has a 250 HP 6 cylinder turbo but it's a dog. Too heavy in front, so they had to decrease the steering ratio. It's slow off the line and doesn't develop any torque until you get the revs way up. It was a stupid change made purely for marketing purposes. "Built from jets?" Maybe, but this one "by morons." They took a great car and ruined it, too soft. It was so great before, like a go-cart. I loved it. **I like to feel the road.**



TONE: So whatever happened to your beloved 96?

MF: I sold the 96 around 2000; the car looked sad when it left and I was sad too. After all, I'd had it for almost half my life, but I just didn't

have time to work on cars anymore! I had to work on turntables! The idea of getting all greasy and cutting my fingers and then having to install a \$4000 cartridge with my fingers all messed up just stopped being interesting. But I did sell it to a young guy who was into vinyl; I regret it of course but I hope it's still on the road with the car and the driver enjoying themselves.

TONE: Noticed the pictures of your dog on your site. Glad to hear that you are a dog guy. Seems like all the other reviewers have cats. My ex father-in law used to say that cats lurk and I agree with him. Any defining comments on the cat vs. dog question?

MF: We had 4 Bernese Mountain Dogs at one point, which is insane, but with the boxes and crap all over the garage and the home theater upstairs and my two channel room downstairs, I really can't be telling my wife she has too many dogs, though she did. Four big dogs is way too many. They turn into a pack. We had mom and dad and kept two puppies from a litter.

Mr. Eno is almost 12 now which is amazing for the breed. He's the Music Angle mascot. His wife Caroline died a few years ago and last month one of his kids got heart cancer and had to be put down at 6. I never much cared for that dog so for me it was an improvement in our living situation but my wife took it hard. So now we have two dogs and four cats. Feh!

TONE: I'm deathly allergic to cats, so I feel your pain.

MF: I'm not a big cat person, but again, it's one of those living compromises you have to make. We have one of Harry Pearson's Maine Coon cats that we've had for about 14 years. She doesn't much care for me and the feeling is mutual. My relationship with Pearson is much better, although he invited my wife to his friendship party and not me. Probably an oversight but could be passive aggressiveness too! *(continued)*





HIDDEN MESSAGES

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We also have a cat my wife rescued from the vet and that one is a licker.

I definitely vomit from cat licks (that's not a religious statement). Any-

way, I also had a Coatiundi for 16 years and that was coolest pet you could ever have. Not for everyone (or many, actually) but it was really tame and slept in bed. I think my wife married me for the Coati.

TONE: Even though I have followed your columns for many years, I don't recall seeing anywhere if you play any instruments. Are you a musician too, or just a music lover? If so, what do you play?

MF: I am a terrible left-handed guitarist. I have a post-CBS early '70s left handed Maple Strat like the one Kurt Cobain played, which I bought in 1972 and still can't play very well, and a Taylor acoustic. I can strum okay but not much else. I was in a comedy group in Boston in the late '70s and did impressions of rock stars (Lou Reed, Jackson Browne, Elvis Costello and some others) and we played The Berklee College of Music auditorium one night and just before the show someone stole my Martin D-18 from the dressing room. That's what you get for leaving an instrument unattended at a music school!

I had to borrow someone's D-28 and turn the strings around upside down to play it. However, I consider myself to be a pretty good pop/rock singer, though no one's asked me to do it for a while. Back "in the day," Aragon used to sponsor "The Mondial Jam," an event at CES that a bunch of us got together and played at and I was one of the two

(continued)



front men. The band had guys from Stereophile, TAS and a few others. It was fun but no one has time anymore. There's too much to cover at CES now for fun and games.

TONE: Were you always passionate about music? Did you grow up in a household with a lot of music going on? Were your parents into hifi?

MF: I've always been into music, records and sound. Before I could read I knew every record in my parents' collection. They'd trot me down to show off to their friends and I'd have to find the Arthur Godfrey record or the Kay Keyser record and **I knew them by the label and "identifying scratches."** Then I'd put them on the Stromberg-Carlson and hit "play." These were 78s of course.

My father worked near where the World Trade Center was and before it was the WTC it was known as "Radio Row." Cortlandt street is where the American audio business began after WWII. It's where all of the Army surplus electronics dealers sold their stuff and where Avery Fisher, Saul Marantz and the others bought parts. Every store was an electronics

joint: Harvey's, Leonard's, Rabson's, and the rest.

Every window was stacked with McIntosh, Marantz, Fisher, H.H. Scott and the like, the way the electronics stores today have digital cameras, iPods and other junk. I'd pass and oogle the stuff in the windows when I was 6 or 7. **I vowed to someday get some of that stuff.** Back then nobody in the burbs got to hear bass anywhere but the movies. When I

heard a real hi-fi for the first time (a Sherwood receiver, Garrard turntable and KLH Model 5 speakers), and heard music with bass it was momentous.

TONE: What kind of gear was in the Fremer household back then?

MF: I'd convinced my dad to get a hi-fi a few years earlier, but it was fatally flawed: it was a Garrard Type "A" turntable with Shure M7D cartridge, a Bogen RP-30 receiver and a pair of Jensen 12" Unaxial speakers. The system sounded clean, with lots of midrange, but there was no bass or HF extension to speak of. It was a really canned sound, but it was stereo, which was brand new in 1959, including FM stereo.

The first station to broadcast it was WTFM, which was located across the Long Island Expressway from my Junior High School (George J. Ryan, better known as 216—Joe Walsh went there) in Flushing, NY. The station advertised that it was in Lake Success, (first home of the United Nations), which sounds far better than "Flushing." They played really crappy elevator music but it was in stereo so I listened, though I was more into Cousin Brucie and Murray the K on AM.

I lusted for a pair of AR-3s which I'd heard at the Grand Central Station Acoustic Research listening room. Finally my dad got a pair of AR-2a speakers which I set up on some snack trays in the middle of the den and WOW! I was about 13. And then I was hooked.



TONE: How did you get your start in this wacky world of audiophile journalism? I know you used to work for the folks at TAS. Were you a journalist by trade or did you just fall into this boat?

MF: I was a DJ in college (at Cornell) but didn't do any writing. While in law school at B.U. in 1969 I got a job in a Harvard Square record and hi-fi store (Minuteman Records) writing and producing their radio commercials, which were outrageous, making fun of Boston, the people and their accent; everyone loved them. Pretty quickly I was hanging out at WBCN and doing voices on the air. People would recognize my voice in restaurants and some of my commercials actually got requested! This led to dropping out of law school and pursuing a radio career.

I also was asked to write some stuff for The Boston Phoenix. I wrote a story about imported albums (then not well known) and a few other

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things, but mainly I was about radio and doing the mouth thing. My first paying on-air radio gig was on WBCN-FM, which means I started at the top and there was no where to go but down once they fired me for stuff Howard Stern built a career on (though BCN wouldn't hire him a few years later!).

I moved to L.A. to work on an animated film that I co-wrote called "Animalympics." I did voices on it too. The other voices were by Gilda Radner, Harry Shearer and Billy Crystal. Now they've all drifted off into obscurity and I'm a big star! Ha Ha Ha. Then I supervised the soundtrack to the movie TRON.

I'll skip some chapters to stay on-story, but I was living in L.A. and started writing for my friend Bud Scoppa, who was the editor of Music Connection, an L.A. based magazine that covered the industry. I also wrote for Optic Music, which covered the then new world of music videos. The editor/publisher, David Schwarz now runs the DVD audio label Hi-Res Music. All this time I'm doing radio commercials, buying vinyl—and L.A. was a great vinyl town—**and then along comes the compact disc.**

I got to hear its debut at an L.A. AES meeting. The player was the size of a refrigerator and they had Roxy Music's Avalon on a demo CD. Now that was one of my favorite albums at the time (still is) and I had a Japanese pressing that was a killer. They started playing this CD and it sucked. I mean it was dead-sounding,

(continued)

bright, missing information and just sonic drek and all these people are “oohing” and “aahing” and that’s when I knew we were in big trouble.

I’d already written a piece for Music Connection on how bad records were starting to sound in the mid-eighties and once CDs were on the horizon I started writing anti-digital articles in Music Connection. **I wasn’t anti-digital, I was anti-bad sound.** I had been reading TAS for years at that point and when, in 1986, Harry Pearson asked for submissions for a new pop music editor, I sent him some of my rants that had been published in Music Connection.

He sent me a letter back, asking me to come out to Sea Cliff and it was big stuff! He offered me the gig, but it wasn’t a full time job, rather a “stipend” that added to my income from producing radio commercials. As I wasn’t having a great time in LA and could do commercials anywhere, I moved back East to Hackensack, NJ. I rented an apartment from a friend and so began my career in audio journalism.

TONE: Do you recall when your first review was published?

MF: At first I was writing music reviews in my column, which I called “Tracking Angle,” but I think the first review I wrote that was published was for a small pair of two-way speakers from a company called Siefert Research. At the time I owned Spica TC-50s, which were legendary, so I had a good basis for comparison. I didn’t think the Siefert were in the same league though they cost around the same. I didn’t understand the power of TAS at the time and I think my less than enthusiastic review doomed Siefert. But I wouldn’t have written it differently. It’s what I heard. That’s how I try to do it today.

TONE: So how did you get from TAS to the current gig at Stereophile?

MF: In early 1995 things at TAS began to plummet. It was not clear if the magazine would survive and paychecks began to arrive later and later. A few too many “the check’s in the mail” conversations led me to resign. I’d always been a staunch TAS defender and felt betrayed. A partner and I had already laid plans for my music magazine, The Tracking Angle and we were spending our savings on the launch. Harry Pearson was generous enough to let me retain the title from my TAS column.

Even though I’d dissed Stereophile’s publisher (Larry Archibald) in TAS, I let him know that I had resigned from TAS. He invited me to write for Stereophile and though I left TAS with much regret, I took the job because I was a realist. I told John I wanted to write a column about analog, even though this was during analog’s darkest days.

He agreed and even though friends told me that I was “writing myself out of a career” we went ahead and look where it has gone! The lesson learned is to go with your gut, your passion. That’s what I tell kids all the time now.

TONE: I really appreciate your dedication to analog playback. How much of your personal listening time do you devote to LP, or is it just nice to kick back, throw in a CD and forget about VTA for a while?



MF: I never listen to CDs for relaxation, ever. They don’t relax me. When I want to kick back and listen to music with the lights out and just float my little mind away, as Jimi put it, I put on an LP. I have just about every record I ever bought (over 12,000 to date) and now there are so many new ones, I can’t imagine actually listening to a CD. I only play them when I have to review something that’s only on CD. If I like the music, I put it on the iPod and listen in the car or at the gym, but at home it’s 100 percent vinyl and when it’s all going well (good gear in for review) I can listen well into the very late hours.

It’s always fun to put on an “old friend” when you are tense and tired. You can feel the tension drain out of your system as the energy rushes in. When that happens, you can stay up listening until the sun comes up. **I vowed that when and if this job saps my ability to enjoy listening to music, I’ll quit. So far that hasn’t happened!** There’s just something special about vinyl and that’s all there is to it!

TONE: Now that you have had access to all this great gear for a pretty long time, do you enjoy it more, or less than when you first got into the game?

MF: I enjoy my personal listening more than ever. TV and radio are so filled with crap, there’s nothing like going through the LPs and pulling out one I haven’t heard in a long time and just enjoying it on the current rig.

TONE: Do you remember what your first system consisted of?

MF: In college I had a pair of AR-3As, Dual 1009SK, Shure V15III and Dyna Stereo 120 with a PAS-3X that sounded extraordinary. Most of the weekends were spent with the lights out listening to music, and of course blowing some reefer, which really made the system sound vivid.

(continued)



TONE: Around that period both Steve Hoffman and I had AR-3As, they were great! What about your first major zooty, audiophile system?

MF: When I started reviewing in 1986, my system consisted of an Oracle Delphi MkII, Emment Technology II tonearm, Accuphase AC-2 cartridge front end, a heavily modified Hafler DH 101/DH-200 amp/preamp combo and a pair of Spica TC-50s. I listened and enjoyed as much to that system as to the one I have now. I got into this more to enjoy music than for the hardware, which is a means to an end.

TONE: Me too, blew a few tweeters with those TC-50s though. Are you sure you aren't my lost brother? I always suspected that I was adopted.

MF: My sisters always told me that I was adopted, but I wasn't!

TONE: Moving on to the present day, do you still lust after anything in audio?

MF: I lust after a CD player that would really let me enjoy the many CDs I own of music I love that will never be issued on vinyl. Many promise to do that, including the big DCS stack I reviewed a few years ago, but good as that was, and it was, **nothing comes close to vinyl for me.** I am so fortunate to have the opportunity to listen to so much great gear now that I really can't say I lust after anything.

TONE: That being said, is there a piece of gear you own, or have recently reviewed that you REALLY dig?

MF: I bought the Continuum Audio Labs Caliburn turntable, which is absolutely amazing. Even with the industry accommodation price, it still was as much as a nice car (and I'll be paying it off for a while) but it's worth the money,

especially considering the size of my record collection.

No one who's actually heard it comes away equivocating. It is the best turntable everyone's heard and according to many, the single most impressive piece of audio gear they've ever heard—and that includes some real audio cynics. However, the amount of hate mail this purchase has generated amazed me. I don't understand it.

TONE: Quick Spinal Tap question: If you could no longer be in the world of audio, what would you like to do?

MF: I really enjoyed producing the new turntable set-up DVD that will be out in June. I wasn't always comfortable being on camera, but now I am. I'd love to have a radio show. I tried getting on Sirius but I don't have the connections, too many famous people are doing it. I mean if Bob Dylan has a show, good luck for me to get one! But I know I can be funny and entertaining in front of a microphone. I do dozens of voices and characters, plus I know lot of great new music made by young people that would appeal to older listeners if they had access to it.

(story continued on page 96)



Head-Fi National Meet In New York



As a newcomer to the headphone scene, Headphone Planet columnist Aaron Kovics graciously invited me to attend their annual meet in New York City, so I could become more familiar with his world.

Editor Toni McQuilken lives close by, so she agreed to meet me and check out the festivities. The first day consisted of a giant suite at the Adria hotel; we walked in to about 100 different headphone systems, ranging from simple to incredibly complex. I even got a peek at the legendary Senheiser Orpheus headphone amplifier, there in all of its glory. I couldn't believe its owner brought it in for everyone to oogle.

Along with many of the loyal Head-Fi members who brought their own personal systems for others to enjoy, many pertinent industry people were there, including the manufacturers of headphones, amplifiers, and accessories. At the end of the day, they offered an extremely generous raffle and a lot of people went home with some very cool goodies.

The best part of the show? Aaron's wife's cooking! They don't call me Foodboy for nothing. After a very late night of listening to music

(just one more record...) She made a great breakfast with fresh mangos and the biggest loaf of homemade bread I have ever seen!

OK, BACK TO THE HEADPHONES

What I enjoyed about this group was the sense of community. These folks have so many different ways to enjoy music through their headphones, and many of them had multiple systems and multiple headphones. This is pretty cool, because you certainly can't have 10 pairs of speakers lying around conveniently.

We listened to a wide variety of different things, and came away impressed. John Grado was there with his latest creation that should be out later this year. A bit larger than some of his past designs, they had a very open, spacious sound. Look for a report from Aaron as soon as they become available. *(continued)*

Ray Samuels was there with his lovely wife and they had everything from their smallest Hornet headphone amplifier (which Toni fell in love with) all the way to his newest two chassis prototypes. The Samuels were at a table with Todd “The Vinyl Junkie” Green spinning records on a VPI HR-x table, with a Shelter 90x through Ray’s latest. He even had a few records synced with CDs, so you could compare them directly on the same system.

I had a great chat with Mikhael from SinglePower with perhaps the most robust headphone amplifier I have ever seen! You can see from the picture that it was a work of art, and it sounded as good as it looked. At \$7,500, this is not for the faint of heart. I also got to listen to his Maestro ZR model which was wonderfully open and transparent. Watch for him at the Rocky Mountain show and make sure to check this out if you are a headphone lover.

Later in the evening, there was a panel discussion moderated by Wes Phillips of Stereophile and a number of the major headphone designers. They revealed insight into the design process and what their priorities were in regard to headphones, and answered a number of questions that were sent in to the Head-Fi forum. At the end, the panel was opened up to questions from the audience.

The following day, it was back to a “traditional” headphone meet, where members just bring in their system and let others listen, enjoy, and ask questions without industry people there. I noticed a couple of the big headphone guys wandering around getting a lot of feedback from the crowd and taking mental notes.

This was nice, as I got to listen to a lot of different systems, and came away thinking I could easily buy five pairs of different phones! Now I know what all the excitement is about! Same for Toni, who walked away impressed and coveting a Ray Samuels Hornet of her very own.



But the day wasn't over, and Todd Green found a record store up the street that was willing to open up for us for a few hours to peruse the shelves. Everything was \$2 each, and we both stopped when we had as much as we felt we could still carry on the plane. I found some really fun stuff and got an almost mint copy of the Woodstock soundtrack for \$6!

At the end of the day, and one more

good meal at the local Bayside Diner, it was time to head back to the Pacific Northwest. If you haven't visited the Head-Fi board, I highly suggest it, even if you aren't a headphone user, yet. This group has a lot of great conversation about gear, setup, and, most of all, music! Rumor has it that next year's annual meet will be in San José, so those of you that aren't geographically convenient to New York should check it out. ●



**I could easily
buy five pairs of
different phones!
Now I know what
all the excitement
is about!**

Never Say Never The BATVK-42SE

— JEFF DORGAY



The Balanced Audio Technology VK-42SE

If you would have pinned me down any time before this box from BAT arrived at my door a couple of months ago, I would have NEVER even considered a solid state preamplifier.

After living with the VK-42SE for quite some time now, I am very impressed.



While I haven't heard all of the mega-esoteric super-expensive preamplifiers, my three favorites (all tube) are the Emotive Audio Epifania, BAT's VK-51SE and my own Conrad-Johnson ACT2. All three of these are priced in the 10-17K range, yet they all have a completely different presentation, as well as a different design aesthetic.

The VK-42SE builds on the success of the prior VK-40 and is said to be a substantial improvement. While I have never heard the VK-40, I was always a huge fan of BAT's flagship VK-51SE. If you are a newcomer to BAT gear, you will notice that some of their equipment is designated SE, while some is not. The SE version is the highest quality grade, offering their SUPER-PAK upgrade to the power supply and SIX-PAK oil filled capacitor modules in the output stage. Bottom line, the SE version is outstanding and with the VK-42 only being offered as an SE

version, it saves you the agony of deciding which version to buy!

Though you can get the 42SE in the two-tone finish, mine came in the very attractive all black finish, which I prefer because it matches my BAT VK-P5 phono preamp. No wuss preamp, the 42SE weighs 40 pounds and most of that is the pair of huge power transformers and all of those capacitors. BAT worked with a number of different suppliers before they settled on the final recipe. Quite a few prototypes were built and most importantly, they spent a lot of time listening to get it just right. Dozens of different prototype capacitors were auditioned. "It was laborious to say the least," said Geoff Poor. Even a casual listen to the VK-42SE shows how well this has paid off.

The 42SE features two sets of variable balanced XLR outputs, one fixed pair of RCA single ended outputs. With two sets of RCA

inputs (single ended), along with three sets of XLR balanced inputs, the 42SE offers tremendous flexibility. Should you need single ended outputs for your power amplifier or another input, you can purchase adapters right from your BAT dealer.

As a tape deck owner, I really appreciated the single ended fixed tape output. If you opt for the built in phono stage, it will be configured at input five and is a single ended RCA input as well.

The \$6000 question facing us is how well does the VK-42SE (\$500 more for remote, another \$500 for phono preamp card) stack up to the big boys? Read on for the details.

(continued)



A MUST-HAVE REMOTE

You would have never convinced me of the importance of a remote-controlled pre-amplifier either; I always thought that remotes were for sissies. I could easily get up and turn up the volume or switch the input from CD to Turntable, thank you very much. But I'm a sucker for great industrial design and the BAT remote is one of the best in the business. Don't even think about buying this (or any of BAT's other preamps) without the remote.

When you are listening to the 42SE, you can control inputs and volume, but wait, there's more! In addition to a mute button, there is also a fade button, which will fade whatever volume setting you have down to zero in about three seconds. Nice touch for when you need to keep the mood going. Being a reviewer and having to change this stuff more often, I really appreciated having a polarity button on the remote as well as a MONO button.

If that wasn't enough, you can adjust each one of these parameters individually for all five of the inputs, along with a few other things. Just in case you have a source component that is a little bit lopsided, you can assign a specific balance setting to each input. In addition to a fixed volume setting, you can also set a maximum allowable volume for each input. The manual politely says that "this can be a convenient safety feature" I think it can save your



prized speakers from junior getting wacky with the volume control before you can stop him. Just hide the manual, so they won't be able to figure out the remote in your absence!

INITIAL SET UP

As with all test gear, the 42SE would start out in my second system, consisting of a Pass Aleph 3, Emotive Audio Poeta, BAT VK-P5 phono stage along with my trusty Apogee Calipers for break in and initial listening impressions. Right out of the box, the VK-42SE was a bit different than other BAT gear I have heard. This one was special; even though it had the powerful sound I am accustomed to with BAT, the 42SE was more vivid in its presentation.

The 42SE was a real KAPOW experience with its increased dynamic punch.

While the 42SE sounded intriguing right out of the box, it will need about 100–150 hours to reach its full potential. From there on, it was all smooth sailing. For those of you not familiar with Emotive Audio, my Poeta preamplifier is a bit on the romantic side (and I like it that way), so inserting the 42SE was

a real KAPOW experience with its increased dynamic punch. Big power supply almost always equals big sound and this makes for a big part of the BAT sound.

A quick, informal poll of my audio buddies (some of them BAT owners) showed that they were not all aware that BAT makes solid-state gear! A quick check of the BAT website reveals that about half of the line is in fact solid state, so here's to getting the word out. Another little BAT tidbit, they are celebrating their 10th anniversary this year. This preamp is a great example of building on everything that they have learned so far.

THE SOUND

For those of you that are already BAT devotees, my take on the BAT sound is that it is very powerful, dynamic and revealing. Sometimes, I have found it just a touch too detailed for my taste, especially when used with speakers that are also hyper-detailed. But in the right system, their electronics have provided quite exciting sound. The 42SE is another step in the evolutionary chain and I feel is more refined than their past models. I would even go as far as to say that this one knocks on the door of their flagship VK-51SE, but I'm getting ahead of myself. *(continued)*



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One of my favorite things about a solid-state preamp is that you can just leave it on and let everything stabilize. After about a day, everything settles into a nice groove and you don't have to worry about rolling tubes, buying more tubes later, or heaven forbid, the latest pair of expensive NOS tubes sounding as magnificent as the last set. Don't get me wrong, I still love the sound of a well-designed piece of tube gear, but as I get older and more pinched for time, I really appreciate consistency. I'm willing to give up a tiny bit of the ultimate sound to have consistently great sound that I don't have to fuss over.

From the minute I turned the 42SE on, what really hit me in the face was the amount of bass control, definition and texture it had.

As someone who is not really a bass junkie, this aspect of the 42SE was very exciting, as I feel it contributes dramatically to the excellent pace of this preamp. The other aspect of being able to leave a solid state piece of gear on, is that you can get some serious break-in time out of the way very quickly.

Waiting for some other gear to arrive, I was able to devote about 10 days of non stop listening time to the 42SE when it first arrived, so I was able to get a good handle on its character very quickly. I like to leave my trusty Radio Shack stopwatch right on top of the rack when breaking in a new component, so I can take notes after 50 hours, 100 hours and so forth, picking out one or two particular tracks that I play

(continued)



over at those intervals so that I can keep revisiting the character of said component through time.

For this test, it was King Crimson's **Thrak**, and the two tracks in particular were *Walking On Air* and *One Time*. *Walking On Air* has quite a few layers of Adrian Belew's trippy guitar work that float around the soundfield at different points when played through this preamp, that just appear in one spot on lesser units. While good right away, this got progressively more complex as the 42SE got some hours on the clock. Tony Levin is one of my favorite bass players, that plays with a lot of texture and finesse. This is an area where the 42SE excels. I listen to a fair amount of fusion and techno music that has a lot of bass detail that I have often had to forgo with other preamplifiers, but the 42SE was fantastic!

I did notice a tiny bit of improvement from 100 to 200 hours and a touch more from 200 to 350, but I felt the 42SE was being all it could be after that. Which needless to say, is a heck of a lot.

Once broken in all the way the 42SE was a joy to listen to. The sound was big, open and very fast. I felt it was very neutral, but because it offers so much retrieval of detail,

it shows no mercy to poorly recorded discs. The good news is that the great recordings in your collection will be a real treat to listen to and you may even hear some things that you weren't getting before. Because this pre-amplifier is so neutral without being dry, you should be able to tailor the end result with your choice of power amplifiers and make the 42SE a permanent part of a very high quality system.

ANOTHER WORD ABOUT BREAK-IN

Remember, should you buy a 42SE, you need to pass signal through it to really break it in. After it has been on for a day, it will completely stabilize thoroughly, but it needs to run. Same with the phono input, even if

you have a few hundred hours on the high level inputs, you need to do the same with the phono to get all the sound you paid for.

My favorite trick to skate this is to plug in the iPod overnight on repeat for the high level inputs. Even if the power amplifier is not on, the preamp is still doing its job and it won't hurt it. The same thing applies for the Phono input. I have an old Dual turntable that I picked up at a garage sale with a lousy cartridge. When not using the 42SE, I just

kept hitting the play button and repeating on an old worn out LP to get some hours on the phono stage.

PHONO OR NO

My test unit came with the \$500 phono card installed. This is a solid-state phono stage and is the same one that you can have installed in other BAT products. As I have owned the VK-P5 tube phono stage for almost a year now, I was really curious if the built in phono stage would make my current purchase redundant (especially as the longer I kept listening to this preamp, the more I started thinking about it becoming a permanent part of my collection...).

If your primary source of music is digital and you have been thinking about dabbling in LPs, the card may be all that you need for a while. While it does not have switched cartridge loading like the P5, it does have a switchable gain option for 46db or 60db. The high gain setting was more than enough for my Shelter 501 (.5mv) cartridge and was very quiet. Because the 42SE's power supply is so overbuilt, adding a little phono card doesn't affect the performance and offers the phono section a much more robust power supply than you would ever get with a \$500 standalone device.

(continued)

Great recordings in your collection will be a real treat to listen to and you may even hear some things that you weren't getting before.

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It is worth noting, that even though the built in card does not have switchable cartridge loading, you can solder additional resistors in to optimize it for your cartridge. I felt like getting wacky with the soldering iron, so I installed a pair of 1000-ohm resistors to optimize loading for my Shelter cartridge. If you are handy with a soldering iron, this will yield a much better match for your cartridge, offering even better performance. If you aren't up to the challenge, your dealer should be able to handle this for you.

For the first stage of testing, I used the internal phono preamplifier with my modded Rega P25 and Shelter 501 with very good results. Again, if you possess a small record collection or are just starting down the vinyl path, this would be a great choice until your collection grows. However, if you have a pretty good turntable and cartridge (and fairly substantial record collection) the VK-P5 that we reviewed last issue would be an outstanding match for this preamplifier. The only disadvantage to the VK-P5 is it does not offer a high gain setting, but it did have just enough oomph to drive the 42SE with a lower output cartridge. Even BAT's best phono preamp, the VK-P10 would not be out of its league mated with this preamplifier. (And a very nice combination for just over 10k!)

THE BALANCED ADVANTAGE

Even though I didn't have a BAT amplifier to use for the test (I am starting to lust after the 75SE...) I did have the McCormack DNA-500 on hand and my Pass First Watt F1 also had

(continued)



balanced inputs, allowing me to experience a whole system running in balanced configuration. It also allowed me the ability to compare the sound of balanced and unbalanced on the same amplifier. I ultimately ended up using it in single ended mode with the BAT adapters and the Conrad Johnson Premier 350.

You have probably heard the same arguments that I have about the advantages and disadvantages of balanced operation. Most agree that the balanced configuration by nature offers much better common-mode rejection of distortion, which leads to less background noise. The 42SE goes from really quiet in single ended mode to SUPER quiet in balanced mode. I felt I lost the tiniest smidge of front to back detail, in balanced mode but felt it was worth the extra blackness in the background. Listening to the first Robbie Robertson solo disc, many of the cuts feature a lot of very quiet passages along with long fades at the end. For one evening it became a contest for Skeptical Roy and I to bounce between modes to see just how many small sounds we could hear in balanced mode that we could not hear as well in single ended mode.

Please keep in mind that I'm talking about a VERY minute difference, maybe 3% at best. As always, make sure and experiment to see which you prefer, they are both exceptional. Remember, I'm talking about balanced output (to the power amplifier) versus single ended

output. For inputs from the VK-P5 phono stage and my Benchmark DAC1, I preferred balanced operation. With low-level signals, I like to eliminate noise as much as possible!

THE VERDICT

I spent a lot of time with the 42SE in three separate systems all with great results.

The BAT VK-42SE is a fantastic preamplifier and an excellent value for the money. This preamplifier will make an excellent control center for all but the snootiest audiophiles seeking only megabucks gear. Because the sound is so neutral and detailed, I would suggest this one to tube or transistor lovers. The highest compliment I can pay the 42SE is that I never thought "this sounds great for a solid state linestage", I just enjoyed the sound.

If you are looking for a new preamplifier in the \$6-7000 range, I would put the VK-42SE at the top of your list of preamplifiers to audition. BAT has hit a home run with this one and it is staying here as my solid-state reference. ●

MANUFACTURER

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302-999-8855
www.balanced.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source Linn LP-12, Lingo/Cirkus/Trampolin w/Shelter 90x and BAT VK-P5 Phono Preamp. Modded Rega P25 w/Shelter 501

Digital Source ModWright Denon 3910, Modwright Jolida CD100 w/Benchmark DAC1

Speakers Apogee Calipers, Tetra 506LTD, Emipirium Acoustics/D&L Design Group Nicole

Power Amplifiers Pass First Watt F1, Conrad-Johnson Premier 350, McCormack DNA-500

Interconnects Cardas Golden Presence, Acrolink 7N-A2070 (from turntable to phono preamp)

Speaker Cables Cardas Golden Presence, Zu Libtec

Power Cords Essential Sound Products, Reference, Running Springs Mongoose

Power Conditioning Running Springs Audio Jaco

Vibration Control Symposium Ultra Platform

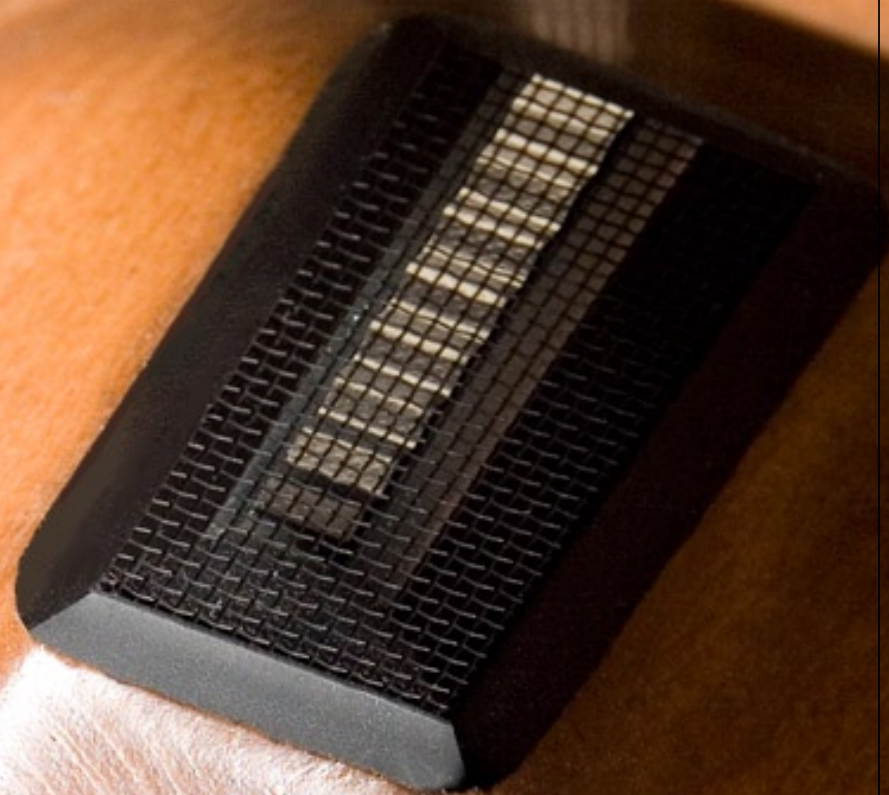
FAVORITE TEST TUNES

King Crimson Thrak, (CD)
The Pretenders Pretenders II, (LP)
Donald Fagen Morph the Cat, (LP)
Cream Royal Albert Hall, (LP)
Keb Mo Slow Down, (CD)
Pink Floyd Dark Side of the Moon, (LP)
Dave Grusin Discovered Again, (LP)

The Sonist Concerto 2 Speakers

— JEFF DORGAY

I first heard the Concerto 2s at the Vacuum Tube Valley Show last fall and was intrigued. If you are infatuated with the sound of low power SET amplifiers and bite on the hook, you soon find there are not a ton of choices when it comes to high efficiency speakers. Reasonably priced high efficiency speakers are an even smaller subset, and we have the size issue (i.e. usually pretty large) to deal with as well. *(continued)*



The Concerto 2 fits all the above qualifications wonderfully. They are \$2,500 per pair, and will fit on a decent-sized speaker stand. Their 95db efficiency rating was enough to use with even my 2A3 Bottleheads at moderate levels, and upping the ante to about 10 watts per channel is all you should need to play music louder than is healthy for you.

According to designer Randy Bankert, the C-2s use a proprietary 8-inch woofer, with a pleated surround, and a Fountek ribbon tweeter. As you can see from the front shot of the speakers, the front panel is machined to act like a horn/waveguide for the woofer and tweeter. There is also a vent for the woofer on the front face.

Initial Set-Up

These speakers weigh about 35 pounds apiece, so you should be able to lug them around easily. Think bookshelf speakers, not mini-monitors. Once up on a good solid pair of stands, I put them in the system I was using to test the Prima Luna gear, consisting of their monoblock amplifiers, ProLogue 3 preamplifier, and the Ah!Tjoeb 4000 CD player/Benchmark DAC 1 combination. The Sapphire XLs were swapped out and the C-2s put in their place, and I noticed a big midrange dip.

To be sure there was no monkey business, I swapped in my Pass Aleph 3 and still noticed a pronounced suck-out in the midrange, which had me a bit concerned. I spent a lot of time with speaker placement, which did minimize this somewhat. The best results were with the speakers about two feet away from the back wall, on the long wall of the studio.

I still had a bit of a dip in the midrange, so before giving up, I put the C-2s in my SET system in place of my 2nd Rethms to see what was up.

(continued)



The Romance Is There

Here's the deal: these speakers are very romantic and are voiced for the average SET amplifier with a bit of a bump in the mid-range. I was beside myself on whether to even review these or not until I called Randy and said "hey, when I hook these up to an SET amp they sound great, but when I use something with a bit more linear response they sound a bit too laid back!"

Fortunately, Randy put me at ease and told me he had voiced these specifically for an SET amplifier, and I was hearing exactly what I was supposed to. With this in mind, I changed the reference system a bit and got fantastic results.

If you like a bit of a tubey sound, on the order of vintage Conrad-Johnson, these will be right up your alley. The best match I got was the combination of our PrimaLuna Prologue 3 preamplifier, Ah! Tjoe CD player, but using the Bottlehead 2A3 amplifiers instead. These little amps are warm tonally, like a low output Stereo 70 but with more midrange detail.

I also used the Dignity Audio 300B amplifiers (also a bit on the warm side of neutral) with great results. Towards the end of this review, I took delivery on a Pass First Watt F1, and this, too, with the appropriate termination, offered great results, but a much more clinical presentation.

If you are looking for the ultimate in detail and resolution, this is not the speaker for you. However if you want a sound that is musical and fun to go along with your low-powered amplifier of choice, this could be your cup of tea. I would like to add that I have heard the ribbon tweeter in these speakers elsewhere, and it has always been harsh. The C-2s exhibited none of that edginess, and had a smooth, natural high-end response.

I spent a lot of time listening to these in my SET system and found them pleasant.

Getting out the tone generator revealed that they go down pretty strongly to 40hz, with some useable output at 30hz, so playing most of your favorite records should be no problem.

Again, I must stress that if your musical taste runs more towards jazz, female vocals and the like, I think you will really enjoy listening to the C-2s. But keep in mind that if you have about 10 watts per channel, they will really rock out too. I grabbed two of my favorite bass and dynamics CDs, Kruder & Dorfmeister's **K&D Sessions** and Mickey Hart's **At The Edge**. I'm sure most of you are familiar with cut seven, *The Eliminators*, and have probably heard this at too many audio shows, but it is great for listening to bass extension and seeing if a speaker has too much overhang.

The C-2s have nice weight, but aren't boomy on either of these records, so I went through some jazz standards, and even dragged out some of my favorite Little Feat

records. Again, it was all good, so I ventured a ways into female vocal territory. One old favorite CD is **Dragonfly** from Mae Moore. A somewhat obscure Canadian vocalist,

this disc is well recorded and has more than its share of breathy vocals. Just so you don't think I'm getting soft in my old age, I listened to some Patti Smith and The Pretenders to keep things real.

Thanks to the ribbon tweeter and wave-guide, these speakers do a nice job of throwing a big sound into the room. It is worthy to note that I think Randy nailed the crossover on these speakers, as I have never heard this tweeter sound this smooth in other designs.

THE VERDICT

If you love the SET, low power sound, and are on a budget for speakers, the OSS Concerto 2s are worthy of your consideration. While a bit on the romantic side, pairing these up with even a budget SET amplifier made for a lot of musical enjoyment. ●

If you want a sound that is musical and fun to go along with your low-powered amplifier of choice, this could be your cup of tea.

MANUFACTURER

O.S. Services Inc.

10153 1/2 Riverside Drive, #159
Toluca Lake, CA 91602
818-632-0692
www.ossaudio.com

PERIPHERALS

Preamplifier Prima Luna Prologue 3

Power Amplifier Bottlehead 2A3s, Dignity Audio 300B, Wavac MD-300, Pass Aleph 3, Pass First Watt F1.

Digital Source Ah! Tjoe CD player with Benchmark DAC 1

Analog Source Modified Rega P25/ Shelter 501 II/BAT VK-P5

Interconnects DH Labs Revelation

Speaker Cables DH Labs T-14

Power Cords DH Labs Power Plus

Power Conditioning Running Springs Haley

FAVORITE TEST TUNES

Little Feat

The Last Record Album (LP)

Mae Moore Dragonfly (CD)

The Pretenders

The Pretenders (LP) Nautilus

Mickey Hart At The Edge (CD)

Patti Smith Easter (LP)

Kruder & Dorfmeister

The K&D Sessions (CD)

The Sophia Music Baby Amplifier

— JEROLD O'BRIEN

Every now and then, being the weird guy on the crew pays off. When JD got done taking pictures of the Sophia Baby Amplifier, he said “this one’s all yours, don’t take it apart!”



What do you think he meant by that comment?

This is one awesome little amplifier, so I didn't take it apart, though I really wanted to.

First off, don't be misled by the SET in the amplifier's description. If you read the fine print, it stands for Sophia Electric Technology. The Baby is a 10-11 watt per channel amplifier that uses a pair of 6P1T tubes per channel in push-pull, class-A configuration, with a pair of NOS 5670 tubes as drivers. The Baby is the utmost in simplicity, with one pair of speaker outputs, one input, and a volume control. Add a little bling, with some cool wood side panels and blue lights coming up under the driver tubes, and you have a very hip amplifier.

Perhaps not enough inputs for a main system, but just fine for a second system, or someone committed solely to LP or CD. For \$899, you get a great looking amplifier that, in the right circumstances, could be all you ever need. Sophia states that it should be used with speakers above 89db and I concur, unless you are using it on a desktop system with something like a pair of LS3/5As.

Initial Setup

You can order the Baby with upgraded output capacitors (now I really want to take it apart, but I promised) for an extra \$120, and an upgraded power cord for another \$175. Our review sample came with the standard caps and a standard power cord. This thing really is tiny, but don't let the size fool you.

I immediately tossed the cord back in the shipping carton, substituted the DH Labs Power Plus cord, and placed the Baby on a Symposium Ultra platform beneath my Prima Luna integrated amplifier. I have been working on a pair of Klipschorn clones all winter, and this was my chance to give them a go with some low-powered

tube amplifiers. You may love or hate the Klipsch monsters, but I like the presentation and I have a big enough room for the horns to integrate.

If you have a high efficiency speaker, the Baby will play at party levels. With a 100+ db set of speakers, the Baby had more than enough juice to play my favorite Pink Floyd discs loud without getting anywhere near distortion.

While it did not take long to break in – only about 50 hours – it does take a while to warm up. I felt a good hour was required before it really opened up, but it's worth the wait.

(continued)



The Baby is the utmost in simplicity, with one pair of speaker outputs, one input, and a volume control.

The Sound

This amplifier definitely has a different sound than a single-ended amplifier. It does not possess the same level of inner detail as, say, a 300B amplifier, but it still had more than my various EL34 amplifiers. I was concerned those little 6P1Ts would not have much bass drive or control, but again, with efficient speakers it was no problem. The opening heartbeat on *Breathe* was outstanding, and spending some time listening to *Great Gig In The Sky* proved there was more than enough going on in the lower registers to keep me happy.

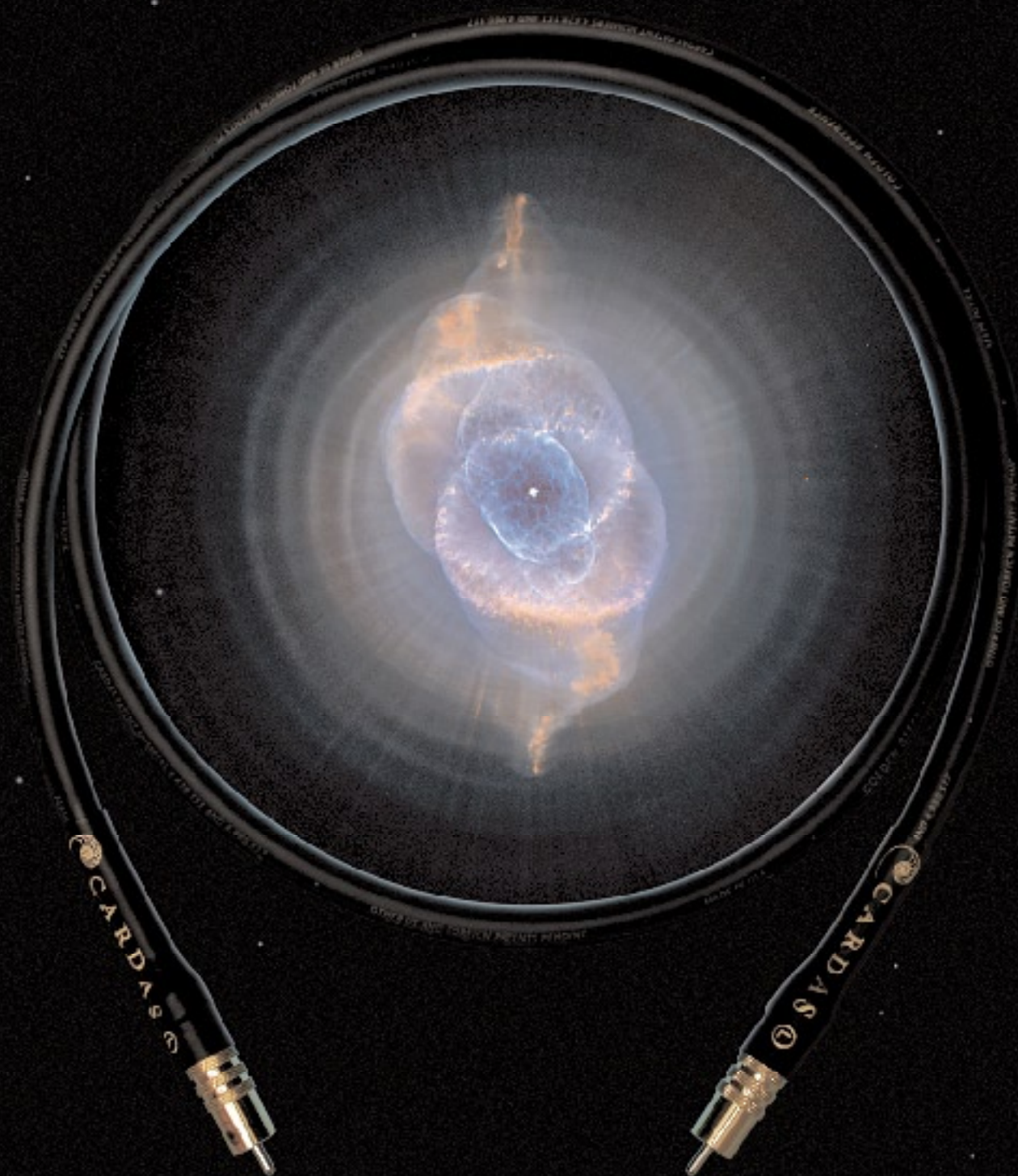
All this talk about bass probably has you wondering, what about the rest?

The Baby, though outwardly small, is robustly built and weighs about twenty pounds, so I suspect there is a pretty beefy set of transformers under the cage as well as some pretty hefty components lurking inside.

Where most inexpensive SET amplifiers have a tendency to roll off the highs, the Baby has an extended, neutral high frequency response. They do a good job with music having a lot of detail, and allow you to pick out individual vocals and instruments. On the much-criticized *Anybody Seen My Baby* from the Rolling Stones' **Bridges to Babylon** CD, you can easily pick up Keith Richards' background vocals behind Mick Jagger, which is difficult on a number of reasonably priced tube amplifiers I have heard.

Mixing it up a bit and playing a few older audiophile LPs revealed

(continued)



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Cardas thanks NASA and The Hubble Heritage Team for the image of the Cat's Eye nebula (NGC 6543)

great transient response and a big sound. Jumping in the way back machine to spin Dave Grusin's **Discovered Again** on Sheffield and Joe Sample's **Rainbow Seeker** revealed that this amplifier has plenty of punch. As long as you use it with efficient enough speakers so it doesn't run out of gas, you would swear you are listening to a big pair of tube monoblocks!

What I really enjoyed the most about this amplifier, was it's tonal character. It definitely had more finesse than some of the tube amplifiers I own. It actually reminded me a lot of the sound of the EL-84-based Manley Mahis. It must be those small tubes.

Just remember, you only have 10 watts. Unless you have a tiny room, you need to use efficient speakers to get all the glory this little

amplifier is capable of delivering. I'd love another input and a remote for the volume, but that would add to the cost and complexity, which in the end would probably sacrifice some of its charm.

THE VERDICT

The Sophia Electric Music Baby is a fantastic little amplifier when used within the proper parameters. Match it with the right set of speakers in the right room and you will be very impressed with its performance, offering a level of detail that can't be achieved with other amplifiers offering more power at this price point. My only regret is that we did not get the upgraded capacitors; I bet that would take this amplifier a step further! I'd love to add this one to my tube amplifier collection. ●



MANUFACTURER

Sophia Electric Inc.

703-204-1429

www.sophiaelectric.com

PERIPHERALS

Digital Source: Ah! Tjoeb 4000 CD player with Benchmark DAC-1

Analog Source: Upgraded Rega P3/Sumiko Blackbird/Bottlehead Seduction

Speakers: Homemade Klipsch clones, Zu Druid, Vandersteen 1C

Interconnects: DH Labs Air Matrix

Speaker Cables: DH Labs T-14

Power Cords: DH Labs Power Plus

Power Conditioning: Running Springs Haley

Vibration Control: Symposium Ultra Platform

FAVORITE TEST TUNES


Dave Grusin Discovered Again! (LP) Sheffield Labs

Joe Sample Rainbow Seeker (LP) MoFi

Rolling Stones Bridges to Babylon (CD) Island

Pink Floyd Dark Side of The Moon (LP) MoFi

Scorpions Love at First Sting (CD) Mercury

A close-up photograph of a wooden speaker cabinet, likely made of birch or a similar light-colored wood. The cabinet is shown from a low angle, highlighting its vertical orientation. Two black drivers are mounted on the front face: a smaller, circular driver at the top and a larger, circular driver below it. The larger driver has a visible orange-colored cone. The wood grain is clearly visible, and the cabinet appears to be part of a larger system, with another wooden structure visible to the left.

The Penaudio Serenades

— STEVE HOFFMAN

First heard of in Scandinavian audiophile circles in 1999, the Penaudio line of speakers has finally made it to America. Thanks to a review by Wes Phillips in *Stereophile* magazine a few months ago, and some strong appearances at the last few hi-fi shows, they are on their way to better recognition. Designed by Sami Penttilä, a Finnish musician and engineer who wanted speakers that sounded natural and reproduced the true timbre of music as it was being played, the Penaudio line of speakers quickly made the round of the Scandinavian audio press. *(continued)*

Penttilä has been playing music since the age of five and his entire family plays in orchestras. He has been trying to reduce the size of the speaker to eliminate baffle interference and maximize the performance of the drivers, while incorporating elements of “nature and elegance”. The SEAS drivers Penaudio use are modified to reach the point of acoustic naturalness and ease Penttilä first envisioned. They then worked with Finnish furniture makers and woodworkers to create Penaudio’s signature birch and cherry laminated outer skin. The goal is simple: they have designed speakers that are detailed and accurate without being harsh, powerful when the music demands, and capable of being played successfully in any room regardless of size.

They wanted their speakers to be “acoustically disappearing” when played; only the music is there.

The Penaudio Serenade is the epitome of Sami Penttilä’s vision; it’s a big speaker according to Penaudio standards: 6x44.5x11 inches, 66 lbs each. It’s a slim and elegant design with special custom bases and spikes, stark with a beautiful styling that says “Scandinavian.” The Serenade is a three-way reflex speaker with a side-firing woofer. The drive units are a 1-inch ferrofluid textile-dome tweeter with silver voice coil, a 4.75-inch specially treated paper cone midrange driver,

and an 8.5-inch long throw custom made aluminium woofer. Crossover points are 180 hz and 4,500 hz. Frequency range is plus or minus 3db from 28-25,000 hz, sensitivity is 87db, and the impedance is 4 ohms.



Not the world’s easiest load to drive, but possible with good electronics. The speakers come with black grills but I chose to leave them off; I like the naked look.

The Set-up

Penaudio recommends the speakers be placed with the side-firing woofers on the outside, well into the room and well away from side walls.

The new pair I received are natural birch laminate on the front, top and back. The sides are a nice light cherry veneer. The bases are simple yet elegant, with novel spikes of high quality. The base of each speaker is comprised of three layers. The two top layers sit directly on each other with a thin rubber gasket between them and are decoupled from the bottom with rubber washers. The bases simply attach with four hex head screws to T-nuts that are in the bottom of the speaker. The tolerances are exact and the bolts screw right in.

Val Kratzman at Finpro, Penaudio’s US office recommends starting with these placement parameters: “Point woofers outbound and at least 18 inches off the back wall. Shoot for 3 feet minimum on the side walls. As for “toe-in”, sit in the sweet spot and look at the speakers. Your sight line should be up the inside edges of the speakers. You should see the front inside edge, and the sides should just disappear. This is the maximum toe in and the closest you may want to be to the walls. Listen and adjust outwards to enhance soundstage. Movement really is not more than an inch for toe-in tuning. Then move the speakers away from the rear or side walls to enhance imaging and further enhance soundstage. Once the room fills with music

(continued)



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and the speakers disappear, you are there; it will be a combination of toe-in and placement which can take several trials depending on your room”.

The Penaudio Serenades need to be burned in for at least 50 hours. Do not do any critical listening before that time. Put your favorite comedy CD in the player, put it on repeat and step away from the speakers for a few days.

Match Made in Heaven

So how did I come across Penaudio in the first place? Glad you asked. At the CES show this year, I heard the Peggy Lee **Latin Ala Lee** CD I mixed and mastered at Capitol Tower Studio B wafting out of a room at the Alexis Park Hotel (S&P Peggy Lee CD SPR-712). It sounded pretty good in the hallway so I stepped in the room and came upon the Penaudio Serenades.

They were using my disc as a speaker demo, but to my surprise the music sounded dead on.

Of course I was overjoyed that they were using my disc as a speaker demo, but to my surprise the music sounded dead on, just like I wanted it to sound when I was working on it. The room was featuring the Serenades with Channel Islands 200 watt monoblocks, ModWright's disc player, and an SWL 9.0 line-stage.

I was frankly surprised; the drivers look so dinky! The Penaudio people were in the back of the room with that slightly glazed “CES Look” on their faces, and

(continued)

I'm sure they had no idea who I was, but I sat down in the middle chair and started listening in earnest. The sound was so natural and life-like that I just sat there and listened to Peggy Lee's wonderful songs, and before I knew it I was relaxing and enjoying myself.

ED. NOTE: *Knowing Steve's listening habits pretty well, if he's sitting down relaxing and just enjoying the music, that's the highest compliment he will ever pay a piece of gear. He likes to change the channel a lot when watching TV too!*

I enjoyed the album like I had never heard it before. By the end of the album, someone must have cued the Penaudio people in as to who I was because I was greeted with smiles and handshakes all around. I wanted a pair of these Serenades! To my surprise, Publisher Jeff Dorgay told me he uses a pair at the TONE studio. That clinched it; after a little chat, it was agreed that I would receive a brand-spanking new pair of Penaudio Serenades to review, so fast-forward to about two months ago.



Getting Acquainted

The speakers were delivered to me via Val's bullet proof reboxing; I set them up in the big room (22x35 feet, with a high ceiling) using the above set-up instructions as a guide, with the usual "Audiophile Triangle" formation. I hooked up my Japanese Concert Fidelity C-040 line-stage and 6B4G tubed amplifiers (around 60 watts a channel), with Kubala-Sosna interconnects and single-wired speaker cable, with the electronics resting on Symposium Acoustics vibration control stands and rollerblocks. The player was a modded Sony 777ES two-channel SACD/CD player. The power cords were Kubala-Sosna, plugged into a Running Springs Jaco power conditioner. The Serenades are bi-wireable but I chose the single-wire option for this application.

I broke the speakers in with my usual collection of Beatles/Stones/Buddy Holly, etc. pop stuff and basically waited patiently until

I had about 40 hours on them. During critical listening I used my old standby discs and SACD's: Donald Fagen's **Kamakiriand** CD on Reprise is valuable in listening evaluations because of the "one note" quality of the bass on some of the songs; synth bass has no overtones whatsoever. Not so great for enjoying but perfect for judging bass accuracy and response (a nifty little trick). The Deep Forest **Sweet Lullaby** CD from Sony Music has a lot of processed surround cues that can help you place the speakers so the maximum phase information is captured in your sweet spot. I use the David Lindley & El Rayo-X **Very Greasy** CD on Elektra because the recording is tuneful, full-bodied, and just fun to listen to.

For realism, I like a few of the RCA "Living Stereo" and Mercury "Living Presence" SACDs, in this case, the Mercury **Frederick**

Fennell Conducts The Music Of Leroy Anderson gave me what I wanted in the way of front to back depth, etc. When I sit down to review a piece of gear, I like to use music I have been working on in the mastering studio, and this time it was Donald Fagens' **Morph the Cat** and the Red Hot Chili Peppers' **Stadium Arcadium**, along with a few others I can't discuss right now.

So how did the Penaudio Serenades sound in my home environment? Pretty much like they sounded at the CES show, tonality wise. My downstairs room is much bigger, so that changed the sound a bit; airier but not as rich in the midrange as in the smaller room at the show. The speakers were never harsh, never less than musical, always satisfying. I noted a bit of a midrange dip, which gives the speakers a more forgiving tonality but made them sound

(continued)

The speakers were never harsh, never less than musical, always satisfying.

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a little more analytical than I prefer. Even though they would play pretty loud in my room, I felt they were getting lost just a little bit due to the high ceiling.

When I moved the entire setup to my upstairs 20x25-foot listening room, things got more intimate with better palpability and more midrange magic. I think the lower ceiling helped, and the room is smaller and not so cavernous so the sound is not getting mixed with the room as much. It was very pleasing with a great deep and wide soundstage with well integrated bass that did not require a subwoofer. (And that's always a relief.)

Are the Penaudio Serenades worth \$9,000?

They took everything I threw at them and gave me back sounds that were always musical and involving. They could play loud if needed in any size room, and can reproduce tones of subtle intimacy and sweetness, or broad strokes of color and emotion. They are beautiful to look at (though probably not to the taste of some American eyes) and wear well; I can listen for long periods of time without ear fatigue.

Best of all, a violin sounds like a violin, and as we know that is not an easy task to accomplish.

Perhaps this was the main goal of Sami Penttilä; to reproduce the delicate sound of a real acoustic instrument in a real acoustic space without regards to volume. The Penaudio Serenades have definitely achieved this.

(continued)

Living With The Serenades Long Term — Jeff Dorgay

I first fell in love with the Serenades at Dan Wright from ModWright's house about a year ago. He had just picked up a pair for use at the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest and invited me over to hear them. "Dude these speakers sound great and they have killer bass!" While I liked the sound a lot, I also liked the Serenades subtly understated elegance.

Next encounter was in Dan's room at the RMAF, where I was again impressed with the sound of the speakers. As the show pair got a bit mishandled by the freight guys, there was a good deal to be had on these speakers so I bought them immediately. Consequently, I have been living with my Serenades for almost a year now and am still as happy with them as the day they arrived.

However, my system is completely different than Steve's. My main listening room is about 15x24 feet, and I just couldn't get the bass right with a traditional setup, so I moved the system to the corner of the room. My speakers are about 8 feet apart, but about a foot from the walls facing towards my couch about 8 feet back. This brought the mid bass right into line. Both Val and Sami agree that their suggestions are merely a starting point and that you will probably have to experiment to achieve the optimum placement in your room.

For a long time I was using the Serenades with my Poeta preamp and Pass Aleph 3 amplifier with outstanding results. I've probably tried them with about ten different amplifiers and they just seem to like current. A quick conversation with Val confirmed this and he commented that the Serenades also worked well with his daughters Creek 5350 SE (also solid-state). When I upgraded the main system to the current ACT2 and Premier 350, it took these speakers to another level completely! As it turns out, Val recently purchased the new CA200 for his listening room, and I hear that

Lew Johnson from C-J has a pair of Serenades at his house.

I'm not saying you can't get good sound out of these with tubes, but you will have to audition the amp in question to be sure. Oddly enough, the tube amplifiers I got the best sound with were the Prima Luna Monoblocks, on the 2 ohm taps. Those were the same tube amps that would drive my Apogees! Some of the other tube amplifiers I tried were a bit thin in the bass, so if you are a tube lover, you must make sure they work with your amp!

What I like about the Penaudio speakers after a year is their speed and transparency.

Those are two of my big hot buttons, being a panel guy, and these speakers do not disappoint. With the CJ electronics and vinyl, the soundstage is big and really deep. One of my favorite records for listening to spatial stuff is Jean Michael Jarre's **Zoolook**. The Serenades throw such a deep sound field, it's almost like listening to 5.1.

I have also noticed that the Serenades are not terribly fussy about cable. My personal favorite so far has been the Cardas Golden Presence, but I have used them with quite a few other good cables with good results, and they are not as fussy as some speakers I have auditioned.

As Dan Wright mentioned, these speakers have great bass response with extension as well as detail. Getting out the Stereophile test disc confirms that they go down to 30hz with no problem. The side-firing woofers will require a bit more attention to setup than a traditional front-mounted woofer, but it does allow for a very compact cabinet.

Bottom line, a great pair of speakers that we highly recommend. If you are looking for something in the \$8-\$12K price range, put the Serenades on your must-listen-to list. ●



MANUFACTURER

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Stamford, CT 06902
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www.penaudio.fi

PERIPHERALS — Steve

Preamplifier: Concert Fidelity C-040

Power Amplifier: Concert Fidelity
6B4G Monoblocks

Digital Source: Modified Sony 777ES

Interconnect: Kubala-Sosna Emotion

Speaker Cables: Kubala-Sosna Emotion

Power Cords: Kubala-Sosna Emotion

Power Conditioner: Running Springs
Jaco

Vibration Control: Symposium Ultra
Platforms, Rollerblocks

PERIPHERALS — Jeff

Preamplifier: Conrad Johnson ACT2,
Emotive Audio Poeta

Power Amplifier: Conrad Johnson
Premier 350, Pass Aleph 3

Digital Source: ModWright Denon 3910

Analog Source: Linn LP-12 w/Lingo/
Trampolin/Cirkus Graham 2.2 arm, Shelter
90x cartridge and Ray Samuels XR-10
phono stage

Interconnect: Cardas Golden Presence,
Acrolink

Speaker Cables: Cardas Golden Presence

Power Cords: Essential Sound Products
Essence Reference, Running Springs
Mongoose

Power Conditioner: Running Springs
Jaco

Vibration Control: Symposium
Ultra Platforms, Rollerblocks

FAVORITE TEST TUNES — Steve

Donald Fagen Kamakirand (CD)
Reprise

Donald Fagen Morph the Cat
(master tape)

Red Hot Chili Peppers Stadium
Arcadium (master tape)

Deep Forest Sweet Lullaby (CD) Sony

David Linley & El Rayo-X
Very Greasy (CD) Elektra

FAVORITE TEST TUNES — Jeff

Jean Michael Jarre Zoolook (LP)
Dreyfus

Crowded House Woodface (LP)
Simply Vinyl

Del Amitri Twisted (LP) A&M

The Police Synchronicity (LP) A&M

John Meyer Heavier Things
(Dual Disc, DVD layer) Sony



A close-up, angled view of the ModWright Instruments SWL 9.0SE amplifier. The device features a brushed aluminum front panel with a power switch and a blue indicator light. The top of the unit is black with a large, slanted ventilation grille. The brand name and model are engraved on the front panel.

High Performance

The ModWright SWL 9.0SE

— JEFF DORGAY

The ModWright SWL 9.0SE

I guess I'm the last guy to show up at the dance reviewing the ModWright preamp, but if you have read much online, you will find out that it has received a lot of praise from reviewers and owners alike. Here's my two cents worth.

I purchased my 9.0 back in January of 2005, right after the CES show, where I met Dan Wright. I was in somewhat of a preamp quandary; I had an ARC preamp that was too lean for my liking and an older CJ that was too warm and fuzzy. Thanks to a little help from Kevin Deal at Upscale Audio and some expert tube rolling, I got closer to what I wanted, but not quite. Dan sent me one of his preamps, and after a short break-in, it was just right!

Many people know Dan Wright as a "mod guy". But like Steve McCormack, Dan got the itch to build his own gear as well, taking a lot of what he had learned from tearing everyone else's stuff apart. Very often a manufacturer is up against the wall when it comes to component choices. Swapping five 3-dollar capacitors and a handful of dollar resistors for significantly more expensive ones, puts the

product in the next price tier and has to be avoided. That's where the mod guys come in, taking a basically sound product and upgrading key parts to a higher level of quality, usually resulting in a much better sound.

So when it was time to build his own preamp, the stakes were high, indeed.

The SWL 9.0 SE is a somewhat understated, but very beefy unit, weighing 25 pounds. Popping the top reveals a very clean layout and massive power supply. Using a PCB instead of point-to-point wiring keeps things very consistent from unit to unit according to Wright, though some may argue otherwise. This preamp features about 15db of gain, using a pair of 5687 tubes with a Class A mu follower circuit. Wright credits the design of the mu stage to Alan Kimmel. The SWL 9.0 SE is \$2200. *(continued)*

So when it was time to build his own preamp, the stakes were high, indeed.



Wisely, a basic remote control has been included that controls volume and mute only. Dan has taken a ration of guff for selling the preamp with an inexpensive remote, but personally, I'd rather see the dough put in the pre-amp! Where the BAT gear takes the high road with the Mega remote (which is mega expensive, too) ModWright takes the minimalist approach, which is commendable. In my book basic remote is way better than no remote!!

There are four inputs, two outputs and a tape output along with a home theater bypass loop, which should satisfy all but the most equipment intensive audiophile. However, the coolest feature that everyone else missed on the 9.0, is the way Dan designed the rear panel. A close look reveals that all of the writing on the lower set of inputs and outputs is printed upside down, so that you can read it while looking over the preamp from above.

I think this is pure genius!! Makes it much easier to hook up another CD player when you are looking over the top of the unit.

Just as I was winding up this review, Dan called to let me know that he had a new version of the preamp available to take to the Stereophile show, the Blu Edition. There is no circuit change, but the front panel is anodized in deep blue to match the ModWright Instruments logo. He hinted that there might be a few other colors on the horizon as well, so stay tuned! I may be the last one to write the review, but I'm the FIRST one on Earth with a Blue one! (or Blu, as the folks at Modwright like to call it) The Blu one sounds the same as the black and silver models, but it really looks cool!

Initial setup

The system I use the 9.0 in now is quite a bit different than 18 months ago. When I unboxed it for the first time, I was using a pair of Vandersteen 2Ce signatures along with a pair of Audio Research Classic 150s and the Vandersteen 2Wq sub. I had been working for the other guys for sometime and was in the

process of upgrading my system considerably in the months to come...

The current system that the ModWright resides in is with a pair of DeHavilland 845 monoblocks and the 2nd Rethm speakers with Tannoy subs. This is a very revealing, detailed system. If a component or cable combination gets harsh, the Rethm's let you know right away. I use a variety of TARA interconnects, with Tara DSC speaker cable, Running Springs Mongoose power cords and a Running Springs Haley power conditioner. My other variation in this system was to use the ModWright with a McCormack DNA-500 and the Penaudio Serenades. The DNA-500 and ModWright SWL 9.0 SE could possibly be the one of best bang for the buck combinations in audio today; great sound that will drive anything.

Over the course of the last 18 months, the ModWright 9.0 has also been included in a number of other systems with great results.

The Sound

This is always the tough part. I find the sound of the ModWright to be very neutral and detailed without being harsh. As a component approaches neutral, others may argue that it is a touch warm to them or a touch dry to them.

While I considered this pre-amp neutral when I bought it, I since have added two more excellent preamplifiers to my collection that I also consider very neutral,

the CJ ACT2 and BAT's new VK-42SE. Even with these two flagship preamps as my reference, I still stand on neutral for the ModWright.

I have not done any tube rolling with it, as I was (and continue to be) very satisfied with the sound as delivered. Tweaking a bit, I had excellent results adding the Running Springs Mongoose power cord and placing it on a Symposium Ultra platform. Adding a pair of Fat Padz to the top made backgrounds even

(continued)



I find the sound of the ModWright to be very neutral and detailed without being harsh.

a touch blacker, so this is a good addition to the system.

The ModWright preamplifier does a fantastic job with inner detail and speed. Listening to music with a lot of textural density, things don't get lost in the mix. Want to impress the heck out of your non-audio friends? Put on the new Donald Fagen CD, **Morph the Cat**. This is warm, big sound at its best, but the bass is a bit whumpy on a lousy system. This reveals another attribute of the ModWright; tight, extended, controlled bass.

While I liked the Tara cable the best with the ModWright, I noticed that it did not seem as affected by cable choices as some preamps I have used. You can still hear the difference, but it was never fussy.

Same for the mids and upper registers, everything is as it should be; not too bright, not laid back, with a lot more detail than I am used to getting with a \$2200 dollar preamp. Listening to one of my favorite CDs (that is poorly produced), The Yahoos, **Fear Not The Obvious** features a track called *Monkey with a Gun*. Most gear at this level can only reveal a wall of distorted guitar sound, but the ModWright could pick out two of the four distinct guitars in the mix.

Switching back to some music with a bit more detail, I was feeling nostalgic and decided to blow the dust off of my favorite 10cc records, **Bloody Tourists** in particular. Again, the ModWright really shined, offering a lot of layers of texture in this recording. The opening of Mr. Time is especially good.

THE VERDICT

This is what makes the ModWright preamp so much fun. You can put it up against the mega-expensive stuff and still come away impressed; it nails the fundamentals.

If you are in the process of upgrading your phono stage, or would like to add vinyl playback to your system, ModWright is introducing a new version of the SWL 9.0 SE, appropriately called the SWLP 9.0 SE. Going back to the best preamps of the '80s, this will be a full function preamplifier with an equally good phono stage built in. The phono stage will be available separately (for \$2500) or as an upgrade to current SWL 9.0 SEs. (price to be determined) The LP version will feature an outboard power supply and feature a tube phono stage. The prototypes have played well to audiences at recent shows and a quick listen here was very impressive. Look for a full review by the end of the year.

The ModWright 9.0 SWL is an outstanding preamplifier that is well built and very reasonably priced. At \$2200, it isn't budget gear, yet offers a HUGE step up from the \$12-1800 preamps. If you are shopping in that range, I would find a way to spend a few more bucks and move up to the ModWright. Even if you can afford something spendier than \$2200, I would still give this preamplifier serious consideration, as it holds its own sonically with stuff costing a lot more and the bucks you save could go for other goodies!

Great sound, great build quality! I say go for the Blu model! ●

You can put it up against the mega-expensive stuff and still come away impressed; it nails the fundamentals.



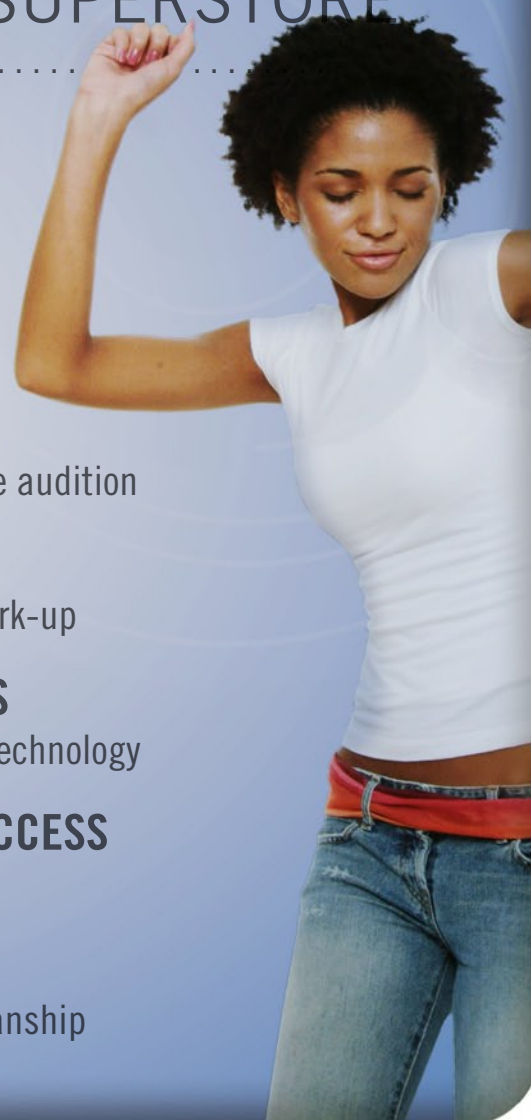
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MANUFACTURER

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Amboy, WA 98601
360.247.6688
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PERIPHERALS

Digital Sources Ah!Tjoe CD player w/Benchmark DAC-1, ModWright Denon 3910

Analog Sources Modified Rega P25/Sumiko Blackbird/BAT VK-P5, Nakamichi 600II

Power Amplifiers Pass Labs Aleph 3, McCormack DNA-500, Conrad-Johnson Premier 350, DeHavilland 845.

Preamplifiers Conrad-Johnson ACT2, BAT VK42SE

Speakers Penaudio Serenade, ACI Sapphire XL, Apogee Caliper, Rethm 2nd Rethm

Power Cords DH Labs Power Plus, Running Springs Mongoose

Power Conditioning Running Springs Haley

Interconnects DH Labs Revelation, Cardas Golden Presence, TARA Labs DSC

Vibration Control Symposium Ultra Platform, Rollerblocks, Fat Padz

FAVORITE TEST TUNES

The Yahoos Fear Not The Obvious (CD)

10cc Bloody Tourists (LP) Harvest

Donald Fagen Morph The Cat (CD)

Steely Dan Aja (LP) MoFi

Yes Close to the Edge (LP) MoFi

Aimee Mann Batchelor no.2 (LP) MoFi



The Music Hall MMF-9

— JEFF DORGAY

Great Budget Analog

Perhaps you are relatively new to the audio game, or just don't want to spend more money on a turntable than a car, but you still want good analog playback. I'm not a huge turntable setup geek yet (but I'm working on it...), so I always favor tables that require little to no setup, because I want to listen to music, not screw around with VTA every time I change a record. No disrespect to those of you that perform these rituals, you just have more patience than I do.

(continued)

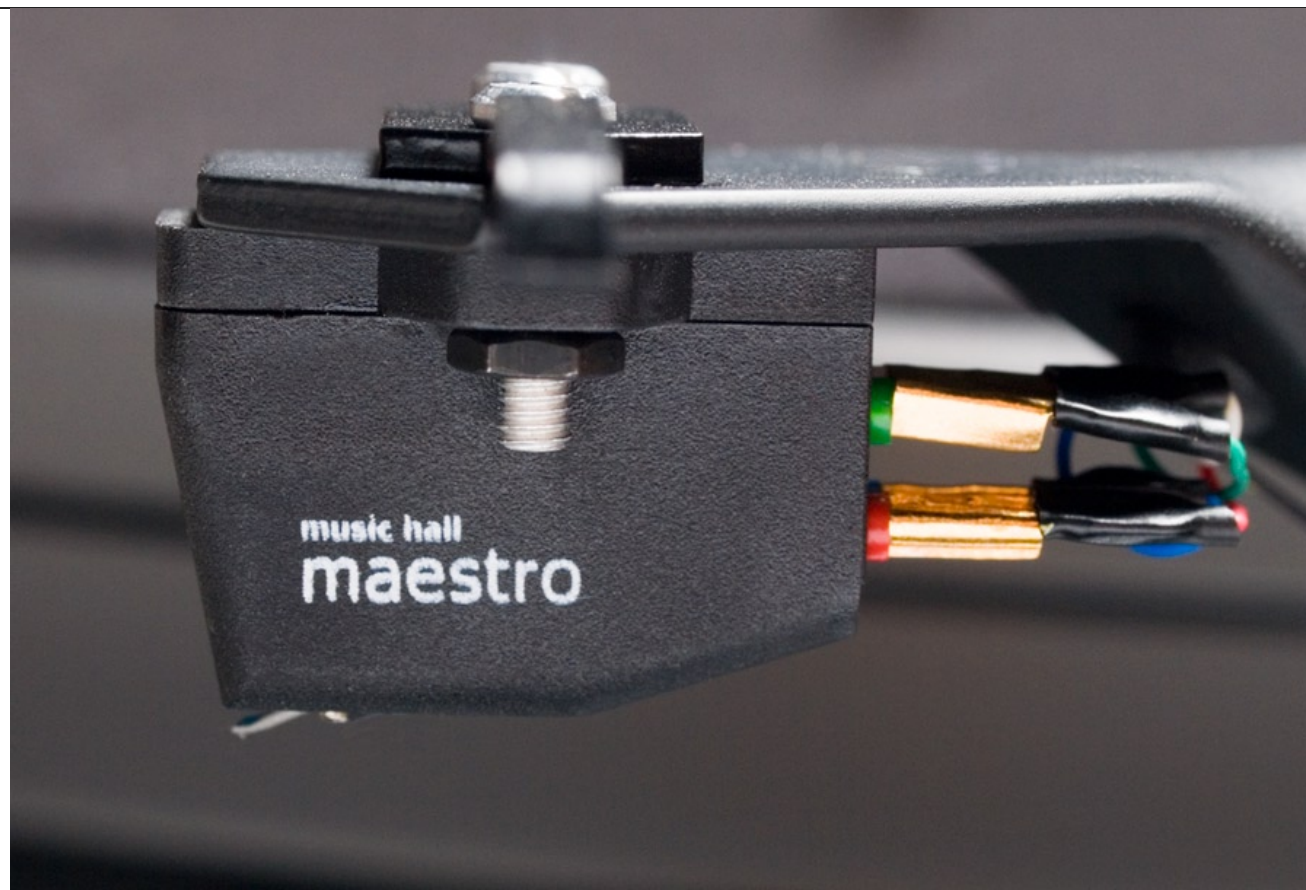
Should you want more performance than the “entry level” tables in the \$3-700 range, I suggest checking out the mmf-9 from Music Hall. The cost is \$1699 with cartridge, \$1499 without.

A chat with Ray Hall at CES put an mmf -9 on our doorstep pretty quickly and we were off and running. The mmf -9 comes very well boxed, with IKEA style instructions. Fortunately, there isn't much to do here, as the cartridge comes pre-installed and ready to go, so all you have to do is unlock (and SAVE) the transit screws, align the motor, fit the belt and set the tracking force. They enclose a handy little gauge to do this, so you should be spinning records in about 15 minutes even if you have those turtles from the Comcast ad set up your mmf -9.



Tech Details

With its functional three-piece plinth finished in a very stylish dark green, the mmf-9 is a very attractive table as well and features the new Pro-ject carbon fiber arm. Anti-skate is set via a small weight on a nylon filament and has three settings. Tracking force is set via a counterweight with a dial, but I suggest using the tracking force gauge of your choice. The mmf -9 offers both 33 and 45 r.p.m. playback speeds, switchable on the side of the plinth. (78 would have been really cool too...)



I could not find an output spec for the Maestro cartridge, but would guess it to be in the 2-3 mv range. output range, providing enough drive for any standard phono stage.

What really makes the mmf -9 a jewel, is that you can adjust VTA and azimuth, something that is not adjustable on my favorite Rega tables. Having these adjustments available to you makes it a lot easier to fine tune the table as well as fit other cartridges without any monkey business.

One other very nice feature of the mmf -9 is speed accuracy. While every REGA I've owned has always been a touch fast, the Music Hall is right on. Looking at the 33 r.p.m. band on the Cardas Test Record, the pattern was rock solid, with no drift in either direction. While this is great for your listening, it is a blessing if you like to record some of your LPs onto other media. The only thing worse than having clicks and

pops on your CD-Rs is to have them run fast or slow!

The Sound

If you are a very low maintenance audiophile that just wants to get it out of the box and go, our story could end here. The mmf -9 is a great choice at this price point. Buy it with the cartridge and enjoy your records.

However, if you want to perform a few tweaks, resulting in quite a bit more performance from this reasonably priced turntable, read on.

While this is great for your listening, it is a blessing if you like to record some of your LPs onto other media.

First thing on the agenda after thoroughly leveling the table, (DB has been pounding on me with this one...) was to check the factory settings. Overhang was fine but the VTA was a bit off, which partially explained the slightly bright presentation. Fortunately, the mmf -9 allows adjustment for VTA, which my Rega's don't. *(continued)*

EXCEPTIONAL AUDIO COMPONENTS



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—Steve Hoffman, TONE-Audio

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www.emotiveaudio.com



Should you decide to fit your own cartridge to this table, you will really appreciate this feature.

I gave the cartridge about 75 hours of break-in before serious listening, but it was still sounding a bit bright for my tastes. The good news is this is not the fault of the Maestro cartridge; it just needed to be loaded a bit differently. Thanks to the three inputs and variable loading ability of the Ray Samuels XR-10B phono stage that I use in my reference system, I was able to experiment a bit.

I fear that if you have a fixed 47k phono input, you may also find the standard cartridge a bit bright, but if you have the ability to make adjustments, I found that a setting of 1000 ohms with 330pf of capacitance tamed the high frequency response of this cartridge rather nicely. Last but not least, I tried the Locus Group Basic Clamp that worked wonders on our REGA P3 and P25, with equally good results.

Once the Maestro is properly set up, it delivers fairly good sound, but I had a sneaking suspicion that this table had more to offer than this cartridge was capable of. The Maestro was somewhat lacking in dynamics and smoothness of the upper registers compared to my REGA P25 that we have been slowly modifying over the last few issues.

The Next Step

Substituting a Shelter 501 (\$850) for the Maestro (which is also mounted to the P25) now made it much easier to compare apples to apples. *(continued)*

The Sumiko Blackbird (\$799) was also an excellent choice should your analog tastes outgrow the standard cartridge. Thanks to the adjustability of the Pro-ject arm, you can get either one of these up to snuff pretty quickly.

Here's where a phono preamp with three inputs really comes in handy. I could switch between my modded P25, the mmf-9 and my reference LP-12 (with a Shelter 90x) to compare the sound directly. The sound of the mmf-9 was very close to the modded REGA in almost every way, but remember the mmf-9 is a \$1600 turntable.

The mmf -9 comes with a fairly good interconnect, but thanks to the RCA jacks on the rear, this is another area that can be improved should you be so inclined. Substituting the Acrolink 7N-A2070 (\$999) was overkill with the stock cartridge, but allowed the Shelter to deliver all it was capable of with this arm. Just in case you do decide to mate a \$1000 interconnect with a \$1500 table, you can always unplug it and use it with your next table... A good budget upgrade for this set-up was the DH Labs Air Matrix interconnect at \$195.

The 501 made the presentation a lot friendlier and I started pulling out a lot of my favorite albums. For some reason, I started spinning some old favorites from college days and listened to a lot of Little Feat. **The Last Record Album** was a classic, and *Long Distance Love* had some great bass riffs that were very well reproduced with the mmf-9. Somehow I got from there to the fusion path, and moved on to the Dixie Dregs, **Dregs of the Earth**. This is where I have been able to really hear the difference between the mmf-9 and the under \$1000 tables, sorting out music that is pretty dense texturally. Same thing when I jump up to phono input three and switch to the LP-12/Graham/90x combination; the space between the instruments gets clearer and better defined.



THE VERDICT

The Music Hall mmf-9 is a great value, whether you are trading up from a lower priced table or entering the world of analog playback at this price point. It is very easy to set up, yet should you be inclined to spend an extra hour or so, it will allow even more sound to be coaxed out of it with a few basic tweaks. The arm is good enough to mount a fairly substantial cartridge, offering a number of choices there as well.

The burning question is: are you a wrench turner or a check writer? If you want a great table out of the box, buy an mmf-9; with the stock cartridge it's a great value. If you feel like upgrading the cartridge and are willing to dial in the adjustments to the nth degree, you will be rewarded with even better performance.

And it looks really cool. ●

MANUFACTURERS INFO

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www.musichallaudio.com

PERIPHERALS

Other Turntables/Cartridges (for comparison) Modded REGA P25 w/Shelter 501, Linn LP-12 (cirkus/lingo/trampolin) w/Shelter 90x

Phono Preamplifier Ray Samuels XR-10B

Preamplifier Conrad-Johnson ACT2

Power Amplifier Conrad-Johnson Premier 350

Speakers Empirium Acoustics Nicole

Interconnects TARA RSC, Acrolink, Cardas Golden Reference

Speaker Cables Cardas Golden Reference

Power Cords Running Springs Mongoose, Essential Sound Products "Reference"

Power Conditioning Running Springs Jaco

Vibration Control Symposium Ultra Platforms

FAVORITE TEST TUNES

Squeeze East Side Story (LP) A&M

Little Feat The Last Record Album (LP) Warner Bros.

Ted Nugent Ted Nugent (LP) Epic

Miles Davis Tutu (LP) Warner Bros.

Pat Travers Pat Travers (LP) Warner Bros.

The Modern Jazz Quartet Plastic Dreams (LP) Atlantic

Keith Jarrett Solo-Concerts (LP) ECM

Having Fun With The ZU Druids

— JEFF DORGAY

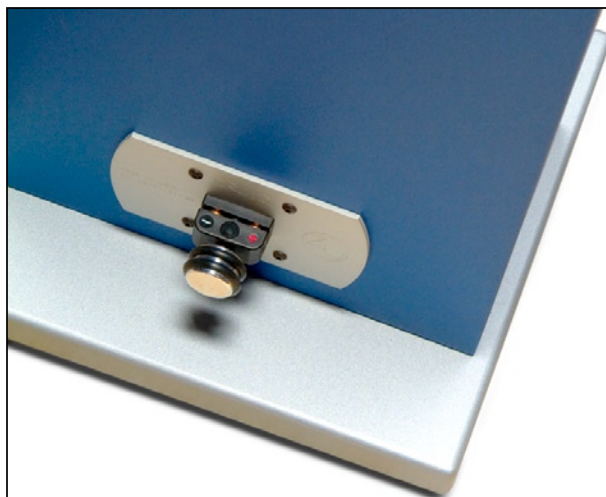




The ZU Druids

I have heard nothing but great things about the guys from Zu for some time now, so their room was one of the first I headed to at this year's CES show, and I wasn't disappointed. Big on the party environment, there were two turntables, a lot of records, and moody lighting. Front and center were the Druids, rocking the house. I can't recall the amplification because I was having a great time listening to music, so that's a big step in the right direction.

After the necessary pleasantries were exchanged, we discussed a review and I got too busy to get right back to the nice folks I met at Zu, but when Dan Wright at ModWright (who happens to live about 20 minutes up the road from TONE's headquarters) told me he was taking delivery on a new pair of Druids, I was back on the front burner. As Dan was pretty swamped with getting his new phono stage developed, I knew he would be too busy to get a new pair of speakers broken in, so I offered to give the Druids a home for a while. What hidden agenda? *(continued)*



While not always in fashion, I am a big fan of the single driver concept, owning a pair of 2nd Rethm speakers I enjoy tremendously. For a lot of music, with a careful choice of components, the single driver speaker offers a degree of coherence that is hard to beat. Even though the Druids use a super tweeter crossed over somewhere between 12 and 15khz, they still rely enough on their own 10-inch full range driver, they still offer most of the benefits of the single driver concept.

If you are an automotive enthusiast, you will enjoy how well these speakers are finished. You can tell these guys spent more than a little time studying the way they do things at Wilson; the finish on Dan's Druids had the \$800 upgrade that included a custom color, in this case, Modwright blue. Retail price for the Druids with standard finish is \$2,800. Wife acceptance factor on these speakers is huge; every one of my friends' wives who saw the Druids thought they were very cool! It is refreshing to see a speaker that looks as intriguing as it sounds.

A Few Important Setup Details

As easy as the Druids are to work with, you need to follow one basic rule. Because the port for the driver is down-firing, you need to have the speakers exactly the thickness of a CD cover from the surface of your floor. There are two sets of spikes included, shorter ones for hard floors and longer ones for carpet. Should you accidentally use the

longer spikes on a hard floor (as I did, because I was too excited to start listening) you will lose a smidge of the bass response.

I'm going to give you a bit of advice here, and I suggest you follow it. If you are buying a pair of Druids, buy a pair of their LIBTEC speaker cables. I tried the Druids with seven different speaker cables from \$100 to \$2,500 a pair, and I could not get the magic. They just were a little bit pushed back in the upper mids and everything seemed a bit distant, like I was back in row 20 or so. As to not hint to the guys at Zu what I was up to, I gave them a call and asked innocently if they had a speaker cable they preferred. Sales Manager Sean Casey, told me to try the LIBTECs. "They aren't our most expensive cables, but the other reviewers are really tripping out over them.

Tripping out indeed, these cables are the secret to the power these speakers have to offer!

I was back in row seven, just where I like to be. The highs were more defined, yet smoother and less grainy. When I was getting used to the speakers, I was listening to U2's **All That You Can't Leave Behind**, and all through the disc, Bono's vocals were way behind the system. Putting the disc back in my reference system (Premier 350/ACT2/Serenades) confirmed the vocals were indeed front and center. Switching cables made everything right.

Staying in the trippy mode, I got out one of my favorite discs. The first cut on Eddie Jobson's **Theme of Secrets** had a huge sound field with a ton of width and depth to the presentation. This led me to various Brian Eno discs, and, of course, Jean-Michael Jarre. Break out the Chemical Brothers and its 2 a.m. again.

I would also suggest a high quality power conditioner (I prefer the Running Springs products), as a high efficiency speaker like this will reveal every bit of crud in your power line in low-level passages. Clean AC power really

lets the Druids reveal all they are capable of.

Big Efficiency

Thanks to 101db efficiency, the Druids barely need any power at all to make plenty of music. With a maximum power handling capacity of 300 watts, you can rest assured they have plenty of dynamic range for whatever type of music you enjoy.

My first thoughts were that they would be great with a few of the SET amplifiers we have around here, and I was not disappointed. To give them a fair shake, I also hooked the Druids up to a few modestly powered tube amplifiers, as well as my reference C-J Premier 350sa. In my opinion, even 50 watts per channel is way overkill for speakers this efficient, but you can do as you please.

Because my BAT 42SE preamplifier is so neutral and possesses a ton of detail, I was able to switch amplifiers at will and get a completely different take on the Druid sound. Your favorite flavor, and of course the amount of room left on your MasterCard, will determine which amplifier is the best match for you. I'll give you my short list, and perhaps it will point you in a direction.

The spec sheet says the Druids will handle 300 watts per channel, so I had to try them with the Premier 350. This was a powerful combination and sounded great, even at low volumes. Some are of the opinion that high-powered, solid-state amplifiers don't have much detail or finesse at the 1-watt level, but I can vouch for the Premier 350 (watch for a full review next issue) having phenomenal detail and control even at this level. I was listening to the current Richard Thompson LP from MoFi, **Some Enchanted Evenings**, and the texture to Mr. T's guitar playing was wonderful.

Split Personality

With that much power on tap, I had to rock, so I dug out my pristine copy of Van Halen 2, and cranked it up until I pegged my sound

(continued)



level meter. Being ever conscious of OSHA noise standards and the fact that my ears are no good to anyone if I destroy them, I only listened at this level for the 2:59 it took to play *Sombody Get Me a Doctor*. Damn! If I would have had these speakers back in college, in my Phase Linear 700 days, I would have been the most popular guy in the dorms at the University of Wisconsin. However, as much fun as this was, I just can't imagine ever needing this much power for the Druids, unless you were doing sound reinforcement for major parties.

Keeping down the solid-state path, I substituted the Pass Aleph 3 for a different take on the solid-state concept. For those of you not familiar with this amplifier, it is a single-gain stage amplifier that runs in single-ended class A mode, and resembles the sonic signature of a Wavac or other high quality tube SET amplifier, but with a bit more control. This provided a touch warmer sound than the Premier 350, but still solid-state in nature.

I tried all of my low power 300B and 2A3 amplifiers, and that was pretty much the sound I was digging the most, especially for extended listening of jazz and female vocals. One of my favorite finds from the recent Head-Fi meet in NYC was a near-mint copy of **Della**, by Della Reece on RCA LP. Forget about Diana Krall and Patricia Barber, the ladies of this era could really sing! **Della** was magical through The Bottleheads; a touch warm and romantic, but wonderful nonetheless.

As I said, your taste in electronics can really vary the sound of the Druids, but the best of all worlds happened when I combined the BAT VK-42SE solid-state preamp with the DeHaviland Aries monoblocks. 30 watts of 845 SET power was an amazing package, providing the detail that only an SET can possess, along with major bass slam, and the authority an extra 20 watts or so can offer.

Big Fun

The key word with these speakers is fun. Normally, I try to keep things a bit more scien-

tific, and only use a couple of combinations to determine how I like the sound of a particular component, but the Druids were so much fun to listen to, I tried quite a few different combinations, just to see where things would end up.

One of the keys to this speaker is decent bass response. I love my Rethms, but because of their horn configuration, they are very critical of room placement, and really require a sub to get the most performance. Because of their tower design, with a port in the bottom, the Druids don't really need a subwoofer to go down to the 35-40hz region, which gives you a lot more flexibility.

I did find the Druids to be a bit directional, though nothing like a pair of electrostats. My favorite position was with them toed in a bit so the tweeters are facing your listening chair. Thanks to the smooth supertweeter, this is not a problem at all. (However, Zu makes a subwoofer that I'll just bet would be very cool with these speakers...)

The Druids are plug-and-play, though an hour careful positioning will reward you with the best they are able to offer; they were one of the least demanding speakers I have ever set up. Even if you don't know what you're doing, you should be able to throw them in the room just about anywhere within reason, and get pretty good sound. If you have ever spent your whole day with guys agonizing about moving speakers a half-inch, a product this user friendly is very welcome indeed.

THE VERDICT

The Zu Druids rule! This is one of the most enjoyable speakers I have had the chance to spend time with. No matter what kind of music I listened to, I was having a blast. You will either love or hate the look, but as long as you purchase the LIBTEC speaker cables, I think you will enjoy the sound. Thanks to the very reasonable price, you can make these a cornerstone of a modestly priced system, or upgrade your gear well into the \$20-\$30K range and still be very impressed. I think I might need a pair of these in Kawasaki Lime green! ●

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Analog Source Linn LP-12 (lingo/
circus/trampolin) Shelter 90x with
Ray Samuels XR-10B Phono Stage

Preamplifier BAT VK-42SE,
Conrad Johnson ACT2

Power Amplifier Pass Aleph 3,
Bottlehead 2A3, Pacific Creek
SE300I, DeHavilland Aries 845,
Conrad Johnson Premier 350

Interconnects Cardas Golden
Reference, Tara RSC

Speaker Cables Zu LIBTEC

Power Cords Running Springs
Mongoose, Essential Sound
Products "Reference"

Power Conditioning Running
Springs Jaco

Vibration Control Symposium
Ultra Platforms, Rollerblock Jr.s

FAVORITE TEST TUNES:

Della Reece Della (LP) RCA

Van Halen Van Halen 2 (LP)
Warner Brothers

Chemical Brothers
Push The Button (CD)

U2 All That You Can't Leave
Behind (LP) Island

Jean-Michael Jarre Oxygene
(LP) MoFi

Brian Eno Music for Films (LP)

The Conrad-Johnson CA 200

— JEFF DORGAY



The Conrad-Johnson CA 200



Talking to Lew Johnson at CES this winter, he said “Take a look at this, we have a new product I think you might be very interested in.” He led me over to this very elegant, unassuming, but pretty heavy box called the CA 200. My first thought was, cool integrated amplifier, but Lew went on to explain that it was not an integrated amplifier at all, but a control amplifier. It is a scaled down version of the circuit used in the Premier 350 combined with the switching circuitry of the Premier 18LS. At first glance, it looks just like an 18LS until you notice that bank of heat sinks along the left side!

This combination results in an amplifier capable of producing almost 200 watts per channel (185 to be exact) with the control flexibility of the flagship CJ products. Because of the small chassis, they could not use the new CJD Teflon capacitors that contribute to the sonic signature of the Premier 350, even though the circuit is similar.

Having my own ACT2 and Premier 350 made this a particularly enjoyable assignment and made it very easy to make this comparison. But first, break-in! Fortunately, the CA200 arrived here just before we had to make a weekend trip, so I could leave the CD player on repeat and come home to an amplifier with some hours on the clock.

So, what's a control amplifier anyway and why do I want one?

Instead of being an integrated amplifier, with a preamplifier and power amplifier on one chassis, the CA200 uses a stepped attenuator that is similar to the one in the ACT2 and Premier 18LS that connects right to the power amplifier, eliminating the interaction that would result from using a purely passive controller and a length of interconnect to the power amplifier. Passive controllers come in and out of

vogue and under the right circumstances can be magic.

However, when the planets do not line up properly, they can roll off the highs and be compromised in terms of ultimate dynamics. The CA200 sidesteps this issue by having it all in one box. I like simplicity and this is where the CA200 excels. No tubes to worry

about and only one good power cord to buy. (Not to mention one less interconnect)

The virtues of patience (if you want to be a Jedi)

I can't stress enough here the importance of giving a component a lot of break-in time before doing critical listening. I have heard of too many people actually selling a piece of gear with less than a hundred hours only because it didn't sound right. Even if you have to find some cheap speakers on Ebay or a used receiver and CD player somewhere, just so you can really give a component the time it needs to break in properly, you will really be rewarded in the end, no matter how difficult this seems. This is a bit harder with tube gear that you can't always leave on for days continuously, but again I stress patience.

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I can't stress enough here the importance of giving a component a lot of break-in time before doing critical listening.

Because the CA200 does not have the CJD Teflon capacitors from the Premier 350, it sounds a lot better right out of the box, and is pretty darn good after about 150 hours. However, the real magic of this amplifier (and every other high end component I have auditioned in the last few years) really starts to unfold around 300-500 hours.

I have spoken at length with the people that design capacitors and a few brainy physics types and they all seem to agree that electrons in a component need to find their own path. If you have ever connected a broken-in pair of interconnects back up the opposite way, you know what I mean.

While I'm harping at you on patience, read the manual. I didn't and paid the price of no sound for about 20 minutes, bad return on investment. Before I called CJ and confessed my ignorance, I got the manual back out and read it CLOSELY. Sure enough, you need to

hold the mute button down for about 15 seconds before the CA200 comes to life, otherwise it will stay in standby mode.

When not in use, the CA200 comes out of standby immediately and is up to full bloom within 15 minutes. Just like my Premier 350, it does not run terribly warm unless you are listening at concert-hall levels.

Initial setup

After a little break in time, the CA 200 was installed in my



second system. It easily passed the Apogee test, powering the 3-ohm speakers with ease, so if you have a somewhat difficult or inefficient pair of speakers to drive, rest assured that will be no problem. The next couple hundred hours was spent listening through the outstanding Penaudio Serenades. These speakers are somewhat inefficient at 87db, so I was able to goose them a bit more than I am used to with my Pass Aleph 3.

I put the AC cord back in the box, installed a Running Springs Mongoose, put the CA 200 up on a Symposium Ultra platform and was ready for serious listening!

The Sound

Not only did I spend a lot of concentrated hours listening to the CA200, I spent a lot of time listening for the differences between it and the ACT2/Premier 350 combination. Back in the old days, CJ gear had a reputation for

being a bit on the warm side (which I always liked, owning a number of their amplifiers and preamps over the past 25 years) but those days are over. The current lineup is not your dad's CJ anymore. The new stuff is much more dynamic, powerful, and accurate. Though it will resolve a lot of detail, it is not harsh the way some extremely detailed gear can be and I was able to spend a lot of time listening without any fatigue.

Obviously, I listened to my 30 favorite tracks right away to get a quick feel for where the CA200 was coming from before moving on to more. All of the things I love about the Premier 350 are here, just in a somewhat lower concentration. Moving the CA200 to my reference system and switching between the ACT2 and Premier 350 confirmed this.

One of my favorite tests for resolution is the opening 20 seconds of the title track on Robin Trower's Bridge of Sighs. If you have a

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The current lineup is not your dad's CJ anymore. The new stuff is much more dynamic, powerful, and accurate.



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good vinyl pressing, that's great, but the MoFi version on gold CD is quite good too. Get right in the sweet spot and listen to the chimes, they should distinctly go from right to left and have a very airy presentation, with someone talking in the background very softly in the lower right side of the soundstage. This was one of the many places where I could really hear the lineage to the ACT2/Premier 350 combination, with the CA200 offering a good portion of what makes them so seductive to listen to.

Another favorite test from the past is the Sheffield recording of James Newton Howard and Friends. While you might argue (and you would be right) that it's really hard to judge any kind of musical accuracy with a lot of synthesizers, this record is very dynamic and is great for hearing whether a component possesses overhang on fast transients. The bass drum on *Slippin' Away* really showed just how much power this little amplifier possessed. Though the CA200 did not have the limitless power reserves of the Premier 350, it played louder than I needed it to on all but the most inefficient speakers. I suspect that if you have speakers in the 86 – 90 db range you may never need more juice than this.

All of my favorite jazz and female vocal discs revealed a level of accuracy and resolution that exceeds what I would have expected at this price point. Remember, we are talking about the CA 200 replacing an amplifier and a preamp, so \$6500 isn't an outrageous sum of money for

(continued)

both boxes. Not to mention you won't need an expensive interconnect or power cord for two devices, so it's as if the real cost of a CA200 is only about \$5000!

Cheating the Amplifier Gods

For those of you thinking you can cheat the amplifier gods and get an ACT2 and a Premier 350 in a small box for a third of the price, the answer is not quite. But you can have MOST of the dynamics, accuracy and musicality that CJ's best gear has to offer at a very affordable price and if you aren't as obsessed as I am, the CA200 will be all you ever need. It's more like buying a "standard" Porsche 911, rather than buying a custom RUF model.

If you aren't as obsessed as I am, the CA200 will be all you ever need.

If you are someone who loves music, wants very high quality playback, but just isn't interested in tube rolling, or a lot of cables, power cords and the like, this is YOUR amplifier! Thanks to being packaged in a slim, attractive box, you shouldn't get any arguments about whoever you share your living quarters with.

Here's my recipe for easy, instant high-end sound: Take the CA200, add a great digital source (CJ's new combination player is quite outstanding and the cosmetics match) and add your favorite \$5-10 thousand dollar pair of speakers. Throw in a good pair of intercon-

nects, a pair of speaker cables and a pair of decent power cords. Set it up, put it on repeat for a week to burn in, DONE. Not only could you be thrilled with this system for the rest of your life, it's going to sound better than most of the other things you will hear, and even when you hear the mega-expensive stuff you won't be unhappy with your purchase.

Or, you can be obsessed, the choice is yours. But remember, while your obsessed audiophile friends will be moving speakers in 1/8 inch increments or trying the latest doodad, you will be digging your music.

THE VERDICT

The CA200 control amplifier offers a lot of performance in a very compact and attractive package. Thanks to the trickle-down of their best technology, CJ is able to offer up a very good portion of the best sound they have to offer at a very reasonable price.

If you want great sound in a compact package, the CA200 is the amplifier I highly suggest putting on your short list. Considering my 29-year-old PV-1 is still running just fine, you can keep this one in the family for a long time. ●

MANUFACTURERS INFO

Conrad-Johnson Design, Inc.
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Fairfax, VA 22031
703-698-8581
www.conradjohnson.com

PERIPHERALS

Preamplifier: Conrad-Johnson ACT2

Amplifier: Conrad-Johnson Premier 350

Speakers: Empirium Acoustics Nicole, Penaudio Serenades, Tetra 506LTD

Analog Source: Linn LP-12 (cirkus/trampolin/lingo) /Shelter 90x/ Graham 2.2 with Ray Samuels XR-10B phono stage

Digital Source: ModWright Denon 3910

Interconnects: TARA RSC, Acrolink, Cardas Golden Reference

Speaker Cables: Cardas Golden Reference

Power Cords: Running Springs Mongoose, Essential Sound Products "Reference"

Power Conditioning: Running Springs Jaco

Vibration Control: Symposium Ultra Platforms

FAVORITE TEST TUNES

Robin Trower, Bridge of Sighs (LP) Chrysalis

James Newton Howard, James Newton Howard and Friends (LP)

The Three, The Three (LP) East Wind

KD Lang, All You Can Eat (CD) Warner Bros.

Pat Travers, Pat Travers (LP) Polydor

Sonny Clark, Sonny's Crib (LP) Classic Records



Headphone Planet

— Aaron Kovics

THE KOSS PRO 4AAT HEADPHONES

I'm not a psychiatrist (although I did take Psych 101 and Abnormal Psych in college) and I don't play one on television, but I can unequivocally say that sounds and smells trigger memories of each of our yesteryears.

I recently purchased the newly released 3 LP 150 gram set of **The Best of the Doors** which also comes with a bonus LP that contains 6 different radio mixes of *Riders on the Storm*. This album is a gem, and contains all of the more popular Doors' songs with a sound quality that is as good as you can hope for from 1967 to 1971. It is mostly binaural with Morrison singing on both channels. As I was listening to it, images were flashing through my mind that were as vivid as a room full of people wearing all white outfits under a black light with a strobe. It brought me back to the times when I had my first pair of audiophile grade headphones. The Koss Pro 4AAs.

I currently have a pair of the original 70s Koss headphones in my possession, and when comparing them

to modern day headphones 30 years later, except for materials, not much has really changed. Just like conventional speakers. You still have a box-like enclosures with some large and small drivers in them and wiring with associated electronics and connectors. When you compare that to how far computers have come from keypunch cards and mainframes with reels of magnetic tape in the '80s to microchips that can hold gigabytes of information today, audio headphones and speakers don't appear to have changed all that much on the surface.

Inside the boxes (or the cans), there have been huge advances in diaphragm materials, vibration control theory, sound quality and the use of expensive woods and man-made headbands and enclosures like magnesium and carbon fiber. My Sony MDR R-10 headphones have cups that are made from the heart-wood of mature Zelkova trees (that tree does not grow in Brooklyn).

(continued)



PACIFIC CREEK

They also contain something called bio-cellulose which is produced by bacteria called "Acetobacter acti" which Sony found a way to dehydrate, and then compress to 20 microns in a diaphragm die. Bacteria...hmmm. I don't think that Koss used that technology in the '70s.

Buck Rogers
could have searched
for years and would
never have found
that on any of the
planets that he
landed on!

Do the headphones and speakers of current times sound better than their predecessors even though they have a similar look? Is the Pope Polish? Well, actually, not anymore but you know what I mean. The differences are astonishing and the sound quality improvement is by leaps and bounds. A large amount of thanks must be given to the military and the space program for their inventions of materials that are lighter, stronger and more resilient than just plastic and steel. *(continued)*



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My flashback memories include lying in a dark bedroom listening to Jefferson Airplanes' **Surrealistic Pillow** and **Bless Its Pointed Little Head** wondering if I should "Go Ask Alice", when she's 10 feet tall. Also, being intrigued by lyrics like "Rock me baby, 'til my back has no bone." I wore my Koss Pro 4AA headphones with the thinly coiled wire.

A cable like that now would certainly be modded by some young daytime college student who makes cables at night so he/she can buy text books next semester.

As I listened, besides dealing with the sweat caused by a thick non-breathable ear pads, I

became obsessed with trying to make the coil go back to its original pattern like the old Ma Bell phone cords that amazed us, because we could never figure out how to get the coil to go back to its original shape. We suffered through the process while trying to figure it out just like the Rubik's Cube.

Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin also took up my dark room listening sessions. Whatever was going on in the guitar tracks of each recording (shhh, nobody knows this but me), **that was me playing the guitar for each band.** I was Yorma. I was Robbie Kreiger. "Thank you, thank you very much. Please hold all of your applause until the end of the performance".

In 1990 I went to J&R Music World in downtown

Manhattan, and asked them to sell me the best pair of headphones that they had, and the salesman came out with a beautiful pair of Beyer Dynamic DT 801s which cost around \$250. I still have those, even though the foam diaphragm covers and velvet ear pads look like they went through a slaughter scene of "Alien vs. Predator". I still have them and they still work, but much like the Pro 4AAs, the sound quality is inferior to modern day headphones that cost half as much.

The next step in my vintage quest for "audiophilia" in the 1970s was obtaining the very first Sony Walkman cassette player. I was working for a hi-fi store, selling by morning and

delivering what I sold by afternoon. My boss had the insight in 1979 to buy a couple of hundred of the first Walkmans to cross the Pacific Ocean and make it's way over to a small stereo store in a large mall in New Jersey. Handing over a weeks pay, I was one of the first people to ride on a commuter railway, listening to music on my head with the small 1½" round headphones on my ears. You should have seen the dirty looks that I got from people while I listened to Ike and Tina Turner's *Working Together*. **Little did they know that half of the world would be walking around the streets of the world with earbuds on in 2006.**

While doing research on the Koss Pro 4AAs, I was surprised that they are still sold today. It is definitely an upgraded version, and I did a search on the internet and found that they cost about \$60 and have a frequency range of 10-25,000Hz; so I thought that they would be worth picking up for nostalgia's sake. In this case, editor JD sent me a pair of the Pro 4AAs which cost \$99.

I opened the box and was wowed by the beauty of the build quality of these puppies.

Sure enough, the rubber ear pads smelled just like my old Pro 4AAs! They use a Titanium coated diaphragm that is claimed to reduce mechanical distortion and improve the higher frequency responses to output a clean, clear sound presentation, or as Koss calls it "reproduction". They offer a lifetime warranty, but the look and feel of these cans assures the buyer that they will never need to use it. **They feel as if Atlas himself would hold these on his shoulders proudly.** These are a closed design that is marketed for use in the studio to stop ambient sounds from intruding on the broadcaster or engineer's ears. Most audiophile headphones that I've listened to in the last five years are open air configurations designed to allow the sounds to flow freely away from the listener's ears to

(continued)

stop any unwanted “slapping” effects to cancel out the waveforms that are being produced by the diaphragms and drivers.

But these are not an audiophile grade headphone. They are priced around \$100 and I am amazed that Koss is able to keep the price point so low while employing such a quality build. Are they better than the same model made in the early to mid '70s? 100% by far. Are they headphones that are worthy of being considered entry level audiophile gear? I'm afraid not. **Although these are stunning to look at and hold, they do stay true to their price** and sound as if there is a pair of heavy curtains draped over the drivers causing a veiled sound that takes them down quite a few notches. Also, and again, remember that I have a big head, (more brains) so they do have a serious clamping effect on my ears even at the most extended position. Also they still use a coiled cord like their originals which I find to be cumbersome.

However, the fact that a tried and true performer from the '70s has made it back into the headphone retailers of the world, reminds me of how everything works in 30 year cycles, like bell bottoms and mini skirts and GTOs. The improvement that Koss has made to the Pro 4AAs is much better than what Pontiac has done to the GTO that was once the king of muscle cars.

Writer's note: I had told a friend about the Koss Pro 4AAs and he asked me why I would need a headphone that ran on 4 AA batteries. That's genuinely funny and cute. ●

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This issue we have a mixture of different things to make your life as an audiophile easier, from some cables to a handy way to transport some of that really heavy gear that we always seem to end up with. There's a very cool table radio from Music Hall, and I submit one of my favorite snack treats as well, Kit Kat Bites. They don't call me Foodboy for nothing! Enjoy.



Cable Towers

www.dedicatedaudio.com \$99 for a set of four

If you are a true blue audiophile, you shouldn't have your cables on the ground. If you are a newcomer to our crazy world, it does actually help to keep things tidy behind your system. I've always had a hard time really hearing the effects of all this, but my scientist buddies tell me that it makes good sense. In the end from a feng-shui point of view, it's a good idea to have as much good chi around your system as possible, so I suggest using the Cable Towers from Dedicated Audio.

They will get your cables up off the ground and are more attractive than a lot of the other solutions I have seen for this kind of thing. Available in clear and black (I prefer the clear ones in my system), these are a bit on the spendy side at \$99 for a set of four, but they do a great job.



Cardas Golden Presence Cable

www.cardas.com

These have been the cables I've been using for quite a long time in my reference system and are VERY happy with the Cardas sound. Some claim that Cardas cables can be dark, however, I have not had that experience at all. The other side of the fence swears by "Cardas Midrange" and I guess that puts me square in that camp. Their current reference cables concentrate on lowering propagation energy and reactance, which lowers high frequency rolloff between sources.

I am currently using the Golden Presence interconnects between my ModWright Denon and CJ ACT2 (2m. length \$1100) as well as between the ACT2 and Premier 350 (1m length, 700). I also use the Golden Presence speaker cable (2.5m length, \$1400) in this system.

According to the Cardas website, Golden Presence is a somewhat simplified version

of the Golden Reference, using the same conductors, but a bit less shielding. In the past, I have found their top of the line Golden Cross cable a bit too detailed for my taste (but it might be right up your alley), so the Golden Presence was like I had George Cardas make custom cables for my system! Just the right balance of detail and freedom from harshness or grain, yet still very neutral tonally.

The Cardas Golden Presence interconnects are non-directional, so this is a big help when plugging things in with less than optimum light or in my case, less than optimum vision. I also really like the way these cables are built physically, with a soft, squishy chocolate brown sheathing. Unlike some cables that can be very difficult to route, these cables are extremely easy to snake around things.

Same thing with the speaker cables, they too are non directional and have that nice,

smooth sheathing that makes them easy to route, however because of their squishy nature, will require more of whatever it is that you use to get them up off the floor.

Be Aware of the Funk

There is one little thing you need to be aware of should you buy these cables, and I have heard it from owners and dealers alike. The best description is "The Cardas Funk". Right out of the box, the Golden Presence cables sound a tad closed in, and after a day or two of continuous play, they start to open up rather nicely.

BAM! Right around 50 hours (and the more resolution your system has, the worse the effect will be) they sound really murky, worse than when you took them out of the box. Avoid the impulse to panic or return the cables. I had even talked to a Cardas dealer that told me he would always have to assure people that everything would be fine with a little more time.

Actually, it's better than fine. Once the funk hits, it lasts for about another 20 hours of play and is then gone forever. After that, you can look forward to a very neutral sound with an extended, yet grain free midrange/high end and well-controlled bass. *(continued)*



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ToneAudio



While these cables have found a permanent home in my reference system, I have used them in a number of other configurations with good luck.

Most audiophiles seem to be split on the copper vs. silver thing, so I'm not going to try and change your mind. Personally, I like the copper sound a bit more as it seems to be more natural, but again, you will need to investigate for yourself. I had a friend over listening to my system with the Cardas cable and he remarked that it was too dark. I switched to a pair of speaker cables that to me were much too bright and he exclaimed, "That's it, that's perfect!" I got busy and my ears got a bit more tolerant of the bright sound when another friend came over and said, "Wow, your system sounds way too bright!" I then remembered the switch, returned the Cardas cable to the system (whew!) and he remarked that now I was on the money.

Bi-wire With Ease

Another nice touch that Cardas offers for those of you that bi-wire, they make the ends that go to the high frequencies about two inches longer than the ones that go to the woofers. If you have ever really struggled with equal length ends on a bi wired cable, this is a true blessing.

How to make heads or tails of all this? If you have components and speakers that lend themselves to a more neutral tonal balance, yet you would like to hear more information, I can't suggest the Cardas Golden Presence cables highly enough. Evaluate them at your convenience and should you like them as much as I do, just ignore the funk! It will make its appearance, but will leave you shortly thereafter.

Purchase from us directly at
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Hello, Dolly

www.handtruckstore.com \$40

Sorry, I know that's really corny, but I couldn't resist. Whether you have a few pieces of really heavy gear or are considering getting more heavy gear, (are you with me so far?) take a trip to Home Depot or your favorite hardware place of choice and get a cool piano dolly. Granted, they don't damp vibration like a Symposium Ultra Platform, one of these might save you a trip to the Chiropractor while you are re-arranging your system.

And with a set of Rollerblocks, it's the best amp stand on wheels you can find for forty bucks!

The one you see here will hold a thousand pounds, so you could even move big Wilsons around! Believe it or not, we used this to move our Steinway from one room to another, so it never hurts to have a piano dolly handy. Should you live on a hilly cul-de-sac, you could even get some pretty mean luge racing going with a couple of your buddies, provided you drink enough beer first. Don't forget the kneepads and don't try to sue me, TONE-Audio DOES NOT condone luge racing with a piano dolly.



Music Hall Table Radio

www.musicchallaudio.com \$199

The official product description refers to this as the RDR-1, or "Radio Done Right" as Roy Hall calls it. I must admit, I looked at this one with a little bit of skepticism at first, but 5 seconds after plugging it in, was very excited about how this little bugger sounds.

Thanks to a wood cabinet and a port in the back, the RDR-1 has a very full-bodied sound. You get AM and FM along with five preset stations and an AUX input, which was perfect for my iPod. A basic FM antenna is enclosed and the reception is quite good. There is even a tape out jack (1/8" mini), and while I wouldn't use it for recording, you can use the RDR-1 as a budget tuner this way!

If that weren't enough, you can use the RDR-1 as a clock radio. This sealed the deal for us, as that old alarm clock from the '80s with the giant red LED readout was about ready for the junkpile.

Should you feel at a loss for audiophile accoutrements, you can always add an ICE Cube and a thousand dollar power cord to put your mind at ease before retiring. Me, I'll just keep it stock and enjoy it, but if Roy Hall ever makes a stereo RDR-2, count me in!



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Music server people are always running out of space, but here is a step in the right direction from Maxtor. Their new One Touch III Turbo Edition is available in 1TB (1000GB) or 600GB versions. The 1TB version is like having almost 17 iPod video players on your desktop, so that's a lot of music! Even if you are recording uncompressed music, the 1TB version should hold about 1500 CDs.

Look to TONE in the future for more info on digital recording, but at least for now, you have a place to put your data.

The Turbo Edition comes pre-formatted for Mac, but works on both platforms and offers USB 2.0, FireWire 400 and FireWire 800 connectivity. Both versions can also be configured as RAID arrays for even more speed, which could come in handy for use in high-resolution digital applications.



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www.silversonic.com \$99 for a 1 meter pair

If you are just looking for a great, basic interconnect, consider the BL-1 from DH Labs.

At just \$99 for a 1-meter pair, these have to be one of the best bargains in the high end. Granted, these are not as exciting to talk about as interconnects that cost as much as a used Ducati Monster, but they work well, and go about their business in a very unobtrusive manner.

All of us at TONE have at least a few pairs, and they are the perfect cable for starter to intermediate systems. The cable is a combination of oxygen free copper, coated with pure silver and use a Teflon dielectric. All of the DH cables are hand assembled in the US.

The sound much better than you would expect for a \$99 pair of cables, and because of that layer of silver have just a touch of zip. For not much more than you would spend at Radio Shack, you can get some great cable.

Ice Cube

www.dedicatedaudio.com \$40

Here's a handy little device. Though I haven't seen a lot of things using the European two-prong outlet, it pops up now and then and always when Radio Shack is closed. There isn't a big selection of cool power cords out there with the two-prong termination, so the Ice Cube is an adapter to allow you to use your standard cool-guy power cord on equipment that has that little cheesy connection. (Usually a CD or DVD player)

Having the benefits of being cryogenically treated, this one works! Using it on my Phillips CD recorder, I noticed a bit cleaner sound on playback as well as recording by having the ability to use an aftermarket power cord. I'm also getting a much closer shave using a DH Labs Power Plus cord on my Norelco electric razor, now that I can make the connection! For the photographers in the crowd, I keep one of these in my camera bag too, because I have a habit of losing those 2 pin power cords! ●



Buying Records At Target — Jerold O'Brien

Most of the time I go to Target to buy Mobil 1 on sale for my loyal 2002tii or to get snack treats, but this trip I thought I would peruse the record section to see if they had anything besides boy band music. Lo and behold, I did pretty well this trip. Got a few great CDs and saved a few bucks! And I remember when you used to be able to get vinyl at Target...



Pink Floyd – WISH YOU WERE HERE
Remastered Version

Right off the bat, I was expecting this one to suck and be really harsh sounding, but I wanted it for the car and was too lazy to digitize the whole album, so I took a chance for \$10.99.

This one's a keeper folks. Doug Sax did the remastering and it's nice and smooth. If you are a Pink Floyd fan you will be happy to add this one to your collection, whether you are lazy like me or want to put fewer miles on the LP version. I happen to own the CBS Mastersound half-speed version (which, buy the way, I bought at Target a long time ago) and the original LP on Harvest. Though not as good as the original, it is nowhere near as bright as the CBS remaster and somewhat quieter.

Back in the day this was one of my favorites and I used to love to crank up *Welcome to the Machine*. My parents hated this record!!

Prince – 3121

You either love this guy or you hate him. I used to hate him, but JD dragged me to one of the shows on the **Musicology** tour and after seeing him live I've acquired a new respect for the man that James Brown called "one funky little dude."



To his credit, this CD hit the Billboard charts about two months ago at number 1 (however a quick check at billboard.com reveals it is down to 80 on the top 200 chart), which is pretty impressive for someone that has been around so long and has had such a mercurial career. The only guy I can compare Prince to in a very obtuse way is Elvis Costello. Every time you think he's washed up, he comes out with something brilliant and you are back on the bus. Same with **3121**. JD thinks Prince is the musical genius

(continued)

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of our time, even surpassing the Beatles, but I can't go quite that far. However, this guy plays a mean guitar!

Even though Prince is a pretty religious guy these days and he's not as nasty as he used to be, there is still plenty of sex you up stuff on this disc. I think you could put some of these tracks in your playlist along with some Marvin Gaye and get lucky, no problem.

But wait, this is TONE, not Maxim, so let's talk about how this record sounds.

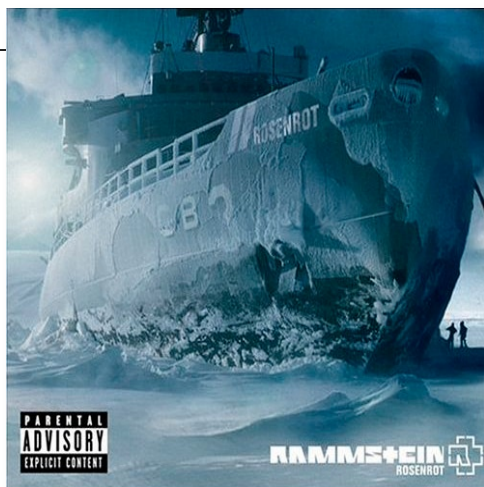
Even though it is mastered by the great Bernie Grundman, this sucker is bright. As much as I like this CD, it is a bit hard on the ears. The soundstage is HUGE, but it is really crunchy up on top and is one of those CDs that makes me wish I'd bought that Cello Audio Palette used when I had the chance, instead of my beloved 2002tii. My solution? Play this one on the Stereo 70 system and it sounds just right.

In conclusion, if you are a Prince fan, this is the record you've been waiting for. **Musicology** was pretty lame, but **3121** is outstanding, crunchy sound and all.

Rammstein – ROSENROT

I don't know how I missed this one a couple of months ago. I was first exposed to this band while a passenger in a good friends Porsche turbo. He put these guys on as we pulled on to the secret stretch of highway in Arizona where a couple of the car magazines do their high speed testing. Listening to *Du Hast Mich* at high volume while going almost 200mph in a

(continued)



Porsche turbo is truly a mind bending experience and I have been a Rammstein fan ever since.

There is also a city in Germany named Ramstein, that was the site of a serious stunt plane accident in 1988 at a military air show, killing almost 70 people. So taking the city's name and adding another M kind of makes them like The Chicago Transit Authority. If you haven't heard Rammstein, they sound nothing like Chicago (and are clever enough to name each album instead of just calling them Rammstein 1, 2, 3, etc.). The music editor from the BBC.com website said "the guitars sound like vacuum cleaners on crack." Spot on, I say.

I have no idea what these guys are saying, as I don't speak a word of German. But I drive a German car and that's good enough for me. For all I know, they are saying "I hate you and I want to rip your eye balls out of their sockets and feed them to your dog!"

Translation anomalies aside, this album really rocks and is extremely well recorded. The guitars have a really fat sound and the bass is very powerful but not boomy; the typical German sense of precision. Every cut is great and is sure to annoy anyone you know who thinks this kind of thing is offensive, especially at high volume. I was going to ask a couple of my German friends to translate some of the lyrics for me, but why spoil a good thing?

The Red Hot Chili Peppers – STADIUM ARCADIU

This one is very interesting because everyone from our music editor Norwood Brown (age 54) to JD's daughter (age 12) has been saying, "have you heard the new Chili Peppers Album? It's GREAT!" So I hopped in the Tii and ran out to Target to buy it. At the time of this article, **Stadium Arcadium** has not been out for a full week yet, so not sure where it is going to enter the chart.

Though the Prince album has fallen beneath the current Kids Bop CD this week, Tool and Pearl Jam hold the number one and two spots on the Billboard chart, so there is hope for those of us that still like to bang our heads.



Produced by Rick Rubin, this could very well be the ultimate Chili Peppers Album. I thought the boys were just a bit off their game with **Californication**, but this record is right on the money. **Stadium Arcadium** is really groovy to listen to and you can really see the maturity of the band. However, what the music gods giveth, they also taketh away. Now that these guys are rich and older, they have lost something. No disrespect to Flea and co., Bruce Springsteen, Elvis Costello and countless others that I have followed for years succumb to the same curse we call maturity. (It's happened to me too, but I'm not rolling in the dough.)

While this two CD set is flawlessly played, recorded and produced (and SH did the mastering on the LP version coming out soon), it lacks the energy that earlier Chili Peppers music had in spades. For me, they are way too chilled out on this record. I never thought of the Red Hot Chili Peppers as a band I would sit on the couch with my girlfriend and drink wine with.

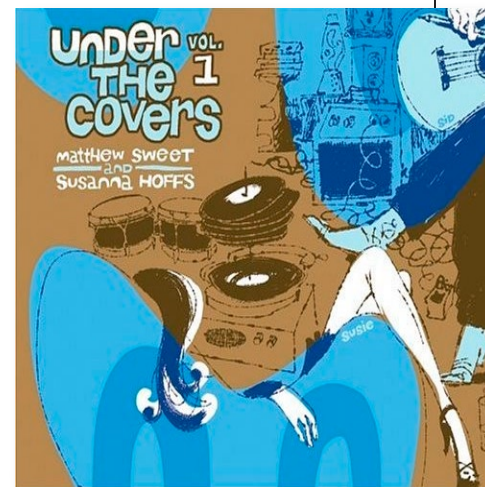
What happened to the guys that got up on stage only wearing gym socks on their wieners, screaming, "Gotta get it, put it in ya?" That's the band I want back.

Matthew Sweet and Susanna Hoffs – UNDER THE COVERS VOL. 1

Yes, you heard right two paragraphs ago, girlfriend. That means a little less Judas Priest around the house and a bit more female-friendly music. Don't get me wrong, I was NEVER a Bangles (or Go-Gos) fan, but I always thought Matthew Sweet was the next Todd Rundgren, so this one piqued my interest right away. Again, it was intro priced at \$10.99 (we're shopping at Target, right?) so I figured this one would win some brownie points at dinner.

Containing a mix of cool tunes from the '60s, this ended up being more of a Susanna Hoffs album with Matthew Sweet as a supporting player, so it wasn't really my cup of tea. Don't get me wrong, this duo's rendition of *Monday, Monday* and *Cinnamon Girl* were pretty good, but *The Kids Are Alright* just doesn't sound good done by anyone but The Who. It's like hearing a crappy bar band try to play Pink Floyd or Led Zeppelin, it just goes awry.

This one is the CD equivalent to a chick flick. ●



EDITOR'S NOTE:

If you have been following TONE for a while now, you know I really liked the Running Springs power conditioners, and since have bought a few of them for my studio as well as the other guys on the review staff. Running Springs Designer Dan Babineau echoed the mail we have been getting about offering a classical column, and in his typical badger-like manner asked,

“So, why DON’T you guys have a classical music column?”

While I was trying to skate around the issue, as we had not found the perfect person yet, I started doing a rough count of all the classical albums Dan owns (he has about 8,000 of them, all over his house in various places), and then asked,

“well, why don’t YOU write it?”

He was hesitant at first, but I assure you he is the perfect person for the job. Not only does Dan have a huge record collection, he is a professional woodwind player to boot. To top it off, when I went to his house to give his system a listen, I was impressed with what I heard. Matter of fact, he had one of the best sounding systems I have ever heard in someone’s home.

What impressed me the most about Dan, though, was his depth of knowledge and the fact that he was willing to share it. The main reason I never picked up classical music was the snob factor. When I asked people I knew to turn me on to classical, they just sneered and said “you listen to rock & roll, this will be out of your league.” But Dan said “Hey, if you like Metallica, you’ll love Shostakovich!” And I did. For that matter, I liked all the stuff he played that day. However, he still was somewhat reticent about taking on the assignment.

But, I’m a badger too, so with a little prodding, we now have our classical guy. I hope you enjoy what he has to tell us.

— Jeff Dorgay



Classical Music A to Z

— Dan Babineau

Passion can get you into some interesting places. I have been passionate about a few things most of my life.

One of the first that ultimately consumed me was the bicycle. I remember the joy of getting my first good 20-inch Schwinn. On my maiden voyage, I rode my brand new bike into a rather large oak tree, and have been possessed ever since. At one point this passion landed me in Italy racing for a very successful pro team – Bianchi. This passion also gave me a Yugoslavian roommate who mumbled in Croatian all night and did not find the benefits of a shower all that important.

I was very passionate about a Dutch woman I met at a Christmas party in Pasadena, years after leaving the bicycle scene. She was raising money for the Pasadena Symphony and talking about how much she enjoyed the company of “classical musicians.” Without hesitation I mentioned that I was a woodwind player and had played for some fairly prestigious orchestras. Half the room lit up and my Dutch passion said, “Oh you must audition for the summer session at the Pasadena, we need good woodwind players!”

Once again, a passion had put me in an interesting place. And playing with the orchestra was fun too.

(continued)

Recently, Jeff Dorgay visited my home in Southern California. He wanted to hear my system that includes two new Conrad-Johnson pieces: the Act2 and the Premier 350. Initially, I met up with Jeff at the 2005 Rocky Mountain Audio Fest back in October, and he called me, or should I say annoyed me enough, to invite himself to dinner, then proceeded to download as many of my classical CDs as possible.

I played every kind of music imaginable at first to give him an idea of just how refined and musical Bill and Lew's latest efforts had turned out. I started out with CDs, but after a short period of time Jeff started jonesin' to hear my two analog rigs: an old Linn LP-12, Ittok arm with a Van den Hul Frog, and an SME 20/2, SME IV/vi arm and Koetsu RSP cartridge.

Let me let you in on something about Jeff: he is a very nosey guy. He asks a lot of questions, and I guess that's alright considering his current position. He started looking through my LP collection, pulled out classical titles, and asked at least two or three intelligent questions about them. He then moved over to an antique trunk in my listening room and asked: "What's in here?"

I've been collecting records for about 40 years, and that antique trunk holds my ultimate favorites. So I responded: "Get your greasy finger out of that trunk or I'll f.... kill you!"

Then Jeff said, "So needless to say, I guess you're passionate about classical music." "Yes", was my only reply, and I proceeded to play some of my favorite classical LPs long into the night.

I always get the same response whenever someone comes over to listen to my system: "I never knew classical musical could be this good." It's boring at this point because it happens all too frequently.



First and foremost, this column is not going to be music appreciation 101.

Classical music has been misrepresented probably since its inception hundreds of years ago. It was originally composed for the rich, and to appease God Almighty. This persistent snobbery has unfortunately carried through to the point where people have become afraid to listen to it. Certain things in life really bother me, and this high-brow B.S. is very near the top.

DECISION TO WRITE

So once again, passion has landed me in an interesting place: here with you talking about classical music. A few days after Jeff returned to Washington, he got a brainstorm: why not have this crazy engineer with all those classical records write a column for TONEAudio?

My initial response was, "absolutely not!" When am I going to find time to write some column!?" But then I started to read the magazine, and was privy to some of the initial feedback from a large cross-section of the English-speaking world. People liked the format. They liked the photography. And many readers

had requested a column on, you guessed it, classical music.

So, nothing to it, right? Just write about one of my passions every other month, a couple of thousand words, etc. Not until I set some ground rules and parameters.

THE RULES

First and foremost, this column is not going to be music appreciation 101. I will occasionally mention a few good references on that have enlightened me through the years, but I'm not interested in chronological order. Think free-form. I'm going right through the middle of this genre and working my way out.

Second, I will not be held responsible for mundane details, slightly inaccurate dates, or other mindless criticism of my interpretation of this wonderful form of music. If it is your wont to pick the fly shit out of the pepper, you might not like it here. But if you want to read and participate in one of man's (and woman's) greatest successes, then stay tuned – it's a wild ride.

Third, I like all kinds of music, not just classical. So don't put me down as one of those people stuck in the past, because when it comes to music, it's all good.

And, by the way, the term classical music will be used loosely to designate music that involves the instruments that make up a common orchestra, from violin to triangle, and will include saxophone and quite possibly something that requires electricity to get up and running.

Another aside, I know the majority people out there already enjoy classical music. I'm positive of this because all those suits on Madison Ave. would not insist on putting classical musical in their ads unless they were effective in selling you anything from chewing gum to BMWs. Then there is

(continued)

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It's a pleasure!

Hollywood, which uses and abuses the classical genre to the point of excess.

Fourth, there will be no real parameters except my focus on the many forms of classical music. I'm going to use every reference I can to get you hooked.

Have you noticed lately that some of the rock stars from the past are writing and using more classical music in their work?

Paul McCartney is "Working Classical" with chamber pieces and the like, Roger Waters of Pink Floyd wrote an opera, and Pete Townsend is always sticking it in his stuff. And don't forget "Tommy" or better "Quadrophonia."

All the cool jazz players have employed classical music at one time or another as well, from Miles to Bill Friesel. What do you think about B.B. King and the London Philharmonic? I wonder if they tuned around Lucille? Some of Frank's best pieces came together specifically because of the classical arrangements that let his golden voice shine through. My point here that is it's everywhere and we're going to find it and enjoy it once and for all!

OH, AND ONE MORE THING:

In the beginning, I'm not going to be overly concerned with providing you with the best recording, performance, or medium, be it: LP, CD, SACD, or DVD-A. Let's get into the music and work backwards to have the maximum amount of sheer entertainment. *(continued)*



CANS & BRAHMS

"It's YES. It's Rick Wakeman!"

"No, it is Johannes Brahms, and you like it and you've lost again."

I still remember a wager I made with one of my college roommates who, on a regular basis, told me how much he hated classical music. The problem was, I could hear him in the shower humming sections of Brahms Fourth Symphony, specifically the 3rd movement. Wakeman and the recording engineers did a fine job of sticking this little ditty in the middle of what I consider to be one of YES' finest records. I have no idea how it's supposed to fit into the rest of the record, which seems very much like psychedelic fusion, but alas it's there.

Most of the music of Yes possess a bold, melancholy moodiness that draws you in and keeps you intent. So does the music of Johannes Brahms.

I play Brahms when I'm trying to make sense of it all...

Brahms was born in a brothel, and later in life frequented the places of his birth. Historians claimed he never found true love in his life. He was taken by Robert Schumann's wife for a time, but in the end put all of his passion into his music.

All four of the Brahms symphonies are masterpieces in mood. The fourth is the most accessible, and probably the most played by orchestra's worldwide.

I play Brahms when I'm trying to make sense of it all – life, why I exist, and what my place might be in the big picture. I told one of my old high school buddies to try this exercise and he came back with one word: Shoes. He said, "I did what you told me, I relaxed and listened, and then I thought of a unique way of selling shoes." And he did get into the shoe industry, and a large group of guys who ride skateboards are glad he did. This shoe guy is now very wealthy and he owes me big!

ROSSINI & MOZART

In their time, both of these guys must have been a blast to be around. The music of both Rossini and Mozart is frequently played for pre-schoolers to keep them smiling, and to take their minds off of their impending doom when their moms or dads leave the daycare facility. There much to be said about the effect of classical music on children.

Let's face it, both Rossini and Mozart were beyond what we call genesis, and this is the reason their music still brings us to life hundreds of years after their deaths.

How many Dire Straits songs do you think will be around in 200 years? How many rap songs do you think will be hummed in the shower in 25 years?

The classical music available to us today is capable of transcending time. There is a good reason it is still with us, and the answer is probably beyond our comprehension. The people who composed a great deal of this

(continued)

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music were as close as we will come to divine intervention. They were not always saints; Mozart apparently was the life of any party at the time. He died penniless at 35, and was buried in an unmarked grave. But he gave us a gift that has brought even the sickest human beings back to life.

Play Symphony #40, or what has come to be known as the Jupiter, Symphony #41. All that Mozart learned and created can be found in these two symphonies: organized to perfection, powerfully understated, and a complete celebration of life.



I bring Gioacchino Rossini into the mix purely because, generally speaking, his music is fun. Being a woodwind player can be an interesting experience; there always seems to be a kind of underlying jealousy between the woodwind section and the strings. String players can get rather snobby if given the opportunity. But when they start playing some of Rossini's string sonatas, even the stodgiest bassoonist begins smiling ear to ear. And Rossini did not leave out the bassoon in his many overtures and sonatas, not to mention a nice bassoon concerto I still can't get enough of.

(continued)

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PERIOD IN HISTORY		PROMINENT COMPOSERS
Medieval Era (in years):	476-1400	Phillippe de Vitry, Johannes de Muris
Renaissance Era:	1400-1600	G. Palestrina, Th. Tallis, Wm. Byrd
Baroque Era:	1600-1760	J.S. Bach, Handel, Vivaldi, Monteverdi
Classical Era:	1730-1820	Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven
Romantic Era:	1815-1910	Schubert, Mendelssohn, Liszt, Brahms
20th Century Era:	1900-2000	Bartok, Richard Strauss, Elgar, Bridge, Debussy, Ravel, Rachmaninoff, Gershwin, Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Britten, Nielsen, Vaughan Williams, Copeland, Barber, Piston, Bax, Holst, Arnold, Bernard Hermann, Korngold, Elmer Bernstein etc.
Contemporary Era:	Now	Pierre Boulez, Phillip Glass

Yes, he wrote operas, and they are fun to listen to. Don't worry about the fact that they are sung in Italian, just listen and get happy. And if you must know what's going on, get the libretto. The stories are always similar: there is a tragedy, some passion, but all in all it's one joyous time after another.

Try out the Barber of Seville, then merge into some of the other overtures. It's perfectly okay to listen to the William Tell, but there are so many other fun pieces. How about La fazza lada – The Thieving Magpie, or the beautiful Cinderella? I'd like to meet this guy and find out what made life so down-right hysterical.

A BRIEF HISTORY LESSON

From this little breakdown by era, you can see where my heart lies. Not to say that we won't explore something from all of the eras. Who could pass up Beethoven or Mozart, and wait until we get into Haydn, the father of symphonic composition.

The Romantic period is amazing and it

sets the stage for 20th Century composers and beyond. And as for the Baroque, let's face it, there is a lot more to Vivaldi than the Four Seasons. And don't forget Telemann, Corelli, Scarlatti, Couperin, or Rameau!

You want passion, look to Bach! You could probably spend the greater part of your adult life and never get through all of his music. And here is the kicker: the music that we associate with Bach is only a small portion of what he really composed. Manuscripts have a tendency of getting misplaced or destroyed when they are kept for hundreds of years.

This ability to lose manuscripts is one of the spoils of the many wars that took place over the last 500 years, right up to the present, with manuscripts blown up in what once was Yugoslavia, Hungary, and the Middle East. Please don't mention the bombing that took place during World Wars 1 and 2. But all of these wars brought out something positive, namely classical music. From Beethoven

to Ralph Vaughan Williams and beyond, classical composers wrote music to attempt to make sense out of absolute madness.

Listen to Benjamin Britten's violin concerto and tell me if you can't feel the pain and anguish that World War 2 brought into everyone's soul at the time. Some composers simulated battle in their pieces; Beethoven's Eroica, Wagner's many operas, Tchaikovsky's 1812 or better yet, the Shostakovich 8th Symphony that sounds like storm troopers are stomping through your music room.

And all of these eras interrelate. Stravinsky went way back to Medieval and Renaissance music for his inspiration. As did Ravel, working in the style of Francis Couperin for one of his most famous works.

In each case, we can feel the passion these men and women put into their work and their lives. All we have to do is give it a chance, sit down, relax and put aside preconceived notions of what used to be called long-hair music. *(continued)*

The Romantic period is amazing and it sets the stage for 20th Century composers and beyond.

Anthony
Burgess &
Stanley Kubrick
had it right in
A Clockwork
Orange: “Come
with uncle,
you’ll hear
angel trumpets
and devil
trombones.”



LOOKING AHEAD

Next issue I'd like to jump right in and give you a list of what I consider to be the essential 100 pieces of classical music.

I'm not going to list specific recordings at first. I just want to give you an overview of how good it can really get. So no matter if you download someone else's collection, (like our infamous publisher), buy used records, or purchase the latest recordings online, we are going to have some fun.

Your assignment for next time is to go out and see a live classical performance. It doesn't matter what it is: chamber music at your favorite restaurant, a small string ensemble at your place of worship, or a full-blown orchestra debuting Esa Pekka Salonen's newest work.

My intent here is simple: no matter what the gurus at some of these high-end audio companies tell you, you will never experi-

**You will never experience
the real thrill of classical
music until you
experience it live.**

ence the real thrill of classical music until you experience it live. Sorry guys, that's the way it is. Don't get me wrong,

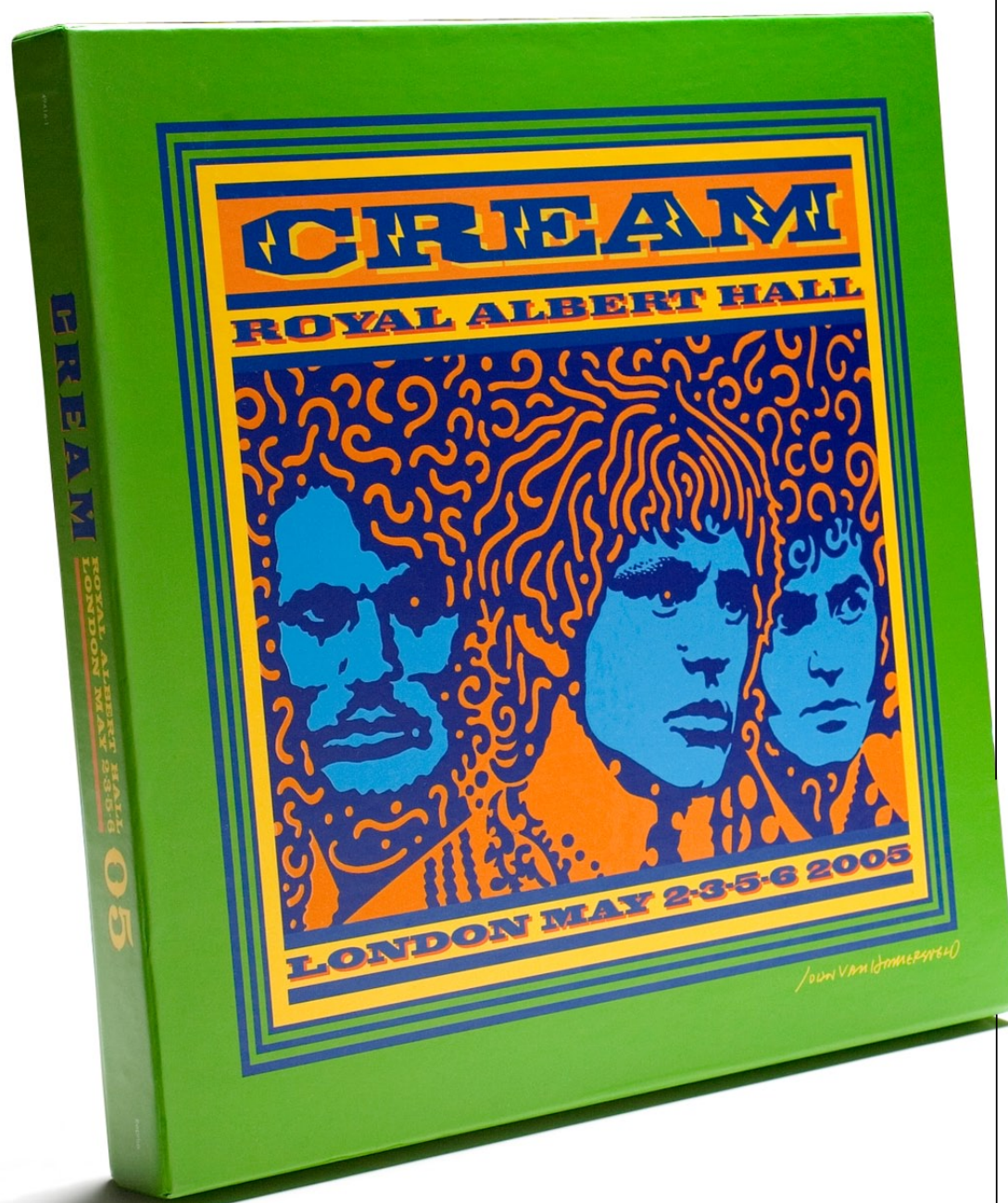
I could not live without a half-way decent hi-fi system. There is nothing like stopping Herbert von Karajan about half-way through Beethoven's Symphony #6 to compare his rendition with Otto Klemperer's. But oh to be in the concert hall when they performed this incredible pastoral piece!

My goal is to expose you to as much classical music as possible. ●

Audiophile Discs

— Jeff Dorgay

Here's a good collection of a few current things as well as an old favorite of mine. Perhaps even a few of you will remember back when Mobile Fidelity was known for their records of trains! We aren't going quite that far back, but hopefully there is something all of you might appreciate. I've been spinning a lot of records lately, so most of the goodies are LP this time.



CREAM AT ROYAL ALBERT HALL

Reprise LP

In recent years, we have fortunately seen a lot more current music getting released in small quantities on vinyl, but there's something in the wind. This one is a three record box set, ½ speed mastered by Stan Ricker, no less!

Even if you were lucky enough to be in the audience for this one, if you were a Cream fan this is worth owning. The box itself is a real work of art, with thick, dimensional printing that has a very trippy '60s/Warhol feel to it. They even put a 12x12 square of big bubble wrap inside to take up the space inside the box to keep the records flat.

I watched the DVD of the performance with music editor NB (we contemplated going to London for this, but our families weren't having it) and another good friend of mine that is a drummer and we were amazed that these guys still play that well considering Ginger Baker is our Dads' age! Granted, they are a little slower than they were back in the '60s, but these guys still rock. You will either rejoice or cringe over two versions of *Sleepy Time*, *Time* (sorry, I still think it's one of the most insipid rock songs ever written...) but the rest of the tunes chosen for the set list are great.

Cool packaging aside, this record sounds fantastic! **Mr. Ricker nailed this one; it is nice and smooth, with a big, open sound that has a lot of weight and punch.** If you're a big Clapton fan, get some Depends before you sit down to listen to this one, because you're gonna mess yourself.

(continued)

Donald Fagen-
MORPH THE CAT
 Reprise LP

Ok, I know Steve Hoffman writes for us, and I'm a huge fan of his work, but this one is out of the park, even for Steve. The bad news is everyone is going to be using this for a demo disc, so listen to it, enjoy it for a short time on your system and put it away for a few years, because I'll bet by the end of CES next year you will be tired of hearing it.

But for now, it's great! The recording is flawless, and produced in a 2-LP format, so each side only has two or three songs on it for maximum sound quality. The Cream record was done this way too and it really makes for dynamic LP sound. If all of my records sounded this good, I'd be a happy guy.

Some of you might complain that this record musically is too similar to the last two Steely Dan albums (especially Everything Must Go), however I still enjoy a good chocolate shake or a really good pizza. **That's what Morph the Cat is, comfort food. It doesn't break any musical ground, but it doesn't disappoint either.** It's what you would expect from Donald Fagen/Steely Dan; some catchy situational pop tunes mixed with outstanding musicianship, produced to perfection.
(continued)

WELCOME HOME



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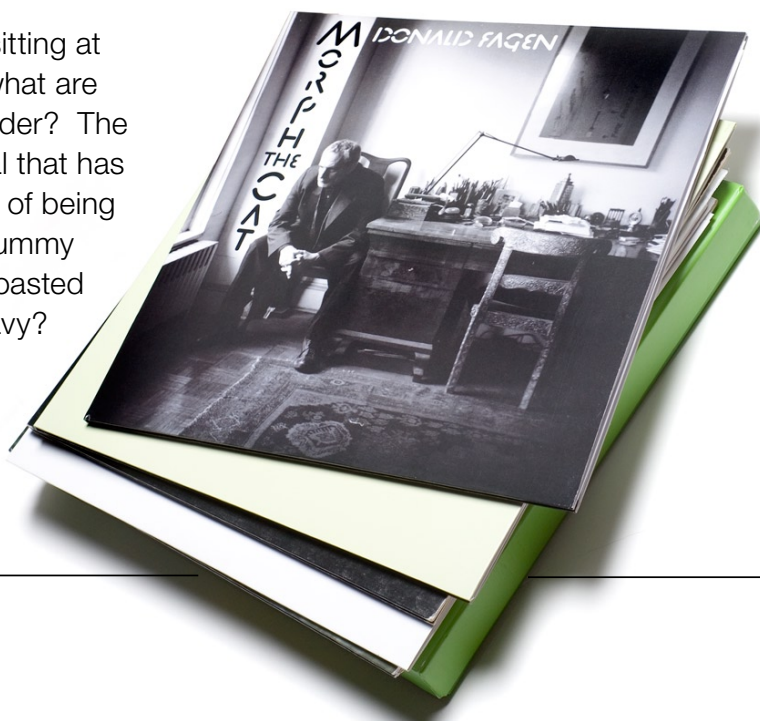
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FOCAL
 the Spirit of Sound

So, you're sitting at the table and what are you going to order? The obscure special that has a good chance of being lousy, or that yummy meatloaf with roasted carrots and gravy? I thought so.



Aimee Mann – **BACHELOR NO. 2**

Mobile Fidelity LP

Yes, I know we reviewed this on SACD in issue 1, but the LP has been promised for about two years now and it's finally out. If you haven't purchased this one on SACD yet, hold out for the LP. As great of a job as the folks at MoFi did on the disc, the LP is much smoother and open, with a more relaxed presentation.

Where the LP version really shines is in all the little nuances that make up an Aimee Mann record. She tends to like a lot of little

quiet sounds, some ambient, some electronic. The LP is much more dimensional, both front to rear as well as being much wider than the SACD. I noticed the ability to hear a lot more of the layering in the vocals as well. I guess the whole damn thing just offers up a lot more than the already quite good SACD.

If you are an Aimee Mann fan, this is a must have.



Dave Grusin – **DISCOVERED AGAIN!**

Sheffield Labs LP

This was where the audiophile record craze started for me. Released in 1976, I believe this record was also the recording debut of then unknown jazz guitarist, Lee Ritenour.

I was smart enough to buy two copies of this back then. One to stay pristine and one to play on my then crappy Technics direct drive table with a Stanton 681EEE. (No, I never put a weight on the tonearm!!) Because of the dynamic nature of this record, nothing I had in my early stereo days would track it, so the original got pretty worn.

While most of the artists that produced direct-to-disc albums felt that because they had to do a whole side in one take while the cutter head was going, they couldn't give the performances 100% of their energy in fear of making a mistake (Grusin himself later commented similarly on this recording), the process made for such a great sounding record. **Discovered Again!** has some of the cleanest sounding piano and vibes I have ever heard.

Thanks to Grusin and crew being the consummate professionals, this disc is fantastic to listen to and every cut is great stuff. You can still buy it on JVC 24 bit XRCB for about 35 bucks if you can find it, but some used record stores still have LP copies laying around for not too much. Beware buying the second run editions that were made from the backup master tape. These do not sound anywhere near as dynamic. Get the real deal, pictured here.





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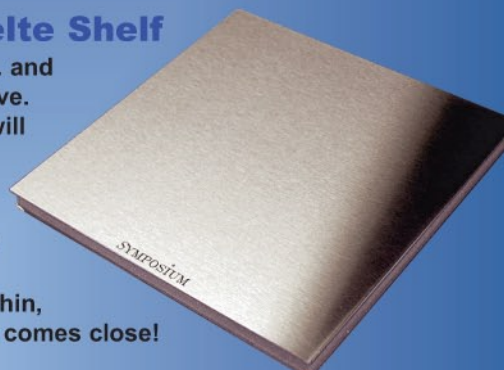
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Blood, Sweat and Tears – BLOOD, SWEAT AND TEARS Mobile Fidelity SACD

Back in the day, there was one Jazz/Rock band and it was Blood, Sweat and Tears, fronted by the (now) famous David Clayton Thomas. Before this record, these genres stayed pretty much apart, but BST burst on the scene winning 5 Grammy Awards and stayed on the Billboard chart for over two years and sold 10 million copies!

I can honestly say that had I not listened to BST, I probably wouldn't have been as open to Jazz, so this was a pivotal record in my collection. Going back to the original LP on Columbia was a pretty dreadful experience, and parts of this SACD are a bit flat, but overall it is much more lively sounding. The bass is very warm with a lot of weight and the vocals are very airy.

Many people think of this self-titled record as the first BST album, but it's their second. The debut BST album "Child is the Father to the Man" did not feature David Clayton-Thomas as vocalist, and the band was actually in the process of almost breaking up when he bumped into them in a Greenwich Village club.

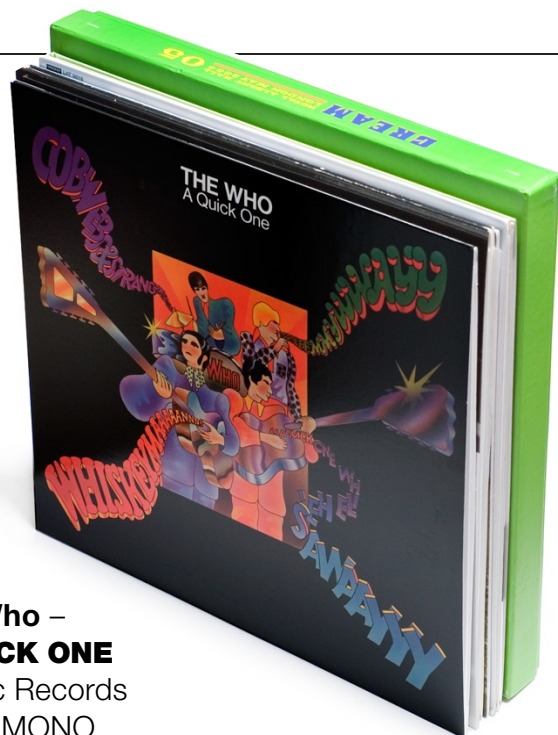
The rest is history. BST actually toured until 2004 (David Clayton-Thomas has moved back to Canada and still tours as a solo act) and they spawned a number of other Jazz influenced rock bands like Chicago, Rare Earth, Chase and The Ides of March, to name just a few.

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**The Who –
A QUICK ONE**
Classic Records
150gr. MONO

The Who's second album is back, transferred from the original mono master tape. All this cool mono stuff is making me consider getting another turntable, just for mono reproduction to really take advantage of this format, but like I said earlier, I'm obsessed.

I've read a bit on some of the message boards that these pressings don't sound as good as the original Decca's. However, when chatting with DB, who DOES have them, he said "oh yeah, they sound like crap too, that was dance hall music." Now if you are an archivist, I understand your quest for the real deal. You can buy one on eBay for about a thousand bucks or you can buy a really beat up one from your local used record store for 20-30 dollars. However, I did hear of someone who tore the stylus right off the cantilever (of their \$4000 Koetsu, no less) on an old copy of one of these that had a little glob of something that they obviously didn't see. Besides, how many times are you going to listen to *Cobwebs & Strange* anyway?

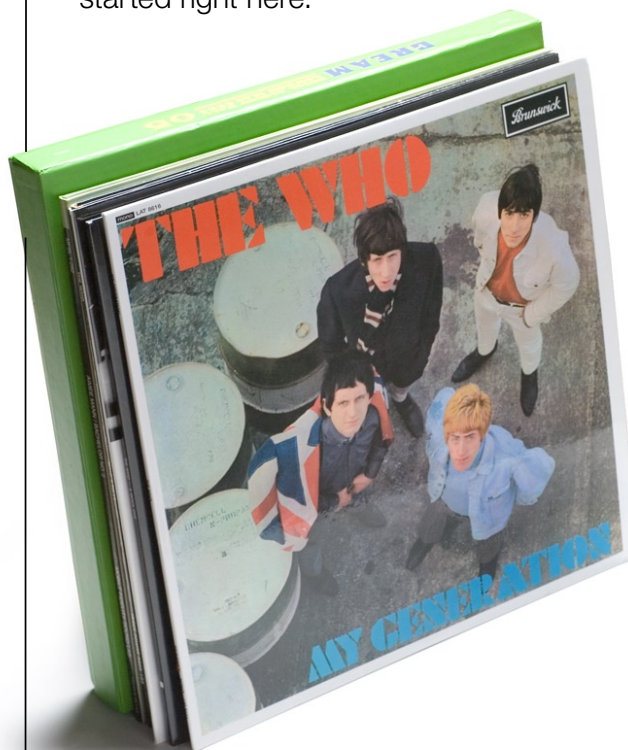
If you are getting that wacky with the checkbook, buy that \$750 Led Zeppelin set from Classic and you still have enough dough left for these Who records! What's really cool is the fact that the folks at Classic Records are producing brand new copies of these tunes at reasonable prices! They also did a very nice job on reproducing the artwork, so buy these and enjoy them (pop-free) for what they are.

The Who – MY GENERATION

Classic Records
150gr. MONO

Everything I said before applies here. **My Generation** is one of my favorite early Who records and unfortunately, I have a pretty beat up copy, so this was a great addition to my record collection. I feel that having the original mono mix is a lot of fun and adds to the presentation. Just like the early Beatles stuff, once you hear it in mono, the reprocessed, ping-pong stereo thing really isn't as enjoyable.

Again, hats off to the Classic staff for making these available. I encourage all of the turntable owning 20-somethings in our audience to go buy these for a good history lesson. You will be surprised at how much of the music you dig today started right here.



The Who – WHO'S NEXT?

Classic Records
150gr. STEREO

This one I DO have an original copy of and I can tell you that the Classic copy is a definite improvement, thanks to their modern pressing and quies vinyl. At first listen, I thought it was a touch compressed (but I just finished listening to **Morph the Cat** and damn near everything sounds a touch compressed after that), so I got out the original and it's really compressed.

I'll bet most people of my generation would put this record on their Top 50 all time most kick-ass rock records list and it was a ton of fun to listen to this one again after a few years. A few of the Who's big hits including *Won't Get Fooled Again*, which should really be the theme song for the upcoming release of the new, improved Windows operating system. (If you remember Bill G. used *Start Me Up* for Windows 95)

Further listening revealed that they did a heck of a job on this one compared to the original. My CD copy of this really sounds terrible, so fire that turntable up and relive this moment!

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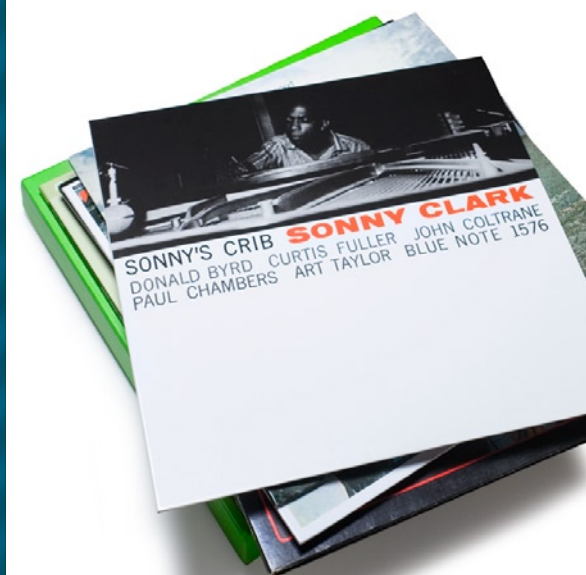


Sonny Clark – SONNY'S CRIB
 Classic Records LP

Another mono release, we end this month's discussion with jazz. Sonny Clark was another very talented musician that met his death because of his heroin addiction. During his short career on Blue Note, he recorded five albums from 1957 to 1961. The Wikipedia refers to him as an American hard bop pianist.

Featuring John Coltrane on tenor sax, it could almost be mistaken for a Coltrane album to the unknowing. (Count me in that group...) **Sonny's Crib** is definitely straight ahead jazz in the Coltrane tradition.

The most amazing thing about this record to me is just how dimensional it sounds, even though it is produced in mono. I am really getting intrigued to get a mono setup after this. The recording is very quiet and the more I listen to this one, the more dimensional it sounds! The folks at Classic did their usual outstanding job. ●



Club Mix

— Scott Tetzlaff

Add me to the list of people that shrinks from the question of “what kind of music do you like?” I’ve briefly considered making a small, but colorful chart... maybe using venn diagrams. I can tell you right now, “*Till Hell Freezes Over* is not on my list.

Since it might be easier to explain in print, here is my attempted ‘cliff note version’ of how that discussion usually goes. (sorry, the diagrams are still in development) I like a fusion of organic and electronic music. Usually, it’s kind of jazzy. Often, there’s a mixture of styles from different parts of the world.

Some repetition is ok ... but if it get’s too trance like, It’s not for me. (Not to mention possible driving hazards.)

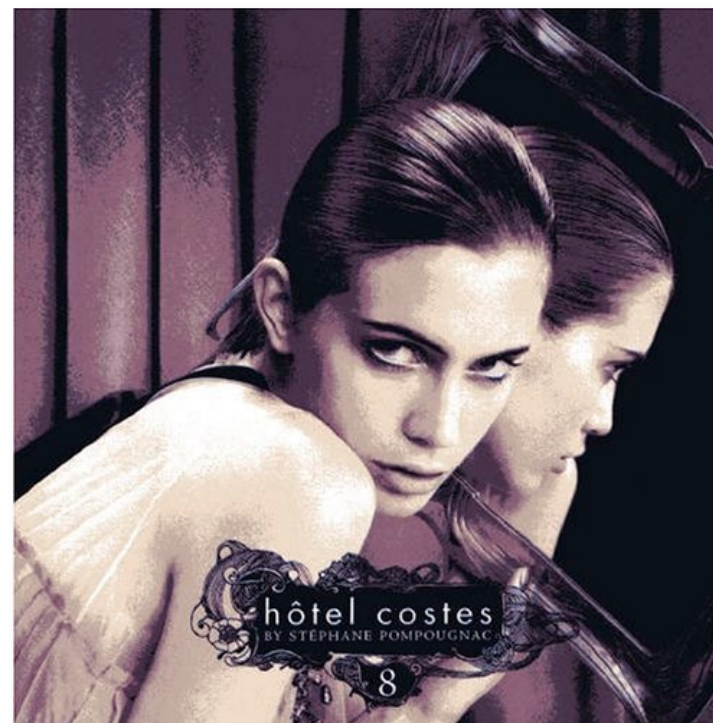
I think a really good piece of music will both relax AND energize you.

There are flavors of music I like in Jazz, Lounge, Electronic, Hip Hop, Rock, New Age, and World which can make CD shopping an interesting sort of easter egg hunt. Often the person at the checkout counter will ask me if I’m buying presents for people. Hmmmm.

I get a secret thrill when I load music into cataloging software, and the genre comes up as ‘unclassifiable’ .. I don’t know why, I just think that’s fun, it means I’m onto something.

Here’s a way to think about it: Imagine a really cool, interesting, and comfortable lounge. A place where you want to sit, have a drink and great conversation with a group of friends. This is the music that might be playing in the background – and if it’s a good night, you might dance a little, too.

OK, enough guided imagery.. here are some examples. I’m not a vinyl guy anymore, gave all my albums to JD years ago, so these are all on CD.



HOTEL COSTES 8 - Stephane Pompougnac

There is an ‘Oh, so trendy’ hotel in Paris called the Hotel Costes. For years now, the resident DJ (Stephan Pompougnac) has been pumping out compilation CDs. **They are all excellent. You should go and buy all of them right away.** If you go to any of the online music sites that offer samples, listen to as many samples as you can. The music is very diverse, and you might have a hard time getting a feel for the CD with just a limited sampling.

The common thread is a very nice music sensibility, with a tip of the hat towards the jazz folks (I’m thinking it’s a French genetic thing). I’ve yet to find anyone that did not enjoy these CDs on some level. All eight of these are amazing. Standout Tracks on Volume 8: *Dream Machine* – A twangy slow tempo from renowned DJ Mark Farina, and *Last Night*. Stephan likes to sneak at least one of his own compositions in on most of these. *All Nite (Yes Maam)* by Visti and Meyland is an interesting Nu Jazz bit that has the nostalgic feel of a teacher chatting with her class. Again, try to listen to as many tracks in sequence as you can to get the full effect.

VERVE REMIXED - 2

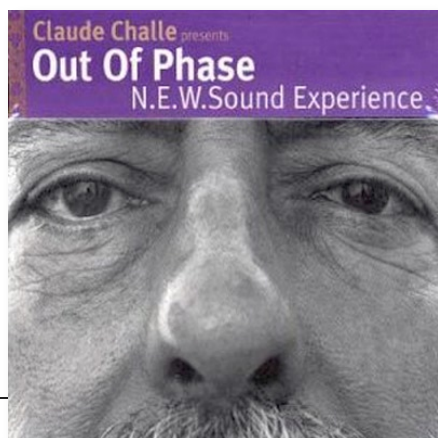
What would happen if you took the famous jazz label 'Verve', opened their vault of classic jazz masters, and gave it to the most famous and innovative DJ's in the world to remix and goof around with? Sign me up. This is some very fun stuff. Warning: if you're one of THOSE PEOPLE that can't let the original go and just enjoy a remix, you might want to avoid this.



An interesting spin off is that so many people had never heard the originals were asking, Verve issued an 'UnMixed' version of the CD so that people could compare the Mixed with the UnMixed.

Standout Tracks:

Sinnerman – Remixed by Felix da HouseCat, original song by Nina Simone. If you're not tapping your toes by the end of this song, you need to call for medical assistance. *Whatever Lola Wants* - Remixed by the electro tango group Gotan Project, original song by Sarah Vaughan. Campy fun. *Soul Sauce* – Remixed by Fila Brazillia, original song by Cal Tjader. It would be really cool if you could embed this song into a tequila bottle so it would play while you pour. (**ED. NOTE:** now there's an advertising guy for you...)



GRAND RISERVA - Dzhian and Kamien

These boys are from Vienna – and are lesser known contemporaries of Kruder and Dorfmeister (who you might already be familiar with). This is a really interesting CD that will constantly surprise you. There are all kinds of little snibbits of varied influences. You might hear a little classical, Jazz, or even Turkish music mixed in with the rest of the program.

Fortunately, the surprises are all pleasant and easy on the ears. This one will stay in your rotation for quite a while. Standout Tracks: Wow. That's a tough one. This is one of those where every track is a gem. If I had to pick....*Basmati* - jazzy upbeat female vocals. *Drophere* - a quiet, smokey café, torch-song. *Gutenmorgenduft* – A mid tempo jazz riff that has a traveling flavor about it...

OUT OF PHASE – N.E.W. Sound Experience

So, you're listening to this CD. The first cut is very 'Arabian Nights'. The second cut has a very mid east vibe going. Very ethereal. Care to venture a guess where this performing group is from? Denmark. Seriously. This group was discovered by Claude Challe, owner of the famous 'Buddha Bar' in Paris while on one of his music hunting expeditions. Standout Tracks: *Ship of the Desert*, *Orion is Watching*, *Half Set of Coordinates*. All three together would make a really compelling soundtrack for a short spy movie.



TURNTABLES ON THE HUDSON - 4

The group 'Turntables on the Hudson' is made up of a collective of DJs in the Manhattan area. Founded by Nickodemus and Mariano, frequent contributors include Osirus, Nappy G, and a handful of other local guys from the area.

This CD starts with a song that incorporates subway sounds and children on a playground. If you're from the area, you might get a little homesick. You'll also find African, Brazilian, and a whole lotta funky NYC sounds blended in to make for a real listening treat. Standout Tracks: *String Vibe* – The tempo of this song is sooo New Yorky I can't believe it. Every time I hear the chorus 'Com' on everybody, LET'S ALL GET DOWN' it just makes me laugh. (it's an inflection thing)

Okay, call me weird, here's my favorites: *Let it Ride* – fast paced, with strong percussion. And *Mariposa*. I don't care if you don't speak the language, by the second or third play through, you WILL be singing along. There's something groovy about enjoying music that you don't even really know the words for.





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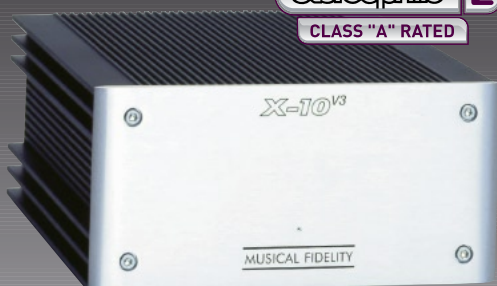
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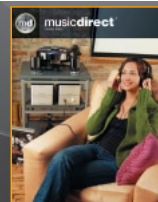


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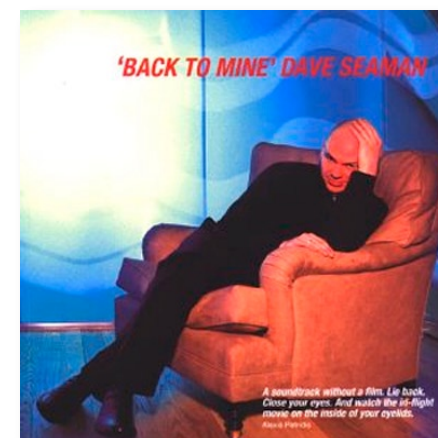
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BACK TO MINE - Dave Seaman

The **Back to Mine** series gives DJs a chance to show off their eclectic tastes. This particular one is a favorite of mine, being very cinematic work. Some people have described it as a soundtrack for a movie that doesn't exist. I find it a downtempo masterpiece that you should listen to in one sitting, just as you would watch a film. Make the time if you get your hands on this and you will have a good time, guaranteed!

The mixing of tracks is flawless and moving. From the orchestral opening, you might think you've made a mistake...keep listening – you will be amazed. Standout Tracks: (This is a tough one – I don't want to ruin any surprises. Stop reading here if that's important to you). *Baja* – by Sasha. It's ghostly and ambient. I especially like the voiceover embedded in the end of the track. *Useless* – by Depeche Mode. Remixed by Kruder and Dorfmeister. Not only is it a great remix, but having it framed by the songs before and after make it really stand out. *Gorecki* – by Lamb. A very moving love song / vocal. It will leave you going 'wow', while it lingers at the end.

Powerful stuff indeed. ●

TONE **95** NO.4 2006

Mikey Cuts Loose: **Confessions of a Vinyl Man** *(continued from page 24)*



That's the show I'd want to do: "Young music for older listeners," or something like that. Listening to young artists like Sufjan Stevens, The Arcade Fire, Spoon and so many others, helps keep you young. These thoughtful young artists give you optimism and fire that you can't get from the oldsters, except maybe for Neil Young!

TONE: For a while in my past life, I crossed paths with Jerry Seinfeld a bit. One time we were chatting and he told me that the thing he hated the most was when people repeated lines from the show to him. He said he also hated it when people tried to tell him jokes. As you probably get mobbed by your fans at the various shows, is there anything like this that really gets under your skin?

MF: I wouldn't characterize it that way. It's more like just meeting and talking with them, which is a real pleasure. When you sit in your basement and write, the feedback is kind of vague. The letters to the editor are nice (even when negative), but you get much more feeling meeting with your readers face to face. I love it when strangers come up to me at shows and feel as if they know me through my writing and begin addressing me as an old friend rather than as some "guru." I hate that.

Most of these people are jealous, and bitter and frankly paranoid. They are positively clueless about how reviewing really works, at least how it works for me.

TONE: So, we reviewers aren't criminals after all?

MF: It's a very small industry and you get to know the people on a first name basis, but for me, if you're afraid of giving someone a bad review if the product is bad, you should hang it up. I've given my share of negative reviews when deserved, and to products from companies owned by people who I consider friends at this point. We're all adults and respect comes from setting boundaries—on both sides.

My working capital is my credibility and I wouldn't trade that for a discount or a meal or a bottle of wine. I love reading the "charges" that Stereophile's reviews are based upon advertising. I remember when VPI's TNT was "Product of the Year" and on the cover of Stereophile one year, and reading those charges against us on-line. Of course VPI hadn't bought a penny's worth of advertising in Stereophile, but that didn't stop the conspiracy theorists!

TONE: Agreed. On the flip side of this record, what do you enjoy the most about interacting with all of us?

MF: I enjoy meeting anyone interested in this subject, whether they share my tastes or not. I don't enjoy interacting with some of the nasty goofballs on Audio Asylum, who think I'm a crook, or that Stereophile is "compromised" because it survives on advertising.

I'm pretty upfront about my ethics. I own the gear in my reference system. I don't have "long term manufacturer loan" deals, I think they are unethical. I get very good "accommodation prices," which are at least the equivalent of cost to manufacture or wholesale. That's up to the manufacturer of the gear I wish to own as a reference, but the amount is never a "token," amount. For instance, the exact amount I paid for the Caliburn is no one's business, but laying out that much is a stretch for me and it's something I wouldn't do unless I felt this product was absolutely amazing. I will have to pay it off over time. Same with my MAXX2s, which I have finally paid off.

One on line maniac, who absolutely positively hates me and has branded me a crook, wrote that I am "terrified" to reveal how much I paid for the Caliburn. No I'm not but here's a guy who used to be a dealer, so he got everything at 40 or 50 points percent less than retail, for sale and for his own use. That's okay, but if I get a better deal, somehow, I'm a "crook." No one goes into audio reviewing to make a financial "killing."

TONE: But you are doing ok, I'm starting to see you all over the place!

MF: I'm one of the few who makes a living doing it. Most do at on the side as a hobby. I make a living because of my output: a column and review in every issue of Stereophile, reviews on Ultimateavmag.com, and until recently a monthly column, plus I write for Hi-F News in the UK, and I get other freelance assignments, along with my website, and now my turntable set-up DVD. So yes, I do pretty well, but I work very hard.

TONE: Guilty pleasures? Anything you care to share with us that you love to listen to that's not really hip? Do you soak in the bathtub and listen to Kiss Alive 2 on a boom box (and sing along)? Ill go first, I still like REO speedwagon (early REO, not the sappy stuff that got all the airplay) and I do listen to Kiss, but usually when I'm in the garage wrenching on my cars. *(continued)*



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MF: I can't say I'm a Kiss fan, or an REO fan, or a Styx fan, or a Kansas fan or a Journey fan and I don't watch American Idol. I was always ashamed to admit being a fan of The Kingston Trio, but now that Bob Dylan has admitted to being one in his autobiography, I'm no longer in the Kingston Trio closet. I also like The Association, which is about as corny as it gets, and I love The Four Seasons. By the way, the Broadway musical about them, "Jersey Boys" is fantastic. Highly recommended!

Otherwise, my tastes run all over the musical map, but I've never been a big fan of "audiophile" music, if you know what I mean—stuff that's musically useless but well recorded. My current "guilty pleasure" is listening to and liking the James Blunt album, which is both very popular and everyone's favorite album to shit on because the song "You're Beautiful" gets so much airplay. The songs are very well crafted and not since Elton John has a singer/songwriter's debut had such a groundswell impact.

TONE: How much time do you still have to listen to live music?

MF: I have a subscription to The New York Philharmonic so I go once a month during the season, and we try to catch some live stuff when it comes to town. I've recently seen Donald Fagen and Ray Davies. Over the past few years I've seen Neil Young, Tom Petty, Sigur Ros, Dead Can Dance, Neil Innes, Lou Reed, Dave Holland, Wayne Shorter, Lyle Lovett, John Hiatt, Bonnie Raitt, and some others. It's expensive.

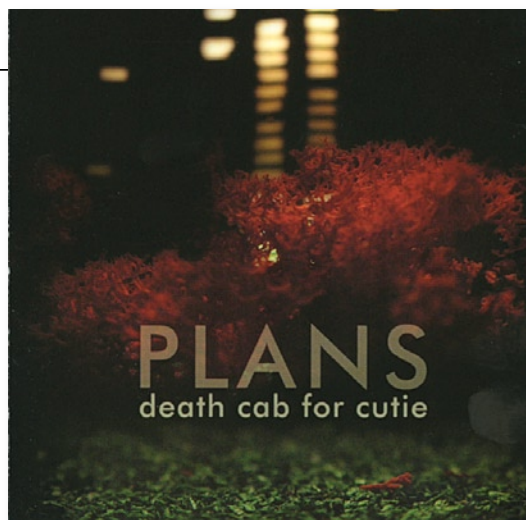
(continued)

It's amusing when a critic like Jon Pareles in *The New York Times* writes disparagingly about recorded music and tells readers it's all about live performances. Well, maybe that's true, but he gets free tickets to everything and good seats too, I'm sure. When I try to get tickets for things, I often get shut out. I tried getting tickets to see Spoon, but they were sold out so quickly I couldn't go. When I do manage to score tickets, by the time I'm finished with the price plus "service fees," a pair sets me back well over \$150.00. Add tolls, gas, parking and dinner and an evening out costs \$250. How many of those can I afford a month? I just got tickets for Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young for this summer. Mostly to see Neil, and because this could be their last time around (not in wheel chairs). Tickets were \$200 each after fees. Yikes! And people say high-end audio is expensive? At least it's still there the next morning!

TONE: Absolute favorite band, at least at this moment....

MF: That's tough: But I love Spoon, The Arcade Fire, Sigur Ros, Radiohead, Fountains of Wayne, Clap Hands Say Yeah, Air, Death Cab For Cutie, Cat Power, and The Shins. Those two Shins albums are just the greatest. And all of this stuff is on vinyl. All of these guys have a level of energy and exuberance that only happens when you're young. Yet these are all thoughtful, mature musicians.

I mean, you listen to The Arcade Fire's album, which is an uplifting set about death and the cycle of life, or Death Cab For Cutie's **Plans**, which is about commitment and love and gets into it on a level that's truly inspiring. Then there's Sufjan Stevens. He's the musical genius of our time. He writes, performs, arranges, records, mixes. He does it all with a thoughtfulness and depth that will change the way you view the world. That's what great art is about. If you buy his double LP set **Come On Feel The Illinoise** and listen carefully and are not moved, then you've



been epoxyed. Sufjan does a song about John Wayne Gacy (the guy in Chicago who dressed like a clown and murdered dozens of young boys) that will leave you shaken and stirred.

TONE: What kind of music do you find yourself seeking out these days? I notice when reading "in heavy rotation" that you seem to have a pretty diverse palette. Is there any particular chunk of music that you really love above all else?

MF: I just want it to be thoughtful and born of inspiration, not calculated and designed for commercial consumption. If it can be both thoughtful and commercial, like James Blunt's recent album, all the better. Most of the good new music is coming from the indie labels like Merge, Beggars Banquet, Matador, and even smaller and more obscure ones. I like all kinds of music and love switching among them.

TONE: What about the nemesis of high-end audio, the iPod?

MF: I love loading stuff on my iPod and putting it in "shuffle" mode. Hearing Converge's *Jane Doe* segue into Bach's *Goldberg Variations* is a real kick—as if the iPod has a musical sense of humor. **Either music is key to your life or it isn't.** If it is, you'd better be seeking out new stuff or you'll go stale and bitter in no time flat. When I talk to people my age and all I hear them whine about is how music was better when they were kids, I want to puke.

What's really cool is meeting young people who can listen to "old" music (from my youth) and love it as much as music made by their peers. When I fly, if I'm sitting next to a kid with an iPod, I always offer to switch so I can hear what they're into. One young girl, maybe 15, had Miles Davis, Kelly Clarkson, Nat King Cole, John Coltrane, and Christina Aguilera!!!!

TONE: I've never met a musician with a great stereo system. Have you?

MF: Well there are some. I mean he's not a musician, but the producer Rick Rubin is a really dedicated audiophile (you can read an interview with him I conducted on musicangle.com). I know that Paul Simon does, as does his long-time producer Roy Halee (Rockport System III Sirius, Wilson Alexandrias, etc.). Lou Reed has Wilson WATT/Puppy 7s, and is thinking of getting MAXX2s. Bassist Tony Levin is a Linn or NAIM guy, I forget which, and I know Keith Richards is really into it. (Tetras, Ed.)

I would bet Peter Gabriel has a good system, as would Donald Fagen, just judging by the care they take with their recordings. I was at a press event for Fagen's latest, **Morph the Cat** and he came in the room looked around, looked at me and gave me a nod as if he knew me. I nodded back and then buried my head in my lap because contrary to popular belief I am kind of shy and starstruck and I was sure he'd confused me with someone else that he knew, but for all I know, he reads *Stereophile* and knew who I was. At least that's how it looked.

I know Bob Dylan is big into vinyl, as was Miles Davis. I think there are probably more musicians with good systems or at least with an interest in good sound these days. The problem is, these guys are out on the road playing and probably when they get home they're burned out and don't want to listen much. *(continued)*



TONE: What is your favorite NON-hifi thing to do, or has this world completely consumed you?

MF: I enjoy watching movies, but not as much as listening to music. I have a 65" Hitachi CRT based HDTV that's fun with surround sound. Very immersive. PBS broadcast the **Cream Reunion Concert** in HD with Dolby Digital 5.1 sound and that was really enjoyable as was **The Concert For George Harrison** in HD. However Stan Ricker's vinyl mastering for the Warner Brothers 3 LP box set sounded much, much better.

I love cooking and baking too. There's very little I enjoy more than cooking a really great meal from scratch and watching people enjoying themselves eating it. Every Christmas I make a huge lasagna from scratch. I make the noodles myself, I make the Bolognese sauce from scratch (gizzards, livers, necks, etc.), and I make enough to fill a huge All-Clad roasting pan. It's the best you ever tasted, I guarantee. And it takes two days to make. I enjoy every minute of it. I'm pretty good at Italian, Chinese, Thai, Tex-Mex and Indian.

TONE: Glad to hear that you are a fellow food-boy. What about your fitness regimen?

MF: The other thing I really enjoy is working out in the gym. I mean it. I've been really into it for the past three years and I've lost 25 or so pounds. I'm in better shape at my advanced age than I was when I was 17. I know that because when I went back to Cornell last month to lecture on audio and vinyl, I found it easier to walk up the hill than I did when I was 18! I'm back to a 32" waist, I run a few miles every other day too and I have no aches or pains. I've been taking Pilates classes too; getting all stretched out is such a relaxing feeling after you bust your balls for an hour. You sleep better, and you listen better too. Highly recommended.

TONE: Shameless self-promotion time. What can we tell our readers about your turntable setup DVD? How much is it and when can we get it? Use your best Jedi technique here....

MF: I wasn't a big enough "Star Wars" fan to use any Jedi techniques but I'll try to keep it short: I've been talking about doing this for years now and I figured this past winter, if I didn't do it, and someone else did, I'd really be upset with myself, plus I didn't think anyone else could do it as well, because I'm pretty good on camera and I think I know my stuff. It's pretty funny (I showed some of it at Cornell and it got big laughs where it was supposed to), and it's informative too. The disc runs three hours (dual layer) and on it I do complete, detailed set ups of a Pro-Ject RM-5, a Rega P5 and a VPI Scoutmaster, using close ups and animated sequences. Using my material plus the instruction manual for your 'table, I think anyone can set up any turntable to perfection.

There's also an interview with Sterling Sound mastering engineer George Marino, and a "tour" of Sterling's Neumann cutting system plus a PDF file on the DVD-ROM section containing a long piece outlining all of the basics complete with graphics. By the time you read this, I will have seen the final, but I think it will turn out swell. Despite the less than entertaining subject

matter, it offers good entertainment and educational value. That's all I'll say, except that it's selling well in pre-sale at amusicdirect.com and acousticsounds.com. There will be foreign language versions coming later.

TONE: Last but not least, my buddy Steve Hoffman wants to know what you think the future of the LP reissue market is long term. Will he still have a job, or will everyone be downloading?

MF: Well this is a very serious question! There are signs both good and ominous on the horizon. For one thing, the labels need to make money any way they can at this point and at this point, encouraging vinyl is in their interest, small as the market may be. Better to make \$10,000 than zero, don't you think? And encouraging people to buy "the thing" is a good idea too. **Vinyl is a "thing" not a download.** So, what better way to exploit a catalog then to license it for vinyl reissues? So that's encouraging.

Warner Brothers, thanks to a vinyl fan in the company named Tom Biery has been issuing new and reissued material including the **Cream** box set mastered by Stan Ricker and pressed at RTI, so you know he's not messing around. The **Cream** box is expensive at around \$90 compared to the CD, yet the box's first pressing has sold out and a second is being done. So that's good news. Sure, the actual numbers are small, but that's okay. As long as it breaks even or makes money, it will continue.

On the other hand, there's some news I don't like. Diverse Records issued some wonderful titles over the past few years from Allison Kraus, Richard Thompson, Ricki Lee Jones and others, yet the owner has, from what I understand, gone back to his "day job" because he wasn't earning enough to make a living at it. *(continued)*



That's too bad because the titles were excellent as was the sound, the mastering and the pressing quality.

Pure Pleasure had a flurry of issues over the past year or so, including a spectacular sounding double LP of Stevie Ray Vaughn's **Couldn't Stand The Weather**, but that label's been kind of quiet lately too and that gives me cause for concern.

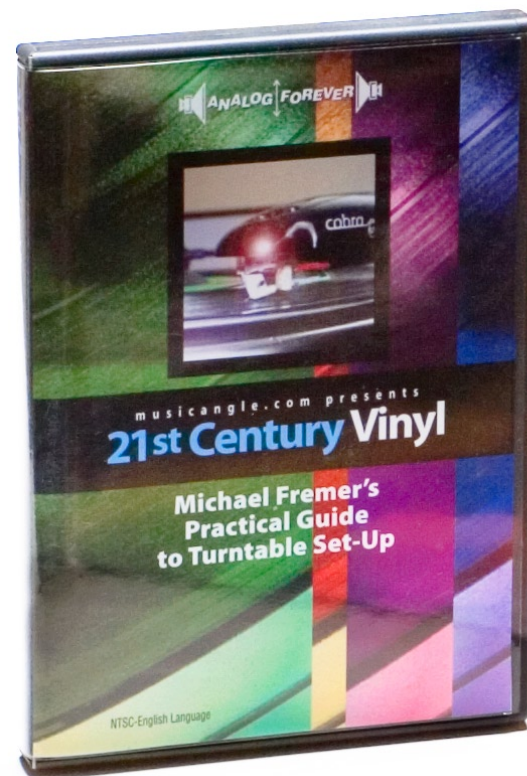
On the other hand, Classic appears to be doing well, as is Speakers Corner, which has an enormous catalog, and Acoustic Sounds' jazz at 45rpm series has been selling out, so I guess the business model and what you choose to reissue is a large part of the equation.

The amount of alternative and indie vinyl is also thriving. Go to insound.com and look around. Both Acoustic Sounds and Music Direct have been stocking some of this stuff lately as well, which is a good thing. That's how you get youngsters into both vinyl and good audio gear.

So really, while downloading is the future for the mainstream, so is consuming fast food. But if I were Bobby Flay or any other gourmet chef restaurateur, I wouldn't worry about having to close up shop because a majority were eating crap. Same with Steve Hoffman. Most people will be downloading MP3s sooner than later, but **there are enough people into gourmet audio that I wouldn't be too concerned!**

TONE: There you have it folks, darn near everything you ever wanted to know about Mikey. He's a crack up on the phone and I look forward to sharing his DVD with you as soon as we get our tech section of the TONE website up, called **The Lab**. We will use his disc to set a Rega up from scratch and let you know how it goes. I'm confident that it will be a winner.

As most of you know, you can always catch him in Stereophile, but if you want more music reviews, frequent his site at **www.musicangle.com**. And buy his DVD, so he can finish paying off that turntable! ●





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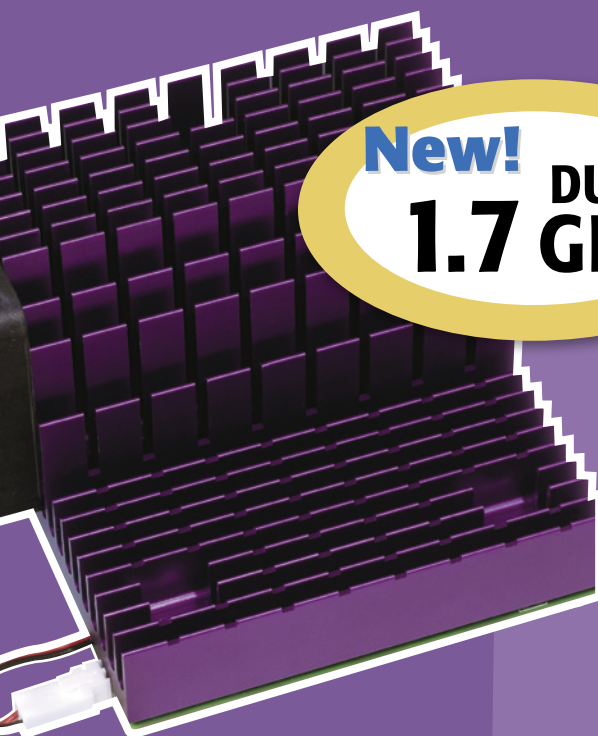
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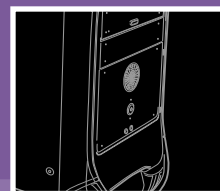
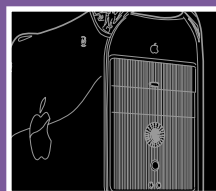
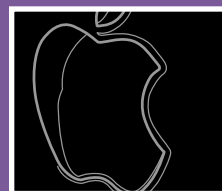
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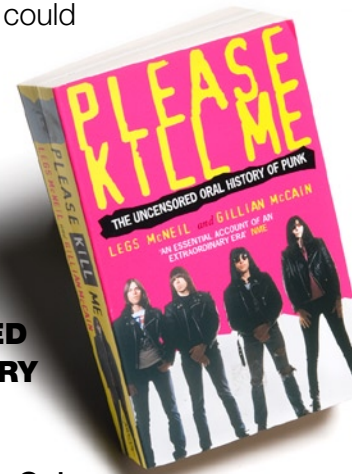
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Back in Ms. Lansing's English class, I HATED writing book reports. If it weren't enough torture to read boring books and write boring reports, she inevitably saw through our trying to b.s. our way through the report, usually resulting in a disappointing grade.

As you can well imagine, this did nothing to reinforce the "reading is FUNdamental" party line the public school system was taking in the 70s. But I WAS having fun reading in English class. I had a copy of Audio, Stereo Review or Popular Photography magazine inside MY English book. I guess it worked out ok, because Ms. Lansing became a spinster and I publish TONE.

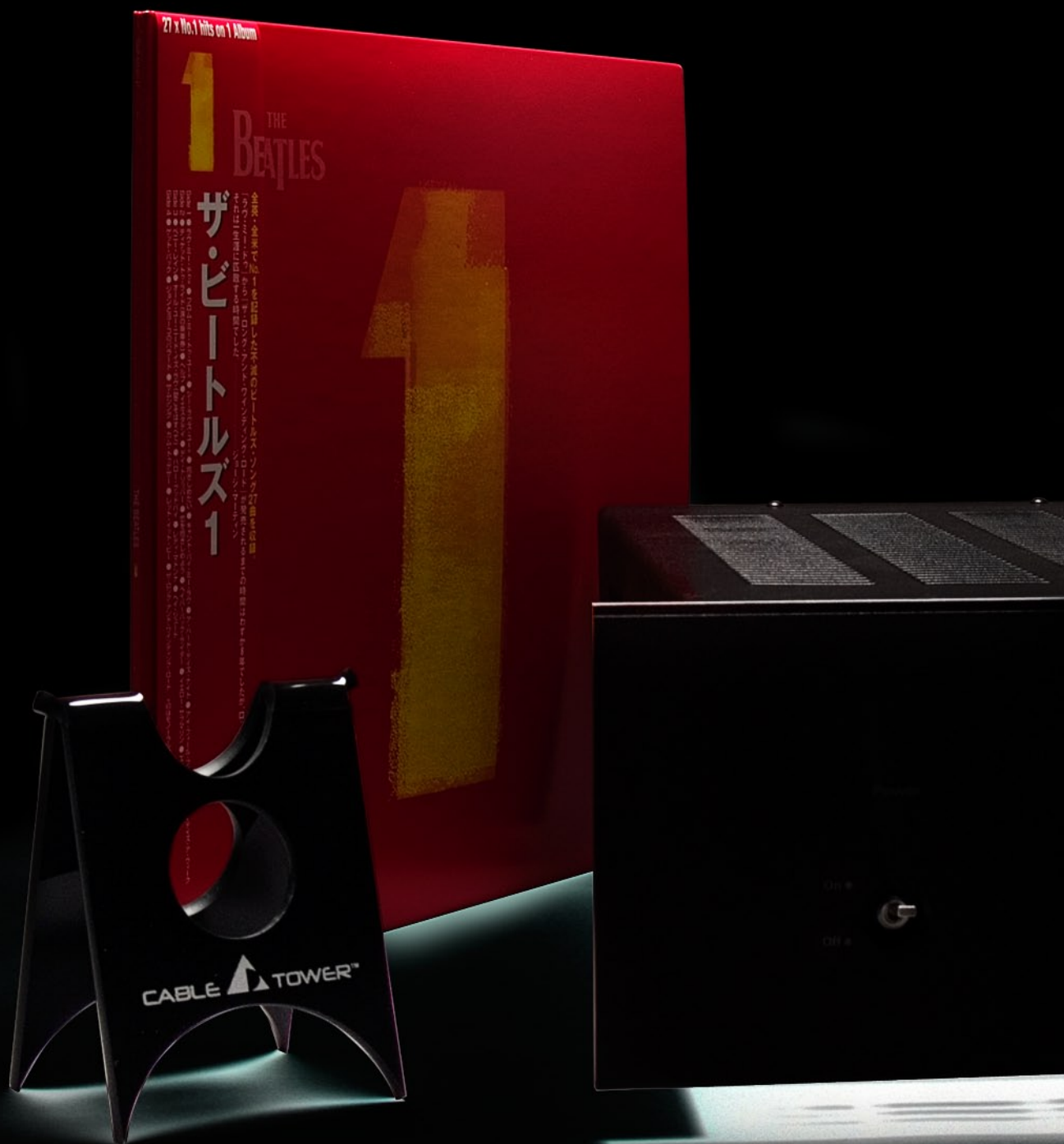
So, the assignment this month was to find a couple of fun audio books that I could share with the class.



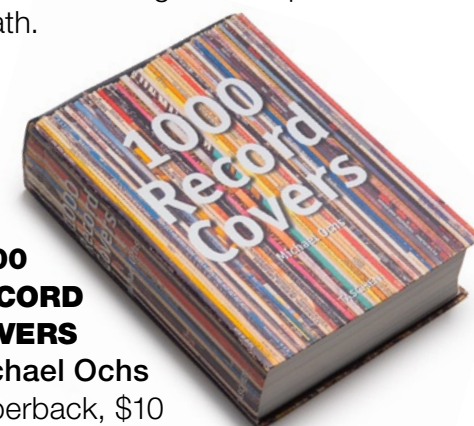
**PLEASE
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ORAL HISTORY
OF PUNK**
Legs McNeil
and Gillian McCain
Paperback, \$10

This one will never be one of Oprah's suggested books of the month, however this group of drug addicts are probably more honest about the details of their lives than a couple of the recent authors on Oprah. Hey they're punks! Fuck you if you don't like them! *(continued)*

Hardware. Software. Accessories.



Completely done in interview format, this book offers a lot of great conversation with all the pioneers of the punk scene, from the Ramones (on the cover) to Blondie and all creatures great and small inbetween. The copy on the back jacket says the book is “endlessly fascinating” and I wouldn’t go quite that far, but it is a fun book to pick up and read 30 pages here and there. Putting on the Dead Kennedys while reading is an extra mood enhancer and I guarantee you will come away from this book with a few insights if the music of this period ever interested you. It does make Lou Reed sound like a real jerk, though. Bottom line: much more fun than reading *The Grapes of Wrath*.



1000 RECORD COVERS

Michael Ochs
Paperback, \$10

Everyone on Amazon gives this one four or five stars and I concur. Other than a short introduction from Mr. Ochs, who used to have one of the most major record collections of all time, this one is all pictures of album covers, from the ‘50s to the end of the ‘90s.

While I’m just a bit too young for the ‘50s stuff (born in 58, what can I say?), I had a great time looking through everything else and seeing how many of these records I owned or almost bought. It’s always intriguing to see what someone else finds to be important enough to put

(continued)



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on their list. Makes me want to produce a “1000 more album covers.”

1000 Record Covers is a great book to throw on your coffee table because it will always be a good topic of conversation. It also makes you appreciate when we could get all of our music in a package this big and really enjoy the art. The sad news is that a few years ago, Michael had a major flood at his home and lost the majority of his collection!



**QUAD, THE
CLOSEST APPROACH**
Ken Kessler – Hardcover, \$80

Unfortunately, I got my last pair of Quads for not much more than the price of this book and as you can well imagine, I still kick myself for selling them! Regardless of whether you still do or fondly did own a pair of Quad speakers or any of their electronics, this book is fantastic. Ken Kessler did what must have been an exhausting amount of research to put this together and it tells you everything you will ever want to know about Quad.

All of the green is a little wacky, but there are a lot of great pictures and reproductions of literature and manuals to guide you on a tour of all things Quad. I wish my history books in school had been this interesting. Highly recommended. ●

Slummin'

— Jeff Dorgay

We've all been pretty busy the last couple of months, so not as much time as usual to find wacky and interesting things, but I think we came up with a few good ones regardless! Always on the receiver hunt, we have an old Heathkit as well as some good vinyl deals.



Keith Jarrett, The Sun Bear Concerts — Garage Sale, \$2

I keep searching garage sales in the hope that I'm going to find a mint Dynaco amp for Mr. O'Brien or a perfect pair of Mac 30s for me in the neighborhood of about 20 bucks. I haven't even found a crappy Stereo 70, but I did find this jewel in a big stack of Lawrence Welk albums. As you can see, the case is pretty beat up but the records inside are perfect! It was marked \$5, but I slyly told the guy "hey, no one listens to these anymore, I'll give you two bucks for them!" Score. *(continued)*



Heathkit AR-15

— Ebay, \$35 (shipping included)

When I was in high school, the AR-15 was the top of the line Heathkit receiver and if memory serves me correctly, one of these would set you back as much as a Marantz, and you still had to build the damn thing! No girlie man kit, with pre-assembled and stuffed boards, you had to solder every component to the board and then round up an oscilloscope to align the AM and FM tuner section. I think these were around 75 watts per channel and the FM section is quite good. This one's going in the garage with an old pair of AR-2ax speakers!

Miscellaneous 78s

— Local Antique Store, 50 cents each

SH says I'm not a REAL vinyl collector unless I have some 78s, so here we go. One day when our art director dragged me into an antique store, I started sniffing around. There was a whole bin full of 78s, so I got this pile of Ella Fitzgerald discs for about three bucks. To my dismay, my old Dual turntable will not play 78s, so guess what's next on the list? ●



Where to find what you have seen in **TONE**Audio.

Aperion: www.aperionaudio.com

AV123: www.av123.com

Coffin and Trout: www.coffinandtrout.com

Cardas Audio: www.cardas.com

Conrad Johnson: www.conradjohnson.com

DH labs: www.silversonic.com

Dedicated Audio: www.dedicatedaudio.com

echo audio: www.echohifi.com

Emotive Audio: www.emotiveaudio.com

essential sound products: www.essentialsound.com

JM Labs/Focal: www.audioplusservices.com

Milbert Amplifiers: www.milbert.com

modwright instruments: www.modwright.com

Music Direct: www.amusicdirect.com

Naim: www.naimusa.com

Pacific Creek: www.pacificcreek.com

Penaudio: www.penaudio.fi

Ruby Star Records: www.rubystarrecords.com

Running Springs Audio: www.runningspringsaudio.com

Symposium USA: www.symposiumusa.com

Sonnett Technologies: www.sonnettech.com

Sophia electric: www.sophiaelectric.com

TMH AUDIO: www.tmhaudio.com

Todd The Vinyl Junkie: www.toddthevinyljunkie.com

upscale audio: www.upscaleaudio.com

vh-1: www.vh1savethemusic.com

wadia: www.wadia.com

