

toneAudio.

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and digital sound.

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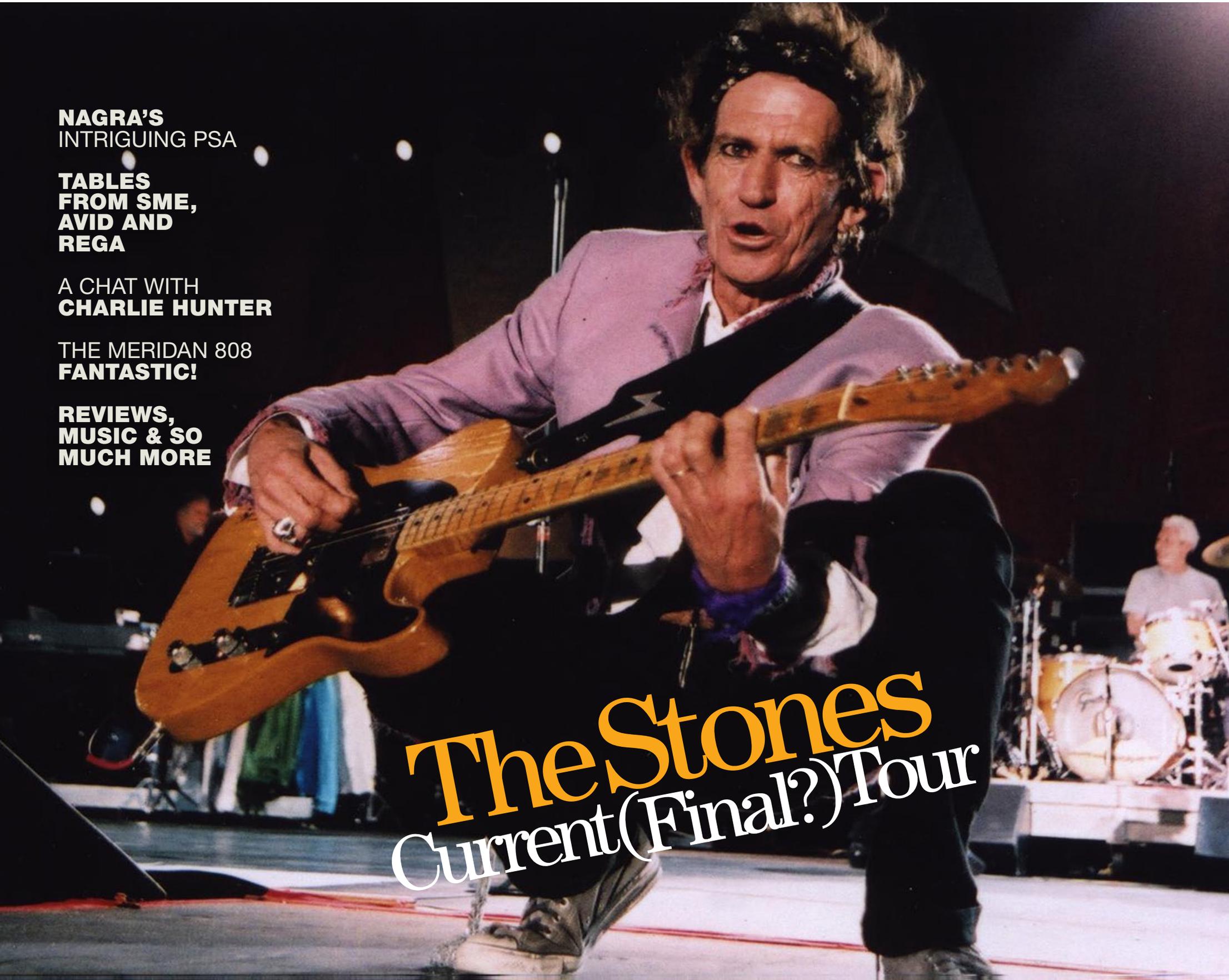
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INTRIGUING PSA**

**TABLES
FROM SME,
AVID AND
REGA**

**A CHAT WITH
CHARLIE HUNTER**

**THE MERIDAN 808
FANTASTIC!**

**REVIEWS,
MUSIC & SO
MUCH MORE**



The Stones
Current (Final?) Tour

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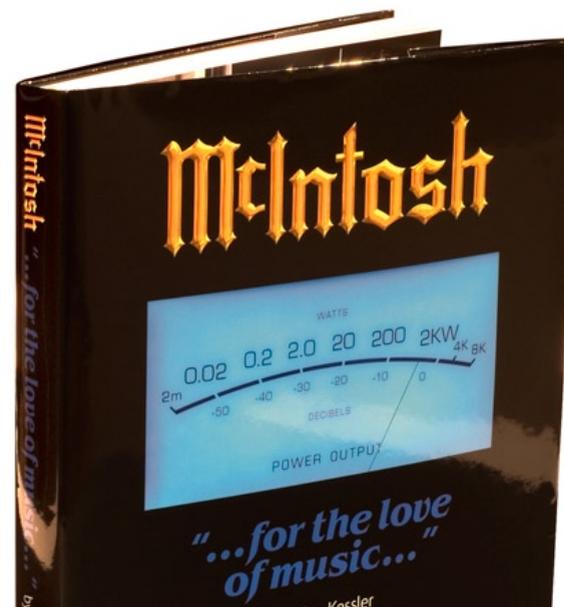
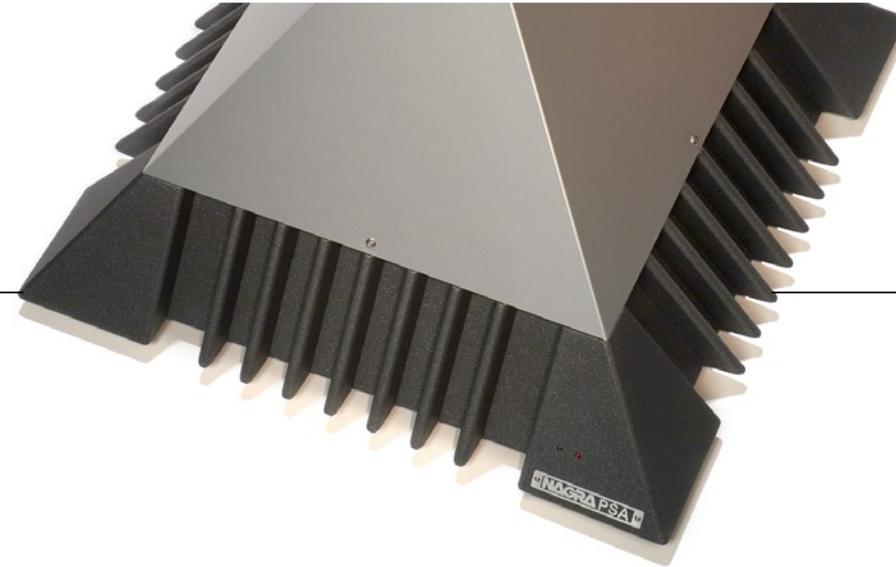
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CONTRIBUTORS

NEW IN TONE THE ISSUE



KARL LARSEN

I bumped into Karl Larsen at a gallery showing of rock & roll photography down on Sunset Boulevard last year and really admired his work. After a long chat and the opportunity to peruse a lot more of his work, I knew we would have something for him sooner or later; when the idea came up for this month's article about the Stones on tour, I knew Karl was our man, as he has been following them on tour for Rolling Stone magazine all year!

You can find out more about Karl and his work on his website: www.karllarsen.com

Many of the cool images you see there are for sale in very limited quantities. Get one of his prints now, before he becomes mega-famous!



DAVE BECKER

A native of San Diego, Dave lives in St. George, Utah with his family. Dave came to our rescue this year at CES, providing some very cool fish-eye shots. His day job is shooting corporate photography, but you can see some of his personal work at photo.net

www.photo.net/photodb/user?user_id=194983



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www.musicmillennium.com

PUBLISHER'S LETTER

It's hard having the Consumer Electronics Show so close to the holidays and a number of family birthdays (Jean and I, plus both of our Moms and Harry Pearson!!), but we made it through in one piece.



Now that the new year is upon us, if you are reading this issue, you have seen our new website, TONEAudio Online. It's been a while in coming, but we hope that you will really enjoy it and that it will keep you entertained between issues of the magazine. We will be posting monthly updates at first and our goal is to have weekly updates by summer if at all possible.

If you haven't taken the time to peruse it much yet, we will have more music, more gear reviews, some articles on setup as well as some DIY projects for you. TONEAudio Online is sole and separate content from the magazine, so we have a lot more information for you to digest in the months to come.

Another area that we are expanding our online presence is our new discussion forum, that has been graciously hosted by the **Steve Hoffman Music Forums**. As we have met a number of our readers there, it was a perfect fit. You can consider this a greatly expanded 'letters to the editor' space where we can interact with you in real time. We will be announcing new developments there, as well as discussing issues pertaining to the magazine, so please drop by and let us know what you think at www.stevhoffman.tv

While there is also a great section about gear there, my favorite part of the SHMF is the music section. These people are obsessed with music and that's what I like! I have always been able to get my most obscure questions answered there.

Speaking of music, we have a wider variety of audiophile discs this issue, heavy on the vinyl and even some DVD-As! I had a great chat with Charlie Hunter talking about his new album and his musical journey of chasing the Jazz Rabbit.

The CES show was a great time and it is always good to touch base with old friends and keep in touch with as many of you as we can. We really appreciate all of the support and kind words you have shown us this year and look forward to this year.

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

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

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DONNELLY



Ghost On The Shelf

The Phase Linear 400

Jeff Dorgay

It was sitting there staring me down on the shelf and I just had to have it...

A Phase Linear 400, looking just as good as it did back in the '70s. My next door neighbor had a 700 back in the day (and he also had a waste basket full of blown tweeters).

For me, I enjoyed the simplicity of the 400. Besides, 200 watts per channel was still crazy power back in those days and it was just before a number of other high powered solid state amplifiers from Mark Levinson, Threshold and eventually Krell would hit the market. My memory is a bit faded but I believe they were \$499 new (I seem to remember the Phase Linear 700 costing \$699...). I bought mine from a good friend who was also trading up to a 700 and for \$325 I was in pig heaven, hooking it up to a super cool Nakamichi 600 series

preamp and matching cassette deck. (remember those wedge shaped components?) Along with my trusty reel to reel, I had more VU meters than I knew what to do with, so it was all very slick indeed.

The one you see here was \$299 at Echo Audio in Portland, so I think it has stood the test of time pretty well on the depreciation front.

The biggest question was how would it sound? To go the semi vintage route, I mated it to my Conrad Johnson PV-1, which I wrote about in an earlier column. Believe it or not, the combination was very musical indeed. Other people collect the cars they grew up with, I collect the hifi I grew up with. Yes, I know I have a problem.

As good as these two sound together, I've decided to really follow the path of insanity and get both pieces restored. *(continued)*



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The PV-1 is going back to the CJ mother ship and the Phase is headed to Circle Stereo in Austin, Texas. They specialize in this kind of work, so look for a follow up column on our website when they get back. The amplifier is gorgeous with those giant VU meters and it even has the same color face plate as the CJ, so it is a great match indeed!

I've been using the whole thing along with my Sapphire XLs and Titan subwoofer with great results. I'm always amused at guests coming over with this system on in the background and they comment at how good it sounds, and then realize what they are listening to!! Just to get the complete vintage trip going, I hooked up a pair of AR-2axs and felt really nostalgic!

Granted, it doesn't have the neutrality and resolution of my reference system, but it still plays music very well and considering you can buy a nice used PV-1 and a Phase Linear 400 for about 700 dollars these days, it still sounds better than some wimpy little integrated amplifier...

The Phase Linear 400 was originally made in Lynwood, Washington (about 150 miles from where I live right now) and designed by none other than audio maverick Bob Carver. I remember when these burst on the scene and some of them burst into flames, earning them the nickname, Flame Linear, but I never had any trouble with mine and I played it LOUD.

So there you have it, an old classic purchased for a reasonable sum that still works well and looks pretty sharp to boot. Keep an eye on our website for the modifications. ●

STEVE HOFFMAN SELECTS:

FEATURE



The Venture
Excellence III
Speakers

STEVE HOFFMAN SELECTS:



In my day job I'm a mastering engineer. Because of this, I listen to music a lot (a good thing) and I love it when my 'job' becomes something more; it's a thrill. There are many ways to 'thrill-dom' for me; finding a priceless master mix of a beloved song and sharing it with you either on a compact disc, SACD or vinyl pressing, discovering music that I've never heard before or (wait for it).....discovering playback equipment that makes my job a joy.

I walk a fine line in my work; I need to listen to the TRUE SOUND of a master tape but I don't want to be denied the pleasure of audiophile playback at the same time. Most mastering engineers do their work in small cramped studios on professional playback gear but since my clients are mainly audiophile record labels, I have the honor and pleasure to actually work with top-flight audiophile grade gear in my professional life as well as my after-hours listening. In my work and for listening on my own time, I demand the BEST SOUND THAT I CAN FIND! *(continued)*

I'M A HEDGE FUND MANAGER

A FASHION DESIGNER. A LEAD SINGER.

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

Jim Ricketts of TMH Audio first told me about a speaker line that was designed and built in Belgium. He was getting a pair of Venture Speakers to use in his room at the Consumer Electronics Show and thought I might want to consider using a speaker in the Venture line in my mastering work. Eventually Jim put me in phone contact with the sole distributor of the Venture line in the United States, Mike Slaminski of Precision Audio & Video www.precisionav.com who just (luckily) happened to be local to me.

At last years CES, I was immediately impressed with the beautiful design and finish of the Venture speakers as well as the great sound I heard in their room. Mike was happy to send me a pair to use for my mastering work and the analysis began. Mike has very discerning taste, and I was happy to lend a hand helping to spread the word in the US about Venture.

Soon after, a brand new pair of Venture Excellence III loudspeakers direct from Belgium were delivered to my mastering studio. It was love at first sight for me!

TECHNOLOGY AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Venture was founded back in the 1980s by Njoo Hoo Kong who is a Chinese Belgian (better known to us by the nickname 'Didi'). His musical passion and philosophy of sound technology/reproduction inspired him to start designing his own loudspeakers in 1986. A masters degree in physics turned out to be a tremendous asset in this endeavor.

The frequency response of the Excellence III speakers is claimed to be 24-30,000 hz (without a db spec) and a sensitivity of 93 db with a 5 ohm impedance. *(continued)*

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The crossover is first rate, as I had no problem driving them with a 9 watt WAVAC SET to more than acceptable levels. Not all efficient multi-driver speakers can achieve this feat. Because of the 100 hour break-in at the factory, they only require 24 hours to really sing and I must concur that they sounded great right out of the box!

The Excellence IIIs feature one Mundorf AMT tweeter, one 7" Venture TV-7pro midrange unit and three 7" Venture VT-7 Graphite woofers per cabinet in a three-way design. Venture measures and hand picks every driver that goes in the Excellence series before final assembly.

Each speaker weighs 140 pounds each, so get some help unpacking and placing them! The beautiful cabinets are made from solid Beechwood multiplex with a composite damping sheet glued between each beech layer. Top that off with a Walnut Burl veneer finished in 16 coats of polyester high gloss lacquer and you have a beautiful speaker that you should have no problem getting in the door past your wife! Crossover networks are meticulously hand-built with point-to-point soldering to meet Didi's stringent quality control and internally wired with proprietary Venture cable.

Because they satisfy on so many levels, I've been bouncing the Ventures between my listening room and mastering room, trying to decide where they should stay!

EASE OF USE IS PARAMOUNT

I really enjoyed how easy these speakers are to setup and get into a suitable listening position; they are very forgiving of placement. After a quick and cursory positioning in the usual triangle, I fired up my Concert Fidelity electronics and let 'em rip. In my listening and mastering rooms, I used the Excellence IIIs in a biwired configuration with Kubala-Sosna Research Emotion speaker cables and FMS interconnects which proved to be an excellent match for these speakers.

One of the first things I always play is *Higher Rock* (track 13) from the Reeltime Travelers CD entitled **Livin' Reeltime, Thinkin' Old Time**. Not even waiting to warm up the tube gear I was immediately grooving to the sound. It is a big sound with full accurate bass response, a pleasing mid-range and shimmering top end.

I immediately moved on to other familiar favorites; Beatles, Donald Fagen, Chris Montez, Bill Evans Trio, and my current jazz fave (from 1956) Howard Rumsey's Lighthouse All-Stars **Music For Lighthouse Keeping** on Contemporary (OJC CD). I know that I'm on to something when it captures my interest long enough to play the whole song; I'm a twiddler and often jump from track to track if the sound doesn't really grab me. The Ventures held my interest very well; I didn't even want to get up and change the disc! This is a very good sign, folks.

Speakers must not only sound good but they have to 'wear well' with me. In other words, they can't get annoying as the weeks go by. Sometimes, things that please me in the first hour have a tendency to bug me as the hours go by. This is why it is so important to patronize your favorite dealer and get an in-home audition, especially when you are spending 50k on a pair of speakers! If we are still happy by the third day, it's a keeper. Well, it's been almost a year and I'm still very happy with the Venture speakers.

COMMAND PERFORMANCE

These speakers are very dynamic and that goes a long way towards creating the illusion of live music. They are also very coherent and for a big speaker do a fantastic job of disappearing in the room, offering up a very nifty three-dimensional soundstage that is magic to experience.

The overall balance of the Excellence III's is very neutral and I found them to be very tonally correct as well; possessing a huge sweet spot. You can walk around the room and the tonality does not shift. I can even walk down the hall to the bathroom and hear great sound!

The Venture Excellence IIIs are champions of resolution, reproducing the finest details and delicate harmonic structures effortlessly. Because these are speakers of such high quality, it goes without saying that they demand electronics of similar quality. *(continued)*



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I've run them with everything from my vintage McIntosh amps all the way up to my Concert Fidelity gear, but they really shine with the top shelf equipment.

That being said, they will not make a bad recording sound good, nor would I want them to. They accurately tell me when the music is just right, or when things are not; when things are sounding too lush or too thin, too bass heavy or etched. They tell the truth. This is crucial to my mastering work and makes for a great playback system as well.

MY KIND OF SPEAKER!

So, as you can tell, they suit my needs quite well. I have used the Venture Excellence IIIs in the remastering process of these great albums (among many others) recently:

Joni Mitchell — **Blue**
Rhino 180 gram vinyl reissue

Red Hot Chili Peppers —
Stadium Arcadium Warner Bros. Records 180 gram vinyl

Tom Petty —
Highway Companion Warner Bros. Records 180 gram vinyl

The Vince Guaraldi Trio —
A Charlie Brown Christmas Analogue Productions 45 RPM vinyl reissue

Art Pepper — **Art Peper Meets The Rhythm Section** Analogue Productions 45 RPM vinyl reissue

Last but not least, the Venture Excellence III speakers are free from listener fatigue and are still very satisfying, even after a full day listening or mastering session. I can't stress enough how important that is to my work!

If these fit in your budget, the Excellence IIIs could easily be the last speakers you need to buy. ●



Another Diamond In the Rough From South Africa

THE VALVE AUDIO EXCLAME 100 INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER — Marc Phillips

Available at Music Direct www.musicdirect.com

I LOVE INTEGRATED AMPS

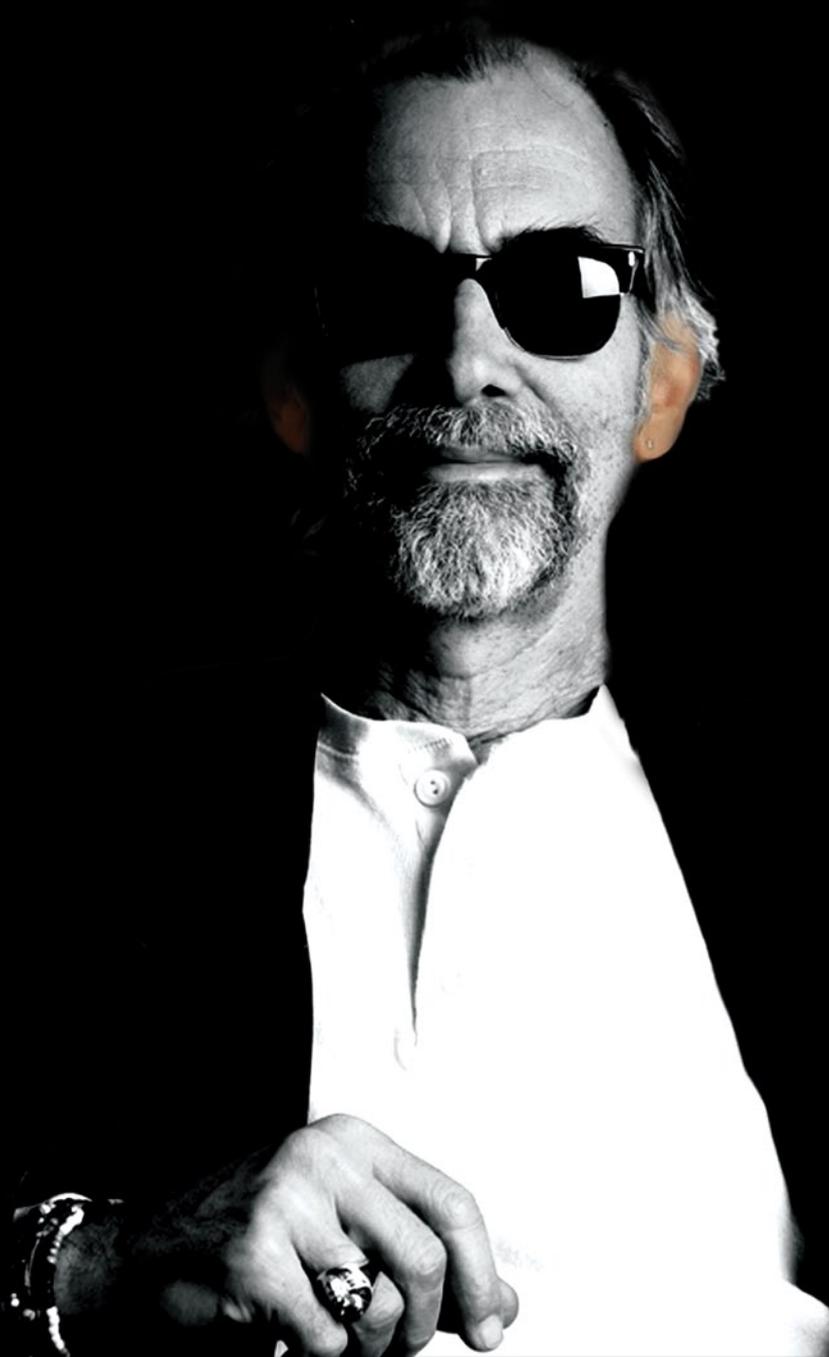
Sure, I love them for the usual reasons, such as their simplicity, their compactness, and the way they can really help to streamline an audio system. I love having to buy one less interconnect. And I love not having to explain to my non-audiophile friends what a preamplifier is. *(continued)*

"I'm a Believer."

"When everything is right, even the listener disappears. It's soulful, powerful, yet delicate and smooth. All we need now is the ears of the world. May it be so."

Rob Fraboni

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



TETRA
SPEAKERS

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But mostly I just love that in the 21st century, integrated amplifiers are really getting good. I think about all the integrations that have passed through my system in the last two or three years, from the self-effacing LFD Mistral, to the gloriously unstable vintage Scott 299B, to the stalwart Naim NAIT 5i, and I think hey, some of my best recent listening sessions have occurred with a decent integrated amplifier at the helm. It's been many years, I now realize, since I've told an audio novice that they should check out separates if they really want the best sound.

So, after spending the last year with a somewhat temperamental yet highly rewarding SET set-up in my listening room, **I welcomed the opportunity to place a somewhat conventional integrated amp into my system, just to, well...clean things up.**

The Valve Audio Exclame 100 integrated, however, proved to be slightly less than conventional. A hybrid 100wpc design, the Exclame uses a pair of Sovtek 6922s, which are directly loaded to a dual pair of MOSFET transistors. Sure, that doesn't sound too exotic, considering all of the hybrid integrated amps that have been popping up lately (think Unison Unico), and the Exclame's rather low-key appearance doesn't suggest anything revolutionary, either. But I knew something different was afoot before I even took it out of its shipping carton. *(continued)*

First of all, I was struck by the words 'handcrafted in South Africa' on the box. South Africa? I thought hard and couldn't think of another single audio company that hailed from South Africa. I've been as guilty as anyone of generalizing audio products according to their country or origin. French speakers, for instance, can sound a bit lightweight, British amplifiers can sound a bit polite, Japanese cartridges can sound a bit lush, and German turntables can sound a bit dead. But I had no preconceived idea what South African audio sounded like, so I knew plugging the Exclame into my system would be crossing a new frontier.

Secondly, there's the remote. It's a hell of a remote. You know that movie cliché where the bad guy empties his gun at the cop and misses, and then, in utter frustration, throws the gun at him? Well, if he had the Audio Valve remote with him,



he'd triumph over the forces of good. **Every time I hold the remote, all I can think about is what a great weapon it would make.**

It's certainly no bigger than your average remote, but it weighs the better part of a pound. It appears to be made from a solid block of brushed aluminum, but I don't think aluminum has this much mass. In fact, the weight of the remote is so surprising, I dropped it several

times on the carpet when I misjudged its heft. It might be a good idea to wear steel-toed work boots, because this is definitely heavy machinery.

Fortunately, inserting the Exclame into my system was easy. The spade lugs on my Zu Cable Libtec speaker cables, for instance, fit perfectly into the Exclame's gold-plated binding posts, as if they'd been custom made. Everything fired up perfectly on the first try, which, if you use tubed amplification, you'll recognize as wishful thinking. In fact, there's a rather nifty little red LED over the Exclame's power button that blinks for a few seconds until the unit is properly warmed up, which is vastly superior to the Egg Timer Method I've been using with my Yamaha amps.

The unit I received already had about 50 hours of use, but I tried to get another 500 under its belt before I made any rash decisions. Even freshly out of the box, however, I noticed bass, deep bass, even deep deep bass. I no longer had any doubt that my Zu Cable Druids measured flat to 35hZ. I brought out Paula Cole's **This Fire** just to be sure, and played the first cut, *Tiger*. Hate the music, but love Tony Levin's Chapman Stick, by the way. And yes, my windows rattled, and my coffee mug ambled noisily across my desk. I went outside to see if all the houses in my neighborhood had been leveled, which I thought was a distinct possibility when mating 101dB efficient speakers with a 100wpc amp. Nope, all was well. *(continued)*



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After the Exclame was properly broken in, the sound changed slightly, not profoundly. This is something I notice with British amplification, especially Naim, that break-in periods aren't as long, and changes aren't as drastic, as with some other gear. **In fact, the more time I spent with the Exclame, the more it reminded me of the Naim NAIT 5i I owned last year.** It had the same punchy delivery and tactile midrange, and it was as incredibly quiet as well, which is a small miracle with the Druids, which tend to place a sonic microscope on any electrical anomalies in my system.

With the Naim, however, I always felt that the sound was a bit rough around the edges, especially in regards to transients, that everything could have been a tad smoother. The Exclame, however, erred a little in the opposite direction, with the edges rounded out a bit more. This glossy character was more noticeable in direct comparison with my Yamamoto Sound Craft amplification, which did a much better job of making voices hang eerily in front of you, and making you believe that there's living, breathing entities making music in the room. Of course, the Exclame is also one-fourth the cost of my Yamamoto gear, so the comparison may be unfair.

At \$1695, however, the Audio Valve Exclame 100 is competitive with the Naim NAIT 5i, and I'll go as far as saying that it is better, even though I no longer own the NAIT for a rigid and possibly painful A/B comparison.

(continued)

But here's how I know: I sold the Naim after a few months. I'm not sure if I would sell the Exclame. There were many times during the review period where I said to myself, if someone came along and made me a decent offer on my Yamamoto gear, I'd go for it and keep the Exclame. Of course, I'd have to shop for a decent phono preamp, too, since the Exclame doesn't offer the option. But I'd still save a lot of money, and I'd probably be happy.

I'm certainly not saying the Exclame is as good as my Yamamoto A-08S amp and my CA-03L preamp. I'm just saying that sometimes I feel guilty for spending \$7000 on amplification, when I could have been satisfied with something like the Exclame.

Besides, the Exclame does something better than both the Naim NAIT 5i and the Yamamoto gear. It rocks. So do the Zu Druids, I found out. Sure, the Druids are an exquisite match for the Yamamoto, smooth and clear and detailed. **But you can't hold a rave in your house with such a set-up. You can, however, with the Exclame 100.** Every once in a while I gotta throw a CD from System of a Down or Tool or White Zombie into my trusty Naim CDX2. The Yamamoto gear will stare at me disdainfully and say, 'You don't really want to listen to this, do you?'

The Exclame, however, says 'Let it rip, dude. Just hold onto something first.' ●





Just how much turntable can you get for \$350? The Rega P1

A number of us on the TONE staff have owned a lot of Rega tables over the years, and I still have a P25 that has had all of the upgrades that we have performed in various articles here and a bone-stock P3, so when the chance to get our hands on the new P1 that all the message boards are buzzing about, I didn't need my arm twisted. And this P1 is staying in the TONE family, going on to our webmaster Eddie Kaddi, to rekindle his interest in vinyl. *(continued)*

FUN RIGHT OUT OF THE BOX

In our sister publication, TONE-Photo, we like to talk about the 5 minute test. Can you take a new digital camera out of the box, ignore the instructions and start taking acceptable pictures in five minutes or less? Due to their nature, almost all turntables flunk this test, but the P1 is really easy. Place the belt around the pulleys, put the platter on

(MDF in the P1 instead of the usual glass Rega platter), the mat and

make sure the counterweight is screwed all the way up towards the tonearm stub. That's it! The Ortofon cartridge is already installed.

Because I can't stand it, I need to investigate and tweek when necessary, so I got out the Shure stylus gauge and the tracking force was spot on, the speed checked out as well. This is something that has dogged Rega in the past, but this one's on the money, so no worries there either. Personally, I'd still get a stylus force gauge of some kind if you are a newcomer to the vinyl

Because I can't stand it, I need to investigate, so I got out the Shure stylus gauge and the tracking force was spot on.

world, because you are going to want to swap that Ortofon OM-5 cartridge for something else one of these days...

THE TWELVE THOUSAND DOLLAR QUESTION

To be completely unfair to this little table, I plugged it into input three of my reference system and switched back and forth between the P1, my Avid Volvere and SME 10, now upgraded to have the SME V arm. The clamp on both of these turntables weighs as much as the P1, so I was anxious to see just what the limits of the performance envelope would be right away.

Ok, the big boys aren't going up for sale on Audiogon just yet, but this table is WAY better than I expected for the money. The big problem that has occasionally plagued lower end Rega tables in years past has been speed accuracy. The test sample had perfect speed accuracy so I think the folks at Rega have this nailed.

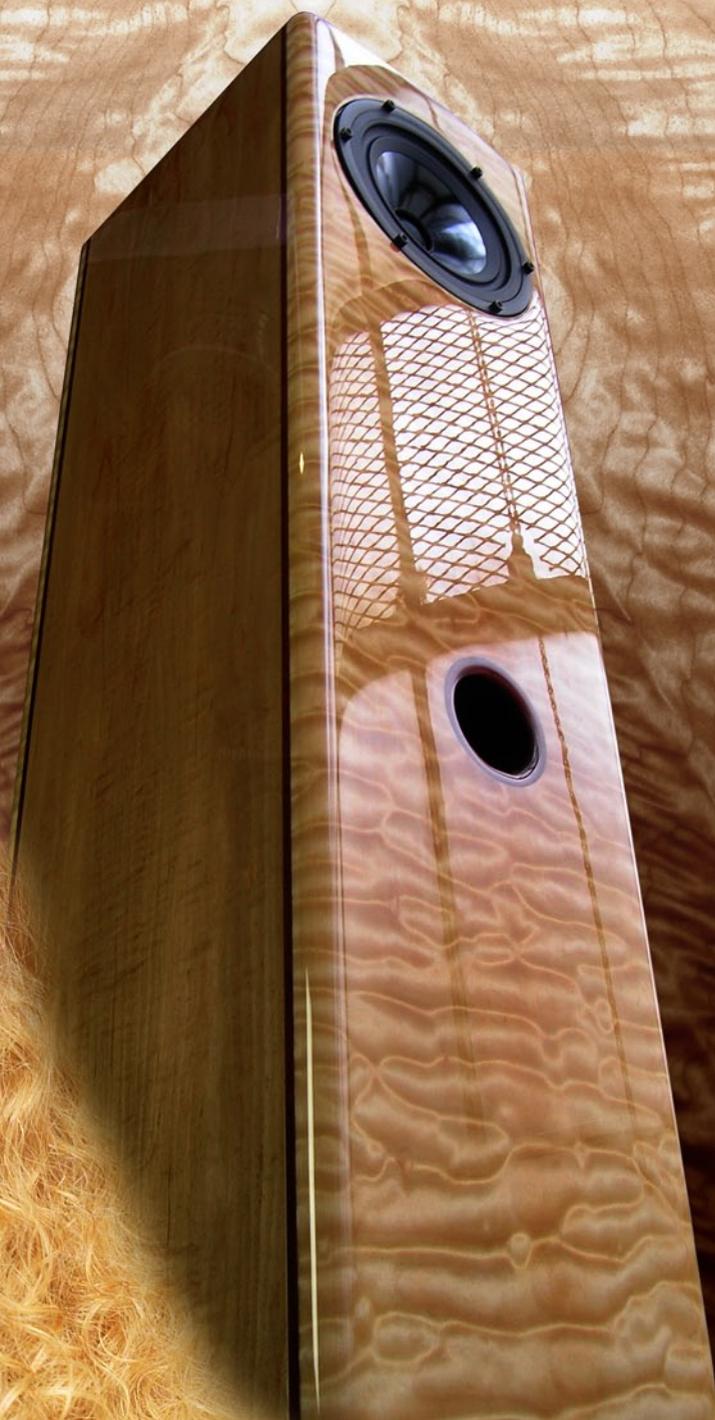
The P1 also features a new, lower cost arm than the RB300 fitted to the P3, which has become an industry standard over the years.

(continued)





Angelus



Many other manufacturers buy it as the OEM 300 and fit it to their tables, so you know they are on to something good. The arm on the P1 features a plastic headshell at the end of the turntable instead of the one-piece aluminum integral headshell on the RB300 arm, but in the context of what this table costs, not inappropriate.

But this little table sounds damn good!

The Ortofon cartridge has a bit of graininess, but threw a pretty wide soundstage. What you lose over the really high end tables is that sense of ease, finesse and resolution, but that's as it should be. The Rega P1 does a great job at capturing the essence of LP playback and it easily trounces CD players in the 500-dollar range.

BACK TO THE REAL WORLD

So, I plugged the P1 into my vintage system, which now consists of a Conrad-Johnson PV-1, my Phase Linear 400 and a pair of ACI Sapphire XLs. Ok, it's a semi-vintage system. Deciding to relax with Larry Ferrari, I got really weird and listened to a half hour's worth of Hammond organ music before moving on. Now that I was thoroughly relaxed, I could concentrate.

Even on a much more realistic system, the P1's character came through. Still feeling a bit squirrely, I plopped in **Trini Lopez At PJ's** (Recorded live!) and drove everyone here to the brink of madness, but what I noticed again about the P1, is how well it does with the fundamentals. This table/cartridge combo does very well getting some air out of the recording, and has a very good midrange tonal character. *(continued)*

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High frequencies are also pretty natural, not harsh. Again, compared to my reference tables, there is a lot more grain and haze than I'm used to, but believe it or not, this record is really good to pick out little details in the audience on the sing along portion, revealing a lot of depth and air.

You could buy a P1 and a couple hundred albums for a grand and have a lot of fun enjoying music. And that, my friends, is what it's all about...

Trust me, if I pulled a disc from the 13 thousand dollar Meridian 808 and put it in a 350-dollar CD player, you'd be looking for a window to jump out of.

Before everyone decided to kill me I moved along to some somewhat normal music. James Taylor's **Sweet Baby James** was my next choice and again, good music was flowing. On a modest system, if you are listening to LPs for the first time, I think you will be shocked at how much music you were missing from that entry level CD player. With a lot of good used vinyl still available, you could buy a P1 and a couple hundred albums for a grand and have a lot of fun enjoying music. And that, my friends is what it's all about...

I ran through some of my favorite Jazz and Rock LPs and the P1 never failed to put a smile on my face.

TAKING IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL

Because the P1 does not have an RB 250 or RB300 arm, it does not have the upgrade path that the P3 possesses, but there are a few things you can do to this table to wring out a bit more music. The easiest and least expensive is to substitute the stock MDF platter for the glass platter that comes stock on a P2/P3/P25. You can find them on EBay for about 25 bucks from someone

who upgraded their table. Just in case you can't find this on EBay, you can call your Rega dealer (or The Sound Organisation) and order their 'platter matter' kit for \$69.

As I just happened to have one of these lying around from my P25 upgrade project, this was a snap. This gives the music more weight, and expands the soundstage somewhat, definitely the best 25 bucks you will ever spend on a tweek!

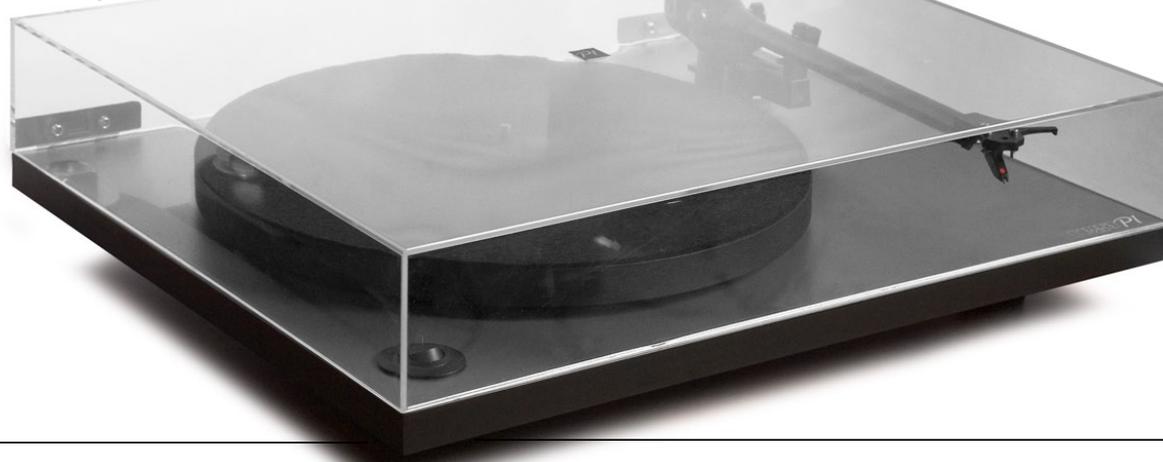
The next thing you can do is put a better cartridge on the P1. Because of it's limited upgrade path, I wouldn't go nuts but something like a Sumiko Blue Point or a modest Grado will take you to another level of musicality. Beyond that, you really are approaching the replacement cost of the table, so it doesn't make a lot of sense to go much further.

FINAL ANALYSIS

The Rega P1 delivers a lot of music for \$350, and commits no real sins. The build quality is as good or better than other tables at this price point and only has a few minor nits to pick: It still has the turnoff thump that my P3 and P25 exhibit to some degree and the extreme lower bass is limited, however it does have a bit of a midbass bump that is not at all offensive and will probably add a little bit of musicality to the modest priced systems that it will be used in.

I nominate the Rega P1 for our first Exceptional Value Award for 2007. It's worth every penny and if it holds up like my P3 (which still runs fine after 30 years), will still be working for Eddie's grandkids as well as it does today.

If you are new to vinyl or the audio world and want to spin records on a budget, I can't imagine a better value than the P1! ●





The Sonics Allegra

— Jeff Dorgay

While many of you may not be familiar with the Sonics line of speakers, their head designer, Joachim Gerhard has been making speakers for many years, formerly as Audio Physic. I was always a fan of those speakers, so when I heard that Mr. Gerhard had a new creation, I was very excited to give them an audition. *(continued)*



My test pair came in Macassar Ebony wood and were very attractive, providing a very nice contrast to the aluminum woofer cones. Grilles are provided for those of you that don't like to look at speaker cones or need to protect the drivers from prying fingers (or noses), but they look much more interesting if you can leave them off. The dark cabinet minimizes the modular look with the midrange and tweeter in the upper part of the cabinet and the two woofers below. The bases are black with a slight curve outward in the middle, making these look just a bit sexier than the standard rectangular plinth. The cool feature is underneath though, when you flip them over you see that you have the option to install three or four spikes. This can really help on certain floors. I prefer the three spike approach, so that's the way I went for the duration of this review.

A pair of the Allegras will set you back \$7800, and for that kind of money these speakers are real contenders.

A pair of the Allegras will set you back \$7800, and for that kind of money these speakers are real contenders. They are a three way system, with crossover points at 280 hz and 2700 hz and an efficiency of 91db. Claimed to be 3db down at 25hz, I was able to verify this measurement with my tone generator. As I can not hear up to 30k, I will just have to take their word for it! They feature a pair of 8 inch (20cm) woofers, a 5 inch (13cm) midrange and a 3/4 inch (22mm) dome tweeter, with 12-24 db per octave crossover slopes.

INITIAL SETUP

At 57lbs. each (26kg), they are pretty easy for one person to move around in the room and set up. The Allegras were very easy to place in the room and get going right away. I found that I preferred the three spike approach for the ease of leveling and actually felt that the bass was just a touch tighter. Placed in my main listening area that is 16 x 24 feet (4.8 x 7.3 meters), I first tried them on the short wall with good results, about three feet (1m) from the rear wall and about 8 feet (2.4 meters) apart, with my couch about 9 feet back (3 meters). After a bit of experimentation, I ended up with the speakers just a touch further apart and the couch another foot back for the best presentation. As always, your results may vary. *(continued)*



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These speakers went in my second system, consisting of the Aesthetix Callisto Signature linestage, the Nagra PSA power amplifier, AVID Volvere turntable and the Wadia 581 disc player. They replaced my Penaudio Serenades for the term of the review. (remember, one piece in, one piece out!) Once I became very comfortable with the sound of this system, I substituted a few different amplifiers that we have in for review; the new VAS Citation Monoblocks, the exquisite Manley 250s, and the First Watt F3. They were connected to all the test amplifiers with a pair of Audience AU24 speaker cables. The Allegras do not offer the option for bi-wiring.

A PAIR OF VERY FRIENDLY GERMANS INDEED

Sometimes, speakers from Germany get a bad rap for being too clinical, but the Sonics Allegras were a lot of fun to listen to! Thanks to the 91db efficiency, they were very easy to drive with even the 15 watt per channel F3. Depending on how loud you like to listen to your music, you could easily get by with a 30 to 60 watt amplifier with the Allegras.

Tube lovers relax; these speakers are very tube friendly as well. They did a great job with the VAS amps and were out of this world musical with those big Manleys in Triode mode! Bottom line, these speakers play well with others.

The Allegras did a very good job at disappearing in my room and have a very wide dispersion pattern. They were not terribly critical of rake angle, but I did find that when I gave them an upward tilt of about 2-3 degrees, the sound barely changed at all when I got up from the couch. I found that just a touch of toe-in was all that was needed. *(continued)*



Even though it's not fair to judge a pair of speakers right out of the box, one can usually get somewhat of an initial picture and then extrapolate from there where the speakers will end up with a few hundred hours on the clock. The Allegras did just what I thought they would; the treble got a bit airier and smooth and the bass tightened up a touch. Overall, these speakers have a very dynamic feel, with a pretty airy treble presentation. They have a very punchy, tight bass response with a lot of weight, which I enjoyed quite a bit. Somewhat like the difference between a Hartke bass amp and a Trace Elliot.

ABOVE ALL, BALANCE

I listen to a very wide range of music all the time, so a speaker that can only do one or two things well doesn't hold my attention for very long. If I can't enjoy Rachmaninoff and RUN-DMC, they're just not a speaker I can live with. Just to make it harder, I do like to crank it up now and then, so a speaker with a wide dynamic range is also a big plus.

If I can't enjoy Rachmaninoff and RUN-DMC, they're just not a speaker I can live with.

The Allegras passed with flying colors. Thanks to the 91db efficiency, I was able to wind out the Manleys and my Premier 350 to the point of my ears rattling way before the speakers did! And rattle they did, as a recent record buying trip turned up a mint Japanese copy of Michael Schenker's **Built to Destroy**. I can't think of a better way to rock!

But you and I know we can't live on a steady diet of this kind of thing (or can we?), so I got out the usual male and female vocal standards just to make sure the Allegras would keep that segment of the population happy and you can rest assured. For a pair of cone speakers, the Allegras do a very nice job of floating a female vocal in the room's space. If your musical taste falls more on this side of the fence, I'm going to ignore the prime directive and suggest tubes here. If you want a touch more detail, go solid state. But I would give that advice for any well made speaker. *(continued)*

The New Sound of the South



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While the Allegras were fine listening at very low levels, there is definitely a point on the volume dial where they really get up and go. Fortunately, you don't have to go too far, but once they start to roll, they become very engaging.

Midrange realism is another of my hot buttons that the Allegras pushed very well.

Ok, I'm really fussy and somewhat impossible to please. One of our readers actually put it very well when he said 'I'm looking for that walk – through sound.' Hmm. No matter how well a speaker does with the extremes of the spectrum, if the midrange has a clouded presentation, I'm walking away. The Allegras had a very realistic midrange sound when listening to music with acoustic instruments and also possessed a very high amount of coherence. I have noticed with a few speakers with metal cones have a different tonal character as the speaker goes throughout the range and these do not.

Last but not least, I did hook the Allegras up to some budget gear and also had excellent results. Should you be thinking about doing a significant system upgrade in the next year or so, you could easily build a system around these speakers and upgrade the rest of the system as your budget allows. Every new component you add will just reveal more music!

THE NEXT GENERATION OF MR. GERHARD

If you liked the Audio Physic speakers, you will love these. Mr. Gerhard has taken everything he has learned in his past venture and added to it with fantastic results. *(continued)*

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At this price point, the Sonics Allegra speakers should be a great fit for a wide range of audiophiles. These are a pair of speakers that I can easily recommend.

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PERIPHERALS

Preamplifier: Aesthetix Callisto Signature

Amplifiers: Nagra PSA, Conrad-Johnson Premier 350, Pass Labs First Watt F3, VAS Citation II (under evaluation), Manley 250 Monoblocks (under evaluation)

Analog source: Avid Volvere Turntable w/SME V Tonearm, Sumiko Celebration Cartridge, BAT VK-10SE Phono Preamplifier

Digital Source: Wadia 581

Cables: Cardas Golden Reference Interconnects, Audience AU24 Speaker Cables, Essential Sound Products 'The Essence' Reference Power Cords

Power Conditioning: Running Springs Jaco and Duke

Vibration Control: Finite Elemente Pagode Signature Racks, with Cerepucs and Cereballs

The Avid Volvere Turntable

— Jeff Dorgay





I love the aesthetic beauty of a suspended turntable and appreciate the sonic benefits of said design, however as you well know, some of these designs can take a while to set up correctly. Not the Avid Volvere; a quick read of the manual, a double check of the settings and a few minutes later I was setting up the supplied SME 309 tonearm. Half an hour later, I was spinning records!

Actually, I had an evil plan; I had recently acquired an SME 10 turntable with the SME 10 arm (That is functionally almost identical to the 309 arm and has the same removable head shells.) and whichever of the two I liked best would get a permanent spot as my reference turntable.

With our commitment to science here, I wanted to compare things on as level a playing field as possible, so the two tables with the essentially the same arms and the ability to switch cartridges very easily between them would make this a snap. Plugging both tables into my reference Rhea phono preamplifier with three inputs made it easy to eliminate the variables introduced by different interconnects and the whole nightmare of plugging and unplugging. I even had a friend that was kind enough to lend an additional Shelter 90x for a little while, so we could really listen critically. My ultimate choice? You'll have to follow to the end. Remember, I'm a journey person not a destination person.
(continued)

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DEFINITELY A VERSATILE PLAYER

AVID's Acutus tips the scales at \$19,000 and is a fantastic turntable, easily competing with the best of the best. However the Volvere is much more affordable at \$5000. (all prices are less tonearm) You can step up a notch to the Volvere Sequel which is another \$3000 and this possesses a beefier motor and an outboard speed control. The good news is that the Volvere tested here can be upgraded to a Sequel at a later date by purchasing an upgrade kit for \$4000. It's a little spendier this way, but again allows you to take a modular approach. I really think that AVID is to be commended, allowing you a path to keep a component that you are very fond of as your system grows.

In case you aren't familiar with AVID, they have been over in the UK making turntables for 20 years now; this is not a "new" company by any means.

AVID also provides design and machining expertise to other high technology industries as well, so these folks are truly masters of their craft. You can get a good look at their facilities by going to their website. www.avidhifi.co.uk

Thanks to a very wide range of mounting plates, you can put just about any tonearm on the Volvere. I confess to a fondness for the SME arms because of their precision and ease of setup. If you have a spare RB300 or any other arm hanging around, this is a very easy way to step up to a much better table than you might have now. The plates vary in price from \$75 to \$400, depending on which arm you would like to mount. *(continued)*



I set it up in my living room, with a bouncy subfloor it was a completely different story; the suspension was very effective indeed!

One sure way to clear out a room full of audiophiles is to put Chicago's *Free Form Guitar* on the turntable; it works every time. But seriously, I've taken a new interest in this because it's another one of my favorite wacky records for listening to spatial anomalies and the MoFi version is quite good indeed. And I'll make you listen to it at very high volume if you come over to my house and start whining about interconnects! This is also a great test track for turntable feedback. If you can blast this song with no feedback, your table is dialed in! Of course the Volvere passed this with flying colors as well.

But let's get serious about listening for a minute and get back to some real music. Spinning a copy of Prokofiev's **Excerpts From Romeo and Juliet** (Sheffield Lab) really helps reveal the character of this table. It has a very open and airy presentation, with a very low noise floor. Real instruments float in the soundspace rather nicely and there is a good dose of front to back depth as well as left to right width. The Volvere will reproduce a good deal of weight, especially for a turntable in this price category. When the *Dances of the Knights* kicks in, it really grabs your attention!

I suspect that taking it to the next level and upgrading to a Sequel will only enhance this aspect of the Volvere's performance further. Keep an eye on TONEAudio Online this summer, we will definitely investigate!

This table did a great job, no matter what I threw on its eleven pound platter. It is nice and dynamic and made listening to a lot of my favorite jazz and popular music records very enjoyable. *(continued)*

If you are an SME fan like, me you are in luck, because the Volvere comes pre-drilled for an SME arm, so no additional mounting hardware is needed.

Again, I would like to stress how easy this table is to get up and running. It was very well packed and only took a few minutes to get ready for assembly. Once assembled and level with tonearm in place it was time to play music!

AND SPIN RECORDS WE DID

One of the best parts of reviewing a turntable, is that it doesn't have any Teflon capacitors that require hundreds of hours of break in before you can assess its true character. Set it up and start listening!

For those of you stepping up from a decent 1000-2000 table, the first thing you will notice is just how much more music is lurking in those grooves of yours!! Thanks to the

three inputs on my Rhea, I was able to leave my old faithful P25 with all the mods that has served me really well over the years. Kapow! Everything got a lot bigger, with a lot more space and air between the notes right away. While we often agonize over swapping cables, or other upgrades, a move like this provides instant gratification.

I checked speed accuracy with a strobe and my SME disc; the Volvere was spot on and I could not detect any other speed or rumble related problems. Their bearing is very quiet, providing very deep backgrounds to whatever music I was listening to. Because I have a very thick concrete floor in my studio, the suspension of this table was not as important in terms of walking around interference might be in some homes. But, when

For those of you stepping up from a decent 1000-2000 table, the first thing you will notice is just how much more music is lurking in those grooves of yours!!

Listening to some of my favorite albums going through everything from Bob Dylan to Led Zeppelin again revealed the Volvere's ability to not only reveal the low bass grunt, but also reproduce the rest of the musical spectrum in a very tuneful and enjoyable way. The Volvere does a great job with music possessing inner detail and can rock when required.

Some accuse suspended tables as being soft, mushy and less defined than non suspended tables. While I had more of this experience with other suspended tables, this was not the case with the Volvere. I would call the sound a bit more on the rich side, but always very musical. I think that cartridge selection would have a wide effect on how one ultimately perceived the sound quality of the Volvere. While I can get away with a bit wetter sounding cartridge on the SME 10,

I would call the sound a bit more on the rich side, but always very musical.

I prefer a bit drier cartridge on the Volvere; the Sumiko Celebration proved to be a perfect match for my tastes.

Your ultimate choice will also be system dependent. With this much resolution available, it will depend on the ultimate flavor you would like your system to portray. Either way, the Volvere is up to the task. I got a much different, yet equally enjoyable sound mounting a Shelter 501 and putting this table in my third system, which is definitely on the romantic side. Not as musically accurate, but a lot of fun to listen to!

SO, DID THE VOLVERE STAY OR DID IT GO?

Rather than agonize over this decision, the Volvere stayed to become an integral part of my growing turntable collection. At \$5000, this table mated with a good arm and cartridge

will get you more than waist high into the waters of great analog performance, with the promise of the Sequel motor and power supply upgrade taking you even further.

Until that new motor and power supply get here, I managed to upgrade the arm on the Volvere to the SME V. Using the same three cartridges, there was a definite improvement in performance, with the overall sound becoming larger and more well focused. While not quite as apparent on the budget Shelter, the Sumiko Celebration and the 90x were able to offer more solid bass performance, thanks to the elimination of the joint at the removable headshell.

This combination offers a very easily heard improvement in the resolution and refinement of the sound, so if you can make the stretch, I would suggest it, but I am very good at spending other peoples money!

I can easily recommend this turntable with good conscience. ●




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Phono Preamplifier: Aesthetix Rhea with Great Northern Sound Updates, Hagerman Trumpet, BAT VK-10SE (currently evaluating)

Digital Sources: Wadia 581, Meridian 808

Speakers: Tetra 506 Custom Speakers with REL B2 subwoofer, Penaudio Serenades, DeVore Fidelity Gibbon Super 8 speakers (currently evaluating)

Cartridges Used: Shelter 90x, Shelter 501 II, Sumiko Celebration and Blackbird, Grado Sonata

Interconnects: Tetra Artet, Cables by Cardas, Tetra and Audience. Speaker cables by Tetra, Wireworld and Tara Labs. Power cords from Essential Sound products, DH Labs and Running Springs Audio

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The First Watt is the Deepest

**An SET Guy's Take on the
First Watt F3 Amplifier**

— Marc Phillips

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Many audiophiles have wanted the stunning immediacy of single-ended triode amplifiers combined with the trouble-free operation and reliability of a solid-state amplifier. And for years, finding such an amplifier was just a dream...

UNTIL NOW!

Hold on there for a minute, Mr. Popeil. While the audio press has certainly been touting Nelson Pass's First Watt amplifiers as sounding like just like SETs, without all the muss and fuss of vacuum tubes, it's not quite that easy. While it would be a good thing for the JFETs in Mr. Pass's excellent new First Watt F3 amplifier to be a transistorized competitor to the 45s and 2A3s and 300Bs of the world, it all depends on which pathway you take to come to this realization.

Jeff asked for my opinion on the F3 simply because I've spent the last year with the SETiest of SET amps, the 2wpc Yamamoto Sound Craft A-08S. It's one thing to say that the F3 will appeal to those who have wanted to try SETs without worrying about tube replacement costs (yes, I've had three 45 tubes die on me in the last year, and they ain't cheap), and quite another to say that the F3 will change the minds of those who have already been living with an SET amplifier for a while. So Jeff sent me the F3, after forming his own opinion, just to see how different mine would be. *(continued)*



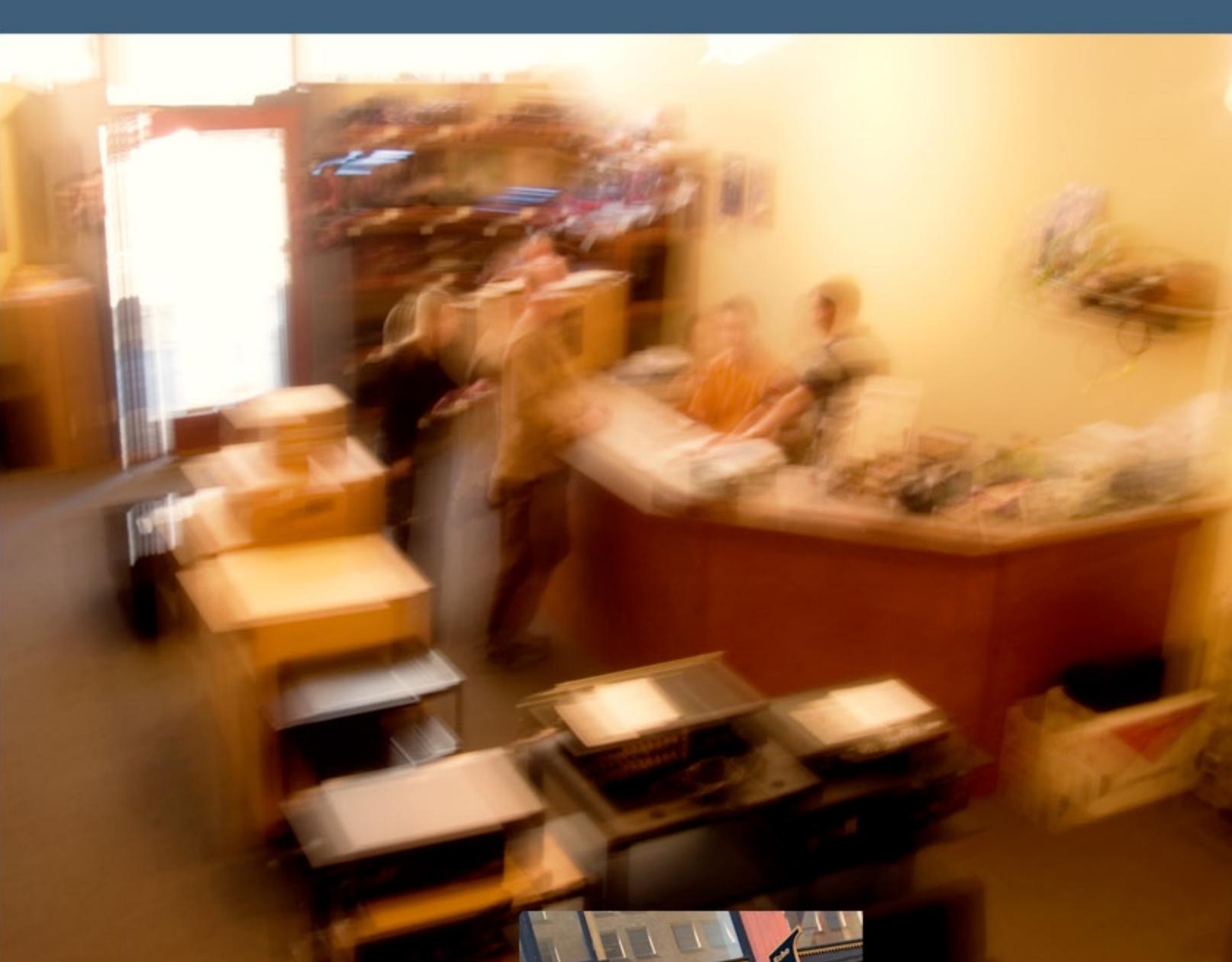
THE SUPREME CHALLENGE

I enthusiastically accepted the challenge, mostly because the F3 would have been an extremely attractive option for me before I stumbled onto the Yamamoto gear. My own vacuum tube experience only goes back three or four years, because I was always one of those audiophiles who recognized the allure of tube amplification, but was worried about the kids and the pets living among glass doodads that could turn bright orange before exploding into flames.

Once the kids got older, and the herd of animals wandering through my living room thinned out a bit, I 'took the plunge.'

But intriguing amplifiers like the F3 keep me from uttering the rest of that cliché, "and I never looked back."

Out of the box, things weren't so promising. Even though the F3 had been fully broken in by Jeff, unplugging it and shipping it to me evidently set all of the counters back to zero. It wasn't that the F3 sounded grainy or loose in the bass or any of those other qualities brand-new components seem to exhibit. It's just that the amp didn't seem to have a lot of grunt at first. I've experienced this once before, with a Musical Fidelity A1 integrated amp back in the '80s, and I foolishly sent it back before letting it work out its issues. So I let the F3 warm up for the better part of a week, its piercing blue LED eyes boring holes into my very soul. *(continued)*



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Yes, that was another issue I had with the F3... those two blue LEDs on the front panel. Boy, are those things bright. During the day I didn't really notice them, but at night, with the lights lowered, I did notice, to the point of distraction. I e-mailed Jeff and asked him if there was a way to dim them or even turn them off completely. 'Nope,' he said, 'that's the way Nelson makes 'em.' So I threw on a pair of Ray-Bans, and I soldiered on.

After a few days, the gain situation improved, although I found I still had to crank the volume control well past midnight on my Yamamoto CA-03L preamp in order to achieve the same volume levels as I could get in the nine o'clock position with my Yamamoto A-08S. At first I thought something might be wrong, that perhaps the F3 might have been damaged during its voyage to the San Fernando Valley. It didn't make a lot of sense that a 2wpc amplifier could sound so much louder and dynamic than the 15wpc F3, but then I was gently reminded that output power isn't the same thing

as gain and output impedance. So I cranked the knob further to the right than I ever had before, which sounds kind of sexy, and I gave the F3 a chance to prove itself.

AT FIRST A HARD SELL

At first I found it difficult to move beyond my first impressions that the F3 was a dynamically limited and overly polite amp. Slowly, however, I began to appreciate the true nature of the amp, that it was extraordinarily quiet and composed and detailed. The F3, after all, was the first amplifier that made me feel that the new Beatles' **Love** CD (Capitol 0946-3-79810-2-3) wasn't as gimmicky as I'd originally thought, that there were layers to uncover, and some real meaning to what George Martin was doing. And it did an outstanding job of reducing Christina Carter's overly-forward vocals on the latest Charalambides CD, **A Vintage Burden** (Kranky 095), into a more satisfying and organic whole with the spare yet beautifully recorded acoustic and electric guitars.

That, of course, is probably the single greatest reason why so many people are comparing the F3 to SET amplification. This

amp definitely performs the eerie, voice-so-real-you-can-reach-out-and-touch-it trick that the SETs do so effortlessly, more so than any other solid-state amp I've heard. The more I listened to music with the F3 in my system, the more I realized that if I absolutely had to give up valves, this would be my amp of choice. The last solid-state amplifier I spent any time with, the Naim NAIT 5i integrated amp, was ultimately too grainy and rough for my tastes. The F3, however, was silky and pure and seamless in comparison.

Where the F3 falls short of SETs, just barely I should add, is in its ability to smooth out unusually harsh recordings. I can't tell you how disappointed I was when I finally grabbed an LP copy of Lucinda Williams' **Live at the Fillmore** (Lost Highway B0002368-01), and found her voice to sound flat and hard and so disjointed from the rest of the band. The F3 did nothing to change my opinion, while the Yamamoto A-08S did make it much more palatable, if not perfect. Of course you can make the argument that

I cranked the knob further to the right than I ever had before, which sounds kind of sexy, and I gave the F3 a chance to prove itself.

the F3 is the more accurate amplifier, and that the Yamamoto was adding euphonic colorations. Well, it is. But the A-08S really isn't one of those big, round, vintage-sounding

SETs. It's fast and detailed, too, even if it does measure poorly on the bench.

Once I put the Yamamoto back into the system, I came to the conclusion that yes, I could live happily with the F3, but only if I'd never known the A-08S first. The Japanese amp sounded fuller and more enveloping, with a much larger soundstage. And then there's the tangibility factor, the feeling that real humans are playing real instruments in front of you. On Joanna Newsom's divinely weird **Ys** (Drag City DC303DC), the F3 did a splendid job putting this young woman and her harp squarely into my listening room.

(continued)

The Yamamoto, however, gave me a better sense of her fingers traveling across the strings.

THE SOUND OF SILENCE

Where the F3 surpasses the A-08S, and many other tube amps for that matter, is in its ability to be absolutely, preternaturally quiet. As I've said before, my 101 dB sensitive Zu Cable Druid mk. IVs can really magnify every bit of sonic mischief pattering around in the rest of my system. Sometimes, I can even hear my neighbor's cell phone calls through them! The F3 eliminated much of that, even significantly relegating the intermittent hum I get through the phono section of my beautiful yet temperamental Yamamoto CA-03L preamplifier.

So, slightly perplexed and more than a little intrigued, I boxed the F3 up. Before I received it, I imagined instantly falling in love with it and wondering if Jeff would like to make a trade for the A-08S, since he loves the Yamamoto, and both amps cost about the same (providing you're not adding in the significant cost of 45 output tubes). After spending a few weeks with the F3, that scenario simply didn't happen. The First Watt F3 turned out to be the only solid state amplifier I've heard in the last three or four years that I truly enjoyed, and made me forget about its lack of valves.

But for an SET guy, is that enough?



It's Enough For This Tube Guy!

Counterpoint by Jeff Dorgay

Well, I've been a tube guy for the last 30 years and it's a love/hate relationship. I definitely dig the SET sound and while not the answer to everything, this configuration is THE answer to some things, and if you come under its spell, you will be hooked for life. The rest of you will just whine about high distortion figures, blah, blah. But if you've read this far, I'm guessing you are part of the brotherhood, so continue on.

Because of my duties with the magazine, Marc is officially taking over this section of the audio world, because it's his favorite, so who better to report the best of the fringe audio world? On this one though, I had to jump in for a few reasons.

I will agree with him wholeheartedly that his little 2-watt beauty is just that. The 45 tube is definitely the essence of seductiveness and Mr. Yamamoto's version is sublime. But I've been listening to 2A3s and 300Bs in particular, and while they also have their own share of SET magic, they are not in the same league as the Yamamoto with its 45 output tubes. As Marc mentioned, it does a great job at smoothing out the rough spots and perhaps that's where the measurement geeks cry foul. My only other complaint with my part of the SET world is that these tubes get really expensive and do not always sound the same from pair to pair. *(continued)*

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OnHiFi.com - Wes Phillips - April '04



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inside

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

However, just as a single loudspeaker or panel speaker is able to nail the dimension of coherence better than a multi-driver speaker, a single ended amplifier has a certain kind of magic with tonality and coherence that big amplifiers just can't quite nail. (Though the best come close) The bad news is that all of these amplifiers are low powered, and all but the best lack any kind of bass control.

I owned Nelson's original First Watt amplifier, the F1, which was optimized for a single driver loudspeaker amplifier. As I own a pair of 2nd Rethm loudspeakers, it proved to be a match made in heaven. A single ended, class-A design, the F1 put out about 10 watts per channel and was fantastic with my Rethms, but did not work well when you put it in a system with a high-efficiency multi-driver system with a conventional crossover.

For a full explanation of all this, go to the First Watt website (www.firstwatt.com) and read Mr. Pass' explanation of his design principles, it's good stuff!

When I had read about the new F3, which was built on the knowledge of the original First Watt and heard that it was going to be designed to be used with any speaker, I was very interested indeed and Nelson was kind enough to send an F3 our way.

Putting the F3 in place of my stable of 300B amplifiers was a real treat. For the first time, my Rethms had some serious bass with the subwoofer switched off! When you work with a pair of speakers possessing 100+ db efficiency, they pick up every bit of crud coming down the line. The F3 is definitely the quietest power amplifier I have ever heard. *(continued)*



TIME FOR A LOT OF AMPLIFIER SWAPPING

If I had to choose between even the best of 300B amplifiers and the F3, I'd have to sidestep the tube monkey business and go for the First Watt. To me, it was 98% as dreamy on the top end and mids, with a TON more bass extension and control. Advantage: F3.

My modded 2A3 Bottleheads were a bit different. Having just installed a new set of Sophia 2.5V 300Bs in place of the NOS 2A3s took them to another level of refinement, but the standard 2A3 was more groovy sounding, so I went back. These little amps are only 3 watts per channel and have more of the magic that Marc loves in his Yamamoto; definitely a 'wetter' sound. But the dynamics and bass control of the F3 still won me over. Advantage: F3

Because in this world, 15 watts per channel is way, way more power than 2 watts per channel, having a little more juice opens up your list of suitable speakers dramatically, especially with this amplifiers drive in the lower registers. Also, keep in mind that my Asthetix Callisto is a bit on the warm side and throws a very huge, three-dimensional sound field.

The ability to drive conventional speakers gives one more advantage to the F3.

Putting the F3 in my reference system in place of my C-J Premier 350 with my Tetra 506 customs that feature a 91db sensitivity was amazing at low to moderate listening levels. The F3 beat even the mighty Premier 350 when it came to freedom from any kind of solid-state grain. The 350 is fantastic, but the F3 is the best I have had the pleasure to hear. I asked Nelson on the phone if he could build one of these with 350 watts per channel and he said: 'when I scale it up, the magic goes away!'

But, (and as Pee Wee Herman once said, it's a BIG but) if you want that last cupful of romance and wetness, I have to concede that the Yamamoto wins the final Pokemon battle. That little amp is hard to beat in that department.

THE ANSWER IS...

If your taste in SET amplification is more on the romantic side and you don't mind fiddling with tubes, you may want to stay put. However, if you love the SET sound (that of the 300B amplifiers in particular), but would like a bit more bass control and the option to use a few other speakers, I think the F3 is highly worth investigating and might change your mind. I could live happily ever after with this amplifier and will be retiring my 2A3 and 300B amps to Marc's house after this review. I'm keeping this one for my single-ended system and it's replacing a WAVAC! ●



MANUFACTURERS INFO:

First Watt
P.O. Box 7607
Reno, NV 89510
775-829-7332
www.firstwatt.com
Price: \$2895

PERIPHERALS - MARC

Preamplifier: Yamamoto Sound Craft CA-03L

Amplifier: Yamamoto Sound Craft A-08S Amplifier

Speakers: Zu Audio Druid mk. IV speakers

Analog Source: J.A. Michell Orbe SE Silver edition turntable, with SME V tonearm and Koetsu Rosewood Standard cartridge Yamamoto Sound Craft SUT-3 step-up transformers

Digital Source: Naim CDX2

Interconnects: Chord Cobra 2

Speaker Cables: Zu Audio Libtec

Misc: Yamamoto Sound Craft PB-9 and PB-10 audio bases Target stand with Neuance shelves

PERIPHERALS - JEFF

Preamplifier: Conrad Johnson ACT2, Series 2, Asthetix Callisto Signature

Amplifier: Bottlehead 2A3, WAVAC MD-300B, Monarchy DA 009

Speakers: Rethm 2nd Rethm, Tetra 506 Custom, Imperium Acoustics Nicole

Analog Source: SME 10 with SME V tonearm, Shelter 90x cartridge, Avid Volvere with SME 309 tonearm, Sumiko Celebration cartridge, Asthetix Rhea phono stage with Great Northern Sound Upgrades

Digital Source: Wadia 581, Meridian 808

Interconnects: Audience AU24

Speaker Cables: Audience AU24

Misc: Finite Elemente Pagode Signature racks with Cerepucs and Cereballs

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The Meridian 808

— Jeff Dorgay



It has been said elsewhere that the Meridian 808 is the best CD player made. After spending a few months with the 808, I'm still not sure that I can make that lofty claim. No disrespect to the folks at Meridian however, I don't think I can make that lofty claim for any CD player and I've been fortunate to have some great digital players to listen to this year.

As someone who ran home from the audio store right after CD playback was introduced to the world more than 20 years ago, you can definitely call me an early adopter of this technology. While many audiophiles stick their noses up at digital playback, I compare it a lot to the photographic world; I see analog and digital playback as having a different feel, and very satisfying if done right

regardless of whether the disc is a black vinyl one or a silver shiny one. I've heard great CDs and lousy albums (and vice-versa), so a lot of it comes down to the care in recording and mastering.

The bottom line is that there is a lot of music that just isn't available on LP, so CD is what we are left with. So, if you want to enjoy music, a good CD player is a solid investment. At 12,500 dollars, the 808 is definitely an investment, but if you have a decent sized CD collection, an investment that is well worth the money spent.

LET'S START THE CONTROVERSY

Remember, I've been in this game for a long time and people are always asking me to pick the giant killer, to find that two thousand dollar disc player that puts all these high dollar players to shame. As I said earlier, I haven't heard every single CD player on the market, but I've heard the lion's share of them and I've made it a point to listen to the so called giant killers.

Drum roll... Forget it, if you want phenomenal CD playback it's going to cost some serious money. (Just like the cost of phenomenal analog playback isn't cheap.) Don't get me wrong, if you have a really nice system that is moderately priced, any one of the dozen CD players in the 1000-2500 dollar playback will be your slice of musical nirvana and there is no shame in that.

But this time, I'm speaking to the people that have broken through the barrier and have spent 50-150k on a system. Regardless of what flavor your sound is, you've moved to a level of reproduction that is quite a few steps above the rest. Your system has it all; big dynamics, big soundstaging, deep bass, extended highs and spot on tonality. Once you get this level of playback, especially with good LPs, it's easy to get disappointed with digital. Trust me; you won't be disappointed with the 808.

Having about 3000 shiny discs around here, I have shared this quest with you.
(continued)

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Somehow, the better my reference system became, the bigger the gap became with digital playback in relation to analog.

The folks at Meridian have been making high performance digital for 20 years now and they have a lot of expertise that becomes apparent the minute you push the play button on the 808.

If you would like a complete explanation of all the technological marvels in the 808, head over to Meridian's website http://www.meridian-audio.com/p_808.htm for the fine details.

I'll tell you this much, the 808 features RCA and Balanced outputs, as well as having a digital output in case you just wanted to use it as a transport (!). It can also be used with one of the Meridian digital control centers. This player utilizes a DVD ROM transport with a true 4x upsampling rate along with proprietary Meridian processing algorithms, which leads us to another little secret about this player-it plays DVD-a as well as both sides of a Dual Disc.

The build quality is exemplary and my test unit came in the standard Meridian silver face with the black glass top. Personally, I think this deck is very attractive in a very understated elegant way. Opening the accessory door, you see the signature of the two Meridian principals and again you know that this is indeed a special piece of kit.

THE SOUND

The 808 arrived on my doorstep at about 6:30 the night before we were about to leave for the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest.
(continued)



Now, if I were a mature person, I would have put that box in my studio and forgotten about it until we all returned from the show. But I'm not that mature, I'm obsessed – I had to plug it in and give it a quick listen before we left. Besides, my system had been playing all day and it was well warmed up.

Granted, it's not really fair to judge a component that's been on a UPS truck all day, but even in this condition, the 808 was obviously something special. You guessed it, I stayed up way past my bed-time and was a bit bleary eyed when it was time to climb into the family truckster to head to Denver, but it was worth it. Once the 808 was on for about an hour, it settled into some very fantastic digital playback and I haven't shut it off since.

This player spent almost all of its time in my main system, with the C-J ACT 2/Series 2, Premier 350 and my Tetra 506 Customs, with REL B2. The rest of my listening was done in

listening area two, with the Aesthetix Callisto, Nagra PSA and the new speakers from Sonics, also reviewed in this issue. I also did a bit of listening in my living room system (C-J CA200 and Penaudio Serenades) and came away wishing I had more than one of these!!

I could wax poetic about this box for pages, but you would probably get bored, so let's cut right to the chase; The 808 is worth every penny asked for it. You can send me all sorts of hate e-mail about your favorite player that costs a lot less, but this deck is head and shoulders above almost everything else I have ever heard.

I usually listen to hundreds of discs on any player, analog or digital before I really draw my conclusions, but I loved this one right away. This is a digital player that just sounds like music, and that's a very hard thing to do. Listening for hours at a time, I never found myself thinking 'hmm, time to

break out the LPs'... To take this a step further, whenever I showed the 808 to friends, I made sure to have a record spinning while it was playing and dared them to guess what was playing. Only the best ears could guess accurately.

Which brings us back to the mastering issue. A well recorded and mastered disc will put you right in the first ten rows of heaven with the 808. This player does a fantastic job with tone and timbre; instruments sound like instruments should sound. I feel that tonality is one of the hardest things for digital to get right, but the 808 passes with flying colors.

The other aspect that really sets the 808 apart from others in the heard is dynamics; if you decide to talk your Meridian dealer out of an 808 for a home audition, I would highly suggest setting the volume control a couple of clicks lower than you normally do. I guarantee that if you play your favorite recordings, you will notice more dynamics and punch than you are used to. *(continued)*

I feel that tonality is one of the hardest things for digital to get right, but the 808 passes with flying colors.

Thinking outside the box...



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Playing the Bax box set that I've been listening to a lot lately, the crescendos kept making me get up and turn the volume down! Combining great tonality with awesome dynamics will make this player a treat for those whose taste falls on the classical side of the fence.

Rock and jazz fans will also rejoice. No matter what kind of music you enjoy, this player is phenomenal. Listening to the DVD-A version of the Beatles' **LOVE**, was truly amazing!

I know the purists only like the mono versions, but this disc really helped reveal the other exceptional facet of the 808; it's ability to retrieve the tiniest low-level details with ease.

As volume is actually the contrast between loud and soft, the more detail you can extract at the lower levels, the louder the music seems to sound. Much to everyone's excitement, this disc has replaced my past favorite, Tom Waits' **Mule Variation** for hearing little things floating around the soundstage. The mashed version of *Octopus' Garden* is particularly groovy.

Other DVD-As in my collection were equally great. This has been the first player that I have heard my DVD-As that I felt really did them justice. I know if the 808 stays here, I'll be out on EBay finding some more, pronto.

Much like my SME turntable, the 808 really allowed my speakers to just melt into the room and produce a very large, three dimensional sound field. Bass is solid, deep and well defined. *(continued)*

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ASSOCIATED COMPONENTS

Preamplifiers: Conrad-Johnson ACT2/Series 2, Aesthetix Callisto Signature

Power Amplifiers: Conrad-Johnson Premier 350, Manley 250 Monoblocks, Nagra PSA

Speakers: Tetra 506 Custom, Penaudio Serenades, Sonics Allegra, Empirium Acoustics Nicoles

Analog Sources: SME 10 turntable with SMEV arm, Shelter 90x and AVID Volvere turntable with SME 309 arm and Sumiko Celebration cartridge. Aesthetix Rhea phono stage, with Great Northern Sound upgrades

Other Digital Sources: Wadia 581, Metronome CD-3i

Interconnects: Tetra Artet, Cardas Golden Reference, Audience AU24

Speaker Cables: Tetra Artet, Cardas Golden Reference, Audience AU24

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

Power Conditioning: Running Springs Haley, Jaco and Duke

Vibration Control: Finite Elemente Pagode Signature, Cereballs and Cerepucs



The SME 10 Turntable

— Jeff Dorgay



In typical British understatement, the first page of the owners' manual that comes with the SME 10 says, 'This is not an ordinary turntable.' Right.

Actually, the model 10 is the entry level in the current lineup of four turntables. Our classical music editor owns an SME 20 and that is precisely how I got hooked on SME's way of doing things. Dan and I possess fairly similar reference systems and at the time I had a pretty cracking LP-12 that I was perfectly content with. Until I heard the 20, that is.

Believe me, I went into this kicking and scratching. After an hour of listening to the 20, I was ruined forever. Dan then said: 'With that concrete slab of yours, you could probably get close to this sound with a 10!' It didn't take much time to get an SME 10 in my hot little hands after that and his analysis was correct. Yes, the 20 has a bit more weight and throws an even bigger soundfield than the 10, but considering that I am only an occasional

classical listener, I felt that I could get by with the 10.

The SME 10 uses an elastomer-based suspension, so it is not quite a solid table, but it is not fully suspended in the way that the 20 or 30 are. For \$8000, it comes with the matching SME10 arm, which is a variation on the theme of the SME 309 arm having the cast magnesium arm tube from the SME V arm, but with the remov-

able headshell functionality of the 309. It is also easier to fine tune the VTA on the model 10 arm fitted to the SME 10 versus the 309.

Though there is no mention of the bearings used in the 10 arm on the specifications sheet, it does seem to have a more delicate feel than the 309 arm on my other two turntables. *(continued)*

Believe me, I went into this kicking and scratching. After an hour of listening to the 20, I was ruined forever.

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The SME 10 has an outboard power supply and plays 33, 45 and 78 r.p.m records. My version of the 10 does not feature the 78 r.p.m. speed which was not at all a problem for me. However, this is where that removable headshell comes in handy. Should you have a collection of 78s that you would like to listen to on occasion, get a 78 cartridge that you can leave mounted. Because the settings on the SME arm are so easy to change (and reset when you switch back), in a couple of minutes, you could be enjoying that sound. Just remember to take the small disk from the spindle, or your 78s will crack!

SETUP AND INSTALLATION

If there ever was a no fuss no muss high end table, this is it! With no sophisticated suspension to set up, even a novice should be able to be playing records in under an hour. However, this brings up my only complaint about this turntable; the instructions, while concise have only a couple of line drawings and NO pictures. With the ease of downloading a PDF file these days; a few strategic color photos would cut the setup time in half. Hint: Download the PDF for the 309 arm from Sumiko's website, these arms are functionally identical and will make the job easier.

Thanks to some good tools, the arm is pretty easy to set up and it STAYS set up.

Because of the removable headshell you will have to make sure that you have the azimuth set correctly so that it stays parallel to the playing surface of the record. *(continued)*



The SME V has a permanently mounted headshell, so should you make this plunge, you will not have to worry about this. The handy thing about the removable headshells is that even though a bit of ultimate rigidity is lost compared to the V, it's a lot easier to mount additional cartridges and that's what my job requires.

While on this subject, even though Sumiko does not recommend using the SME V arm with this table (they suggest moving up to the SME 20 table, which comes with their SME IV.Vi arm), this is really the ultimate sleeper combination. But that is another story for another article. Our test here will focus on the SME 10 with the arm that it comes with from the factory. Hint #2: When setting up the SME 10, though this seems obvious, use a good bubble level and the adjustable feet to get it really level. Take an extra 10 minutes and level it at about six positions

on the clock and you will be rewarded with the most it is capable of delivering.

ENGINEERING EXCELLENCE

If you take a peek at the SME website and do a little bit of nosing around it's pretty easy to see they are an engineering company. Of note, they do a number of projects for BMW's Formula One team, which is all tightly under wraps.

In a world where the tiniest improvement can be the difference between pole position and tenth position and hundreds of millions of dollars are at stake, precision is everything. This precision is clearly evident the first time you tighten the record clamp on the SME 10;

this table is exquisitely built. If you appreciate attention to fine detail, you will love any of the SME tables.

THE SOUND, OR RATHER THE ABSENCE OF A SOUND

Granted, there are turntables that cost six figures that truly are amazing but 11 thousand bucks (with cartridge) is still big dough in my book and the SME 10 delivers music that is very free of tonal colorations. So far, it's the best I've heard at this price point. If I find something I like better, I'll be sure to let you know, but for now the SME 10 really floats my boat. *(continued)*



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I've been listening to this table for about five months now, with a number of different cartridges and regardless of what cartridge used, the character of the 10 always shines through. Some have accused the SME tables and arms to have a bit of bass bloat and I can't say that I have had this experience. My REL B2 subwoofer goes down to 20hz in my room and believe me, I'm just not hearing anything but tight, defined bass with a lot of texture.

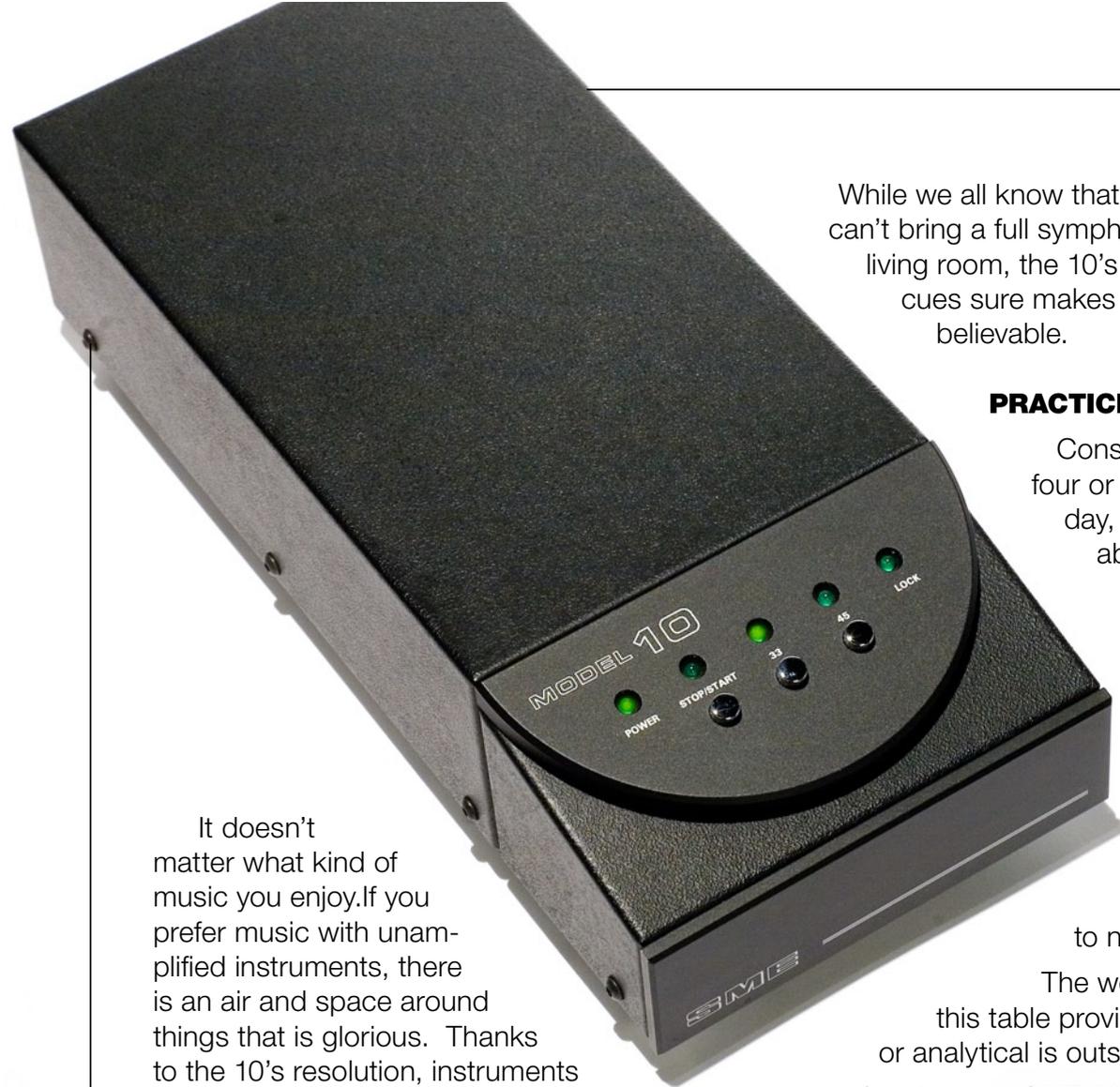
Actually that really does define the overall character of this table; it resolves a lot of detail. Over the past 20 years, I've owned some pretty decent tables (Oracle, Sota, Rega, Linn), but the SME 10 is one of those epiphanies that you can't ignore.

Records that I was very familiar with went from being great to unbelievable.

As it is, my reference system with the C-J Act2/Series 2 and the Premier 350 has a very seductive character to it and thanks to the REL B2 sub, my Tetra 506s make up a system that has a lot of weight, resolution and dynamics.

The SME10 never disappointed me. No matter what I put on the table, it sounded better than it ever has on this system. What I like the most about this table is the way the speakers seem to disappear; it's like the speakers just melt away and there is just music present in the room. This was what grabbed me at Dan's house when I heard the 20 for the first time and it grabs me every time I put a record on.

(continued)



It doesn't matter what kind of music you enjoy. If you prefer music with unamplified instruments, there is an air and space around things that is glorious. Thanks to the 10's resolution, instruments not only sound tonally correct, they have a lot of air and a tremendous sense of space around them. Listening to the current Madeline Peyroux LP on MoFi is fantastic, the piano just floats and her voice roams around the stage and the brush work on the drums just emerges effortlessly from the background. If I had to describe the SME 10 in just one word, it would be effortless.

Should your tastes be more towards popular music or hard driving rock & roll, this too will benefit from increased resolution. Put on Pat Travers Crash and Burn (which was recorded analog at 30 i.p.s. with no Dolby) and not only will Tommy Aldridge's drumming pin your ears back, but you'll hear a few more layers of overdubbed guitars as well.

The wealth of musical detail this table provides without being harsh or analytical is outstanding.

While we all know that even on the best system can't bring a full symphony orchestra into your living room, the 10's ability to resolve spatial cues sure makes an illusion a lot more believable.

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

Considering I listen to at least four or five records on any given day, I've probably listened to about a thousand records on this turntable by now, so I feel like I've had a lot of seat time with it and my opinion has not changed one bit. This turntable and given me more pleasure listening to LPs than anything I've heard up to now in my system.

The wealth of musical detail this table provides without being harsh or analytical is outstanding.

Granted, the SME 20 and 30 are even better, as well as a handful of other mega-turntables that I've experienced but if I'm in the position to write a 50-150 thousand dollar check, it's going to be something that has a Porsche badge on it. Yes Margaret, there is more performance to be had, but I'm happy right here.

However, I think for those more reasonable and prudent audiophiles (Is a 20k turntable/arm/cartridge and phono preamp really reasonable?) the SME 10 is a turntable that you may never outgrow. I think you could probably buy a 10, drop a small fortune on records and still be a very content person indeed.

I have found it to be an excellent tool that I rely on every day to use as a reference evaluating other components. ●

MANUFACTURER

SME UK

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www.sumikoaudio.net

PERIPHERALS

Preamplifier: Conrad-Johnson Act2/Series Two

Amplifier: Conrad-Johnson Premier 350

Phono Preamplifier: Aesthetix Rhea with Great Northern Sound updates

Digital Source: Meridian 808

Phono Cartridges: Shelter 90x, Sumiko Celebration

Speakers: Tetra 506 Custom with REL B2 subwoofer

Interconnects: Tetra Artet, Tara Labs The ONE

Speaker Cable: Tetra Artet

Power Cords: Running Springs Mongoose

Power Conditioning: Running Springs Duke (power amp) Running Springs Haley (everything else)

Vibration Control: Finite Elemente Pagode Signature racks with Cerepucs and Cereballs

Room Treatment: GIK bass traps and 242 acoustic panels

Swiss Precision and Style

THE NAGRA PSA

— Jeff Dorgay





Just in case you are wondering, PSA stands for Pyramid Stereo Amplifier. If you were like me and were drooling over those cool pyramid-shaped monoblocks from Nagra a couple of years ago, this is the next step in their product line. The PSA delivers 100 watts per channel, as opposed to the 200 watt per channel PMA monoblock amplifiers and is priced at \$6595.

If you want an amplifier that not only sounds great but is a show stopper, along the lines of a Ferrari Enzo, the PSA is the ticket.

I guarantee anyone that sees this in your home and has even a passing interest in aesthetics will be intrigued by this amplifier that can easily pose as a piece of modern artwork. Everyone that saw it in my studio was fascinated by its stunning good looks.

I first saw the PSA at the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest in October, where the head of U.S. Sales for Nagra, John Quick was showing it off with Nagra's new CD player and a new pair of Verity Audio (another favorite of mine) Rienzi speakers in a huge room. The PSA had no problem driving these speakers as loud as I needed to hear them. I made it a point to drag each one of the TONE staffers in attendance down to the Nagra/Verity room to hear this system!

As someone who grew up with giant amplifiers from ARC, Krell and a few others, I definitely went through massive amplifier phase of my audiophile life. Granted, I worship great sound above all else, but when I can get great sound in a beautiful package it's a huge bonus.

When I can get great sound in a beautiful package it's a huge bonus.

SETUP

The PSA is not a terribly large pyramid, with a base of 15" x 15" and about 10" high. It weighs 35 pounds, so you can actually think of it as your personal pyramid. All kidding aside, this is a serious amplifier and though it possesses a switching power supply, it is a traditional audio amplifier, not Class D.

It will run comfortably on a 15 amp circuit, as it only draws 500 watts at full output. It features a pair of WBT binding posts on the rear panel along with a pair of XLR input connectors. Nagra is kind enough to supply a pair of RCA adaptors, so if your system does not have a balanced input you are covered. Please note, in the interest of keeping a compact rear panel, there is only the single pair of balanced inputs.

As our columnist Kurt Doslou likes to say, 'Don't play catch with this one!' *(continued)*

series 9

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REVIEW

However, I liked the shape so much; I actually put the PSA up on a pedestal. I had an old concrete pedestal that looked like a column from the porch of one of the houses in *Gone With the Wind*, but this was not the optimum setup for the ultimate sound quality.

I had great luck using the PSA on a large Symposium Ultra platform that I often use as an amplifier stand. Once connected to my Aesthetix Callisto Signature, we were ready to begin listening. My test unit had already had some hours put on it at the RMAF, so I can not accurately tell you how long one takes to break in; this one sounded great after two days of continuous play. The rest of my system was rounded out with the Penaudio Serenades, Wadia 581 and the AVID Volvere turntable with a Sumiko Celebration cartridge installed. I used a pair of Cardas Golden Reference interconnects with XLR termination and left the PSA balanced from the Callisto with excellent results for the majority of the review period. I tried it both ways, but with the Callisto, could not hear a difference between the two.

Due to the close proximity of the speaker binding posts, I would suggest having the ends that go to your amplifier terminate with banana plugs. I did manage to get some spade lugs in the terminals, but if you are looking for the most aesthetically pleasing setup, go for the bananas, it looks much tidier.

Lurking underneath the cool pyramid top panel is a set of jumpers to adjust the input sensitivity for the PSA. You have a choice of 1V or 2V sensitivity.

(continued)

L I V I N G T H E D R E A M

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TONE 58 NO.8 2007

My Callisto has a lot of gain, so I chose the 2V setting and that was perfect, keeping maximum volume right around the 12:00 position on the volume controls, just how I like it.

DOES THE SOUND LIVE UP TO THE FASHION FORWARD DESIGN?

Definitely. I was very impressed with what I had heard at the RMAF, so I figured if they could get sound that good at a show, it would be considerably better in my more reasonably sized room and I have not been disappointed. If I were to sum up the PSA in only one word, I would call it precise. Ah, but it comes from Switzerland, so why would you expect anything else but precision from the Swiss?

To expand this definition a bit more closely, what I noticed immediately about the PSA is that it has a very dynamic sound, but never out of control. The highs are extended without being exaggerated or grainy. The bass has weight and texture, but you will never mistake this one for a Krell amplifier, either. It's just right.

If you are an audiophile that wants an amplifier that is very tonally accurate and has the punch of a solid state amplifier over tubes, this is one to put on your short list. (especially if you are a person that is design conscious)

Some people will make fun of this amplifier for having a tiny blue LED for power output and a tiny red LED to indicate clipping in the lower right corner of the front panel. I say it's a lot of fun and a very useful device. But fear not, there is a switch beneath the amplifier under a small cap to turn the blue level LED off if you prefer. If you had to judge clipping by ear, you would be melting tweeters by the buckload, because on the rare occasion that I did see that red LED light up, I was listening to music WAY TOO LOUD and it sure didn't sound like the amp was going into clipping at all. I also found the gently pulsing blue light coming from the base of the pyramid to be very soothing.

As I was in the middle of the Charlie Hunter interview while working on this review, I listened to the PSA with a lot of jazz in addition to the whole Charlie Hunter catalog. The PSA always did a fantastic job with revealing the most minute details and the trailing edges of percussion instruments. Cymbals had great air as well as attack on Charlie's first album **Bing, Bing, Bing!** Not to worry though, when things got a little bit beefier on his current release, **Copperopolis** (especially the first cut) this amplifier did not flatten out. Taking this groove to its ultimate conclusion, I went for broke, put Joe Satriani's **The Extremist** (back in the day, Charlie used to take guitar lessons from Joe...) in the player and really cranked it up.

Even with very dense rock guitar music, the PSA held its poise and did an outstanding job of preserving that precious space between the notes. Exceptional quality from a solid state amplifier indeed. Then I sharpened all my razor blades. Just kidding.

VERY NEUTRAL... JUST LIKE SWITZERLAND

The really handy thing about a power amplifier that has this neutral of a sound is that you can do your system tuning elsewhere. Because my Callisto is a bit on the slightly warm and slightly wet side of the presentation, for me it was the perfect match to the PSA. I did try it with a number of different preamplifiers, but I kept coming back to the Callisto with this one. I haven't had a chance to sample the excellent Nagra PL-L or PL-P linestages yet (which are both tube units),

but again I really enjoyed what I heard at the RMAF, so watch for a future review.

Some of you may have the burning question as to whether 100 watts per channel is enough. Always a tough call, but I think that in most cases it should be more than adequate. It depends on the side of the room and what speakers you are pairing it with. The 87db Rienzi speakers were playing in a room that was 22' x 26' (with an 11' drop ceiling) and the sound was very big and involving, so I would think in a moderate sized room with speakers in the 87-90db range, you should have more than enough power to spare.

My main listening room is 16' x 24' and I never ran out of power with the PSA with my 87db Penaudio Serenades, or the 84 db ACI Sapphire XLs. The only speakers that did give it some grief were my Apogeos, but they give almost every amplifier grief due to their 82db sensitivity and 3 ohm load.

(continued)

If I were to sum up the PSA in only one word, I would call it precise.

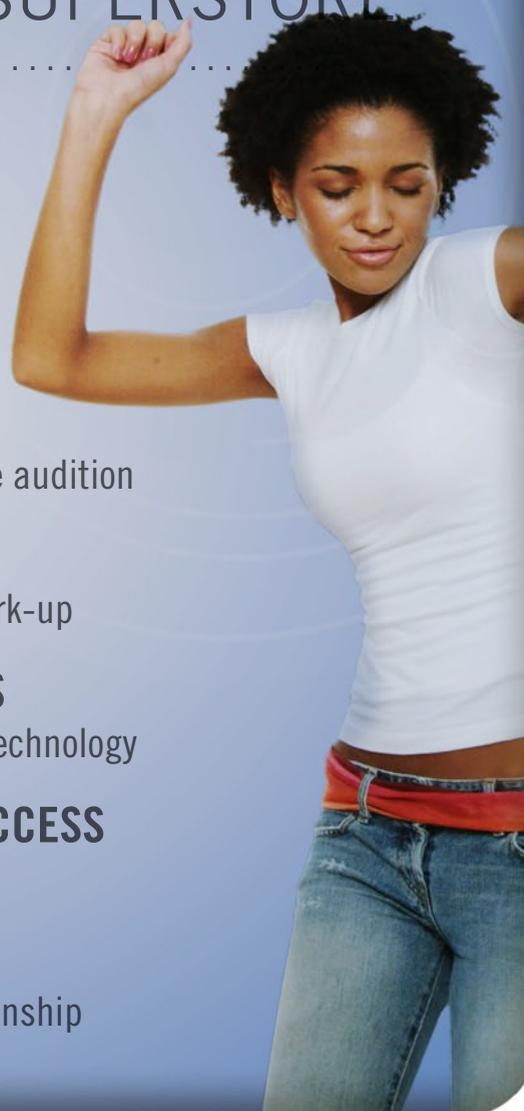


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In my book, the Nagra PSA's performance justifies its price. Add their legendary build quality and outstanding mechanical aesthetics and you have a pretty interesting little amplifier. If your listening requirements demand good sound, high quality and intriguing looks, this is the amplifier for you! ●

MANUFACTURER

Nagra Audio

Distributed by:

Tempo Marketing

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PERIPHERALS

Preamplifiers: Conrad Johnson ACT2/Series 2, Aesthetix Callisto Signature

Speakers: Tetra 506 Custom, Penaudio Serenade, DeVore Gibbon Super 8 (under eval.)

Analog Source: Avid Volvere w/SME V arm and Sumiko Celebration cartridge, BAT VK-P10SE phono stage

Digital Source: Wadia 581

Interconnects: Cardas Neutral Reference

Speaker Cable: Cardas Neutral Reference

Power Cords: Running Springs Mongoose

Power Conditioning: Running Springs Jaco

Vibration control: Finite Elemente Pagode Signature Rack with Cerepucs and Cereballs, Symposium Ultra Platform and Rollerblock Jr.s



High Performance Phono From Great Northern Sound

— Jeff Dorgay

There are a lot of decent phono stages out there at a wide range of price points, but if we were to discuss those occupying the stratosphere of performance; the Aesthetix IO would be up there in the top five of most audiophiles' wish list. With a price tag hovering around 10k (more, if you go for the dual power supply option) and a dual or triple chassis design, this baby costs more than a lot of us spend on a WHOLE SYSTEM, but it is fantastic. I've spent a lot of time listening to our classical columnists' IO and it is indeed a pretty amazing product.

As cool as that IO would look next to my Aesthetix Callisto, I just couldn't go quite that far, and I couldn't spare a few more rack spaces, not to mention adding more air conditioning for all those tubes! What about the rest of us?

The Aesthetix Rhea is designed to be part of their Jupiter series and a mate for their Calypso linestage. The Rhea is reasonably priced (no nasty emails, please) at \$4000 and incorporates much of the technology that lurks under the hood in the IO. What you don't get in the Rhea is another big box or two containing full tube power supplies. The Rhea has a solid state power supply, which actually gives it a bit different sonic signature than the IO. Not to mention, 10-20 less tubes to buy.

Fear not, tube lovers, there are still plenty of tubes under the hood!

The Rhea also has three separate phono inputs (single ended inputs only) that can all be individually configured and features balanced XLR as well as single ended RCA outputs. All of this is microprocessor controlled, with said microprocessors only powered up when needed. The Vinyl Anachronist will be pleased to know that the blue lights on the front can be dimmed and even shut off.

Fear not, tube lovers, there are still plenty of tubes under the hood! Eight 12AX7s and a pair of 6922s to be exact. Thanks to the removable Velcro top panel, you can get right at them too, and trust me, you will want to...

The Rhea has been out for a while now and has received a lot of praise from audio journalists and audiophiles all over the world with good reasons. It's a great phono stage: very musical and it possesses a lot of adjustability along with three inputs. One of the most exciting things about the Rhea is that you can make all these adjustments (gain, loading and phase) from your couch or chair with a remote!! Yep, this is as good as it gets for those of you that want to get your phono stage just right. You can stay right in position and adjust on the fly to your heart's content. The bad news is that this ability will drive some of you to madness, but I warned you. *(continued)*



**OF COURSE ONE WOULD
LIKE TO HAVE THEIR CAKE
AND EAT IT TOO**

After living with a Rhea for a while and spending a lot of time comparing it to the Ray Samuels XR-10B that I had been living with for about a year, I was definitely at a crossroads. The RS preamp was definitely convenient because it was solid state (with excellent flexibility), could just be left on and forgotten and it was dead quiet.

However, even though the Rhea by definition could not be as quiet, I kept going back to the musicality that tubes bring to the table.

**As the typical crazed
audiophile, I wanted more.
Enter Steve Huntley from
Great Northern Sound.**

While some people immediately think heresy when the word "mod" gets mentioned, I prefer to think of what they do at Great Northern Sound as upgrades and would compare them to the staff at Dinan, who provide some of the best BMW "upgrades" available today. The upgrades that GNS performs on this unit retain the original circuit design completely while improving the power supplies, providing power supply filtration, signal path upgrades and mechanical damping.

The end result is a higher performance version of a great original and well worth the money. Popping the removable top revealed that there were a lot of new capacitors under the hood as well as a few other changes. Give the guys at GNS a call to discuss all the various upgrades they have to offer. *(continued)*



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Inquiring with a few friends who were very happy with the work done by GNS, I knew my Rhea would be a lot better when I got it back, but this was now a completely different phono stage in terms of sonics! Every aspect of the Rhea's performance was improved except one, it was still a touch noisier than I liked, but this was easily remedied. A careful selection of a compliment of NOS tubes made this preamp right as rain. For now, I just went up a couple of clicks on the quality/price chain, but I am in the process of securing a full set from Andy at Vintage Tube Services. This man is the maestro that put a full compliment of tubes in my Callisto Signature and it has been a fantastic experience, so there is probably still some more performance to be had from the Rhea. Keep an eye on our website for a follow-up this summer.

Should you choose not to go the NOS route, you may have to go through a couple of sets of current production tubes to get the noise level down a bit, or you could completely luck out and get a perfect set of tubes right away. This is no shame to Aesthetix or GNS; I have had this experience with everyone that uses current production tubes, it's just the nature of the game today.

Thanks to the multiple inputs, I used a variety of turntables during the course of this review. It was great to have my reference SME 10 and Avid tables in place, with one more input to revolve other tables in and out

at will. The Rhea is definitely a reviewers dream come true! However, if you are an analog maniac, you will also appreciate the ability to have three tables; one for reference, one for clunkers and one for Mono or 78s; perfect!

QUIT TALKING ABOUT TUBES AND PUT A RECORD ON!

If you have been following TONE for a while now (or have been tortured by me at one of the various hifi shows), you know I have somewhat odd taste in music. I left the same stack of ten records piled next to my rack the day I sent the Rhea back to GNS, so I could pick up where I started when it came back. Steve said it had some hours already on it, but I figured it might need a little more break in time.

Nonetheless, I put Jean-Michael Jarre's **Zoolook** on and was in for quite a treat indeed! When I listen to any component, here's what pushes my hot button: Spatial capabilities, tonality and weight. I want a big sound that is tonally correct and a lot of dynamic range; this is what really gets me involved in the music.

The title cut of this record has a lot of sound effects and spooky stuff that bounces all over the soundfield. The Rhea had definitely gone up a few orders of magnitude here! Things were definitely floating around

the room in a much bigger way than they had in the past, but this record is really better at providing those parlor tricks that we audio-philosophers often get bashed for, so it was time to move on to some other things.

A quick spin of a few Patti Smith and Pretenders discs told me everything I needed to know about capturing the delicacies of female vocals as well as proving that this preamp can rock too. Moving right along to some of my favorite Beatle albums and some great jazz albums just kept confirming what I was hearing, that this was something quite special indeed. Bottom line, that pile of ten records grew to fifty and then a hundred in a couple of days time! Always a good sign.

Bottom line, that pile of ten records grew to fifty and then a hundred in a couple of days time! Always a good sign.

While the gain on the Rhea can be set from 40 – 75db of gain, I would advise you to not get carried away with the gain settings. Remember, this is a tube preamp and if you want to have the luscious tube sound without the background noise, keep the gain as low as you can on the phono stage and let your linestage do the work.

Cartridge loading can be set from 75 ohms up to 47k. My only complaint about the Rhea is that I wish there were more settings on the lower end of the spectrum. I've never found a need for 2500 ohms and 10k. My experience with MC cartridges has been after 1000 ohms, it's up to 47k. Perhaps another potential update if it can be done... *(continued)*

2500 DOLLARS WELL SPENT

The difference between the stock and upgraded units is not subtle. The GNS version of this preamp offers more of everything you like about the Rhea without changing its character. Again, it's just like taking a stock 540i BMW, lowering it an inch, stiffening the springs and dampers a bit and adding 40 more horsepower. Some guys will just go all the way and get an M5, if you want something different, but don't necessarily want to spend that much more money an upgraded 540 is the perfect fit. That's how I see the upgraded Rhea.

While still not an IO, the upgraded Rhea does some cool things that even the IO does not.

Especially in terms of functionality and input flexibility, it has fewer tubes to crap out on you eventually and only takes one space on that potentially expensive equipment rack. I will share one more little tweak with you though; get a set of Cereballs from your Finite Elemente dealer. I went back and forth with these a number of times and every time I could tell a distinct tightening up of the upper bass with them underneath.

For a total of \$6500, the Great Northern Sound version of the Rhea is definitely on the rear bumper of the best phono preamps. What I really like about this concept is that you can put your hands on a Rhea for now and then when your budget permits, get to the next level for a reasonable amount of money without starting over. I guarantee that if you have more than one turntable or cartridge you will be hooked by the flexibility of this unit as well as the sound. *(continued)*

Sonics by Joachim Gerhard

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Someday, I might be brave enough to go for all those tubes, but for now the Great Northern Sound version of the Rhea is a reference I'm happy to live with! Note: If you live anywhere near Stillwater, Minnesota, stop by GNS and check out their new retail showroom! You can see a lot of this stuff in person and meet the guys who perform the upgrades. ●



MANUFACTURER

Great Northern Sound Co.

217 N. 2nd. Street
Stillwater, MN 55082

651-351-5355

www.greatnorthernsound.com

PERIPHERALS

Preamplifier: Conrad Johnson Act2/ Series two preamplifier, Aesthetix Callisto Signature preamplifier

Power Amplifier: Conrad Johnson Premier 350 power amplifier, Nagra PSA power amplifier, Red Rock Audio Renaissance power amplifiers

Analog Source: SME10 turntable w/SMEV arm and Shelter 90x cartridge, AVID Volvere turntable w/SME 309 arm and Sumiko Celebration cartridge

Digital Source: Meridian 808, Wadia 581

Speakers: Tetra 506 custom speakers with REL B2 subwoofer, Penaudio Serenades, Peak Consult Princess (floorstanding model)

Interconnects: Tetra Arted, Cardas Neutral Reference, TARA LABS The One

Speaker Cables: Tetra Arted, Cardas Neutral Reference

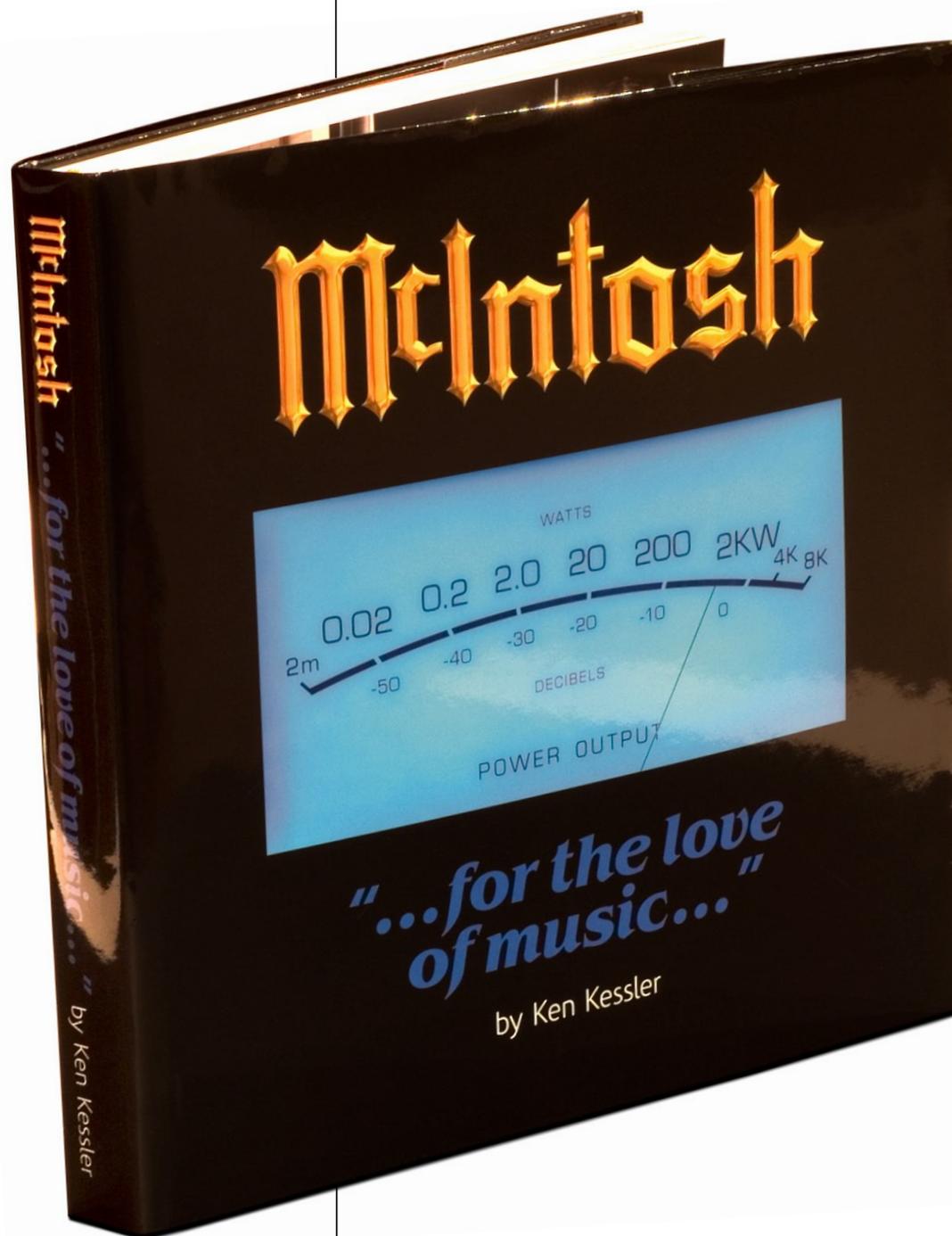
Power Cords: Running Springs Mongoose, Essential Sound Products The Essence Reference

Power Conditioning: Running Springs Haley, Jaco and Duke

Vibration Control: Finite Elemente Pagode Signature racks, Cereballs and Cerepucs

Room tuning: GIK labs

McIntosh Must Have



Ken Kessler's newest creation is a BIG book indeed, chronicling the history of McIntosh; their products, their people and some of their customers.

A casual read will reveal that some pretty interesting people have owned McIntosh over the years...

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Even if you haven't followed Ken Kessler's career in the world of audio, if you read his book on the history of Quad, you know that this man has a passion for audio, attention to detail and a good sense of humor to boot! (And he's a car guy too, which gets BIG brownie points around the TONE office)

We were fortunate enough to be invited to the introduction and signing of this new book at this year's CES. The folks at McIntosh really know how to launch this kind of thing!

Not only did they have a ten foot high pile of these books to hand out, but Mr. Kessler was on hand to sign our new pride and joy with living legend Sidney Corderman, and Charlie Randall, the president of McIntosh Labs!

It was like being back in high school for a minute, 'Jeff, it was great rolling tubes in homeroom, see you this summer!' Well, that's not what they wrote in my book, but it was part of my McIntosh fantasy while I was standing in line!

If you are a McIntosh enthusiast, this book is a MUST HAVE. The minute you see that big blue meter on the cover, you know that more lurks inside. Trust me, this one will tell you damn near everything you ever wanted to know about McIntosh and it is loaded with a ton of great photos from the company's history. There's even a great shot of Sally Goff, the marketing and PR manager for McIntosh when she used to work in the art department!

Bottom line, this is a great chronicle of a great American hifi company.

You can buy a copy for your coffee table at your local McIntosh dealer or order it directly from McIntosh at:

www.mcintoshlabs.com

The cost is \$150. ●



CES Moves Upscale

— Jeff Dorgay

This year, amidst much controversy, the High Performance Audio segment of the Consumer Electronics show moved from its old digs of quite some time, the Alexis Park Hotel, into the Venetian. Moving towards show time, there were a number of questions and uncertainty following the migration that I was very curious as to how everyone would pull it off. *(continued)*



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One of the big concerns on everyone's minds was the room configuration. It appeared that you would not be able to remove all of the furniture as at the AP, and that those who did would be charged heavily. EveAnna Manley bravely protested the whole thing and even had shirts made up poking fun at the series of events, culminating in putting the room service menu on the back of the shirt in lime green (my favorite color). After the first day, they became collectors items as the GES people that handle the grunt side of CES got pretty hacked off, forcing the shirts to go away. Hats off to Ms. Manley for having the guts to whip them the finger.

ALL THAT ASIDE, I THINK THE SHOW WAS A BIG SUCCESS

I'm going to get on my soap box for a second and say that I really do think that a large portion of our world has become a luxury product. That being said, I feel everything we can do that is feasible to treat it as such will help sales. I realize that not all of the manufacturers can afford to advertise in The Robb Report, but now that it is pretty easy to drop 50-100k on a stereo system, an effort to find the people with this kind of cash isn't an all bad idea.

Moving to a more upscale venue is a good start in that direction.

Almost all of the manufacturers I talked to had a good time at the show and were able to adjust to the new situation well enough to take advantage of it. A few were very unhappy and I suspect they will either not be there next year or will migrate to T.H.E. Show.

This is a TRADE show.
It's about business to
business relationships.

I have never looked
at CES as a giant
'stereo mall' where I
could audition every
piece of gear under the
sun and make a
purchase or review
decision.



Yes, I know it was hard getting around on the elevators a few times, and the food was pretty darn expensive, but all in all I thought it was a very nice presentation and I thought that the manufacturers involved did an excellent job at adapting to their situation. Besides, this is a TRADE show. It's about business to business relationships. I have never looked at CES as a giant 'stereo mall' where I could audition every piece of gear under the sun and make a purchase or review decision. It is unfair to everyone that participates in this event to judge their wares by what you hear in a hotel room, that's what dealers are for. Hence, there is no 'best sound at the show' award, and there will never be one.

However, I did hear some pretty good sound in a number of rooms. A few people were fighting some pretty high and odd shaped ceilings, so all the room treatments in the world wouldn't have helped. I also managed to talk to quite a few people there and secure some pretty interesting gear for future reviews, so keep an eye on the next year; we definitely have some fun things in store for you. The TONE staff was

in full force there, and we had a great time talking to a number of our readers as well.

Speaking of sound, on a lighter note, did anyone have fun with the dome in the entryway right before you got on the elevators? With the domed ceiling and marble floors, if you stood right in the very center, it had a huge amplification/resonance effect and it made your voice sound very BIG! It was a great place to practice your evil laugh or your best Darth Vader voice! Steve Hoffman commented that only I would find something like this...

So all controversy aside, I hope that everyone attending CES this year was able to be as productive as we were. Our corporate hat is off to all of the manufacturers for working so hard and doing such a great job. I would also like to personally thank the folks in the **Running Springs Audio/Imperium Acoustics/Cardas Audio** room for letting us store briefcases and the like during the show as well as steal their snack treats on a more than regular basis. The hospitality was appreciated.

Here's to seeing you all next year. ●

W

With all the snow here in the Pacific Northwest, we got into a bit of snowman building. When my daughter said, “**what’s that snowman missing?**” (And I think she was referring to the perfect carrot for a nose) I said, “**a pair of headphones!**”

So there you have it.

This issue we have nothing but headphone amplifiers! Two new amps from Woo Audio and a nice portable amp from Grado. All good, yet all different; we hope you enjoy!



A Pair Of Amplifiers From Woo Audio

One of my favorite aspects of this business is the extended network of friends and colleagues that have become part of our everyday world. When talking to Rob Fritz at Audio Art cables, he said 'Hey, have you heard those Woo Audio amps? They're pretty good!' A few quick calls to my other in the know headphone addicts and I got in touch with Jack Wu. He sent out a pair of them right away, the WA6 and the WA3+. *(continued)*



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If you gave them a casual glance, both of these little amplifiers from Woo Audio look pretty similar, but they are in fact very different. The WA 3+ is an OTL (output transformerless) design with three tubes (1-6AS7 and two 6922s) while the WA 6 uses output transformer design with three tubes (1 5AR4 and a pair of 6DE7s). The WA3+ uses solid state rectifiers, and the WA6 features a tube rectifier.

You can get your Woo Audio headphone amplifier in a variety of different colors, so check the website for the variations.

My test samples came in black (WA6) and red (WA3+) and look very cool. Mechanical construction and machining is first rate and popping the bottom panel reveals very good quality components as well as very neat wiring. These two are built very well, indeed! The WA 3+ is \$495 and the WA 6 is \$570. Interestingly, Mr. Wu gives you a link on his site to the data sheets for all the tubes he uses in PDF format, a nice touch!

I also need to mention here, that Mr. Wu sent me the new, upgraded WA 3+, which is not even on the Woo Audio website yet! It features an additional choke to beef up the power supply. 'I added it so the amplifier would have an easier time driving the AKG 701s. They can be difficult to drive for some amplifiers; this also makes the 3+ a little bit quieter.'

I gave both amplifiers about 150 hours before I did any serious listening; hooking them up to a pair of iPods on repeat and just let em go! *(continued)*



ANALYSIS TIME

The Woo Audio amplifiers do not come with power cords, so rather than just using the box rejects, I plugged each one into the DH Labs Power Plus cords, which is a nice upgrade from a stock cord, at a price that won't break the bank.

Sources were my iPod, playing uncompressed selections through the Audio Line Out Jumbo Cryo RCA cable, and my Wadia 581 through a pair of Cardas Golden Reference interconnects. I'm sure your source will be somewhere in-between those two, however the Woo Audio amps did a very nice job even with an iPod, so those of you beginning audiophiles could start here and be very happy!

The first thing you will notice about either of these amplifiers is how quiet they are! Woo lists a spec of 95dB for the WA3+ and 93dB for the WA6, but they were both so quiet I couldn't believe it.

The next thing I really enjoyed was how nicely they are built. The volume control and power switches have a very solid feel. The Woo amps definitely feel more expensive than they are.

But none of this means anything if the amplifiers don't deliver great sound. Rest assured, these are a fantastic pair of headphone amplifiers in this price range, however,

The Woo amps definitely feel more expensive than they are.

they offer up a different presentation. Which one is for you? Read on...

The WA6, because of the transformer in the output stage that allows you to switch between high or low impedance is a bit more versatile than the WA3+. Even though both claim to be suitable with phones between 8 and 600 ohms there is a definite difference between them and it depends what your favorite phones are. I tried these two amplifiers with three of the most popular headphones out there: The Sennheiser HD650, The AKG 701s, and The Grado GS1000.

While there are an almost infinite number of choices, I am quite familiar with these three and they present different challenges to a headphone amplifier.

(continued)



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For those of you in the audience that are already living on Headphone Planet, you know they all sound rather different as well.

And this will determine which one of these little jewels you write a check for.

If you have a collection of headphones, I think you might prefer the WA6 because of the variable impedance switch on the back. This amplifier was a bit more transparent with the Sennheisers (300 ohms), but not quite as detailed with the Grados (32 ohms) even on the low impedance setting. Both did a pretty good job with the AKG 701s which is somewhere in the middle at 60 ohms.

I really enjoyed the midrange presentation with both of these amplifiers, which just seems to be what tubes do the best anyway. They also offer up a huge ball of sound inside your head, so get out your favorite trippy CDs and shut your eyes! I was listening to **Joe's Garage Part 1** by Frank Zappa and I could hear little tiny percussion details floating all over the place! This is one of the things that makes headphones so much fun to listen to! I also got out a few Tangerine Dream discs as well as my favorites from Jean Michael Jarre and Kraftwerk to just enjoy the effects.

Getting back to some music that is a little bit more traditional, I pulled out Hall and Oates **Abandoned Luncheonette** to listen to some vocals, moving on to **Painted From Memory** by Elvis Costello and Burt Bacharach. This was where both amps did a very nice job, with music possessing a lot of layers, keeping everything in its own space.

(continued)

This was where these amps started to peek into the territory of more expensive hardware. Granted, they couldn't match the transparency of my 300B amplifier, but Mr. Wu has one of these on the horizon, so I can't wait to see what he comes up with there!

If you are someone that just has a pair of Grados, especially the GS1000s, the WA 3+ is a match made in heaven; and if you want to make that little patch of heaven a bit larger, experiment with some different tubes. There are a number of variations on the 6DJ8 theme, and Mr. Wu is kind enough to send these out with a pair of NOS Phillips tubes. But being the ever inquisitive audiophile, I substituted a pair of Bugle Boys and the match was even better! Still not WE300B territory, but way better than one would expect for this kind of money.

If you only possess a pair of HD650s, I'd steer you to the WA6. It has more drive with the high impedance phones and allowed the 650s to really shine. This can be a phone that sounds closed in with the wrong amplifier, but there were no problems here. I don't know enough about the

6DE7 to try and do any tube substitutions, but this amplifier also came with some NOS GE tubes. You could probably play around with rectifier tubes too if you really wanted to get geeky.

Just to get really crazy, I made an adaptor cable and ran the headphone output of the WA 3+ to my 101db Second Rethm loudspeakers that feature a single Lowther driver that has been modified by Rethm. This was a pretty amazing combination too! With such a small tube compliment and a high quality source like the Meridian, it offered up a very interesting presentation that was very musical and detailed. I bet the WA3+ would work with a pair of Klipschorns too, so I think that extra choke in the power supply is working just fine!

In the end, a pair of great headphone amplifiers. I would base your choice on the headphone or headphones you already own, but either way you can't lose. The Woo Audio WA3+ and WA6 offer great sound and great value!

www.woaudio.com

The Woo Audio WA3+ and WA6 offer great sound and great value!





Next, let's move on to something we can all use, a portable headphone amplifier that is battery powered. If you are on the go a lot or really need something compact, a battery powered headphone amp along with your digital player of choice assures you of music wherever you are. This issue we look at a great example of portability from Grado.

The Grado RA-1 Headphone Amplifier

Keeping with the Grado tradition of wood and lots of it, the RA-1 is an understated little box indeed, and if you didn't know any better, you would think it might be packaging for one of Grados' products, until you notice the volume knob and headphone jack on the front.

The RA-1 comes in three flavors: The DC only model uses a pair of 9V batteries and costs \$350, the AC only model plugs into the wall and costs \$425 and the AC – HG (high gain) version, which will work with high impedance phones as well as the standard 32 ohm Grado phones. Considering my recent infatuation with anything that isn't picking up grunge from the AC line, I went for the battery powered model. *(continued)*

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- Think ESL...but faster, more transparent, detailed & dynamic
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- TAS #131: *The Mangers (ZeroBox 109) otherwise were outstanding, even stunning. Their coherence is total. Almost no other speaker comes close in this regard. The Mangers also have extraordinary clarity, transparency & resolution. Instruments such as the banjo, which have distinctive, emphatic initial transients, had extraordinary lifelike character.*



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The rear panel has a pair of RCA jacks and a power switch. According to their specs, the RA-1 will play for 40-50 hours on a pair of 9V batteries. I did a little bit better than this with a pair of 9V rechargeables from Radio Shack and I suggest if you are going to be a serious headphone listener, to invest in two pairs of these batteries, so you have a replacement pair when the first pair have depleted themselves.

No AC cord not only means no power issues, it means no lost wall wart or power cord, either.

It also means you can take high performance headphone sound anywhere! Only 5" x 5 1/2" and weighing just 12 oz., you can put this in a briefcase, suitcase, whatever! Thanks to the RA-1, there is no reason to be without music, ever!

I used three sources for my tests: Uncompressed music through my iPod and the outstanding Audio Line Out Jumbo Cryo RCA cable, A Squeezebox with standard power supply and a pair of Audio Art IC-1 interconnects and the Meridian 808 CD player with a pair of TARA Labs The One interconnects. Why would I hook up 16 thousand dollars worth of CD player and interconnects to a \$345 headphone amp? Because I can!

Watch for a review in our Pod People Column on the web soon for a review of the Audio Line Out cables. The Jumbo Cryo is the definitely the best iPod cable I've heard to date. Extremely resolving, yet grain free. *(continued)*

You haven't heard what your iPod is capable of playing uncompressed music until you check this cable out. Yep, it's a bit spendy at \$365, but it sounds great and besides, you'd drop that kind of coin on a decent interconnect cable for your system, right?

Moving right along, there is one other thing to note. If you are like me and do NOT listen to headphones at a super loud level, (and you SHOULDN'T be doing this anyway) you can probably get by with the lower gain battery powered unit. I used my Sennheiser 650s with no problem and it was a great match. I was a little bit higher up on the volume dial, due to their 300 ohm impedance, but they got as loud as I needed them to.

However, all the magic is on tap with the lower (32 ohm) impedance Grado phones. Starting with my SR80s for a while, I jumped up to my reference phones, the Grado GS 1000s. Woohoo! This is a sweet combination that really gives a nice grain-free presentation. While not quite as airy as either of my tube headphone amplifiers,

for this kind of money it was a wonderful experience indeed. I am curious as to how much of this is due to the battery operation? Perhaps in the future, we will get a powered one in to compare. I spent a number of multiple hour listening sessions with the RA-1 and experienced no fatigue, no matter what phones I was using.

The bass response was more than adequate; I sampled a few of my favorites in this department and was very impressed.

First stop was a few of my favorite war horses **Dark Side of the Moon** and the **K and D Sessions**, along with a little bit of hip hop as well as the latest disc from Tosca. Vocals, male or female were very natural and I felt overall that this amplifier was almost un-solid state like in the way it offered a very large soundfield inside your head.

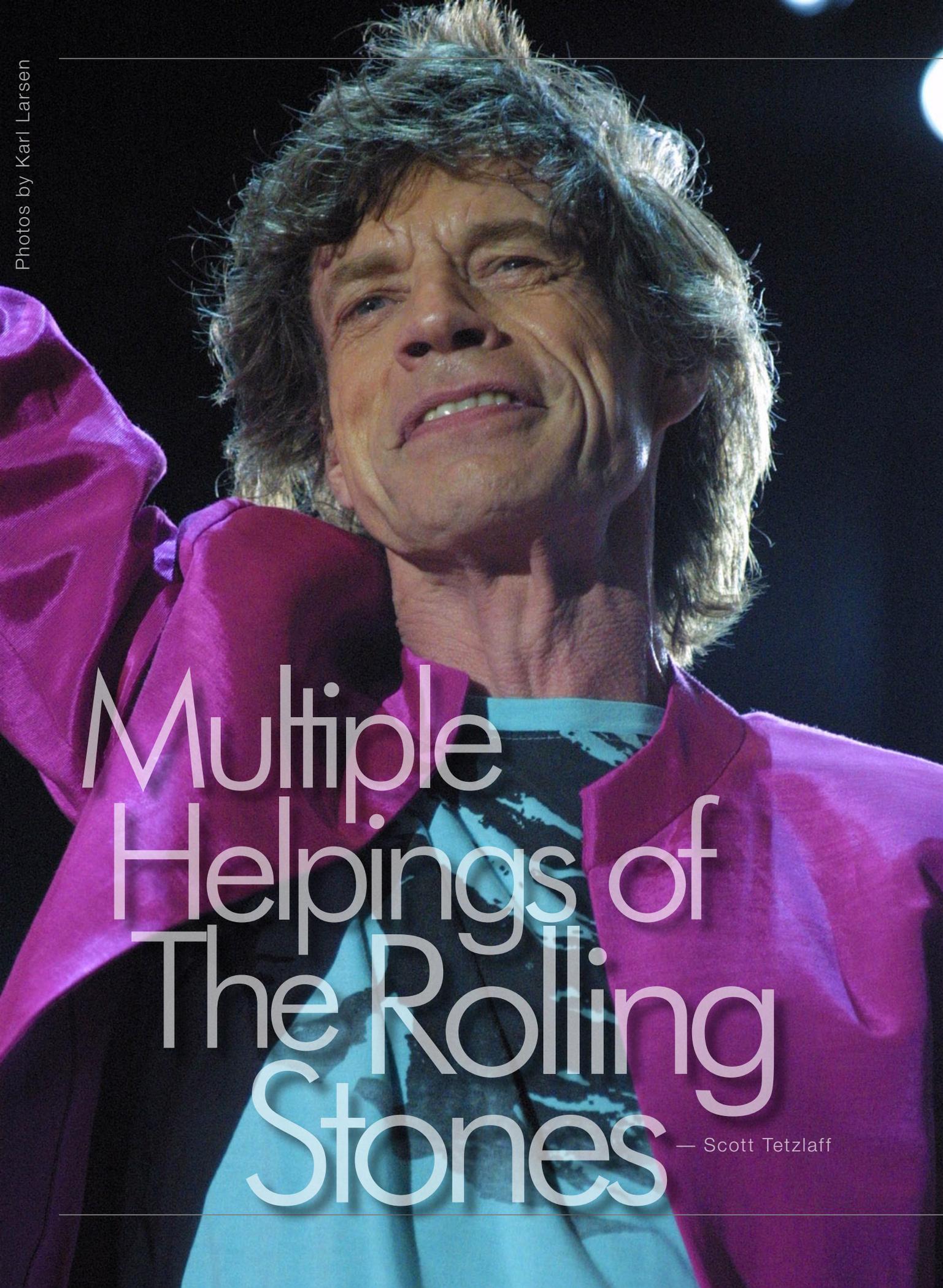
The best compliment I can pay the RA-1 is that I am used to listening to my GS 1000s on a few fairly expensive headphone rigs, and with this setup I was still very happy indeed. I decided to keep this little jewel so that I can have music anywhere I go. While not quite as small as some of the portable amps available, this one really grabbed me in terms of its natural ability to present the music.

Last but not least, it looks really cool with my GS1000s! I am in the process of putting together a custom Pelican case so that I can take these two with me wherever I have to travel!

If you are looking for a headphone amplifier in the 3-400 dollar range, make sure you audition the Grado RA-1. This one's a winner. ●

www.gradolabs.com





Multiple Helpings of The Rolling Stones

— Scott Tetzlaff

Right up front, I'm going to come clean. I am not the biggest Rolling Stones fan in the world. Oh, I like them, maybe even a bit more than the next guy. But, I am not the guy wearing the tour shirt from the 1980s and waving the 'tongue flag' at the concert.

That being said, maybe I am the guy to be writing this – if only to inject a little objectivity.

I might actually know 'the biggest Stones fan in the world'. I have a pal that has flown around the country following them. Sometimes finding out where they're staying and booking a room in hopes of bumping into them in the elevator. Frequenting bars where they play 'after concert' to cool down, or work on new material. I believe his concert count for this tour is around 15 times, in at least 6 different cities.

It's a sickness that requires time, an intelligence network, and a fair amount of financial resources. You say 'fan', I say 'stalker' – it's all semantics, isn't it? (*continued*)

One of the strategies the Price Club employs is to generate excitement by implied scarcity. One week the lawn chairs are there, the next week, they just might not be.

The Stones really have the same kind of thing going on their latest tour outings. You just never know if this is going to be the last one. What, with Keith falling out of trees while hammered (yes, that actually happened this tour) which required a hole to be drilled into his skull for medical reasons, and Charlie just recovering from throat cancer, this very well could be your last chance to seem them live.

Being a self confessed sucker for good marketing, I was swept up in the excitement of this last tour. I got to see three of the concerts at various checkpoints along the tour. (That's not counting the brilliant IMAX showing of the Brazilian 'free' concert) I saw the Hollywood Bowl, The Forum (in Inglewood, Ca.) and the MGM Las Vegas shows.

There are two things I find very interesting about the whole Stones phenomenon:

First: I always feel really bad for the opening group. It doesn't matter who it is. They are usually treated in a way teetering between indifference and the polite indulgence you reserve for a conversation with your crazier relatives. It could be a fan tradition. Maybe it's a belief fans have that 'no one could hold a candle' to these guys. Either way, the audience is only around 30 percent full when the opening act comes on.

Second: It's pretty much the same story each time, so it's the nuances that are focused on. It is very much like the retelling of a favorite story. You know how it's going to go – and that's part of the pleasure. The skill is in the execution – and those slight variations. I've heard the boys get a little antsy playing the same stuff, too. Hence, they're always working on different arrangements, that way everyone wins.

Since the tour is in support of the new CD **A Bigger Bang**, it's a bit of a balancing act. They've got to play a few of the new songs, but everyone there REALLY wants to hear

the old classic tracks. The good news is, the current CD is the best one they've put out in a lot of years. It's one of those that the more you hear it, the better it gets. By the end of the tour, I really wanted to hear more tracks off the newer CD.

HOLLYWOOD BOWL:

My adventure started at the beginning of the tour, late in 2005. They had not played this venue since 1966. I suspect that some of the same hot dogs from 1966 are still on those rollie things they cook hotdogs on at the concession stands.

The crowd was very mixed. Very old, very young, hard core fans, curiosity seekers, glitterati, anything you could think of. The atmosphere was very much like a carnival.

The opening act I felt sorry for that night was Joss Stone. She was amazing. *(continued)*



**THE SET FOR THE EVENING:**

Jumping Jack Flash
Oh No Not You Again
Sway
Far Away Eyes
Worried About You
Tumbling Dice
Midnight Rambler
Gimme Shelter
This Place is Empty
Happy
Miss You
Rough Justice
Respectable
Honky Tonk Women
Sympathy For The Devil
Start Me Up
Brown Sugar
**You Can't Always Get
What You Want**
Satisfaction

A personal favorite from the night: the Ray Charles tune *Night Time is the Right Time*. It doesn't get much better than that.

Another variation in this tour was the inclusion of a movable stage. The center part of the main stage rose up, and was walked forward during the concert, putting the band on an island another 30 paces or so into the audience. The effect of this simple move was amazing, because it broke the unspoken barrier of the stage and the audience, creating a feeling of real intimacy.

The Hollywood Bowl is an outdoor venue, which allowed for a little bit of pyrotechnic fun.

When *Sympathy for the Devil* reached its crescendo, red flares around the top of the bowl matched the wild, red spectrum lights

framing the jumbotron on back of the stage wall. It was perfect, and that's what you get from 30 years of practice.

The audience was still 'Woo Woo-ing' all the way out to the parking lot at the end of the night.

THE FABULOUS FORUM:

A couple of months later, in the Spring of 2006 they performed at the Forum in Inglewood, California.

This crowd was a little older, and a bit grittier. Sure, there were a couple of stars sprinkled in, but by and large it was a working class crowd. Lots of old biker looking guys and their female companions.

The Forum is an old venue that's been converted to a Baptist church. The church rents it back for a performance now and again. I swear the same seats are in the house from the 1970s. It feels very retro and very intimate for a larger venue.

Right from the first song, you could tell the night was going to be magic. There was a crazy energy in the air. The guys were spot on and keyed up. Charlie even said something during the band intro!

Now I don't know if it was the weather, the vibe of the venue, or something in the band's cornflakes, but they put out 120 percent that night. There were times I wondered if the roof was going to pop off the old building. *(continued)*

Another one of the seldom played in concert songs was *Sway*, from the **Sticky Fingers** album.

That's the beauty of having a massive catalog, there's a lot to pick from.

Another special moment was during *Far Away Eyes*. There was something very perfect about hearing the line 'Well the preacher went right on saying that all I have to do is send ten dollars to the Church of Sacred Bleeding Heart of Jesus located somewhere in Los Angeles, California,' while in an actual church. Priceless.

When the movable stage moved forward, it actually crossed to the other side of the venue. The effect was electrifying. It was like having the band in your living room.

After the whole concert was over, I kept thinking, 'was it me, or was that an extra special amazing event that came down this evening?' So, I asked my fan/stalker pal that was also there. He's seen them so many times, in so many cities, over so many years.

His answer was: **'Dude, That's it. I'm not going to see them again on this tour. Nothing could top that. Seriously.'** That was, with out a doubt, the best concert I've ever seen.

But, I went to see em again, in Vegas....

MGM, LAS VEGAS:

At the end of the tour, one of their last American venues was the MGM in Las Vegas.

Once again, I was struck by the fact that **this could be the end of the road.** *(continued)*



HIDDEN MESSAGES

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A lot of stuff had come down, during the tour – They had cancelled a few shows due Mick having problems with his voice, the Keith falling out of the tree incident (and subsequent skull drillage), and finally – Mick's father was sick. Right up until show time, there was a great deal of talk about a cancellation. The press reported the band had flown to the UK to see Mick's father. His father passed away while they were flying back to the gig.

The show did go on.

The crowd was 'eclectic' as can only be found in Las Vegas. **The best visual in the crowd for the night had to be the two middle aged women with flesh colored nubby devil horns glued directly to their foreheads.** You don't see that everyday.

The opening act was the long time friend of the band, Bonnie Raitt. She mentioned that her first big break was opening for the Stones in the 70s. It was the warmest reception I've seen for a Stone's opening act, ever. She played a long and amazing set. Of course, it featured lots of blues and slide guitar.

When the Stones took to the stage, it was a very interesting moment. It was very emotionally charged, a mixture of empathy and thankfulness perhaps.

It was an amazing show in it's own way, if only to see the dynamic of the band. Mick was in a very chatty mood. He seemed cheery – but, I'm thinking it was the stiff upper lip thing. Keith and Ron were stepping in and kicking it up a notch. On this show it was their night.

There was a very humanizing aire about the whole evening.

Shattered is always fun to hear live. It's one of those songs where literally everyone in the audience is singing along. If you haven't heard *Streets Of Love* off the new album, you might want to take a listen. The performance that night was particularly good. I'm hoping someone captured it somewhere.

The biggest surprise had to be the Keith set. Normally, about half way through the concert, Mick gets a break to go freshen up while Keith does a couple of his tunes. This is when I would normally go buy a beer. That night, there was a little pixie dust on Keith, so I didn't go in search of a beverage. Thank goodness. The guitar work on *You Got the Silver* along with his gravelly vocals merged perfectly. A quick transition later was the seldom heard classic *Connection*. It was a shining moment.

Now that the tour is over, and we're all sitting in our (figurative) rocking chairs with time for quiet contemplation, you have to wonder 'what's next?'

Really and truly, could this be the last tour? I mean really, Cher had 16 or so farewell tours. And don't forget about Ozzy.

So you never know what they're up to.

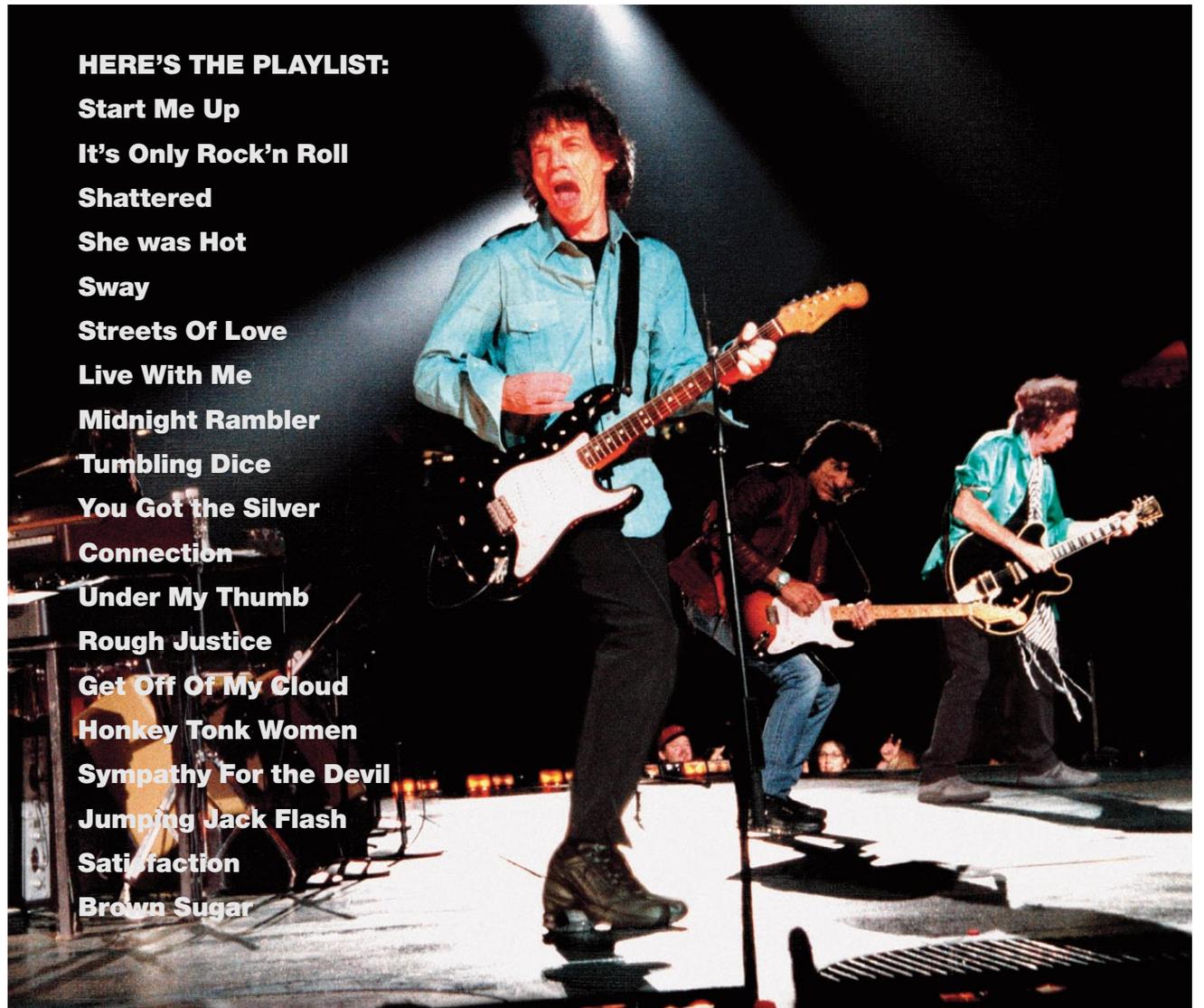
Here are my theories, you can pick your favorite. We'll come back to visit this in a couple of years.

1. The band continues using propriety medical technology only available to the ridiculously wealthy to hold them together.
2. Portions of the band tour, maybe a Mick solo tour with members that feel like showing up.
3. In a bunker somewhere, a design team from Pixar/Disney is working on a Keith Richards animatronic. The trouble is, it's too life-like...

Whatever happens, I'm pretty sure I'll be there waving my stack of dollar bills (if not a tongue flag). ●

HERE'S THE PLAYLIST:

Start Me Up
It's Only Rock'n Roll
Shattered
She was Hot
Sway
Streets Of Love
Live With Me
Midnight Rambler
Tumbling Dice
You Got the Silver
Connection
Under My Thumb
Rough Justice
Get Off Of My Cloud
Honkey Tonk Women
Sympathy For the Devil
Jumping Jack Flash
Satisfaction
Brown Sugar



Audiophile Recordings

This issue we have a somewhat expanded list of audiophile discs for you to peruse, with more of us getting into the act. I have covered the standard MoFi and Classic releases, while our classical man, Dan Babineau has covered three DVD-A discs from High Definition Tape Transfers, a new arrival on the scene. Jerold O'Brien put down his soldering iron long enough to listen to a pair of new CDs from Work of Art, the first two releases on Barry Diament's Soundkeeper Label.



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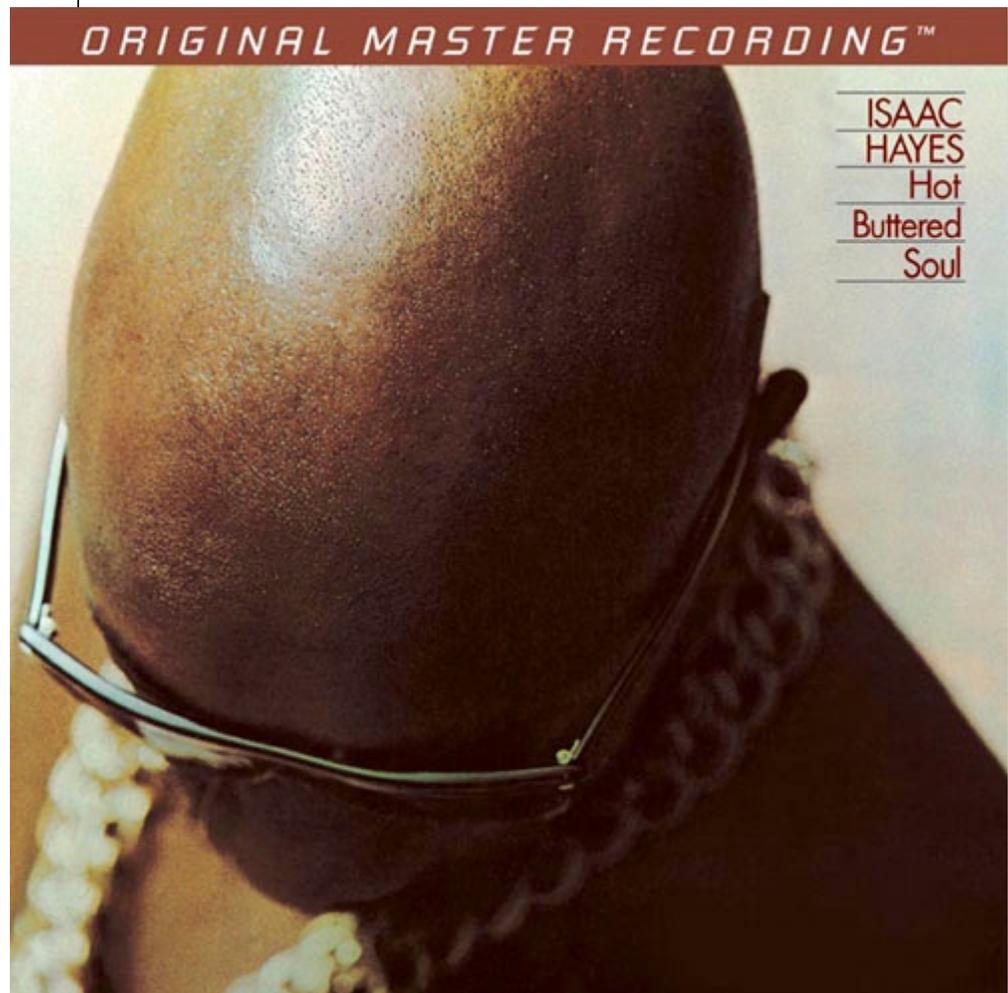
— Jeff Dorgay

ISSAC HAYES — Hot Buttered Soul MoFi LP

This is one super cool and funky record, however because I've been watching South Park for so many years now, whenever I listen to Issac Hayes I just see Chef singing and I crack up.

Putting that silliness aside, I really enjoyed this record a lot. Originally produced in the July of 1969, featuring Issac Hayes recording in the STAX/Volt studio and the results are fantastic. There are only four songs on the record and they are all somewhat of an extended soul mix, from the 12-something rendition of *Walk on By*, to the completely out there *Hyperbolic-syllabicsesquidalmystic*. The first song on side two, *Woman*, is a classic crooner song about an extracurricular relationship gone awry; definitely something Chef would explain to the kids in the lunch line.

But the classic rap here is the last song, an 18-plus minute rendition of *By the Time I get to Phoenix*, where Mr. Hayes goes on to tell us about how 'he has to do it his way and he wants us to travel with him.' Reading the great liner notes, there is a great discussion about how the engineer experimented with a lot of different echo techniques to make Issac Hayes sound 'like he was in a big room with a blue spotlight on him.'



I have to say that as many times as I had heard this song on the radio back in the day, **I never gave it anywhere near this much thought, nor do I think I will ever give it this much thought again.** But, in the best In-na-gadda-da-vida tradition, it becomes an extended jam that I guarantee you will revisit.

In the end, it's a great record that sounds quite good too. Definitely a keeper.

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JOHN LENNON — Mind Games MoFi LP

Arguably one of the more notable John Lennon albums and certainly one of my personal favorites, this one was also mastered by Paul Stubblebine and has had a bit of controversy surrounding it, because there are some that argue that they have hot stamper pressings that are better than this release.

However, my criteria for an audiophile pressing has always been: is it better sounding or at least quieter than what I can put my hands on TODAY. (or does it possess better fidelity than the old copy I already own)

In both cases, this record passes with flying colors. If you are one of the fortunate ones to possess a very low numbered import pressing of this, no need to worry, but if like me you bought it at Columbia House or your local record store long after it was released, go to the MoFi site and grab one of these before they are gone.



**PLASTIC ONO BAND —
Live Peace in Toronto 1969**

I have to admit that even though I am a huge Beatles fan, I thought Yoko Ono ruined the band and had precious little talent to boot, so at first go, I wasn't too thrilled with the idea of listening to this record and was not extremely familiar with it.

A quick look at the credits show that none other than Eric Clapton, Alan White and Klaus Voorman were in the band along with the evil one, so I started to get more interested. After pulling the shrink-wrap, a John and Yoko 2007 calendar fell out and I was getting more impressed. I put this baby in a ziplock bag right away, and plan on selling it on Ebay in about 20 years!

Side one is a pretty groovy recording of this live event and mastering engineer Paul Stubblebine did a great job. I had heard this back in the day a couple of times and it was really dreadful, so hats off to Mr. Stubblebine here. Fortunately, even though Yoko is listed as a vocalist, you can only hear precious little of her on side one.

But side two is a different story. Featuring a heartfelt rendition of *Don't Worry Kyoko* and *John, John*, this just isn't anything I can warm up to. I didn't get it then and I still don't get it today. If you haven't heard any of Yoko's solo work, you are in for a treat/torture.

My grandfather used to say 'one man's princess is another man's pig' so, if you are a Yoko fan, this record will be a true gem. If you are just a John Lennon fan, buy this one for the cool calendar and side one...



Carole King — **Tapestry** Classic Records

This is by no means a current release, but one of my favorite records. Not a terribly good recording and the CD copy I have is probably one of the worst sounding CDs I've ever heard. Arguably, Carole King was one of the best female singer/songwriters of my generation, so hearing the Classic Records remaster of this record is good news indeed.

Almost every song on this record went on to become a hit, and many of them went on to be hits when covered by other artists as well.

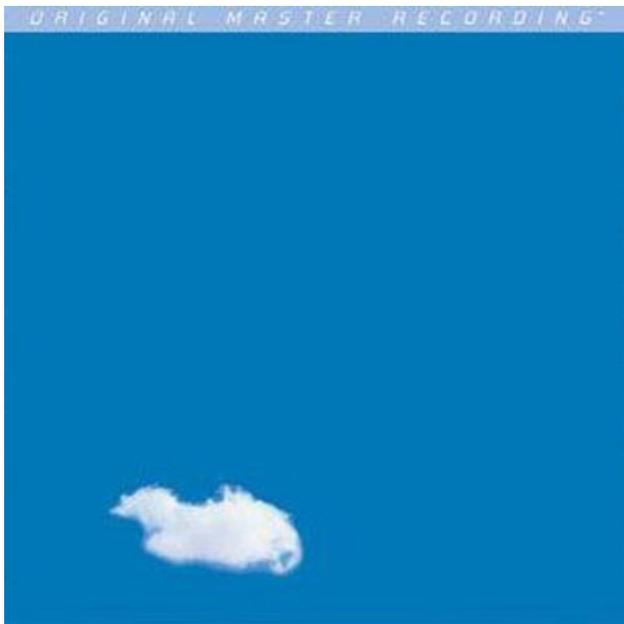
Though the recording here is still a touch compressed, it's a clean master and is also nice and quiet, thanks to the Quiex vinyl. If this music spoke to you and you have a lousy copy, go to your favorite audiophile record vendor and pick one of these up.

ALISON KRAUSS + UNION STATION
— Live
MoFi LP

Honest, I tried really hard to like this, but it's just not my bag. But for the rest of you that are Alison Krauss fans, you are in for a treat. I have to say that this has to be one of the most well recorded live records I have ever heard, following the recent LP trend of only putting a couple of songs on each side for maximum bandwidth. **Honestly, it's hard to believe that this is actually a live recording.**

For those of you with a great system, this record will really show it off and even if you have a mediocre system, it will make your system sound a lot better than it usually does. Just don't play it when I'm over, because I don't do banjos, there's not enough room on my porch.

If you haven't heard the work of AKUS, but are a bluegrass fan, I do think you will enjoy this 3 record set tremendously. You can sample some of the tracks on the Alison Kraus website if you want to get a feel for the scope of songs on this disc, that range from some of her early works to the present.





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JIMI HENDRIX — Classic Singles Collection Classic Records

Now this is just damn cool. A stack of colored 45s that look like a Marshall amp! The bad news is that they just went out of print, so you will probably have to pay over sticker if you want this box set.

The sound quality is decent, but I suggest this one for the coolness factor alone! Even if you are not a huge Jimi fan, I think this box set will make a great conversation piece.



Three Great DVD-As From a Newcomer in the Mastering World

— Dan Babineau

Once in a great while, the planets line up and technology actually delivers an exemplary product. And this is the case with three DVD-A discs that I have had the pleasure of reviewing.

Careful attention to detail paid off and the people at High Definition Tape transfers should be given a hardy slap on the back for their tremendous effort in remastering some first class performances of truly monumental classical works.

To start the process they selected top rated remastering components including Weiss, Studer, Manley, etc. etc. These DVD-A were transferred directly from 'hand-picked' masters and apparently someone at HDTT can hear because these discs are wonderful!

(continued)



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Granted, these performances by William Steinberg and the Pittsburgh Symphony for the *Rachmaninov's Symphony #2*, Peter Maag and the Czech Philharmonic for Dvorak's *Violin Concerto* and last but not least, Robert Mandell and Ars Nova for Stravinsky's amazingly complex *L'Histoire du Soldat* are far beyond the planets and technology. Let's face it; these three recordings are truly benchmark performances – warhorses, to be exact. But this is where the HDTT people grand slam home runs as each of the three DVD-As consistently exhibit grand sonic performance for naturalness, air, tone, pace and unadulterated dynamics.

If you do not like these three diverse pieces of music there may be no hope for you!

I have always said from an engineering standpoint that: **EVERY ASPECT OF THE EQUATION EFFECTS THE OVERALL RESULT** or more simply put: 'It all matters'! And in the case of the HDTT process, the means greatly affected the end results which I will gladly award 5 stars for both sound and performance!

You can purchase these, and the rest in the series at:
www.highdeftapetransfers.com

The Soundkeeper Recordings

— Jerold O'Brien



WORK OF ART — Lift

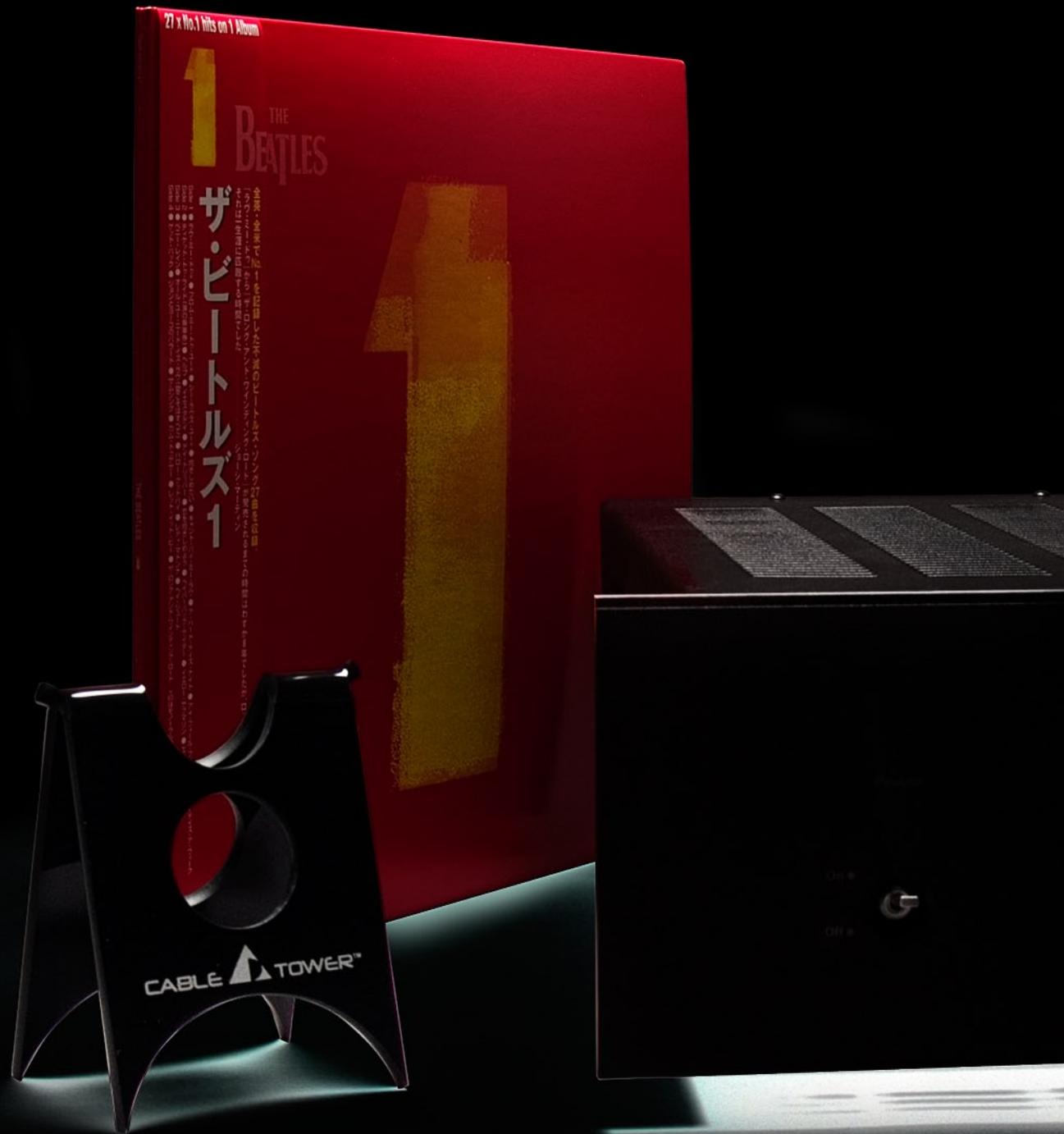
WORK OF ART — Simplicity

When JD tossed these discs at me, I had no idea who Work of Art was, but I knew a lot about Barry Diament, from his career at Atlantic Records. If you haven't heard of BD, check out his resume at www.barrydiamentaudio.com, this guy has had his fingers in a lot of great music over the years, so I jumped on these right away!

Work of Art consists of Art Halperin and his band, from New York City. Interestingly enough, I didn't check out his background until after I heard the CDs and made some mental notes of who's influences I thought I was hearing. **A quick Google search revealed that this cat has played with everyone I had on my list and then some!**

Both of these discs have somewhat of an Al Stewart/Dave Grisman groove to them, so if you like either of these guys I think you will really dig Work of Art. Simplicity has a bit more electronic feel and Work of Art is a bit more on the acoustic side. Damn, this guy is a great guitarist! These records have tons of space between the notes! *(continued)*

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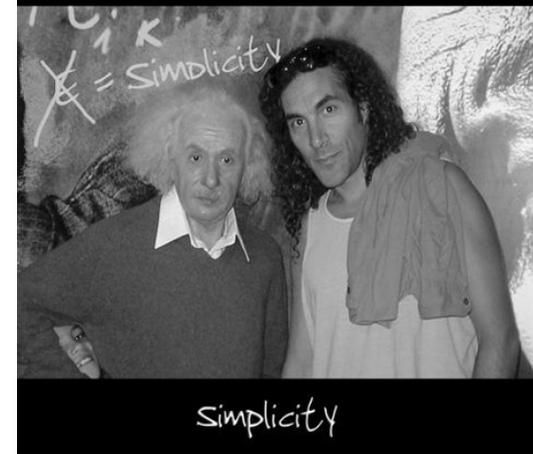


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Work of Art



But what really makes this music shine is the recordings! They both take a somewhat different approach; Simplicity was recorded at NY's Top of the World studios in multi-track, but there is no compression or limiting and the miking techniques are very simple (hence the title). Art plays almost all of the instruments himself, with a bit of help from his bandmates that appear on Lift. Lift was done as a live recording performance at St. John's Episcopal Church in Elka Park, NY. with just a pair of mics.

Check out Barry's website for all the geeky details, but you can tell that these discs were a labor of love! I know I'm normally the headbanger of the crew here, but these are two great selections for when you are in relax mode. Whether you are a hard core audiophile looking for another great demo disc or just a music lover, I think you will really enjoy these two.

I noticed on the website that these are also available on DVD-A format in full blown 24/96 format, so I'm going to have to get my hands on those, if only to listen to on JD's new Meridian 808! ●



Classical Music A to Z

— Dan Babineau

CLASSICAL MUSIC AND PORNOGRAPHY ARE ALIVE AND WELL IN LAS VEGAS

Well at least for a week or so!

Imagine the contrast, The High-End segment of the Consumer Electronics Show with a subtle backdrop; the Adult Entertainment Convention. That's right, smut-peddlers meet audio geeks. And it looked more like the clown convention had come to town with scantily clad porn-stars sharing the fine digs of the Venetian Hotel with strange looking men carrying heavy pieces of high-end audio gear.

(continued)

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For those of you that have not attended the 'high-end version' of the Consumer Electronics Show here is a simple explanation:

Every year usually in January a fairly large group of manufacturer's of high-end audio components literally take over a portion of a hotel, take out most of the furniture and set up their gear. Then for the next four days a variety of high-end audio retailers, as well as general consumers – namely audiophiles, shuffle in and out of these highly modified hotel rooms in search of 'good sound'. Nothing is more ludicrous to me but it is still fun to see what's new and some of the people attending even like classical music. As a matter of fact in our exhibition room more than half the people sticking around asked us to play classical music of all kinds.

But there was one additional bright spot this year; we got to share the elevator with many of these 'entertainment queens' that were attending their show.

I'm not altogether privy to what they do at their 'Adult Entertainment Show,' but I do know that the Venetian Hotel staff had the foresight to play classical music in all of their elevators to calm weary gamblers, hotel guests, audio enthusiasts, porn-stars and their 'managers'. We're not talking light classical or elevator music, we're talking Beethoven, Wagner, Prokofiev, Mozart, Schubert, Rossini, Verdi and a little too much Andrew Lloyd Weber, you know – 'Phantom of the Boredom'!
(continued)

And to my utter amazement – small pun – one morning before the high-end show began I got on the elevator with one of these treasures of the adult entertainment industry. She was bending down to fix one of her 8 inch clear plastic platform shoes and I had to ask: ‘How can you walk in those things?’ (I mean, I was definitely on my game with that line). She politely responded, ‘I really don’t have to walk far at all, my manager will pick me up at the tenth floor in a wheelchair and whisk me off to my shoot,’ (that’s photo shoot for you rookies out there). ‘Now may I ask you a question?’ she smiled.

I’ll admit I was almost ready for anything at this point but all I could get out was – ‘Yes, shoot!’ And here is what she said as she pointed up to the speaker in the roof of the elevator: ‘I love this movement of the Mozart Clarinet Concerto, but isn’t the tempo a bit off?’ (I could now breathe again). I smiled and agreed that it was a bit fast: ‘probably was not the great-

‘Perhaps you’d like to visit our showroom and hear more great classical music?’

est performance or recording. But do you like classical music?’ I asked rather shocked. ‘Yes,’ she said, ‘I used to play B flat clarinet all the way through

college and even had a chance to play with Andrew Litton and the Dallas Symphony Orchestra.’ Unfortunately, at that comment the elevator arrived at the tenth floor. And just as she’d said, her manager was waiting, wheelchair and all. She hopped in and waved goodbye. Just as she was sped away I shouted: ‘Perhaps you’d like to visit our showroom #29-110 and hear more great classical music?’ She just smiled and the elevator door closed. Imagine if she had shown up at our showroom with all those geeky audiophiles milling about? Why, we’d find out the true definition of ‘jaw-dropping!’

All kidding aside, I really do enjoy these audio shows. Great music, great people and I learn something at every show. At this show I spent a good deal of time talking to a variety of classical musicians that went out of their way to comment and compliment this very column Classical Music A to Z. It’s great to meet new people and get new ideas and insights.

As I proceed forward I will get a little more technical about various compositions or types of music. Structure, invention and musicality. Just as Prokofiev took a giant step back to the Classical era with his first symphony, I will attempt to tie as much together as possible to give you the deepest respect and understanding of this amazing musical genre. And no one illustrates structure, invention and musicality better than our first composer for this segment: Franz Joseph Haydn.



FRANZ JOSEPH HAYDN (1732-1809): For whatever reason, Haydn dropped the Franz part of his given name early in his life and went on to be one of the most influential creators of classical music to have ever lived; and a long, prolific life it was. Joseph Haydn is credited with developing the basic structure of the classical symphony. This not so small task is something that many other composers had attempted but only Haydn had the insight, inventiveness and fortitude to establish the template for what was to become classical symphonic form: the foundation of all classical music to follow. Widely called the ‘father of the classical symphony’, Haydn churned out a whopping 104 numbered symphonies with Symphony A and Symphony B bringing his total up to an astonishing 106 symphonies. You could spend the greater part of your life digesting these works and still never run out of admiration for this musical evolution. Not to mention Haydn’s dedication to perfecting the classical string quartet. Mozart admired and studied with Haydn as did Beethoven to a lesser extent. In his lifetime Haydn was appreciated and rewarded, deserving every accolade awarded to him. His devotion to classical symphonic form alone became the starting point for all future classical composers. *(continued)*

Widely called the ‘father of the classical symphony’, Haydn churned out a whopping 104 numbered symphonies.

His basic symphonic form starts with an **Introduction** to draw in the audience and is then followed by an **Exposition**. In the Exposition basic themes are presented and sometimes there are changes in tone and structure. The **Developmental** stage is next, here the central themes of the work go through key changes and shifts both tonally as well as tempo. Recapitulation comes next, and in this stage he returns to the home key bringing order back to the work, usually re-submitting the music of the Exposition but slightly modified. Finally a **Coda** to close down the work. And this form works so magnificently that it just seems easy! I once started writing a Rock song following this form and it just freaked me out. The raw power and organization of this musical style clearly established classical music as the musical genre that would become timeless.

From the early symphonies with their 'storm and stress' to his middle period where he became more inventive and relied on folk music for development of the central themes, Haydn clearly outshined almost every living composer of his time. Haydn became

You must start with Haydn if you're going to grasp the Classical era or orchestral music as a whole!

pen the twelve London symphonies. These late symphonies clearly illustrate the musical evolution of a man that started out with nothing.

It is said that at age 17 Haydn's voice changed and he was sacked from his choir position at St. Stephen's Cathedral. He was literally thrown out on the streets, penniless with little support from friends or family. And from this pathetic beginning, Joseph Haydn produced one of the largest and most majestic music offerings ever to be penned by one man!: 106 symphonies, two cello concertos, a trumpet concerto, a cornucopia of strings quartets, piano sonatas and trios, over twelve masses (Haydn was a devout Catholic), some less popular operas, and brilliant vocal works that he completed late in his long life.

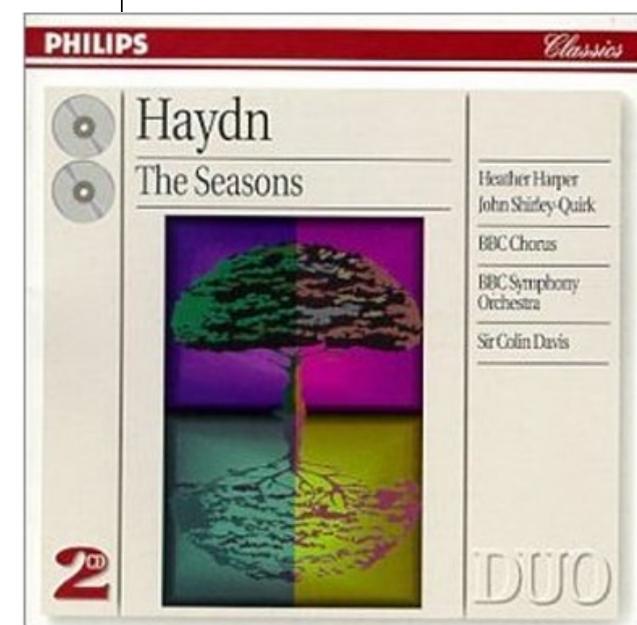
You must start with Haydn if you're going to grasp the Classical era or orchestral music as a whole! If you spend enough time with the work of this musical genius' from Austria, your life will be more complete and you too will become more

focused, more refined and more enchanted by this energy and raw fortitude that Haydn's music clearly exemplifies. (But I'm not biased!)

DAN'S PICKS: I could spend weeks listing all of the excellent recordings of Haydn's music, but there are some basics that no fan of classical music should be without: First and foremost, purchase a set of the complete symphonies. I guarantee you'll never tire of the energy and ultimate refinement of these works! On vinyl the complete symphonies on Decca with Antal Dorati and the Philharmonica Hungarica can still be found for a reasonable sum. This 12+ box set with supplements is one of the most rewarding treasures on my record shelf. (Just be sure to get someone to help you haul it in to your library).

A little more convenient alternative, with good sound and solid performances can be found on the 33 disc set on Brilliant Classics #99925 which features Adam Fischer and the Austro-Hungarian Haydn Orchestra. For the symphonies I also like Adrian Shepard and the Cantilena on Chandos #6579. Thomas Fey and the Heidelberg Symphony do a splendid job performing *The Bear* - Symphony # 82 plus #'s 88 & 95 on Hanssler Classics, #98391. For the latter material, I like the 12 *London Symphonies* on DG #000120302 with Eugen Jochum leading three first-class orchestras: the LPO, the BPO & the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra. For me Jochum really captures the inner spirit of Haydn in these diverse performances. The *Surprise* #94, the *Military* #100, the *Clock* #101 and the *London* #104 are probably the most performed but pay attention to all 12 of the 'Londons' as we see the evolution of classical music change before our very eyes and ears!

By all means do not forget Haydn's other material. Don't argue, just go out and purchase both of the cello concertos along with the trumpet concerto. I prefer the classic recording for the cello pieces, Jacqueline Du Pre with Daniel Barenboim and the English Chamber Orchestra for *Concerto#1*. And Ms. Du Pre again performing with Sir John Barbirolli and the LSO for *Concerto #2*. These two pieces can be found on EMI Classics, catalog #66948, along with a killer performance of Boccherini's 9th cello concerto. Compare the two styles; Boccherini is more fluid and carefree where Haydn's two cello pieces carry more weight and definition. (*continued*)





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For the trumpet concerto I have two choices: the first is on Telarc #80232, with Rolf Smeding and the Scottish Chamber Orchestra with Jahja Ling conducting. Another great performance and excellent recording appears on Delos #3001 with Gerard Schwarz and the New York Chamber Symphony. For the string quartets look no further than the exemplary Emerson Quartet on DG #471327. This fantastic 3 disc CD set will bring the dead back to life with additional material in quartet form by such incredible composers as: Bartok, Beethoven, Dvorak, Ives, Mozart, Schubert, and Shostakovich & Webern. Titled the **Haydn Project**, this effort may not be the most accurate in parts.

Performance-wise these works may very well be some of the most fun you'll have with your clothes on.

Last but not least, you have to grab a few of Haydn's chorale works. A good place to start will be the DG/Archiv discs #449217 with John Eliot Gardiner and the English Baroque Soloist/Monteverdi Choir performing Haydn's *The Creation!* And I always have to hear *The Seasons* at least twice a year; another Haydn oratorio with Handel's influence clearly marked. I like Sir Colin Davis and the BBC Symphony & Chorus on Philips #464034.

I hope that I've done Haydn justice in my brief write-up because without his monumental efforts classical music as we know it may never have evolved to what it is today!!



GUSTAV HOLST (1874-1934) Sometimes a composer hits the mark so well with a piece of music that people forget about their other work. This situation was and is very apparent with composers like Johann Pachelbel's *Canon in D Major* or Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* or even the first movement of Beethoven's *5th Symphony*. In the case of Gustav Holst, it was his *Planets* that catapulted him to fame. However, Holst was much more prolific than he gets credit for. A masterful teacher and surprisingly diverse composer with Debussian accuracy and charm, Holst remains one of the cornerstones of English music or should I say the English sound! Along with his school buddies, Elgar and Vaughan Williams, to name a few, Holst developed an amazing amount of original music. Largely ignoring conventional use of metre and relying heavily on folk music, Holst scored some of the most melodious music ever created. He even drew some of his ideas and imagery while studying Hindu spiritualism.

With over 200 cataloged compositions Holst's work never fails to deliver both innovation and musicality. Yes, I love *The Planets* but you have to keep going to get to the real genius behind Holst. His life experiences became the catalyst from which he drew many of his most interesting pieces of music. While teaching at St. Paul's Girl School in Hammersmith he penned two incredible examples of his finely honed craft. His *St. Paul's Suite* was written for a girl's school orchestra. *The Hammersmith Rhapsody*, which came later in his short life, was written to commemorate the city that he had spent a great part of his life.

Believe me, once you start to delve into Holst; the history, the travel and all of the incredible people that Holst associated with during his life, you come to realize just how important this man was to the evolution of 'classical' music. Arnold Bax's brother Clifford is largely given credit for introducing Holst to astrology and from this study of astrology we get *The Planets*. More than program music, Holst takes us far into the heavens for the joy ride of the century and then finishes off mystically reaching for nirvana.

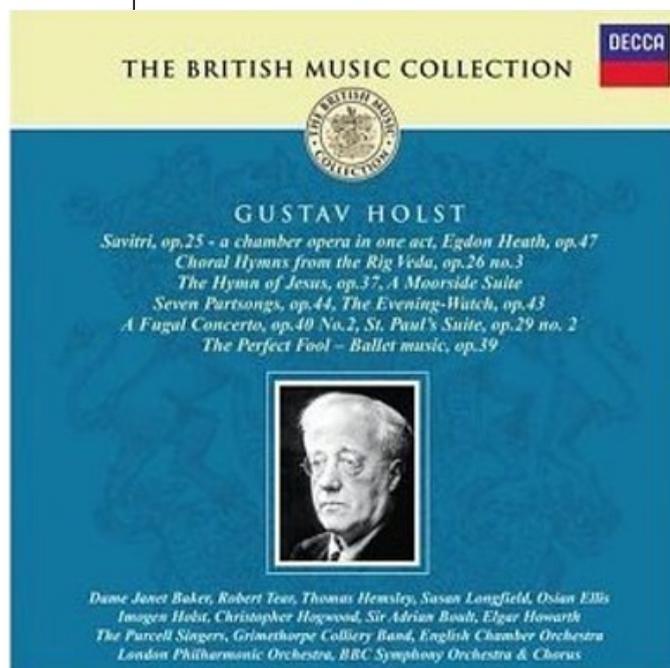
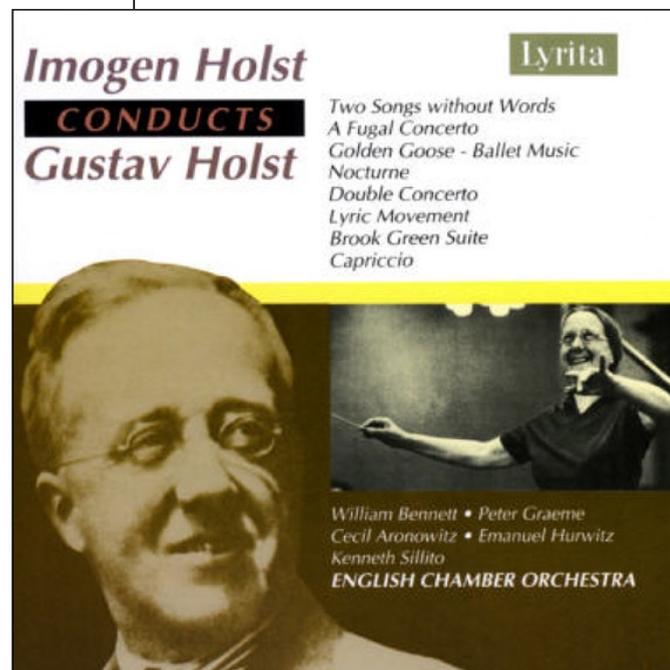
He even wrote crazy amazing music for the British Military band. Beautiful choral music, a few good operas, chamber music, piano music and a killer assortment of music for wind ensemble. I admit a weakness for English woodwind music and Holst is one of the best at this genre. *Quintet for Winds in A Flat Major*, *Terzetto for Flute, Oboe and Viola* and *Duet for Organ and Trombone* are insanely brilliant. Just like Vaughan Williams' *Concerto for Tuba*, Gustav Holst was pushing the musical envelope like no one had before and the result is nothing short of incredible!! (*continued*)

His life experiences became the catalyst from which he drew many of his most interesting pieces of music.

DAN PICKS: Starting with *The Planets* I have two favorites. The first is the warhorse that Sir Adrian Boult laid down in the year 1978 at Abbey Road's Studio #1. On EMI Classics #66749, this disc will take you way above the moon as Boult's understanding and reading of Holst is the benchmark that later day conductors judged themselves. A more modern version is performed by Zubin Mehta, the LA Phil and the masterful LA Master Chorale Women. I enjoy this recording on vinyl but the CD version on Decca #467418 is also very good. The rest of the disc is that sonic blockbuster stuff that I can't handle anymore. And yes there are many other fine recordings of the *Planets* from David Atherton's DVD version with computer graphics to Mr. Blockbuster himself, John Williams and the Boston Pops.

**ALL GOOD!
BUT WAIT, THERE'S MORE!**

How about Gustav Holst's daughter, Imogen, conducting the English Chamber Orchestra in a number of lively pieces, on Lyrita #223: *Songs without Words* and *A Fugal Concerto for Flute, Oboe & Strings*, Opus 40. Richard Hickox and the LSO definitely have a grip on this beautiful music for small orchestra and the Chandos CD #9270 illustrates this fact. On this disc you get all the goodies: *St. Paul's Suite*, *Lyric Movement for Viola*, *Brook Green Suite* etc. I also like the newer recording of Holst's lyrical music on Naxos #8553696 with David Lloyd-Jones and the Royal Scottish National Orchestra. As for the operas I really like my buddy Richard Hickox and the Northern Sinfonia performing the *Wandering Scholar* on Chandos #9734. And speaking of warhorses, you might as well pick up a copy of a Holst compilation 2 disc set on Decca #000200302. This set contains Holst's other opera, *Savitri* along with top rating performances of ballet music, hymns and assorted choral music.



So, we did not get very far this issue in our musical sojourn of classical music. It is next to impossible to rush through the likes of both Haydn or even the underrated Gustav Holst. Next issue I will attempt enlighten you on a few more dynamos of classical music: Gustav Mahler and the one and only Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

We finally left the Las Vegas Consumer Electronics Show in a wind storm, through seventy mile an hour winds in a cargo van that fortunately, was loaded down with high end audio gear! Still, I felt like I was surfing the wind. Interesting enough, all I could think about was that porn-queen in the elevator. Yes, classical music truly does transcend all boundaries. I wonder if she'll ever get back to playing her clarinet? I can't wait to ask Andy Litton about her audition! ●

A Quick Chat With Charlie Hunter





If you haven't heard of Charlie Hunter, stop reading right now, click here www.charliehunter.com and buy some CDs! He's been around since the early '90s but his first major release on Blue Note in 1995 **Charlie Hunter Trio Bing, Bing, Bing!** put him on the map. This was actually when my world collided with his. I was hanging out in Phoenix at the Border's in the Biltmore Fashion Park one day perusing the new releases. Charlie's disc was at all the listening stations; so I put a pair of headphones on to check it out.

Little did I know I was in for a major treat. While paying plenty of respect to the world of traditional jazz, Charlie Hunter puts his own spin on all of his music. The highest compliment I can pay him is that he doesn't sound like anyone else and that's a tough task to muster these days.

Once I got home with the disc and spent more time with it, I got around to reading the album notes and realized that there was no bass player on the record, this guy plays an eight string guitar, that's 2/3rds guitar and 1/3 bass! Now I was really impressed! In the years that passed, I have bought every one of Charlie's 13 CDs and you should too.

Charlie was able to spend a little time chatting with me about his life and music, past, present and future. Here's what he had to say:

TONE: One of the highest compliments I can pay you besides the fact I love your music is that you don't sound like anyone else to me, you really have a distinct flavor and that's hard to do nowadays!

CH: (laughing) Thanks man, I appreciate the support!

TONE: However I did notice that you used to take lessons in the old days from Joe Satriani. Do you two still stay in touch?

CH: Not really, but he's a great guy and he was a great teacher when I was at that point in my life. He has been to a few of my shows though!

TONE: Does your mom still repair guitars? Did she build your first 8-string?

CH: No, my Mom is retired from that now. She just repaired guitars; the 8-string in this configuration (part bass, part lead) was pretty much my invention, as far as I know.
(continued)



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TONE: I have to admit I freaked out, when I looked at the cover notes and saw that there was no bass guitar! As I've never had the privilege of seeing you live, that's gotta be damn hard to pull off! How DO you keep it straight, or do you take a bass player on tour these days just to give your fingers a rest?

CH: It's all me, even live. It's a process that has taken me about fifteen years and I'm still exploring. Perhaps one of these new kids will come along and figure out what it's taken me so long to learn in a year or two and then take it to the next level.

TONE: Electrically, how does that work? Does one cable go from the bass pickups to the bass amp and one to a lead amp?

CH: Exactly, I use two separate amps on stage.

TONE: I can't believe I missed you on Conan, way back then. Done any other TV or movie stuff since?

CH: (laughs again) Well, that was a long time ago! Conan was a great guy and he really enjoyed our music, but that kind of thing is always what I call a "Belly of the Beast" kind of gig. But it was good to have done, even if it didn't sell any records. We did do a thing on NPR about a year ago though, and we sold 5000 CDs the next week!

TONE: Sounded like I heard children in the background when I called yesterday. Are we going to see one of your kids take over on bass some day, like Eddie Van Halen's son? *(continued)*

CH: (big laugh on this one..) No man, I want my kids to get real jobs so they can support me when I get old!!

TONE: With such deep roots in traditional jazz, do you listen to vinyl, CD or both?

CH: I used to be a big vinyl guy, but with little kids running around the house, it just got more and more difficult to manage. I gave all my vinyl to good friends and these days, I just ripped all of my CDs to a couple of big hard drives in AIFF format. I listen to my iPod a lot, especially when I'm on the road.

TONE: Any chance you are a hifi guy, or are you so busy playing you can't be bothered with a good stereo?

CH: I'd like to get a really good stereo one of these days, when the kids get a little older. I have a cool setup with a small pair of Paradigm monitors and an amp that I take on the road so I can listen to music in my hotel room, it's great! I'd also really like one of those Imp amps from Zvex, that looks really cool!

(Watch for an upcoming review from Charlie on the Imp, we are going to try and get one in his hands!)

TONE: What bothers you about listening to recorded music?

CH: Crappy recordings don't bother me as much as crappy mastering.

TONE: What really sparks your creativity?

CH: I've got music going on in my head all the time, but things go in phases, definitely. Most of the time I sit down with my instrument and just let it unfold. You can't force creativity.

TONE: Do you ever wake up first thing in the morning with a song in your head that drives you nuts all day? Like cartoon jingles or really bad disco songs, etc.? *(continued)*



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We like the stuff, and think you will too; but we'll let you be the judge of that with a no obligation audition. Give me a call and let's discuss your system and your goals. We'll get you set up with Shunyata products that will truly unlock the potential of your system.



CH: That would drive me crazy! But if it did happen, I would just have to sit down and play it to death to get it out of my system!

STONE: What is your absolute favorite thing to eat?

CH: That's a really tough toss up between Mediterranean food and Japanese food.

STONE: Do you ever just plug into a big Marshall stack and play Led Zeppelin for laughs?

CH: Well, the closest thing to that was my six string playing in Coalition of the Willing. That was some pretty wild stuff...

STONE: That being said, your current album has a much more rock, almost prog feel to it in parts. Very groovy I might add.

CH: Now that it's 2007, it's time to stop chasing the Jazz Rabbit. I'm just letting the instrument be what it wants to be.

STONE: Do you sell more of your music direct through your site, or through record stores?
(continued)



CH: Honestly, it's about 50/50. I want people to come and see us play!

TONE: You have been on the East coast for a long time now, any chance you will ever go back west, or are you a New Yorker to stay?

CH: I'd love to come back out West, but I'd miss the trees. Who knows, maybe Portland. I enjoyed playing there. But for now I think we will be staying in New York; the kids are in great schools.

TONE: If you could go back in time and play with one of the old school guys, who would it be?

CH: Oh man, that would be too hard. I think I'd just like to go back and listen to those guys play. Right up front, I'd love to see Buddy Bolden, back before they were even making records!

TONE: When will the next release be available?

CH: We go in the studio next week to start on it. Should be done by this summer.



And with that, we both had to go and pick our kids up from school, so I bid Charlie Hunter adieu. He was a blast to talk to on the phone and seems like a guy who really enjoys his life and his music. You can download some of his tunes from his website, so if you are looking for something to expand your jazz palette with, check him out.

If you live in New York City, you can go see him live in a number of venues; tell him we sent you.

TONEAudio would like to thank **Robert Ailstock** and **The Pour House** in Charleston, South Carolina for supplying us with the live shots of Charlie's performance from October 10, 2006. Please visit their establishment to hear some great music if you are in the area!

www.charlestonpourhouse.com

“I’ll take Female Singer/ Songwriters for \$500, Bob...”

— Nicole Wilson

My Mom and I often like to debate about music and being from different generations, this can get somewhat heated at times. If we ever played against each other on Jeopardy, I would probably win this one, especially if the questions were in the singer/songwriter category.

Once I played Fiona Apple for her and she scrunched up her nose while commenting that her voice was flat. (Art Director Jean says the same thing... -ed.) I told her that she may not be classically trained, however she writes her own music and that her voice did not detract from the experience. My mother disagreed and stated that Barbara Streisand has a beautiful voice and though she doesn’t write her own material, she makes the songs her own with her emotion. I think Barbara sings well but I don’t care to listen to her because I know she’s singing someone else’s lyrics.

So, forget about Barbara for now. Here’s a few of my favorites; on to the lightening round!



The first time I ever heard Iceland’s own Bjork in 1997 I was blown away by her ability to rock beats and use such raw emotion while maintaining a tender feminine side. On **Homogenic** her intensity in songs like *Bachelorette* take her music to new heights. With the use of orchestral strings and dynamic beat she sings the tale of heartbreak. ‘I’m a tree that grows hearts/One for each that you take/ You’re the intruder hand/I’m the branch that you break.’ The grandeur of the song’s drama transforms love lost into art. Other songs like *5 Years* she dares her lover to take her on and complains of boredom of cowards. She seems to just want to leap head first into love and journey the adventure.

This album has some of the best beats, excellent for dancing! She is so brave artistically and **Homogenic** is an excellent reflection of her ability to take risks artistically and produce a very unique sound.



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No one is sexier on the microphone than Tori Amos; you can see her in your mind singing by the way she will breathe on the mic. I listened to **From the Choirgirl Hotel** from 1998 often because the techno mix was new for Amos and I was not a stranger to glow sticks at the time myself.

A friend of mine in social studies slipped me a tape of her first album and I've been a big fan ever since. Her lyrics deliver trauma and heartbreak in such a soothing nature which is both alarming and admirable. Her meaning remains notoriously cryptic on most of the songs but *Jackie's Strength* and *Northern Lad* have her beautiful piano and sincere storytelling. In *Playboy Mommy* I believe she is singing to her unborn daughter that she miscarried early in production of the album. **The song seems regretful and grieving yet Tori clings to her pride and tells her to be brave.**

Amos's talent overflows as a singer/songwriter. Her songs on this album are a bit melancholy but still remain rich with sincerity.



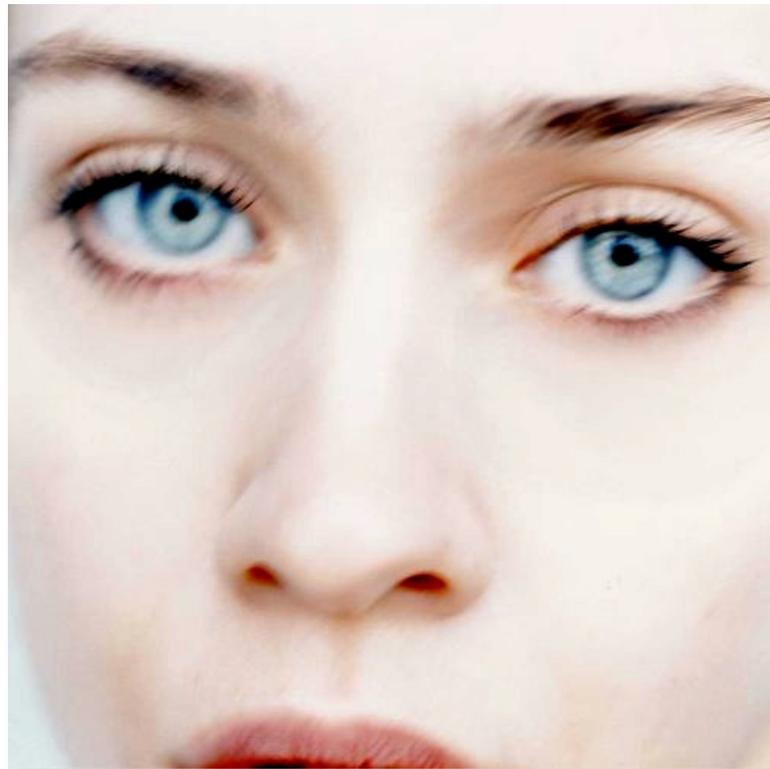
During the winter months I always want to listen to Jewel's **Spirit** because of her gentle nature and romantic lyrics that are the equivalent to watching a serious chick flick. **Spirit** followed her debut album but was never huge due to her somewhat naive lyrics and polished sound. I listened to it with great passion thinking I would be consumed by true love like in her songs. A true hopeless romantic is revealed on *Kiss the Flame* and *Jupiter* where in the latter she sings, 'Fasten me to your side/Say it will be soon/You make me so crazy baby/Could swallow the moon.' *Enter from the East* was and still is my favorite song for the lyrics and intimacy. 'Must have you all to myself/Feel the full weight of your skin/I'll hollow out my insides/To place you in.'

I appreciate that her stories apply to everyone and she holds strong to her hope and earnest desire to love mankind. This album just fits the bill during the winter season; a metaphorical fire for your soul.

Fiona Apple's **Tidal** is **the kind of fire I would never snuggle up to on a cold night; this fire is bursting in angry spurts** from Fiona's heart from the pain of past love and mistrust. In the opening song *Sleep to Dream* she sings, 'Don't even show me your face 'cuz it's a crying shame/Just go back to the rock from under which you came/Take the sorrow you gave and all the stakes you claim- And don't forget the blame.'

Her vindictive demeanor is paired up with her piano and sprinkled with desire and moodiness. Her hit *Criminal* played for years on the radio but that was one of my least favorite on the album. I heard *Shadow Boxer* on MTV and seeing her very thin frame play the piano and sing in that sultry deep voice had me hooked.

She just seems upset that she grew up quickly and dealt with the loss of innocence too soon. Her songs are deeply touching to those who relate and her style is all her own.



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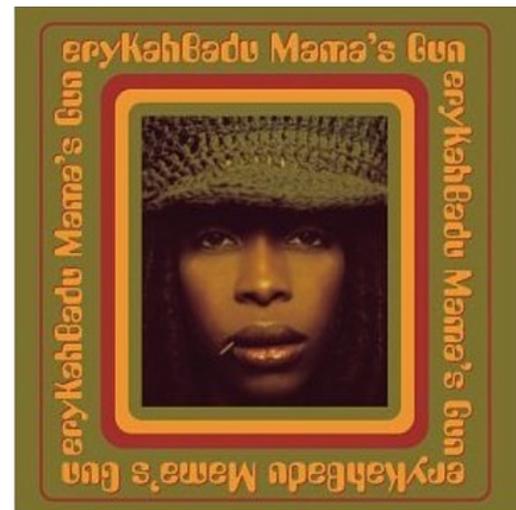
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I was never a huge fan of R&B until I listened to Erykah Badu's **Mamma's Gun**. This is a feel good album that has a little attitude and a lot of soul. Her music is real laid back with a groovy beat and life lessons that every woman needs. *Bag Lady* tells the story of a woman with so much emotional baggage that she can't catch the bus. Songs like *Booty* have the humor 'Ya got a PHD, Magna Cum Laude/But ya nigga love me with a GED/I don't want him....I don't want him cause of what he doin to you.' She sings about her cleverness and her desires but never out of anger and always with an easy feeling. **Mamma's Gun** all the way through is a very enjoyable time with some groovin' and laughing, and a nice moral ending.

I listen to these albums and remember how inspired I was to understand their pain and enjoy their pleasures. **Listening to artists that don't write their own songs is nearly pointless because the song is the experience and the voice is the messenger.**

Classically trained voices are wonderful and have their definite place in music, but for me I love to be entertained by wonderful storytellers. No offense to Barbara or Mom. ●

Club Mix

— Jeff Dorgay

With your host Scott off seeing the Rolling Stones somewhere in the country, we decided to switch places this month. As I have been having a lot of fun listening to a lot of the music from his column, I went a step further and bought some of it on vinyl. I felt this was really staying in character, as so much of this music does start out in clubs on turntables.

All three of the following selections are available on LP or CD from www.audiopharm.com. Should you like these, they have quite a few more in this vein and their compilations are very enjoyable. Over the last couple of years when I've been at Fashion Week in New York City, I have noticed clips of a lot of this stuff getting played on the runways, so it's always fun to bring a little bit of that home. Even if we are just cooking brats, a little style goes a long way!

For the dyed in the wool audiophiles that need to know, as much as I preferred the additional warmth of the LPs (as well as the big boxes), if this kind of music is your bag, I would suggest sticking with the CDs. Warm midrange aside, this stuff is way too heavy on the ProTools and drum machines to really sound great. I'd just buy them all, rip to iTunes and hit play. Any one of these three are great for just relaxing around the house in an ambient kind of mood.



I started out with our first selection, **Afrotronic 2** which I managed to pick up on sale for \$7. This box set had the best sound quality of the three, with a very round bass quality to it that I found very pleasant. The levels were not cranked up as far on this one, which gave the whole project a fairly ethereal quality.

One of my favorite artists, Janice, is on side five, doing *Voodoo Bliss*. This is a very groovy track with some fantastic beats and it almost sounds a little bit like Tosca or Kruder and Dorfmeister. However, the level of music on this set is all good, and I think there will be something for everyone to enjoy. I often listen to this kind of music a lot when I'm editing copy because of its soothing nature. (Or Brahms...)

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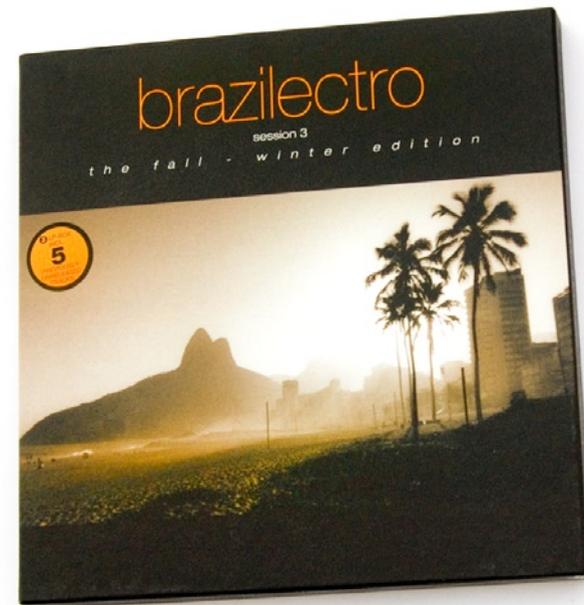
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Moving right along to **Brazillectro vol. 3**, we find Janice doing a few cuts here too, but with a decidedly different flavor. The levels on this LP set are cranked up a bit more and the compression follows it, but hey, we're having fun so who cares.

A casual outsider to this music might think that the music in **Afrotronic** and **Brazillectro** are somewhat similar, but there is a big difference; there is a lot more percussion going on here as well as more sax bits sprinkled in. The female vocals here also have more of a Jazz feel, almost a lot like some of the **Verve Remixed** tracks, so if you enjoyed those discs, I think you will enjoy these as well.

These would be the discs that I would play partway through the party, to uplift the mood a bit and keep things moving along. Definitely not the stuff to play at chill hour.



WHICH LEADS US LAST BUT NOT LEAST TO THE NOVA SOUL COLLECTION

Perhaps even a bit more upbeat than the Brazilelectro collection, dropping the needle on the **NOVA Soul** collections first side had a definite Stevie Wonder groove to it, sped up a bit. Imagine Stevie's **Innervisions** with an extra dance groove track and a can of Red Bull... The first track is pretty bouncy, but the rest of the side is very chill indeed. It definitely pays homage to some of the disco greats. You can hear the 70s and 80s disco beats at work until you flip the album over and then it starts to sound a bit more contemporary. The rest of the set bounces around rather playfully.

As an old timer, I'm always amused at how much of this music is so derivative of the stuff we used to listen to back when Scott and I spun records in a club. Definitely very groovy stuff. I'm even hearing some Sly and The Family Stone bits and if I didn't know better some Jamiro-quai riffs as well. It's like playing musical Trivial Pursuit!

Again for you hard-core audiophiles, too much Pro Tools on this one, but for the rest of you fun loving party types, I guarantee this collection will have people dancing around your house. However, dance is not a medium in which I choose to express myself.

All in all, another really fun collection from the folks at Audiopharm.

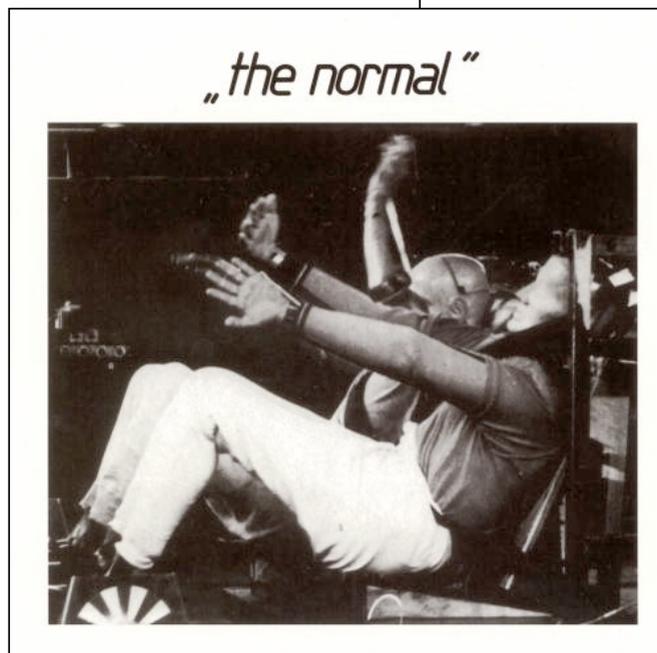
HERE'S A COUPLE FROM THE VAULT

While some of you might recognize Mute records when listening to Miss Kittin, Goldfrapp or Virgin Prunes, you might not know that it all started with one man (Daniel Miller) and one single, *Warm Leatherette*. Though this catchy tune has been covered by Grace Jones, Miller is the one that brought us the original version. If you own a vinyl copy on 45 or 12" single, with *TVOD* on the flipside, you are a lucky person indeed!

For a great interview with Daniel Miller, check this out:

<http://finelinefeatures.com/crash/cmp/warm-interview.html>

I dusted off the 12" for this article, long a New Year's Eve favorite and gave it a spin. If there was ever an audiophile club disc, this is it! Big sound and haunting vocals. If I hear someone playing this at CES next year, I'll buy you a glass of your favorite adult beverage!



HAGERMAN

MUSIC



Before there were trendy VW ads, and when we were just hipsters (not aging hipsters) Trio was another cool band from Germany that was somewhat punkish. Slightly trippy, they made their way into clubs all over the country. Another classic on vinyl, this one is a complete blast to drag out at party time; some of the lyrics are German some are in English, so it's a ton of fun. The famous *Da Da Da* isn't till the second side, so your friends will really freak out when they finally hear it and go 'that's the Volkswagen ad song!' To which you act mega cool and tell them that you've had it for years – on vinyl!

Giving it an extended listen again, it almost has a Lou Reed feel to it. Actually, these guys sound better than Lou Reed! Definitely a sparse guitar and gravely vocal feel with a little German feel. If you can find one on LP, check it out! The great news is that both of these gems are now available on CD, so even if you are not a vinyl person, you can buy 'em at Amazon! ●

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

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

However, accurate waveform reconstruction is insufficient. It's about enjoyment, musicality and emotional involvement (tears held back, spine tingle, or a lump in the throat), the transcendental connection through space and time between musician and listener. Such amplification is not easy to achieve and does not come from a data sheet or reference manual. Only through a process of experimentation and invention can true progress be realized.

As a designer, I exploit a naturally irrational and chaotic thinking as a means for creative breakthrough. Innovation is unpredictable, but long-term intellectual deliberation and an open mind have often led to practical and novel advancements. It takes more than just a blind obligation to the latest trend or boutique component. Most limitations are architectural, requiring attention to circuit topology and system synergy, which is exactly where my skill set lies. I sweat the details, and it pays off.

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Slummin'

— Jeff Dorgay

During the Christmas season, I had a few opportunities to check out some new goodies that looked like great fun. Besides, I was already in the shopping mode, so why not pick up a few things for myself while I'm at it? If you haven't guessed by now, I'm the world's greatest rationalizer!!

LOOK MAGAZINE —
County Antique Fair, \$40

Who could pass up the issue with John Lennon on the cover, taken by the world-famous Richard Avedon? The good news is that this one is in fantastic shape, and it is soon to be digitized and printed HUGE in my listening area. AND, there is a cool, fold out poster of the Beatles inside to boot! So the next time your wife wants to drag you to one of these things, tag along – you just might find something cool!



KLH MODEL 18 TUNER

— Echo Audio, \$75

A little expensive for a Slummin' purchase, I couldn't pass this one up. When I was paying for the Phase Linear 400 at the beginning of the magazine, I spotted this one out of the corner of my eye. Certainly no 10B, the little KLH ten does a nice job at getting my local classical station and that's all it needs to do!



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MUSICAL FIDELITY X-10D

— Ebay, \$50

Remember these? This was a cool little tube buffer stage that all the titans of the audio industry said made your cheap CD players sound like megabucks units and gave them that tubey smoothness.

Know what? It actually works pretty good and it will take the harsh edge off of inexpensive CD playback. Put in a pair of dreamy 12AX7s and you will be surprised at the results!

**JVC 8 TRACK RECORDER**

— EBay, 99 cents

That's NOT a misprint. After reading Ms. Rigby's article on 8-Track tapes on our website and watching a few extra episodes of 'That '70s Show' I was inspired to pick up an 8-track deck of my own.

Not to be outdone, my favorite guys at T.H.E. Show, the NFS Audio room were playing 8 tracks in their room! However, the 99 cent question is, how did the darn thing sound? A little warbly, but great for my vintage garage system. The King of discontinued formats strikes again; I Am Iron Man!! ●



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