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The e-journal of analog
and digital sound.

no.9

2007

SPEAKERAMA!

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DEVORE

STEVE HOFFMAN
SELECTS THE
MCINTOSH MC275

AN AFTERNOON
WITH JAZZ GREAT
DARRELL GRANT

MUSIC VIDEOS
—ANYONE?

MUSIC,
REVIEWS & SO
MUCH MORE

The Conrad- Johnson ART3



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WHO WILL?

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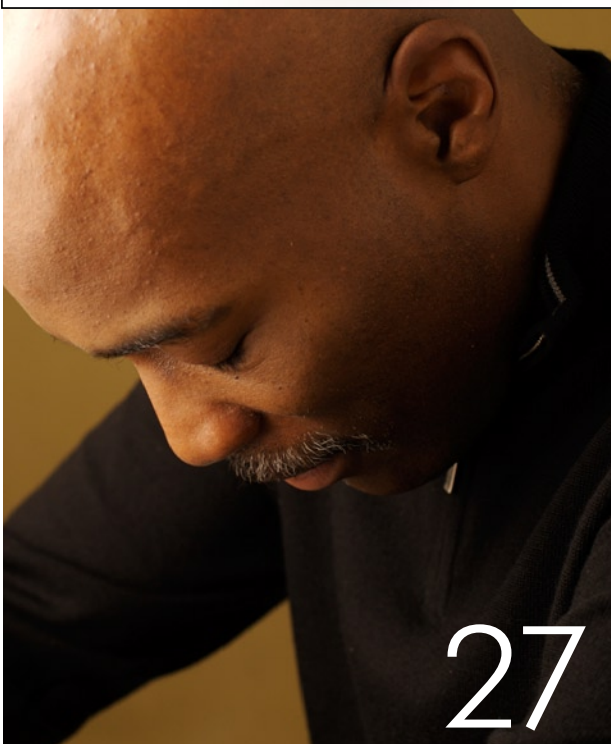


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CHRISTINA KRATZMAN

Christina Kratzman started her career early on with a Playschool piano (the one with colored keys) and rapidly progressed to playing the xylophone with three mallets by third grade. But she tells us that it was a 'short-lived gig' when she picked up the cello, along with the obligatory piano lessons. Exploring the full world of band instruments, she started playing the oboe and moved on to the bassoon, which she still currently plays along with the cello.

Moving on to Bates College, she is looking forward to pursuing a liberal arts education with emphasis in music. Having very eclectic taste, she prefers anything her father doesn't own, but in her own playing alternates between modern and romantic music.

IRV GROSS

Irv Gross just happens to have a day job working at Krell Industries in sales and marketing. With his love for the blues, he will be taking over at the helm of our Blues You Can Use Column.

Having a BA and MA in Philosophy from the University of Colorado, Irv got involved in the audio business in 1979 'because he loved music, and people weren't hiring philosophers!' He moved to Krell in '97 and still enjoys philosophy and music, working with their dealers, customers and the press.

We are very happy to have two more big music enthusiasts on board!



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www.kidrobot.com

PUBLISHER'S LETTER

Greetings loyal readers, we have a lot of new things in store for you this issue!

If you pull any of the TONEAudio staff on the side, they would all tell you the same thing, we're about music. We all got into this pursuit of having a great hifi system so that we could enjoy music more. My initial vision for TONE Audio was to be 50% music and 50% gear. We aren't there yet, but we keep pushing toward that goal for a number of reasons. I would like to see us grow beyond being another niche magazine just serving the audiophile crowd. (Not that we don't appreciate the hard core audiophiles...)

I also feel that it's extremely important to reach out to a younger audience. Many of the people that started out with the pillars of our industry (both the manufacturers and the magazines) are getting a bit long in the tooth, with some of us pushing our 60s. Let's face it, most 60 year olds are simplifying and downsizing.

One of the biggest issues surrounding our industry is how to attract more people. Contrary to popular opinion I think it's going to get easier. Want to know why? Because young girls are just as excited about technology and electronics as young boys are. My own 13-year-old daughter and her friends are a prime example of this. They all have cell phones, iPods and laptops and THEY ALL KNOW HOW TO USE EM!

That's right.

My daughter doesn't need me to hook up her internet connection or load songs on her iPod. She's got it all figured out. Recently, I agreed to let her upgrade her cell phone to the new Motorola Q if she would take a little time to explain all the features to me. We both won, she got to be the kid in school with the coolest phone and I finally know how to get MP3s loaded on my Q.

The bottom line is that we have a whole generation of women growing up that want a good stereo as much as the guys do and that's good news for retailers everywhere. Think of it, a whole generation of guys that don't have to try and hide their electronics or music purchases from their wives and girlfriends anymore. Kind of liberating, huh?

Music is how we bridge the gap.

The best part of this entire age gap thing is that we all like to listen to music. I'd be willing to bet that if you get 100 people in a room and ask them how many like to listen to music that 95 of them will raise their hands. Then if you ask those 95 if they know what VTA means, all but maybe one will give you a blank stare. It starts with music.

I'm confident enough with what I've experienced that when you put the average teenager or 20 something in front of a good system, they will respond, especially if you throw them the remote and let them listen to their music. Granted not all of them will run out and buy 100 thousand dollar systems right away, but none of us did when we were that age either. And if we can't convince enough of them how great listening to music on a good system is, they'll all buy jet skis.

So, don't worry, we will continue our commitment to reviewing great gear. But we are stepping up our game on music coverage in the issues to come because that's where the future is.

I hope you all enjoy the format change.





"I told you those tubes were firecrackers!"

STEVE HOFFMAN SELECTS:



“Can a vintage McIntosh collector find happiness with the new McIntosh gear?”



I've loved McIntosh ever since my mastering engineer buddy Kevin Gray first lent me his pair of 1959 McIntosh MC30 tube amps back in 1992. I was struck at how the sound was suddenly holographic and how realistically they reproduced music that I had heard many times before with my high power amplifiers. Clearly watts were not watts; it was where they came from that counted. I was hooked on tube gear from that moment on. The McIntosh name always gives me that warm, tubey feeling!

Fast forward to 2007. Thanks to our friends at the McIntosh Labs in Binghamton, NY, I have the brand new 'lead free' Mark V version of the MC275. For those of you not up on the latest worldwide ecological trends, all electronic components that are exported to Europe must be free of lead, so that they can be recycled. No more lead solder, ever.

This is a retro looking design but don't let the classic good looks fool you, this is a thoroughly modern sounding tube amplifier.

I was never a big fan of the original MC275 from the early 1960s; too forward and slow sounding, I felt it lacked a lot of the midrange magic of the

smaller Mac amps like the MC240, 225 and my favorite tube rectified MC30s and 60s (the recording studio standard mixing amplifier). After a brief audition of the current MC275 at the CES Show in January I was impressed with the sound and felt that there was a place in the Audiophile Realm for a reasonably priced good sounding amplifier that looked like pure 1961.

So, at the end of January I was informed by the United Parcel Service that a heavy box from a 'Mr. McIntosh from Binghamton, NY' was on coming to me the next day. I had to chuckle over that a bit; talk about what brown can do for me! UPS is so darn serious about everything... *(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.

When I received this big box the next day I was delighted that it said 'McIntosh Labs MC275 Power Amplifier' on the side of the box just like the good old days. **I admit my pulse quickened when I saw the box; even though I have amplifiers in my systems worth 50k, it's a thrill to get something from McIntosh.** I get the same feeling when I get a package labeled 'Leica'.

I just happened to be reviewing a test pressing of Joni Mitchell's **Blue** that I had finished remastering with Kevin Gray (now available on Rhino/WB as a 180 gram LP) when the MC275 arrived. My usual habit when getting a piece of new gear is to drop it cold right in to my mastering playback system and see what happens. This usually separates the men from the un-men, so I carefully unpacked the MC275, slowly seated the stock tubes that came with the unit and brought it upstairs (the thing is pretty heavy, almost 70 pounds!).

Once in my mastering studio I simply plugged my speakers and inputs right into the amp, installed the tube cage (to protect small fingers and small animals), fired it up, sat patiently and read one chapter of William L. Shirer's *Berlin Diary* to give it a chance to warm up a bit. After five minutes, I couldn't stand it anymore, I had to hear it!

I started the song I had been listening to earlier and heard Joni sing '*The wind is in from Africa, last night I couldn't sleep...*'
(continued)

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Well, immediately a big smile formed on my face and a thought, unbidden came into my mind: **"This new McIntosh MC275 could be perhaps the best deal in high-end audio I've ever come across."**

The sound was wonderful, tube-like, that holographic image holding rock solid but not overdone; just right. The sweetness of the sound plus the 'breath of life' in Joni's vocal made for a good duo, but the overall dynamic drive of the amplifier sealed the deal. Needless to say, I was very impressed. It looked just like a 47 year old amp but it sure didn't play like one: No slowness in the bass, no overblown midrange, no overhang, just lifelike sound reproduction. I took off Joni and blasted the Rolling Stones *Jumpin' Jack Flash* just to see how loud I could crank the system before it lost focus. Remarkably, just like every other McIntosh tube amplifier I have ever tried, the sound got BETTER as the amplifier was played LOUDER. Good stuff, and once the MC275 had about 100 hours on it, the sound came together even better.

Of course, the amplifier is not the last word in finesse. At this price point one should not expect everything. But it does many things very well, indeed. My next phase of investigating the MC275 was to try it in several other systems I have. Rest assured, this one plays well with others, and it was easy to mate with all of my other systems too. It finally came to rest downstairs in my living room where I used it as a standalone system with the new McIntosh CD/SACD player, the MCD201. Thanks to Sally Goff at McIntosh, there was another big box from Mr. McIntosh at my door!

The MCD201 is a digital player that has a volume control and balanced (as well as unbalanced) outs to go to McIntosh amps 'directly'. Ron Cornelius, the head product manager at McIntosh swears that a preamp is not needed between the MCD201 and the MC275, so that's the way I used em'. I was eager to try this combination because this could be a painless way to have a top-notch system for not as much money. *(continued)*

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I hooked up the two components using some nifty Kubala-Sosna 'Emotion' balanced interconnects and used my Venture Excellence III speakers with more purple Kubala-Sosna wire. I kept the stock tubes in the MC275 and stock power cords in both Mac components. After a few days of critical listening, I agree with Ron. These two work together well and sound great.

Of course, one could add a preamp or line stage to get that extra flexibility that a good preamp can give but in this case it's not essential; probably the first duo that I've ever said that about. I honestly did not miss the preamp. I have had these going now for a month, every day for hours a day and have had no trouble with either component.

Tube rolling? Well, not essential (yes, you heard me) especially in the power tubes but I like Telefunken 12AX7s so I replaced the stock tubes with those (expect in the first position, not used in the balanced mode). I am happy with the sound of the 'McIntosh' labeled output tubes; so happy that I don't even feel like swapping out different new old stock 6550s and KT-88s. If you know me you know that I ALWAYS want to try different output tubes. Not this time, it's just not needed. I know some of you will be DYING to experiment, but I told you so...

The updated design of this classic 1961 amplifier has impressed me. Not only does it sound great but the 'look' of the amplifier itself (all black and chrome) always stops traffic in my house. People want to know what it is and what it does. When I show them and the tubes light up, they nod and smile; they get it.

(continued)

The Mark V version eliminates the archaic volume knob on the amp and also updates and enlarges the speaker connectors, making the MC275 much easier to use with he-man audiophile speaker cables. It has gold-plated unbalanced input jacks and speaker outputs, balanced XLR input jacks, nifty ceramic tube sockets and a crucial front power switch. It features the famous McIntosh Unity-Coupled output circuit, refined very much from the original 1949 design, and IEC power cord plug on the right side, a stereo mono switch for bridging, the usual taps for 4, 8 and 16-ohm speakers and a unbalanced/balanced switch on the left side.

Although it's called the MC275 (75 watts a channel), I've been told it is much higher now, almost 90 watts a side. That should be more than enough power for most people.

Thanks to a signal to noise ratio of over 100db, this amplifier makes NO noise.

It is without a doubt the quietest tube amplifier I have ever heard, bar none. When music is not playing the only way to tell it is even on is to see if the tubes are glowing. The distortion-canceling properties of the Unity-Coupled circuit and unique output transformer design yield very low distortion across the frequency spectrum. You can of course combine the two channels into a 150-watt monoblock amplifier but I see no reason to do this unless you have very inefficient speakers. Why buy two amps when 1 is plenty?

And now I'm going to write the ultimate reviewer's statement: I am going to buy my review sample of the McIntosh MC275. It has classic good looks and a modern take on a classic sound.



How I Too Became A McIntosh Devotee — Jeff Dorgay

Back when I first got into the world of high end audio (the late 70s) I thought that McIntosh was a bit more of an 'old guy hifi' kind of thing, though I always admired the big knobs, glass faceplates and of course, the big blue meters. Fast-forward to 2007 and some consider the McIntosh gear to be retro, but it really is a refined take on what they have always been doing. Other great companies like Naim and Conrad-Johnson have used this formula with great success.

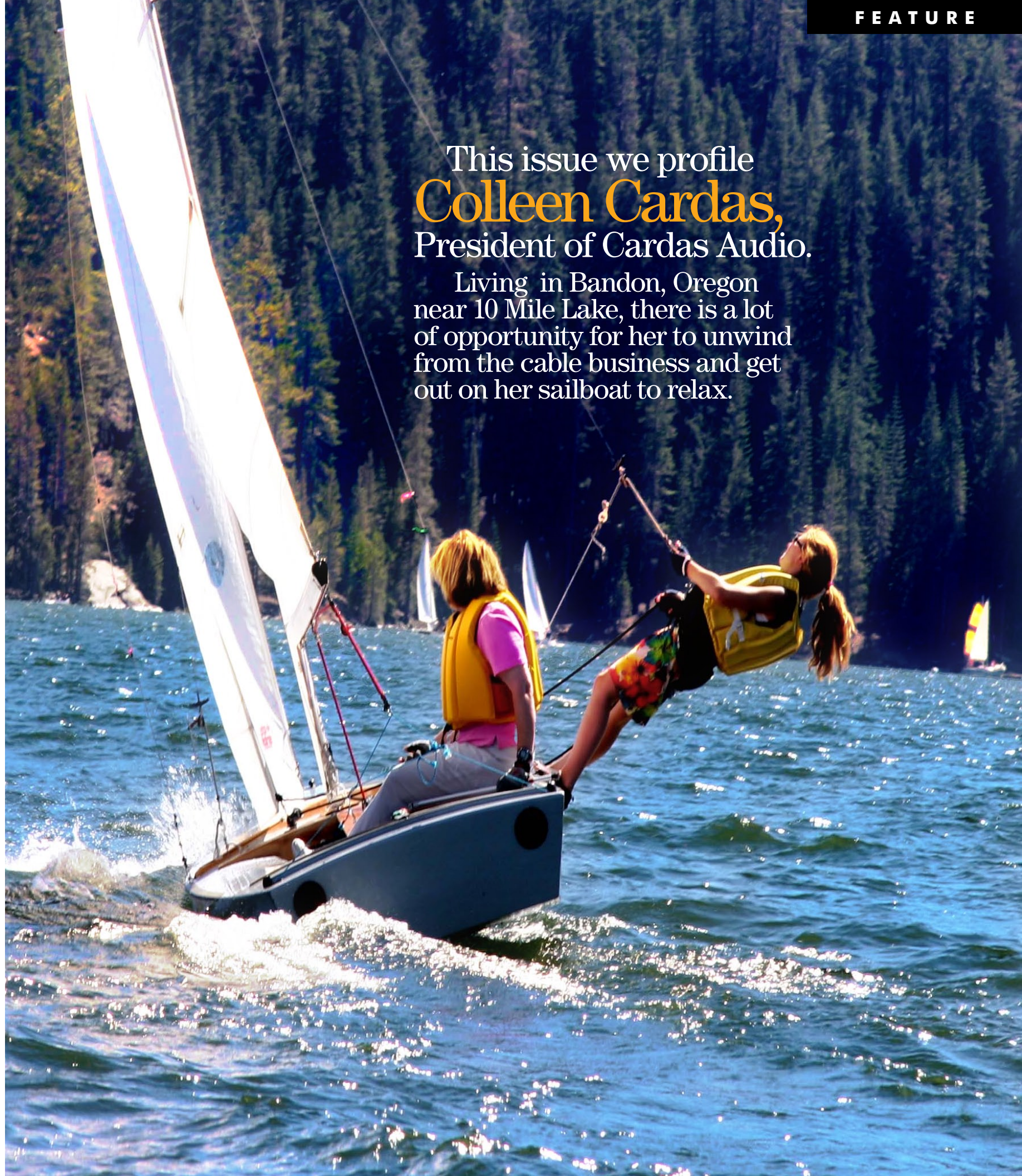
But the more time I spend with McIntosh gear, I really understand the attraction. They are one of America's oldest hifi brands (granted, the parent company is now Japanese) and it is a product that has a tremendous following. I started like Steve, buying a couple pieces of vintage gear and really digging it. As we have had a few more of their current pieces in for review, I have enjoyed every one.

What I like best about the MC275 now that I've had one of my own to listen to for a while is just how well this amplifier nails the fundamentals. The midrange is scrumptious and while it does not resolve as much detail as my main reference components, it does way better than you would expect a \$3900 tube amplifier to. While balanced operation is always a hit or miss thing for me, in this case it is very good. Using the MC275 with the Aurum CDP in balanced mode was a fantastic combination, especially with the Final 600 electrostatic speakers that I have in for review.

And that's what McIntosh does a fantastic job with. While you can choose other amplifiers that offer up more resolution or greater extension, I dare you to find an amplifier for \$3900 that is more musical than the MC275. If you are on a constant quest and like to change gear and cables often, the MC275 is not for you. But if you want to sit back, relax and enjoy a very musical sounding amplifier day after day AND put it in your will to your kids, I can't suggest a better amp than the MC275. This is why McIntosh gear has such loyal customers. ●

This issue we profile
Colleen Cardas,
President of Cardas Audio.

Living in Bandon, Oregon
near 10 Mile Lake, there is a lot
of opportunity for her to unwind
from the cable business and get
out on her sailboat to relax.





We caught up with her recently to talk about her love of sailing and terriers.

TONE: Did you start sailing as a kid, or is this a recent pursuit?

CC: I was a late starter. Until a few years ago I had never been on a sailboat. My hobbies when I was younger were playing musical instruments (trumpet, violin, upright bass etc), and playing racquetball.

TONE: Aha! Another racquetball player! Do you still play?

CC: I don't play Racquetball anymore because the only courts are a 40-minute drive away.

TONE: Who got you hooked on sailing?

CC: My mother and father started sailing about 10 years ago. I never had a complete appreciation of how difficult sailing was technically or physically when watching my father skipper and my mother crew.

About 6 years ago one of their friends (Tom Mills) wife needed surgery and was unable to crew for her husband. He (Uncle Tom) asked if I would crew for him for the rest of the sailing season in a Geary18. www.geary18.org.

One day there were perfect wind conditions and we got on what is called a screaming reach. The Crew gets out on a trapeze wire

to balance the boat and hangs a few inches over the water at the top speed of the boat. Right there I knew I was hooked!

TONE: So is the speed thing confined to sailing, or are you a speed enthusiast elsewhere? Cars, motorcycles, etc?

CC: Speed in a sailboat is relative, however I am not a fan of fast things in general, but for anyone who races or even sails boats for fun, the 'magical moment' that keeps you coming back is the planing screaming reach.

TONE: Is sailing a Cardas family thing, or a solitary pursuit? *(continued)*

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Triode Monoblock Amplifiers



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CC: Sailing in general is a family thing. However the reason I sail a Geary specifically is a Cardas family thing. After crewing for half a year I decided that I needed to try my hand at skippering the boat. I took an adult sailing course at the local community college with my husband and joined the Coos Bay Yacht Club www.coosbayyacht-club.org.

The first set of races that I skippered, Uncle Tom crewed for me and we came in second in my boat named Phantom. My father came in first in his wood Geary named Furious. I rely on my Father for advice on sailing, and 'tuning' the boat for optimum speed. He's a good competitor that I have to catch up to most of the time!

TONE: So tweeking your boat is just as maniacal as the audio world?

CC: Definitely!

TONE: What kinds of boat do you use/own?

CC: The Geary 18 is a flat-bottomed 18 ft. dinghy. It weighs approximately 525 pounds and has a main sail and a jib. It was designed by a man named Ted Geary in the 1930s. The boat is currently used for competitive racing more than a pleasure boat. It works best with a skipper and one crewmember however it can be single-handed. We have the largest fleet of this type of boat at our club on Ten Mile Lake, which is located on the southern coast of Oregon. In our group of skippers we have a wide variety of experience including a few junior sailors that participated at our international regatta as well as a skipper that is in his 80s that has been sailing a Geary for longer than I have been alive. *(continued)*

GET OFF THE COUCH:

Most skippers are male and their crew is usually their wife. There is only one other female skipper in our racing club and she sails a different type of boat. Sailing is not only a competitive sport but it is also a social event and there is always a spirit of co-operation and camaraderie.

TONE: How long does the sailing season last in Bandon?

CC: We put our boats on the water in mid April and pull them out in early October. In spring and fall the winds come from the south and are very light, which makes for more challenging sailing conditions. The summer season is the most fun and some years the winds are able to knock the boat over. Tipping over is part of the sailing experience in dinghy sailing however is it best to avoid it because it is hard on the boat, and harder to win a race!

We sail two races on the weekend and one on Wednesday night during the whole season.

TONE: Do you travel other places to sail and if so, where is your favorite place to sail other than home?

CC: The Geary is very easy to travel with and we do go out of town to sail. I have been to regattas at Vancouver Lake in Vancouver, Washington, Howard Prairie outside of Ashland, Oregon and Fern Ridge reservoir in Eugene, Oregon and Mission Bay in San Diego. I have also traveled to our fleet's international championship regatta to Huntington Lake outside Fresno and Long Beach Harbor in Southern California. But my favorite place to sail is wherever there are good winds!

TONE: Do you participate in any competitive events?

CC: I only sail competitively. Although I occasionally take the boat out to teach new crew 'the ropes'. I also volunteer to teach the students in the Adult Sailing Class.

As part of the course they receive two days on the lake with an experienced skipper. They get to sail on each of the types of boats that our club uses. The other boats that people compete in are the San Juan 21 (my father and Uncle Tom are 2 time National Champions in this boat) and the MC Scow this is a boat that is similar to the Geary but does not have a Jib (small front sail) or a trapeze for the crew (the fun part!).

TONE: Any words of advice to a beginning sailor, anything to look out for?

CC: In the wise words of my father 'Never approach the dock any faster than you want to hit it.'

TONE: Is there a dream boat that you would love to own?

CC: There was one, as a few days ago. The 6 time International Champion Oscar Barney decided he was going to move out of the country and sell his boat.

Unfortunately the skipper and crew did not come with the boat but it is a well designed

very clean boat that I am now the proud owner of. There were only about 1500 Gearys ever built and many have gone to the boat graveyard (I was forced to burn an older wood one about a year ago because it had a forest growing in it!) so I try to get boats that are for sail to keep them in the club and being used.

I will sail this boat at the beginning of this year so that I can do some repairs (from an unfortunate accident on the water) on my father's boat that I have been using for the past couple years.

TONE: Once you are out on the boat, how long does it take to completely forget about work?

CC: It is an hour drive up to 10 Mile Lake and during the drive I am already thinking of sailing. While sailing you have to be aware of where the wind is, how the sail is 'set', which direction is the most favorable, what your crew is doing, where all the ropes are, how the boat is balanced, what the course is, and most importantly where the other boats are so you do not have a collision.

In addition you are on a beautiful body of water surrounded by forest, with the wind blowing in your hair, water splashing on your face and the sounds of boat rigging changing as you tack (change direction up wind) or jibe (changing direction down wind).

The thought of work or anything negative stays pretty far behind. In competition anytime there are 'other' things that are more powerful to think about than the long list I just mentioned. Even though mistakes happen, winning is about making the least number of mistakes! Enjoying the experience comes naturally.

(continued)





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TONE: Tell us one thing NOT to do on a boat...

CC: Well, once I lost my crew overboard. Not quite a devastating as tipping over but very embarrassing if you do not turn around and go back and pick them up!

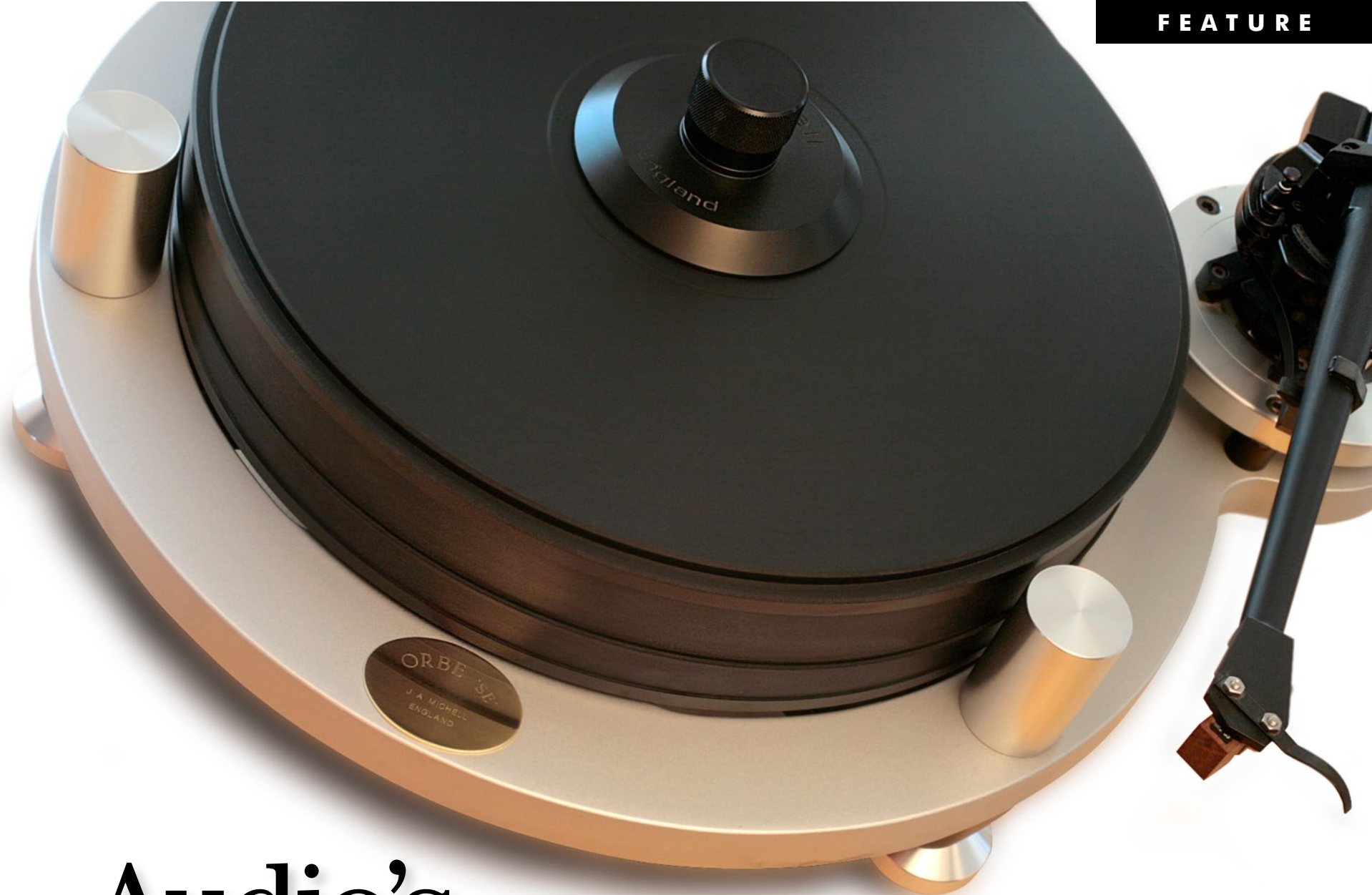
TONE: You have mentioned a Jack Russell terrier, I guess you are a dog enthusiast as well! Tell us a bit about your current pet...

CC: I am a big fan of the Jack; I had a wonderful male named Speck who is in the Cardas Brochure. (Very subtly placed) He passed away about a year ago at the young age of 11. I did not think I could ever find a new dog that would give me the joy that he gave to my husband and I.

But about a month ago I found a great male pup who we named Ripley. I cannot tell you how lucky we are to have found him! Not only is he the cutest dog in the whole world (my opinion of course) but also he absolutely loves everyone he meets.

TONE: As a fellow terrier owner, you know the challenges of the breed then!

CC: Definitely! Having a terrier means you have to try to keep up with them most of the time, and I learned to pick the cutest one so that I don't strangle him during those 'devil dog' moments. He is too adorable to keep all to myself so I created a Bog for him to show off and communicate with all his 'friends'. You can meet him at www.ripleybion.blogspot.com; feel free to post something to him. I lend him a hand replying to the new posts that he gets on a regular basis. ●



Audio's Red-headed Stepchildren

Or, Why Bad Things Happen to Good Components

— Marc Phillips

“Dude, maybe I should just do a review on my Michell Orbe SE!”

Jeff and I were walking through the hallways of the Marriott during the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest last October, discussing which products I'd be interested in reviewing. After he put the kibosh on my plans to get a hold of a Continuum Caliburn or a Clearaudio Statement, I thought about the fact that the turntable I've owned for the last four years, despite being highly regarded in audiophile circles, hasn't really gotten much press. In fact, when you enter 'Michell Orbe SE' into any search engine, the closest thing you get to a formal review is me gushing about it online, back when I bought it in 2003.

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Jeff immediately agreed that I should definitely review the Orbe. Unfortunately, the first obstacle I ran into was that the version currently being sold by J.A. Michell is slightly different than the one I own. The turntable itself is exactly the same, but Michell now sells it exclusively with its 'Never-Connected' power source, which isolates the motor from the AC power source. This little item turns what used to be a \$3500 turntable into a \$5000 one. And while it's certainly possible for me to upgrade to this version in the future, and while I've been told by reliable sources that it does make a difference, I think I'd rather spend the money upgrading to a Koetsu Urushi, or swapping my SME V out for a Breuer arm, or maybe making my mortgage payment, at least for now.

Nevertheless, I continue to wonder why the Orbe isn't mentioned in the same breath as some other 'tables in its price range'.

I know quite a few people in the industry who think the world of it. Four years ago, I found out about the Orbe when I was seriously considering its much more famous little brother, the Gyrodec SE. More than one person told me that if I liked the Gyrodec so much, I really needed to hear the Orbe, which was everything the Gyrodec was, but more. I was intrigued, but didn't know if I could swing the extra cost.

Then, my dealer and I performed an interesting experiment. I was considering a handful of tonearms for the Gyrodec, including the Rega RB-1000 and the Origin Live Encounter. *(continued)*

When he saw how much I was willing to spend on an arm (around \$1500), he immediately suggested that I try the Orbe with the lowly Rega RB-250. That way, I could get a much better 'table now, and I could easily send the RB250 to Origin Live for massive modifications at a later date.

Needless to say, the Orbe/RB250 combo easily outperformed the Gyrodec SE/RB1000 combo, for roughly the same price, proving to me once and for all that the turntable is the most important link in the analog chain. The Orbe with the RB250 was quieter, had better bass, and threw up a magnificent soundstage compared to the Gyrodec and the better arm. How I wound up walking out of my dealer's house with an SME

V arm and a Koetsu Rosewood cartridge, however, is a different story, one that's equal parts friendship, the power of haggling, the wisdom of considering demo units in the showroom, and the strong desire to have the coolest turntable on the block.

So is the J.A. Michell Orbe SE really one of those underappreciated gems that is poised on the brink of extinction because no one knows about it?

I doubt it. When Michael Fremer first reviewed the Gyrodec SE a few years ago, my dealer friend told me he started selling them at a rate of almost one a day, which was

enough for him to make a living. In other words, he could have turned his entire enterprise into 'The Gyrodec Store,' and he'd still be able to pay his bills. He also told me at the time that both the Gyrodec SE and the Orbe SE were backordered for at least six weeks, which is one of the reasons why I grabbed his demo unit when I could. In other words, J.A. Michell is doing just fine with or without equipment reviews.

But what about those products and companies that live and die by a good review in one of the audio magazines? Okay, we've all heard those sob stories before. It's not the audio press's fault that they can only review so many products each issue.

The high-end audio business is like any other business. It's not enough to have a good product. You need a little luck. You need to be at the right place at the right time. And yes, you could make a great product without anyone noticing, and you can be back to working your day job as a bank teller in just a few months. But once in a while, a ball is dropped.

Take the Sendor S20 loudspeaker. Never heard of that one?

That's no surprise. It was only available for a year or two, in the early '90s, and only a few hundred pairs were sold. *(continued)*



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I know, because I own serial numbers 371 and 372, and they were discontinued shortly after I bought mine. They had the same midrange driver and tweeter as the legendary Spondor SP100, in a mini-monitor enclosure. And they were, and are, superb. I chose them over much more famous contemporaries such as the Epos ES-11 and the Totem Model One Signature. The Spondors, for me, sounded less congested and more alive than any other sub-\$1000 bookshelf monitor I'd heard up to that point. I thought they were going to be wildly popular.

It Was Not To Be

Instead of giving them a proper review, Stereophile threw them into one of those big speaker shootouts, where in blind listening tests, they finished in the middle of the field and were not ultimately admitted onto the Recommended Components List, even though both J. Gordon Holt and Corey Greenberg took the S20s home afterward and gave them a big thumb's up. And the winner of that shootout? It was that Epos, the same one I felt sounded small and uninvolved compared to the S20. So the little Spondor went away, replaced by the SP3/1, a ported design that went a little lower in the bass (the Stereophile panel's main reservation about the S20), but lacked the same midrange magic.

I can go back further into my own audio history and pull out the Concept line of receivers and speakers. Concept was the house brand for the West Coast stereo chain Pacific Stereo, and we all know that 'house brand' can certainly be synonymous with 'crap with huge sales commissions.'

(continued)

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THE VINYL ANACHRONIST:

I purchased a Concept 5.5 receiver when I was just 15 years old, and I can remember my father, who was in the aerospace industry, being angry with me for choosing it over a Kenwood or Sansui. He thought I'd been bamboozled by the store's salespeople. In truth, the Concept products sounded fantastic. I wound up buying a pair of their speakers, which had the Heil Air Transformer drivers, just a year or so later. And now, thirty years later, the Concept products are developing a cult of their own, and are getting good prices on e-Bay. But back in the '70s, they couldn't give them away. They were the 'house brand.' Ewww.

Which brings me back to the Orbe SE. A few months ago, I was all set to trade it in on a Wilson Benesch ACT One turntable and a Breuer tonearm because I liked that combination better than almost anything else I had heard. Then I heard the Breuer on a couple of other 'tables.

They sounded just as good. I came to the conclusion that it was the Breuer, and not the WB, that was providing the magic. I told the Breuer distributor that I owned the Orbe, and he asked me why I would want to get rid of such a fantastic turntable. That's when I realized that the turntable I've owned for the last four years is one of the world's finest. I should hold onto it indefinitely, and get the Breuer when I can.

You know you have the sickness when you want to upgrade from an SME V. ●

LINKS:

Michell Engineering
www.michell-engineering.co.uk

Spendor
www.spendoraudio.com/exp800.htm





A Legendary Workhorse

The Audible Illusions Modulus 2 Preamplifier

Jeff Dorgay

In the early '80s a new audio company named Audible Illusions burst on the scene with a single product, a dual mono preamplifier for about \$300. It got a little bit of press and no one paid a huge amount of attention to AI until 1985 when their Modulus preamplifier debuted. It had dual volume controls on the front and took care to minimize the use of switching in the signal path along with careful circuit design to present a \$595 preamplifier that posed some competition for the big bucks gear of the day.

The Modulus 2D, pictured here was the

ultimate realization of this circuit and was made between 1988 and 1991 before AI moved on to their model 3 preamplifier which achieved international acclaim.

Using just four 6DJ8/6922 tubes, two for the linestage and two for the built in phono section (oh, when all preamps used to have a built in phono section...) the Modulus 2D was one of the best values in high end audio for quite some time. I owned one myself from 1989 until 2003 where it was still chugging along in my second system quite nicely.



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Though it had no fancy stepped attenuator, remote control or outboard power supply, (it had a fixed AC cord as well) the 2D sounded fantastic and in the day was the closest thing to a giant killer I had ever heard. The dual volume controls were a bit of a pain and the high level inputs were limited, but it really sounded great!

This preamp had fantastic imaging and if you sprung for a fairly expensive set of 6922s it would really sing.

With the top cover removed, you could see that the 2D had a simple circuit that used some of the best parts of the day. Though AI had a few service issues, these preamplifiers were workhorses. Many of them are still in service today.

Just to make sure I was not just waxing poetic, I managed to pick one up on EBay for \$450, which seems to be the going rate and give it a good listen to refresh my memory.

I was still impressed at the sound quality and would suggest a 2D to any audiophile on a budget looking for a great first or second system preamplifier.

Those of you that like to get a soldering iron out, could easily upgrade a few caps, install some premium NOS tubes and end up with quite a fine preamp indeed on a minimal budget. Either way, the 2D is a legendary item.

Audible Illusions is still in business, producing the current version of the Model 3 as well as a linestage version of the 2. You can contact them at:
www.audibleillusions.com ●

An Afternoon With Darrell Grant

— Norwood Brown

One of the great things about living in Portland, Oregon is that we have a very rich and diverse music scene here. Granted, it doesn't hurt being so close to that other famous city in the Pacific Northwest, but we have a unique blend here that is very different from what's going on 170 miles North, especially when it comes to Jazz.

We are very privileged to have a very well renowned Jazz pianist teaching here at Portland State University in the music department, Darrell Grant. If you have a minute, peruse his website (www.darrellgrant.com) and you can see that he has played with a rather large number of jazz greats and has pretty much been playing all of his life.





If you read the complete bio in Darrell's website, it mentions a post-it note that he keeps above the keyboard of his piano with two words, 'show yourself'. When I first read this, I thought to myself, 'uh-oh, more PR gobbledy gook...'

But that's just what Darrell did for publisher Jeff Dorgay and I over lunch.

Not only is Darrell Grant an outstanding musician, he is a very articulate spokesman as well. What impressed me the most was just how passionate and knowledgeable he is about this world of music that we all enjoy.

He showed us quite a bit of his personality and we had a great time spending the better part of the afternoon with him.

If you have heard Darrell's last CD, **Spirit**, you might mistake him for a smooth jazz artist, but this couldn't be more wrong. With his roots deep in traditional jazz, all of his earlier works are much more in a straight-ahead style. His upcoming CD, **Truth and Reconciliation** takes a bit of everything that he has worked on and wraps it up into a double CD set, offering a very wide gamut of musical styles.

TONE: Listening to your earlier work, it has much more of a straight ahead jazz style to it, but the current record **Spirit**, has a more contemporary feel. Where will the new record be?

DG: (laughing) That was my New York period... The new record, **Truth and Reconciliation** goes a lot deeper and brings everything together. All the different courses of my musical career come together here. I have a lot of classical and popular music influences as well as ones from the jazz world. This is the most successful effort of mine to date to really express myself and not leave anything else out! I even sing on two tracks! *(continued)*

Fundamental particles and forces, including electrons and photons.

I got to use some of the best musicians on the planet to make this record (list.....) and some great guys at SONY helped master this.

TONE: So you went back to New York to record, what was the reason for this?

DG: Well, everyone is there and I'm here.... But seriously I had the opportunity to use this engineer, Joe Ferla. He's got over 500 albums to his credit, he was Betty Carter's engineer! I've wanted to work with him for my whole career. We got to record in the big main studio at Right Track Studios where they record a lot of Broadway musicals. They had a killer nine foot Steinway, it was great!

TONE: Tell us a little more about the mixing and mastering. It sounds like you are a musician who not only knows quite a bit about this, but is very convinced that it does make a difference.

DG: Joe is John Mayer's engineer. I wanted someone who really understood music to record my album, a guy that had jazz and pop sensibilities.

TONE: So, we have to ask, was this an analog or digital recording?

DG: We went with 24 bit/96k from start to finish. You can get anything in New York, but recording in full analog has become a pretty expensive proposition these days.

tone: How happy are you with the result? Is the reproduction realistic enough for you as a discerning musician?

DG: Very, I feel like the digital is equivalent to analog. Do they still make LPs? I was very happy with the choices we made on the album.
(continued)

TONE: How about the final mastering?

DG: I'm amazed at how much difference a talented mastering engineer makes! They take something that is already great and make it BETTER. When we were working on this album, the engineers would say, 'do you want the cymbals to sound like this, or like this?' The little nuances they picked up just blew me away.

TONE: Canine hearing.

DG: Exactly.

TONE: After working on a project like this for such a long time, are you still really excited about the final project, or are you just glad it's done, like on a cooking show?

DG: It's been a year to finish this, and granted it's a little anticlimactic, but I love opening the new CDs and it was great to come back to it again, in final form!

TONE: How do you access most of your music these days?

DG: With the digital world, I don't even listen to CDs anymore. It's all in my iPod or on my computer. I take the CD out of the case to dump to my computer and that's it. Most of my listening now is research for one of my classes. The computer just makes that so much easier. But I still enjoy this to relax, it's a very different experience. The computer has given everything such a sense of immediacy. No one sends me promo CDs anymore to listen to. Musicians that I play with just point me to their websites and I listen to MP3s of their work there and make a decision.

That and all the anti-theft measures on a CD these days (the tape, the wrapper, the stickers, etc.) has really taken the fun out of just getting a new CD out of the case and on to your stereo. It's a different world.

TONE: The same thing happened in photography about 15 years ago.

DG: Exactly. People want to see pictures of my family and I pull out my laptop!

TONE: So what brought you from NYC to Portland?

DG: When I was 11, the church choir I was in performed here and the trees stuck with me. All that lush green really made an impression on me. I read an article in DownBeat in 1980 about how great the scene was in Portland and I said, 'that's what I'm going to do, I'm going to Portland when I get out of college.'

But then I ended up moving to New York and stayed there for ten years.

My friend Alan Jones invited my wife and I to Portland when I had a bit of a break from work. I spent time here the year that you had all the floods, but I still enjoyed it. A friend had sent my info to the college and I got a letter from PSU the following August letting me know that I had a job waiting for me here! That was 10 years ago and now I'm a full professor.

TONE: So are you still happy about the move, or will you be leaving us in the near future?

DG: I can't imagine where I would rather live.

TONE: We noticed that quite a few of the people you play with live here also, though they play all over the country.



DG: Yes, it makes everything very convenient. For a city this size, there are an incredible number of jazz musicians. I think there are even more per capita here than in Seattle or even San Francisco.

TONE: In the world of popular music, there are a certain number of bands that really influence or have influenced others to become musicians (KISS, The Beatles, The Ramones, etc.) Who would you say are the equivalents in terms of really inspiring a lot of other musicians in the jazz world?

DG: It's different for everyone, but remember the history of rock & roll is a lot shorter. You can actually see someone, be influenced and be out there in the lifetime of those that influenced you. A lot of the people in jazz that I idolize were dead before I was born. *(continued)*

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—Jeff Dorgay & Dan Babineau, *TONE Audio Magazine*

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People of my generation often look to Charlie Parker and a few others, but it's hard to pin down.

TONE: Who were your influences?

DG: For me it was Herbie Hancock. But I remember buying **Finger Poppin'** by Horace Silver and going, 'That's it!' I dragged my Mom downstairs and told her she had to hear this, I didn't even know what to call that music. I played it over and over trying to figure it out.

I really liked Vince Guaraldi too. That was music I could play right away. I also liked Joe Sample and the early Crusaders stuff a lot. But I was so into Herbie Hancock that I used to have dreams about him playing my piano at my house!!

TONE: Because of Herbie Hancock, were you very interested in electronic keyboards, or have you always been strictly an acoustic player?

DG: I remember being at the music store when they unboxed the first Yamaha electronic keyboards. They couldn't get me out of the music store, but they were so cost prohibitive back then it didn't make sense. But all those sounds, wow!! Nowadays, you can get a kid a keyboard at 8 and they can release their first album when they are 10! Well, maybe it's not that easy...

TONE: So you came from a musical family?

DG: Yes, definitely. My Mother was a singer and I always knew that it would be my path to be a musician, I just wasn't sure what kind. Who knows what area of music I would be in if I hadn't heard jazz at an early age?

I might still be playing Lynryd Skynyrd! *(continued)*

TONE: Was there ever any other instrument you wanted to play besides the piano?

DG: I really wanted to play drums, I tried but I got stuck on the piano. I still want to play the drums, so I do it with my students a bit in the improv class.

TONE: Working with your students, how much spark do you see in them?

DG: Our program is very exploratory, but now that we have a music technology program they are a lot more focused and know where they want to go. We are getting more students from a few places that are well trained, but a lot of schools don't have music programs any more.

I do get some that have a spark, but only a few that I listen to and think, 'Wow, this one's going to go all the way...' By the beginning of their junior year, that's the make it or break it point. The ones that are the most exciting are the ones that surprise you.

TONE: How has teaching affected your just being a musician?

DG: One of the greatest things about being here in Portland is that I can teach and have been able to give a lot back to the community. I was not able to do much of that in New York. I was playing a lot of great gigs and touring, but I wanted to do more community related things.

The only difficult part is now I am so busy with a lot of this work that I am missing a bit of the solitude in which a musician focuses on their own work. I put the new record off for some time, so it was good to get back to this side of music again! It's good to have the self dialog and the self exploration again. Now, I'd like to shift my emphasis just a little bit so I have some more creative time.



I'm negotiating the balance, but I want to do everything!

TONE: Is there any jazz arena that you see yourself more prevalent?

DG: I come from the traditional jazz framework, but I've played in a lot of different areas, even the Grand Old Opry! Jazz musician is the label I'm happy to wear, but because of globalization (Dave Douglas mentioned this first, I can't take credit for it), I think of music in terms of language. i.e. What language do I want to use to express my musical vision?

I used to restrict the language I used, say Be-Bop jazz from 1956 to 1968 because the climate of the music business was such that if you didn't define your language, it would be a lot harder to sell any of your records. But now that this concept has fallen away, the channel has become a lot wider, and I don't mean just jazz. Rock is the same way. Let's combine some things and see what we come up with. I can be influenced by Sly Stone or Schubert. It's no longer restrictive.

TONE: It sounds like you have achieved a really good balance in your life.

DG: I'm still working on it! The music I'm making now is more me than ever before.

Balance is a fleeting thing, there is no stasis. But I have had it for periods...

TONE: Have your students thrown anything at you that was out of left field enough that you had never heard of it?

DG: Mr. Bungle; Google them when you get a chance. It's interesting though, when I'm in a room full of people and they all know something musical

that I haven't heard of, I think "I have to check that out!"

TONE: Have they exposed you to anything that you probably never would have listened to, but upon investigating, found out that you really liked it?

DG: Aphex Twin and Squarepusher. A few years ago a couple of my students exposed me to that music and I went, 'Wow, that's really fast!'

TONE: What is your biggest musical guilty pleasure?

DG: I have a lot of guilty pleasures, but none with music! There is no music I feel guilty about listening to.

So there you have it. When you get a chance, take a peek at Darrell's website where you can find out a little bit more about him and get a great sample of his music on quite a few of his albums. And on April 17, you will be able to purchase his new album, which we have for you here. *(continued)*



Truth and Reconciliation

— Darrell Grant
By Jeff Dorgay

I know from sitting in on our interview, that Darrell Grant is a man very immersed in jazz and admires many of the greats in this world. As I listened to his new double CD, I kept trying to find those riffs and identify the obvious influences. I heard a bit here and a bit there, but honestly the two highest compliments I can pay this pair of CDs is that I really enjoy them and Darrell Grant is his own musician.

Much like Prince, when I listened to this collection I didn't find myself thinking, 'that's some Herbie Hancock' or 'hey, that's a recycled Chick Corea bit'. And with so much great classic jazz behind him, that is a hard feat indeed.

Teaming up with a number of great musicians from his past projects that you are all familiar with, you can tell these guys have played together before. There is a definite connection here, and the texture of this record is wonderful. Not being a musician, this is a very hard thing to describe, but especially on some current jazz recordings I've heard they lack that telepathy between the musicians that I really felt these guys had.

It's just a space and timing thing, that the more you listen to this music, it just has a seamless groove to it that is very enjoyable. Almost all of the tunes on the record are Darrell's and his covers are spot on.

An interesting part of the two disc set, Darrell also includes strategically placed quotes from Mohandas Ghandi, Nelson Mandella, Dr. Martin Luther King and John F. Kennedy in between and through a few tracks. As passionate about his politics as he is about his music, these are definitely some good words to take to heart. Two tracks feature vocals by Darrell and it just leaves you wondering if there isn't a musical dimension he doesn't possess.

Just so the audiophiles in the audience don't feel neglected, they did a very nice job on the recording as well. This record has captured a very nice sense of space and all of the instruments are very well represented here; nothing overbearing, nothing missing.

I suggest buying this one as soon as it comes out. It's one of the most refreshing jazz records I've heard in a long time. ●

Classical Music A to Z

— Dan Babineau

**Take Two Ms and Call Me in
the Morning — Don't Foget
the Liszt!**

*(Dan experiences his first
mid-life crisis.)*

I have a small confession; I'm going through a mid-life crisis. I don't remember when it all started but it's very real and somewhat freaky. To give you some examples, I seem to be extremely attracted to the opposite sex. I also have this unbelievable urge to go out and purchase an exotic German and/or Italian sports car. Then there is this intense passion that I have for bicycles and bicycle racing. A short time ago I even bought a set of carbon fiber wheels for one of my many bikes that weighed next to nothing and cost in excess of 5K. I hate to even mention my mania for collecting old LPs, especially those from the 50s and 60s.



But wait, these passions are nothing new. I've enjoyed these pleasures for the majority of my life. Then one late night while listening to music my real mid-life crisis presented itself in the form of an apocalypse. Out of the dark haze in my listening room came a voice, dark and mysterious. Actually, it was my own voice and this is what I said to the night air: 'What, you're over fifty years old and you don't have a decent piano?' And there, my friends was the answer to my crisis.

I do have one other affliction. This disease has been called many names but the most recognized title for my ailment is 'MOB' or music on the brain! My disease is not contagious and as far as I know does not alter the earth's orbit. The nature of MOB is a constant stream of music playing in your head. Whether you're sleeping or awake, moving or static, talking or silent; large passages of music never cease to play between your ears. I have been awakened from a dead sleep to hear Shostakovich's 3rd movement of his Tenth symphony. And when in church with my family, I've had to sit down in the pew largely because Prokofiev's Fifth was blasting through my cerebral hemispheres. **But this disease began to progress and I was now starting to hear music that I couldn't identify!** As hard as I'd try I was lost as to who was creating this strange music dancing in my head.

And then, once again an apocalypse took place, but this time out of the dark haze erupted a thought even more scary than the last; the music flowing through my head, interrupting

my sleep and making me wonder about my own sanity was – my music! And that's why I need a piano and that's why I'm having these weird dreams. And that's why I will never be at peace until I write it down!! (Enter a piano.)

Oddly enough, when I presented this situation to my wife she took it quite well. I have to admit she looked a bit panic-stricken when I told her that I was having a mid-life crisis and that we needed to talk. **'A piano! You're having a mid-life crisis because you need a piano!?' she shouted.** And off we went in search of my new instrument.

The beauty here is that I firmly believe my wife thought I was going to tell her about some extra-marital affair or perhaps about a Porsche that I had stashed in some airplane hanger somewhere. Bottom line: price is no object!: Baldwin, Bosendorfer, Chickering, Grotrian, Hardman, Ibach, Kawai, Kemble, Mason&Hamlin, Niendorf, Otto Altenburg, Ritmuller, Steinway, Suzuki, Weber, Yamaha, Young-Chang etc. here I come! Talk about a labor of love!

Have you looked for a good piano lately? It's like going to heaven and back. The selection is huge! The instruments are absolutely amazing: you do not have break the bank to get great sound and you'll get more than adequate action out of the keyboard. And when I audition many of these fine instruments and start to play the music that's stuck in my head, I definitely turn a few heads in the piano store!



The two Ms that I'd like to discuss in this installment of my classical column were all very proficient at the piano at an early age. Felix Mendelssohn was a child prodigy as was Gustav Mahler who composed the lion's share of his music sitting at his favorite set of 88s. But before I get to Mahler and Mendelssohn; no one composer of classical music has exemplified the virtuoso pianist better than Franz Liszt:

FRANZ LISZT: (1811-1886) One of the founding fathers of the Romantic period, Liszt was always the consummate showman being the first to perform piano-only recitals throughout Europe to huge audiences. Another child prodigy, Liszt's recitals would leave audiences bedazzled, complete with screaming finale's that would bring many women in the audience to utter breathlessness, in other words: they fainted! It was almost like early Beatles' concerts as Liszt would be whisked off stage to avoid being trampled by his hysterical crowds. *(continued)*

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—Dave Clark
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This long-haired virtuoso always brought down the house and when we examine his music it's easy to see why. Unlike the 'absolute music' that Brahms turned out, Liszt went far beyond the boundaries of music of his time and created some incredibly complex, emotional scores that completely mesmerized audiences. The founding father of the 'symphonic poem', no one before Liszt had dared to use the piano as such a powerful artistic tool.

Liszt became very famous, very fast! Lisztomania completely consumed Europe and Liszt's rather mysterious/cult-like lifestyle just added to the hysteria.

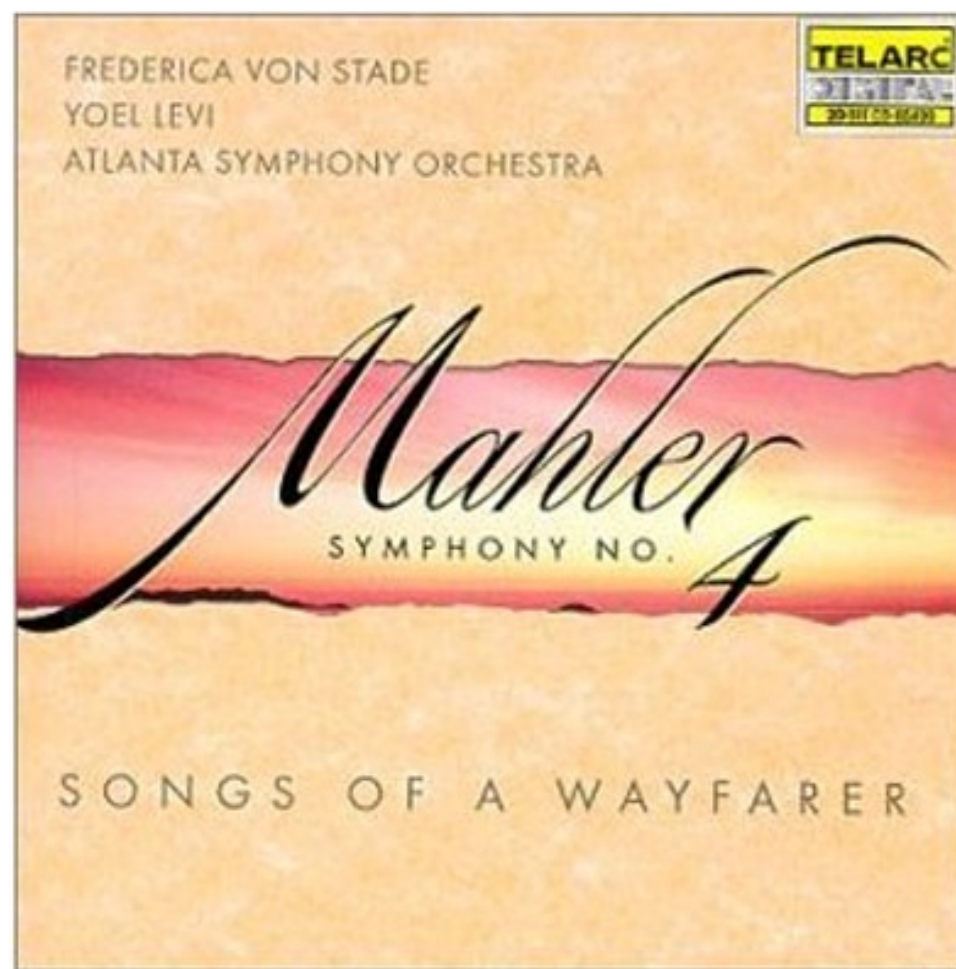
Liszt's topics for musical discussion revolved around things somewhat macabre: Faust, the Devil – Mephitiso, Gnome Kings, funerals and delightfully powerful Hungarian rhapsodies.

Interestingly enough, although Liszt was born a Hungarian, he never became proficient in his native language. Instead he chose French to communicate with his European followers. He was a huge fan of philosophy and the occult and built many of these beliefs into his music. And he also paraphrased and/or interpreted many other composer's music including Mozart, Paganini, Schubert, Verdi and of course Wagner. He greatly admired Chopin but came to dislike the Pole mainly because they ended competing for the same social graces throughout Europe. Liszt was the clear-cut winner here with his stunning looks and fanatical approach to performing. Chopin was a delicate man and Liszt performance would do nothing more than overpower Chopin's softer approach. *(continued)*

Liszt's **Liebestraume**, S541: #3 would bring down the house not to mention his two *Concertos for Piano* and even the *Consolation* piece. I can't get enough of the 'Mephisto Waltzes' and the *Hungarian Rhapsodies* will definitely get you moving. And Liszt can also be sublime and emotional as in his *Sonata for Piano in B* or his *Transcendental Etudes*. It is this strange Hungarian spell that Liszt casts in his music that reels us in like a hazy black and white horror movie. And we don't even have to cover our eyes to watch the ending.

DAN'S PICKS: Contrary to popular belief, Classical music is alive and well in the world today. I would have given one of my molars to have the selection of classical music that is now available to all of us when I was young! The Liszt catalog is a perfect example of my point as there are a number of excellent recordings on CD that will thrill you for years to come. And many of these fabulous performances are compiled on one or two discs. For example the London/Decca release, Catalog #44851 will give you a real taste of the vast range of Liszt's 'piano only' music. Then jump over to the orchestral music with the two concertos, take your pick either it's the very romantic Claudio Abbado recording with Martha Argerich on DG Cat. #: 449719; or the more straight-ahead release with Kiril Kondrashin at the helm and Mr. Sviatoslav Richter lighting up the room with amazing dexterity and raw dynamics. This one is on Philips, Catalog #446200. I also like the performance of the *Sonata in B Minor* on this disc.

You could top the whole thing off with a two disc set on DG featuring Herbert Van Karajan and Claudio Abbado trading batons. DG listing is catalog #469151. This set has a little bit of everything and should be on everyone's record shelf! Last but not least, (if you can find it) get a copy of an amazing compilation on a small label – Ivory Classics, Catalog #70901, appropriately titled **The Virtuosity of Earl Wild**. On these discs Mr. Wild exemplifies Liszt's fiery, romantic style with huge dynamics that are always tastefully and technically under control. And the other non Liszt performances on these CDs just add to the fun!!



GUSTAV MAHLER (1860-1911) Mahler did as much for the development or evolution of the symphony as Liszt did for the piano. He told Jean Sibelius: **'A symphony should be like the world, it must embrace everything'**. And to a large extent he put this philosophy into everything he composed. Mahler was often criticized by his peers for his tendency to throw the everything but the kitchen sink into his symphonies. But Mahler's music is derived from song or lieder.

I always think of nature when I listen to Mahler. I hear all of the many tones that make up a truly organic environment. Mahler did embrace life itself in his music. Another child prodigy, Mahler amazed his family at a young age with his innate ability to compose. Another Bohemian of sorts from Austro-Hungaria, (now the Czech-Republic), Mahler fused all of the many melodies of his surroundings into huge musical journeys. His music is lyrical; makes me relax, stop and smell the roses. Then a rousing crescendo, a big change in tempo and the journey continues. Mahler composed 9 complete symphonies and died before the tenth was completed. His symphonies each tell a story; sometimes about the beauty of nature, i.e. symphony number 4 and sometimes a little more intense like the Resurrection, symphony number 2. From the first symphony, sometimes called 'The Titan' to the ninth, Mahler combines amazingly rambunctious melody, loaded with strange tonality, with surreal, introverted moodiness. *(continued)*

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I'm not going to bore you with all of the controversy that surrounded Mahler throughout his life. I will say that he did influence a great deal of other composers during his life and thereafter. Mahler raised the symphonic bar forever. Only Wagner composed more grandiose scores and attending a Mahler concert is an event not merely a performance, with his vocal music being some of the most beautifully enlightened song that you'll ever hear!!



DAN'S PICKS: I know this sounds cliché, but Mahler's music is strangely 'all good'! But it can be an acquired taste for some. When I was younger I used to dread performing Mahler works largely because they were so damn long. And we'd go through the score bar by bar. But the majesty of the performance, with a huge orchestra accompanied by one, two or even three choirs has always been some of the most exciting chapters of my musical existence! To get started pick up a copy of Mahler's 1st symphony conducted by another Hungarian, so to speak, on Decca, catalog #458622 with Sir Georg Solti and the London Symphony Orchestra. *(continued)*

This performance might be a little light on bass for some but overall Solti and the LSO nail the 'Titan'. By the way Solti and the LSO's Mahler symphony #9 is a milestone performance.

For the 2nd symphony, go no further than Otto Klemperer who hung out with Mahler and was able to interpret this work better than any other conductor. On EMI, catalog #45622, this exemplary recording could very much change your life. No one gets Mahler's passion, extreme lyricism, raw dynamics and deep moodiness better than Klemperer. For the big guy, symphony #3, I like Riccardo Chailly with the outstanding Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra accompanied by the Prague Philharmonic Chorus and the Netherlands Children's Choir. Catalog #00023360 on Decca. As I mentioned in a previous issue, I was completely blown away when I attended the LPO's performance at Disney Concert Hall of Mahler 3!

For the fourth symphony I would suggest a relatively new release on Telarc, Catalog #80499 with

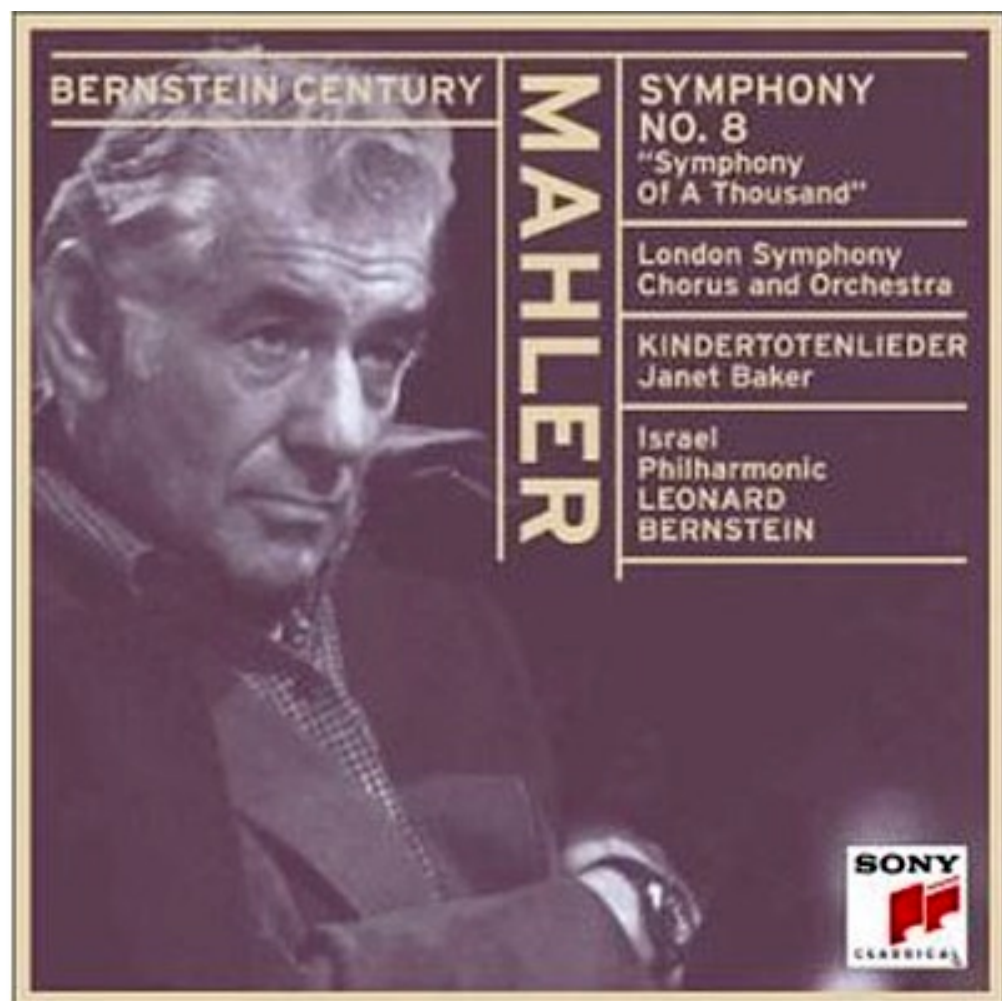
Yoel Levi and a very proficient Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. The vocal or 'Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen' is also wonderful on this fine CD. Bernstein's Mahler #5 is still my favorite on Sony, catalog #63084 with the New York Phil. And Lenny's Mahler #9, this time with the Berlin Philharmonic, is very good dope indeed; DG catalog #435378. While you're at it, pick up #8, *Symphony of A Thousand* with Bernstein again conducting the London Symphony, catalog #61837. What can I say, I like Bernstein's Mahler!!

Yes, you can also have great success purchasing some of the fine complete Mahler Symphony sets, but for me the quality of the separates replaces any cost factor! How about the Royal Concertgebouw but his time with Kiril Kondrashin conducting the musically insane Mahler #7? This performance is on a weird label Tahra, Catalog 451. And last, but not least is Michael Tilson Thomas and the SFO performing Mahler's 'Tragic' symphony #6, a killer disc on SFO's own label: 60001. It won a Grammy and it deserves it!!

FELIX MENDELSSOHN: (1809-1847) This installment of my classical column is full of contrasts. Liszt and Mahler were cut from two completely different pieces of cloth. Compared to these two fine composers, Felix Mendelssohn was weaved out of his own incredibly unique fabric as well. However, the common thread to all of these three composers is the fact that they were all child prodigies and were all extremely proficient at the piano! (My cure for mid-life crisis!)

Mendelssohn began composing seriously when he was about fifteen, writing his first *Symphony in C Minor*. Then at sixteen came his gorgeous *String Octet in F Flat Major*. Bitten by the music bug badly, Mendelssohn also wrote his famous overture to Shakespeare's **A Midsummer Nights Dream** the same year! Unlike Liszt and Mahler, Mendelssohn was a staunch conservative, musically speaking, and drew much of his influences from the past: J.S. Bach, Schubert and even Beethoven. His family was fairly well off which allowed Mendelssohn to travel extensively throughout Europe. From these adventures came music, conservative but incredibly light and elegant.

Mendelssohn's music is extremely melodic and full of sophisticated themes, all very precise but very moving just the same. Where Liszt and Mahler would employ the folk music of their roots Mendelssohn would invent his own melodies to describe his many travels. His 3rd Symphony – 'the Scottish' uses little if any original Scottish folk music but is instead Mendelssohn's own interpretation of his visits to Scotland. (continued)





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The Hebrides (Fingal's Cave) is a classic example of how Mendelssohn uses music to paint his many life experiences. Another popular work is his *Violin Concerto in E Minor* which is kind of a Neo-Classical number with a few powerful twists that clearly show the genius of Mendelssohn. He wrote an amazing amount of music in his relatively short life: symphonies, concertos for violin and piano, operas, choral music, piano music and even music for the organ.

His **Songs Without Words** are still some of my favorite solo piano pieces! He wrote erratically, many times stopping one project and starting on another. Structurally Mendelssohn's music is very serious and technically the work of someone far beyond many of the so-called legends of his time. **Technically, I'd stack him up against the likes of Mozart or even Beethoven. What a tactician!** Of course what we really have in Mendelssohn is the evolution of both Mozart and Beethoven. Powerful and elegant, Mendelssohn developed his own unique sound that brilliantly brought two unique eras together: the Classical and the Romantic!

DAN'S PICKS: With Mendelssohn, it is easy to recommend a variety of absolutely first-class performances and recordings. Historically, his violin concertos were performed by the best fiddle-players to ever grace the earth. Jascha Heifetz, David Oistrakh, Yehudi Menuhin and many others all gained great notoriety by putting their spin on this amazing piece of music. *(continued)*

For Heifetz, Charles Munch and the Boston Symphony Orchestra offer a solid backdrop to launch his stunning performance of the Violin Concerto, Opus 64. On RCA, catalog #61391, this 'multiformat' disc is a real treasure. I like the Menuhin disc with Furtwangler on EMI, catalog #66990 but this old mono recording could be a little harsh for new ears. Then get the newer version with Efrem Kurtz and the Philharmonic Orchestra, EMI catalog #57766. This disc also comes with a DVD of Menuhin performing the work in Paris!

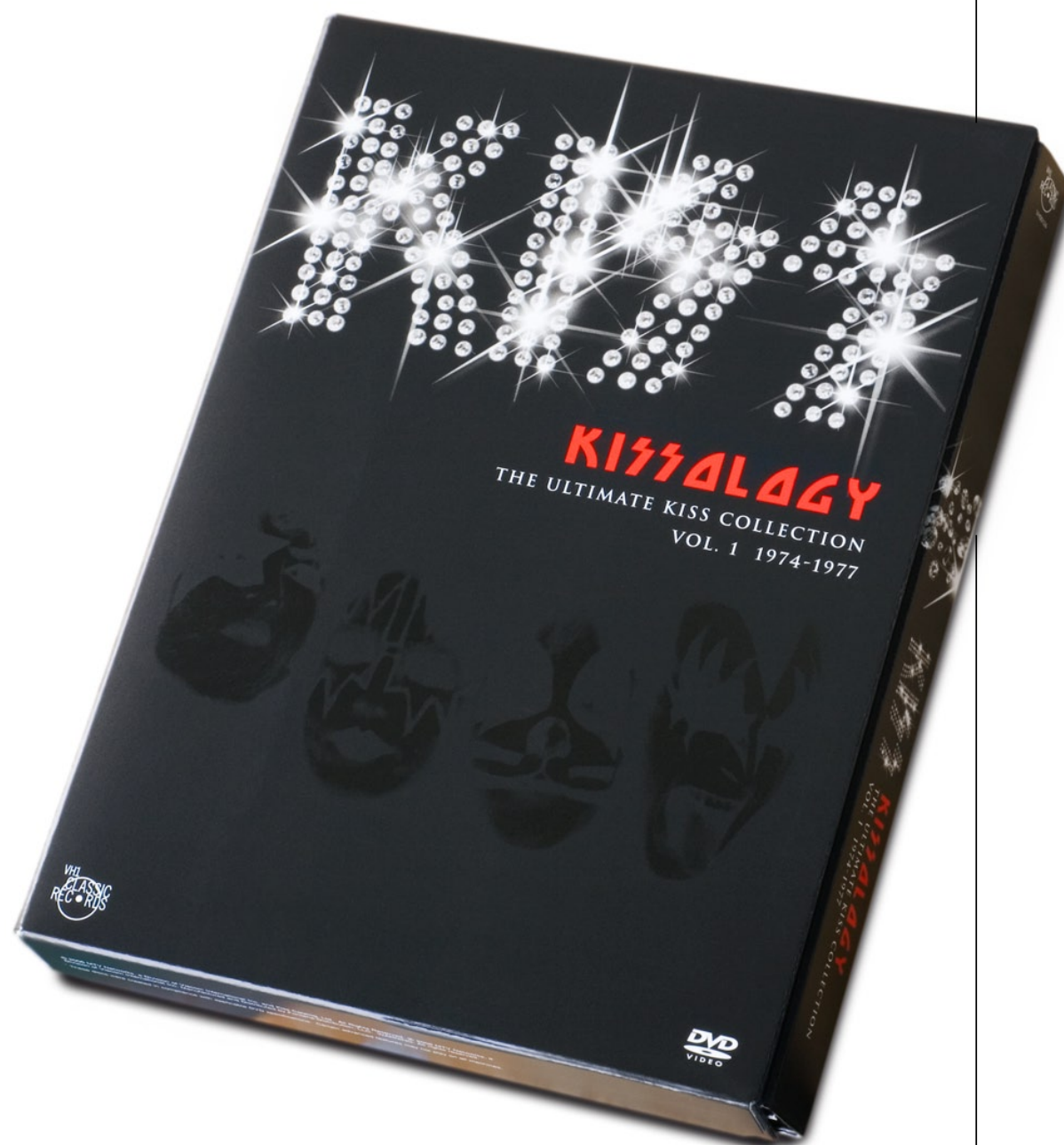
For the symphonies I have been blown away by Claudio Abbado and the London Symphony Orchestra, DG catalog #471467. This disc has it all, the five major symphonies and 7 overtures!! DG has hit a grand slam with this offering.

For the earlier material, start out with Andre Previn and the LSO on EMI Classics, catalog #74981 performing both Opus 21 & 61 of **A Midsummer Night's Dream**. And for a nice collection of Mendelssohn's songs pick up the Helios offering with soprano Margaret Price and pianist Graham Johnson, catalog #55150. This collection is my kind of female vocal and will steal your heart! To round things off don't forget the piano music – *Songs Without Words*. Check out Daniel Barenboim on DG, catalog #453061. Yes, I know there are others but this 2 disc set has it all in one place, give Barenboim a break!!



Just thinking of the Barenboim rendition of *Songs Without Words* makes my quest to find a proper piano even more urgent. Many men my age, while experiencing their version of a mid-life crisis, have done unbelievably crazy things. I even visited my local Porsche dealership and test drove a new Porsche Cayman S, just in case I got this mid life crisis thing wrong. It was a very nice automobile, but there was only one problem. As the salesman and I were speeding down the freeway, (of course within the speed limit), I made the fatal error of turning on the radio and there it was: my favorite classical station KUSC, playing - you guessed it – Mendelssohn's Opus 62 – *Songs Without Words*. When we pulled back into the Porsche dealership the salesman asked what I thought of this fantastic sports car and I replied: **"I like the car very much but I really need a piano!"** His jaw really did drop!

My next installment of 'Classical Music A to Z' will be dedicated solely to the most amazing classical composer to have ever penned a note: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. I promise it will be good summer reading and listening! Wish me luck on the piano... ●



KISSology

And the Relevancy of KISS To My Generation

— Christina Kratzman

I've been playing the cello for almost nine years. During these years I've played in a variety of large, and small, ensembles and done some solos, but almost always stuck to playing in the classical, baroque, and romantic genres. When Jeff asked me to do the review about the **KISSology** DVD set, I was psyched – I love music and love doing as much as I can in as many different genres as possible – but was also excited because it was KISS. I had been watching the show **Gene Simmons Family Jewels** on A&E but had never seen Gene perform or dressed in full concert attire.

After watching even the first half hour or so of the DVD, I was surprised, in a good way, about what I was seeing. **I had expected to hear some really hard-core, heavy music from such a dark looking band, yet was humored by the synchronized head and body swaying between Gene and Paul** – especially right after the song where blood was dripping out of Gene's mouth. More surprising to me, though, was the quality of their music - it was real music! There was a consistent major chord quality sound that really helped to give them a big, round, full sound. I was expecting to hear a bunch of songs that were harsh and gritty, and really just loud noise, but was completely blown away about how well all the parts fit together and the quality of the playing – it was really evident that these guys knew how to play their instruments well!

(continued)



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There were some incredible guitar sections that were matched well with percussion, which consistently added to the music rather than simply add excess noise. Each song sounded put-together, or as put-together as KISS and rock can be.

I have very few negative things to say about the KISSology DVD. The only problems I found come from a person who isn't a die-hard KISS fan: the long guitar solos and the similar song selections from the various concerts. (Ed. Note: It was these very boring solos that sent many people of my generation to embrace 'New Wave' music and their perky 2 ½ minute songs with open arms...) **Although the guitar and percussion solos might be a fan's favorite part, they are something that I'm not used to in music I normally listen to and I started to find them repetitive and drawn-out after a few minutes.**

The song selection might also be a big seller for a KISS fan. The selection really highlights some of the more popular KISS songs and showcases them over a three year span in various performances. From a person who isn't very familiar with their music, I would have liked to hear a little more variety, but at least I know the lyrics to most of their songs now.

(continued)



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The DVD was also broken up nicely with interviews and short documentaries about KISS which provided, if you will, a little bit 'KISStory' and the huge impact that KISS had during that time period. KISS really grew into a rock phenomenon and created this 'army' of fans and a new rock culture. One of my favorite parts of the DVD was the documentary about Cadillac, Michigan. KISS was invited to come and visit – and the town completely transformed and unified for their visit. The high school cheerleaders painted their faces like the band members and the football team was even more excited, (they normally listened to KISS before a game). The rest of the town, including the major town officials, joined in on the face painting and the parade. **KISS had such an influential power, and enormous group of fans, that they were able to really unify and bring a town together because of a similar interest.** I can't think of many bands that would be able to accomplish something this big today – or one that has such a huge fan base.

The concerts also show the progression of the band's popularity and performances. The early concerts were on decent size stages but small compared to the stages and full arenas KISS was using three years later, not to mention the lights and fire – which became just as over the top as their wardrobe. Their later performances were chock-full of lights, smoke, pyrotechnics, and the great accents of fire-breathing and flaming guitars (yes, flaming guitars). But while KISS increased the pyrotechnics and intensity of their shows, it really was in part because of a growing fan base – which started to spread globally. Two of the concert clips take place overseas – one in Germany and the other in Japan, which had shows that were as crazy as those in the U.S.



While the big hair and make-up might not hold up too well today, the fire and really, entertainment, from the concerts was still awesome to watch! It was fun to see them perform, and though their appearance, and use of fire, smoke and other pyrotechnics, might be considered over the top, all these factors really do combine and play off each other to create an entertaining show, not just a concert. Each aspect made their performance more unique than anything I've seen before and there was always some unexpected burst of fire that added to the excitement that the group clearly brought to the stage with every show! They really seemed to love what they were doing and that they were having just as much fun as the audience, which, without a doubt, definitely helped to create the high-energy, excited, and crazy atmosphere their shows are known for.

Although many people in my generation, the generation of the iPod, might not know KISS very well, most of us probably have heard KISS and never realized it or never connected it back to what they look

like - there seems to be a huge disconnect between hearing them and seeing them that exists among us. I had heard a lot of the songs on the DVD before in TV shows and movies but never realized that that was the sound that those guys in face-paint and dark costumes were producing. Now, their looks almost take away from the music if they aren't paired together - like in the DVD or in a concert. The faces on an album cover don't seem to go with their music, but in a concert, they are so unpredictable and wild that it doesn't matter what they look like, their personalities carry through and tie everything together.

However, while that might not have been a problem thirty-years ago, when KISS was at its height and performing regularly, in my generation, we don't have the same visual and listening experience and impact that there used to be – which is definitely why it was more fun to watch the DVDs then to just listen to their music – watching really created the outrageous atmosphere that seems to have hooked people in to being a KISS fan. *(continued)*

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The show aside, their music, minus the lyrics at times, is still pretty good with some guitar sections that could still stand on their own and impress.

The vast availability of music at most of our fingertips, thanks to the computer, has also contributed to the downfall of the KISS phenomenon and rock 'God' status to my generation. It has

become really easy to find music from all around the world - from indie bands to techno to rap and pretty much anything inbetween. We are exposed to tons of music and, inadvertently, some of the music from the past just kind of falls through the cracks and gets lost while newly discovered bands move in and take their place.

The appearance of KISS also, sadly, has become sort of cheesy and hokey. One would be hard-pressed to find a bunch of people willing to dress like that today. Maybe it's the big hair, maybe it's the knee-high-platform boots, or even the leather and spandex garments, but something about their appearance has lost it's appeal to my generation. The appearance of KISS really did, however, make watching the DVD just that much more entertaining when paired with some good rock music. Plus, good fire and pyrotechnics never get old, or as Beavis likes to say: 'Hehe-heh, let's burn something, that would be cool!' ●

Club Mix

— Scott Tetzlaff

I read scientific papers from time to time (no, seriously, it's a hobby). The other day I read a paper by a mathematician discussing 'time waves.' He had a theory that 'time' is similar to sound, in that it actually occurs as a wave. Further, he went on to say, the time waves both bounce and curve – into a helix shape – like a chunk of DNA.

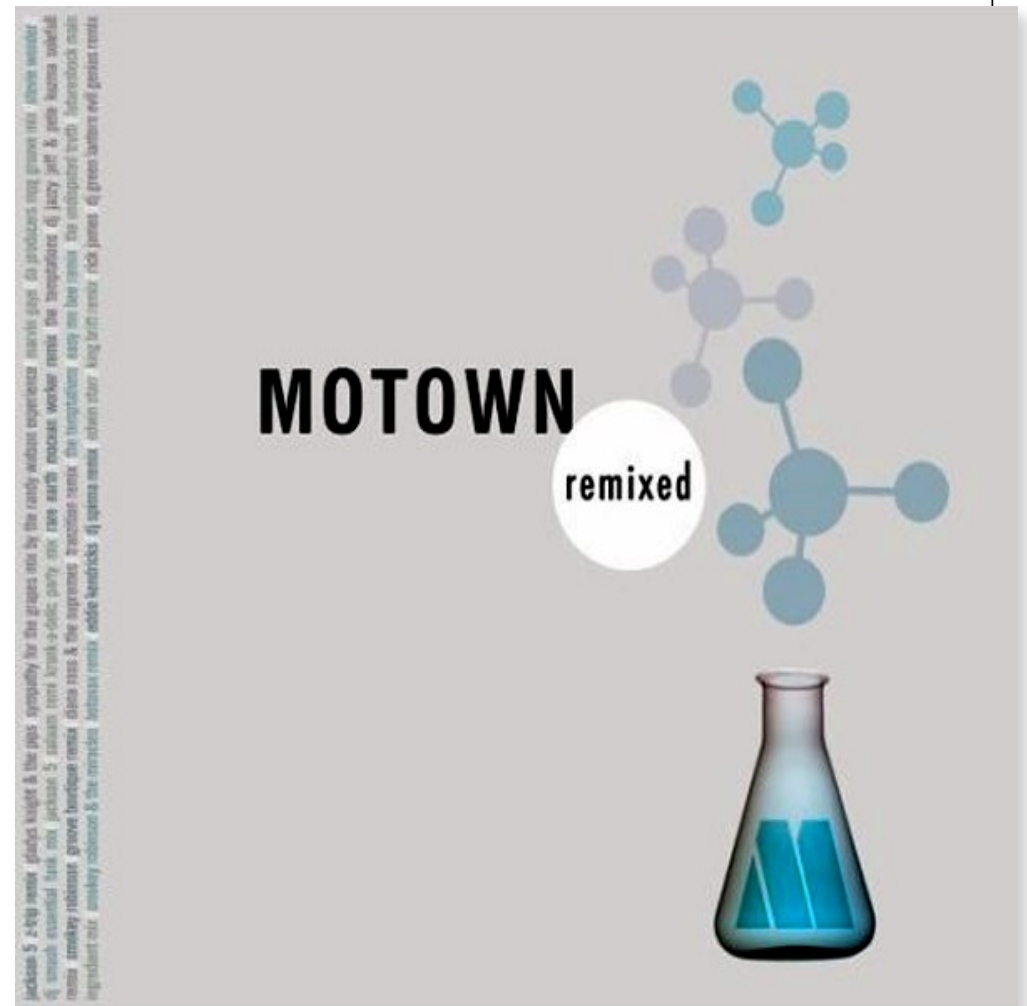
Part of the idea is history repeats itself, but curves as it goes along - so it's always little different each time it repeats. The implications are staggering. That's right, there might be another 'Dukes of Hazzard' movie. Only this one might be an opera, done completely with midgets. Or animated penguins. Or something worse.

Anyhow, with this idea of 're-occurring history with a twist' fresh in my mind, I started flipping through my music collection, to see if I could find that idea reflected in music.

Sure enough, I found a whole genre of music that was both old and new. These are blends of styles from other times, but not direct remakes (well, one is a remix, but who's counting). Music with lots of wah-wah pedals, sometimes a little surprise brass and maybe just a pinch of Steve McQueen.

Besides being great listening, you can use music of this type for another noble purpose... I think we all have that special friend with feathered hair and a really embarrassing CD in their car. These CDs would make a great gift to ease them into the 2000s. – Just a thought.

So, let's buckle up, and take a listen.



Motown Remixed by Various

Ok, I'm going out on a limb here. Some people would consider remixing Motown classics somewhat akin to vandalizing classic pieces of art. Really though, it's not like they're loping the heads off greek statues or something. It's just a recording, for heaven's sake. So, if you're the kind of person that it would really bother having something familiar tinkered with, jump to the next CD review. The Motown remixed (in my opinion) pushes some old favorites into some pretty new territory. In some cases to the point where it's something completely different. Besides, I haven't met anyone that doesn't smile during the Jackson 5 songs. The standout tracks are the DJ Jazzy Jeff remix of *Poppa Was a Rolling Stone* and the Z-trip remix of *I Want You Back* by the Jackson 5.

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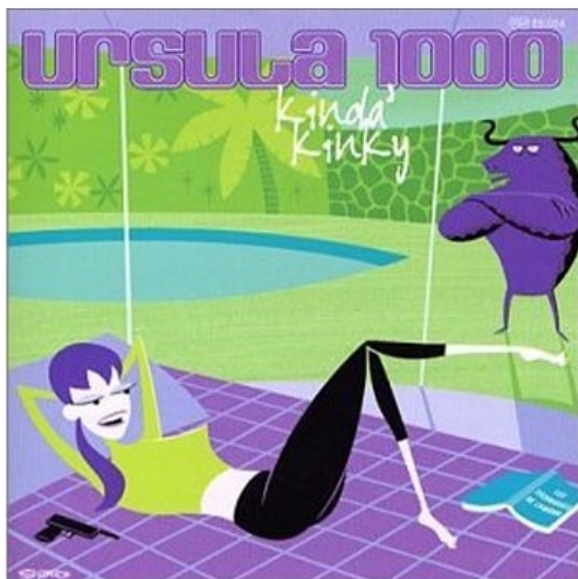
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Counterfeit by Cirrus

I think this is one of those CDs I bought originally because I really liked the cover art. I'm a sucker for bold graphics. Happily, it turned out to be a good choice. The earlier CDs from this group were heavy and hardrock-ish. This CD introduced both a new drummer, and a new female vocalist (Laura Derby). It completely changed their sound. Ms. Derby has a breathy, Sarah Maclachlan/Dido lilt to her voice, however, this is no sleepy album. There are lots of quick tempos and breakbeats to keep everyone happy and moving. There are some excellent hooks on the tracks *Boomerang* and *You Are*. Do yourself a favor, reserve judgment and give the whole CD a listen through. This is one of those that has such a wide variety of styles, you need to give it some time. And if you really like it, refrain from buying their earlier work, because (so far) this gem is one of a kind.



Kinda Kinky by Ursula 1000

If you've not heard anything from Ursula 1000, you're in for a treat. It's rare you find a combination of glamorous and goofy. This is the kind of music you might imagine is being played at jet set night clubs in exotic locations. That's because it is, come to think of it. Alex Gimeno (the guy behind Ursula 1000) has DJ'ed and mixed for a crazy long list of fashionistas and entertainment people all over the world. There's lots of samba and congo music, mixed with a big dash of humor. Suggested use: party music while playing vintage 'Laugh In' videos on a large monitor with the sound turned off.

Ed. note: Scott and I used to do this all the time in college, playing DEVO albums while watching the news...



Scorpio Rising by Thunderball

Mix a little funk, a little soul, and some lounge – it's a recipe for some pretty groovy fun. The opening track: 'The Heart of the Hustler' is a tip of the hat to Curtis Mayfield, and possibly one of my favorite tracks ever. That's just the beginning for this one. Another standout is 'Angela's Lament' – with lots of brass and percussion, it sounds as if it could have been lifted from a old movie soundtrack. Frankly, every track on this disc is great. If you needed a soundtrack CD for an exciting evening out or for planning a bank heist, this is the perfect choice.

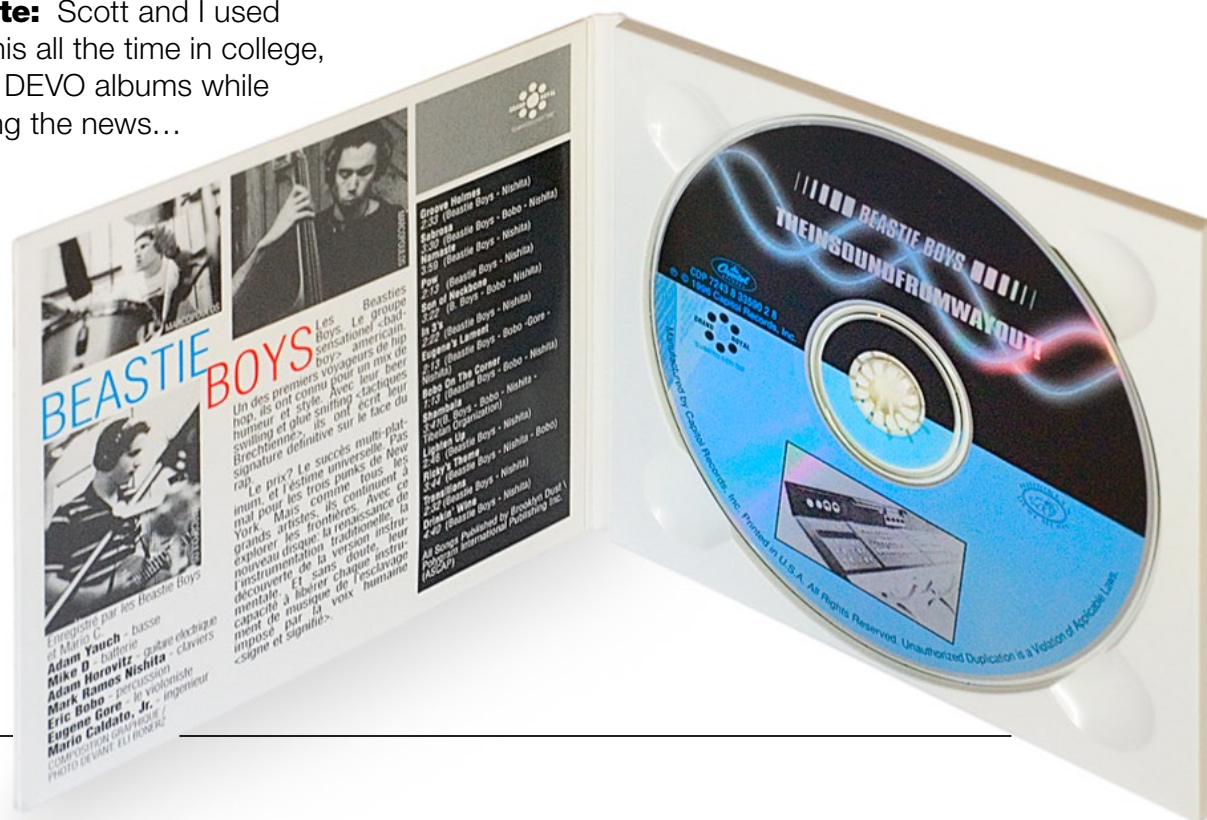


It's You, It's Me by Kaskade

This is the first full length CD from the San Francisco based DJ group. The CD has tons of R&B, Soul, Funk, Disco, and Jazz influences. There's something really warm and familiar about this set. It's House music that has so much other great stuff in it, it's almost something else. Whatever it's classified as, it's extremely listenable. I'm pretty sure you will be singing along and tapping your feet by the second play through. Favorite tracks have to include the retro dance tune *Meditation to the Groove*, the shimmering *Seeing Julie*, and the very funky *Get Busy*.

The In Sound From Way Out by The Beastie Boys

The Beasties like you've never heard them before. This is an old CD that never really got a lot of press. It's a masterpiece. Even if you don't like the Beastie Boys, give this CD a listen. Maybe, especially if you don't like the Beastie Boys, give it a listen. It's fully instrumental, part bluesy jazz, part experimental music, and all good. Lots of cool organ, harmonica, and conga riffs. I don't know why, but it's a generally hard to find CD. It is available on Amazon (and for cheap, too). So, hurry and order before midnight tonight!! You'll be glad you did.



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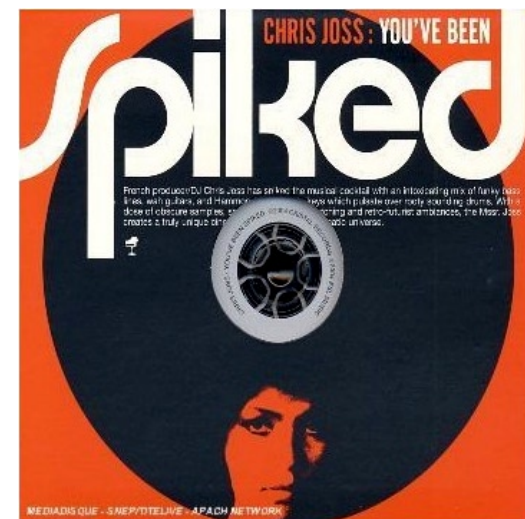
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You've Been Spiked!

By Chris Joss

A retro blaxploitation soundtrack from a Frenchman? Ah, but of course. This really is an amazing piece of work. A 'Superfly' meets 'Starsky and Hutch' soundtrack mixed with a helping of cheesy disco and some great scratching. There's a whole lot of the style from Laylo Schiffrin (the guy who wrote the music for movies like **Mission Impossible** and **Enter the Dragon**) mixed in here. If it wasn't for the great production on some of the tracks, you might think they were vintage. A word of caution: You will have a very strong urge to jump in your car and drive a bit recklessly after listening to this. You've been warned.

So there you have it. I hope you enjoy a few of these discs because after all, everything old becomes new again. Me, I'm waiting a few more years to dig out some really old stuff, repurpose it and make a killing! With a slight twist, of course... ●

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January 30: Phoenix, AZ



As much fun as it is to get out to the shows and see the latest and greatest gear, it's also a great time to mingle with our readers and find out what you are up to. I find that it's a great way to get feedback on the magazine and good ideas for new projects as well.

At the end of January, I was invited by the Arizona Audio Video Club to stop by and talk about music, audio and the magazine to their members at the monthly get together. As Phoenix just happens to be old stomping grounds, it was a great excuse to get back to the Valley of the Sun and catch up on a few old friends, record stores (and of course) eateries.

Members Jeffrey Behr and Dean Love met me for an early dinner at Houston's on Camelback and we had a very pleasant chat about hifi, music and automobiles. On to the club meeting, they had a great turnout and even a few of our friends from the Steve Hoffman Music Forum stopped by!

The AZ AV Club is a great group of folks and we spent a lot of time discussing how important it is to really enjoy your system, no matter what the configuration.

They were split about 50/50 between analog and digital and there was even a man in the group that has 40 THOUSAND LPs!! That's dedication to vinyl, so on my next trip, I'll definitely be stopping by to check that out as well as a few of the systems of the various group members. www.azaudioclub.com

It wouldn't be a trip to Phoenix without stopping in at my favorite record store, Tracks In Wax down on Camelback and Central Avenue. Back in the 80s and 90s I spent a small fortune there and probably bought a good third of my record collection at TIW. There were some great bargains as usual and I ended up purchasing about 25 albums! Then my good friend Al and I were off to Tokyo Express to get some curry before I had to jump on the plane and get back to the Pacific Northwest. A good trip, indeed.

Pearl Audio Video
March 29: Portland, OR



Pearl Audio's Bennett Rowe and John Loranger with Steve Hoffman

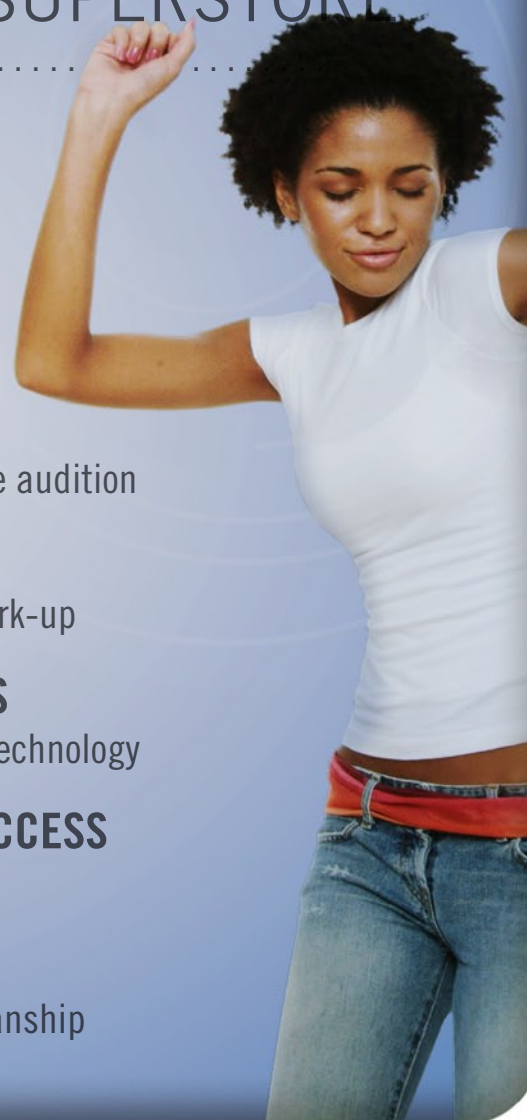
A little bit closer to home, Steve Hoffman and I joined the folks at Pearl Audio Video for Steve's lecture on mastering. If you have sat in on one of these at CES or the RMAF, you know what a witty and informative guy Steve is.

He always has a few great stories to tell and some great music to share with the crowd. The staff from Pearl cleared a few racks of gear out of the showroom to open it up a bit and they set up a pretty major system for Steve, consisting of a giant rack of McIntosh gear including their flagship, C1000 preamp and a pair of MC1201 mono-blocks, all looking sharp on some Finite Elemente Pagode racks with a large pair of Dynaudio floorstanding speakers to round out the system. *(continued)*

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Ron Cornelius from McIntosh was on hand to answer questions and audition gear for the customers. Pearl is a Premier McIntosh Dealer, so they have one of just about everything McIntosh makes. If you have been considering a McIntosh purchase and live anywhere near Portland, you should pay them a visit. Their highly professional staff will take good care of you.

The place was absolutely packed and I think that there were probably about 200 people there. This is the kind of thing that the high end needs more of!! People getting together to enjoy some music and a glass of wine in a very friendly (and hip) setting.

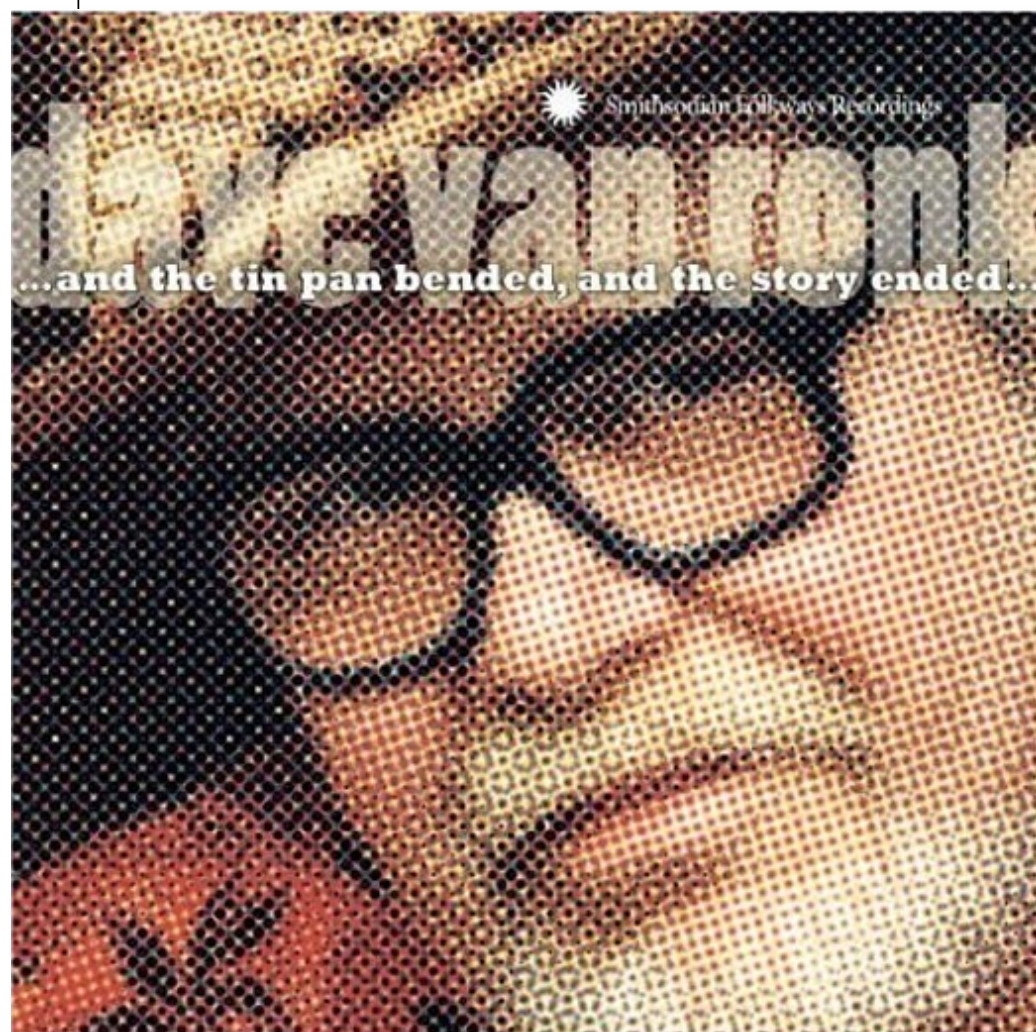
Once Steve finished his presentation, we met a few local members of the Steve Hoffman Music Forum (they're everywhere!!) and finished off the evening over dinner at PF Changs.

We will definitely be doing more of these throughout the year, so I look forward to talking to as many of you as I can! ●

Blues You Can Use

— Irv Gross

The blues cuts a wide swath through the fabric of American music, from its Robert Johnson origins in the Mississippi delta, through soul-tinged Memphis blues, the electric blues of Chicago, the acoustic blues of Appalachia and the rural south. The blues has influenced rock and roll from John Mayall and the Rolling Stones forward, has fortified folk music, and lent strength to the blues infused jazz of John Coltrane. It can be played on any instrument from the guitar, keyboards, harmonica, or the human voice. The blues can be as cutting as Buddy Guy or as gentle as Mississippi John Hurt. The important thing, as Charlie Parker once put it, 'If you don't feel it in your heart, it won't come out your horn.' Like all great music, the blues reaches into the soul and raises the human spirit.



My own journey to the blues began during the 'folk scare' of the 1960s when I came across a musician named Dave Van Ronk. While the 'Mayor of MacDougal Street' may be best known for having his version of 'House of the Rising Son' appropriated by Bob Dylan, he remained a consummate musician and interpreter until his death four years ago. Dave was a classic example of a musician who just played 'good music' regardless of the idiom or label. While he aspired to be a jazz musician, the blues guitar and voice are where he most often found home.

...and the tin pan bended, and the story ended...

(Smithsonian Folkways LC9628) recorded in October 2001, captures Dave's last recording with Dave in good form while fighting cancer. *(continued)*

One of the most enjoyable things about this recording is that it contains not only some wonderful playing, but also great commentary; for the blues is, among many things, a living history. Dave's set-ups along with the track notes written by his biographer Elijah Wald, deepen one's appreciation of the songs by setting them in a proper context. The recording is solid, though not spectacular. It captures a guitar player and his appreciative audience. It is as unpretentious and honest as the performer himself.

Ultimately, it's about the music, and the music shines. Songs range from Bessie Smith's hit of *You've Been a Good Wagon* to Josh White's *One Meatball* to Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee's *Sportin' Life Blues*.

Dave's strength as a performer was his phrasing, and the disc does a great job of capturing both the both the vocal phrasing and the guitar accompaniments.

As an interpreter of songs, Dave was able to tap into the essence of the song and re-invent it as his. His interpretation of *Jelly Jelly* is one which he had been working on for many years before recording it at this performance.

Listening to Dave perform *Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out*, you can hear that he knows what he is singing about and the great pride he took in his level of musical craftsmanship.

Dave's interpretation of *St. James Infirmary* is a classic.

The combination of scat-styled vocals with the plaintive mournfulness of the guitar solo drives home the power of the blues like a velvet hammer. Both a raconteur and a troubadour, his stories give the original writer their due while honoring their subject. Amongst the classic blues songs, Dave is able to

weave in his contemporary Tom Paxton's tribute to one of the blues legends in *Did You Hear John Hurt?*

Over the years, Dave championed many Joni Mitchell songs, always trying to do at least one of her songs at every concert. He frequently found lesser known songs and gave them his unique signature. Fittingly, as he has passed on, the final selection on the disc, is a stunning interpretation of Joni's, *Urge for Going*. Often the word 'great' is often over-used, but not in the case of Dave Van Ronk. He was a seminal influence on a generation of singers, songwriters, and performers. Dave is gone, but his music continues to enlighten our spirits. **...and the time pan bended, and the story ended...** allows us to enjoy this giant spirit one more time.

Susan Tedeschi's **Hope and Desire** (Verve B000511102) is her fourth album and first on the venerated jazz label. Thematically, the album explores various manifestations of loves won and lost, the hopes and concerns of parenting, and looking for the best in relationships. The title song really worked for me, coming from a line in the Bob Dylan song *Lord Protect My Child*; the lead vocal was clean and focused, the piano carried the melody, and the background vocals were where they needed to be. Tedeschi covers songs from the soulful vein of Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin, Fontella Bass, and Donny Hathaway. There is a sense of strength and maturity in her song selection, reflecting a woman of sensitivity and intelligence. *(continued)*



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Produced by Joe Henry, an esteemed singer/songwriter in his own right and producer of Solomon Burke's powerful **Nashville** album, the album contains songs by Bob Dylan, Ray Charles, and Mick Jagger/Keith Richards, a band of great musicians including Doyle Bramhall II and Susan's husband Derek Trucks of Allman Brothers fame. If you like your blues tinged with Bonnie Raitt style soul, this disc is an easy listen. The band was always tight, and Tedeschi's voice was focused and easy to listen to.

I couldn't help but feel that this would be a great band to see live, where all the musicians could really cut loose.

Though the album seems characterized by a tasteful restraint, I would have liked to see the musicians take the brakes off.

My favorite cut on the disc is *Magnificent Sanctuary Band* featuring the Blind Boys from Alabama. The gospel group lends a sense of gravitas and perspective to the song, which also features some tasteful piano playing. On the whole, the album strikes me as somewhat of a mixed bag. There are lots of good elements to the album. It features Tedeschi's strong voice and some excellent playing. The album is well recorded. Each instrument is properly placed. You can close your eyes and see the musicians where they ought to be. Ultimately, it reminds me of listening to a set of high priced loudspeakers. You ask yourself, do they image, do they have frequency extension, do they have vocal clarity, etc. The answer to each of these questions is yes. *(continued)*



But if you ask the question, do they make you want to stay up all night and listen to music on them, the answer is no. For me, I would love to see Susan Tedeschi and her band play live; on CD, give me some more Bonnie Raitt.

Tab Benoit's blues reflect his Cajun heritage. Born, raised, and still living in the Bayou country, Tab Benoit plays blues steeped in the country tradition. His latest album, **Brother to the Blues**, (Telarc CD-83639) showcases his talents on both electric and pedal steel guitar. Tab is backed by Louisiana's LeRoux, and their playing adds a swamp-rock inflection throughout. However, it is Benoit's playing and song selection that make the album. He takes the Sam Cooke classic *Bring It On Home to Me*, inserts a one minute instrumental bridge to it, and takes this beautiful song from Memphis to points south.

Once I heard the title track, I was hooked.

The title refers to the ubiquity of the blues, and all of the variations on that theme, from country to soul are blues brothers. Through the various songs on the disc, each style is done justice. Hank Williams' melancholy prison ballad *I Heard That Lonesome Whistle* recalls bluegrass pioneer Bill Monroe's high lonesome sound. While both this and Billy Joe Shaver's *Comin on Strong*, may be country songs at their roots, Benoit provides them with fresh interpretations, making them FEEL like the blues.

With Shaver on lead vocal, Benoit on pedal steel, and Waylon Thibodeaux on fiddle this music just begs to be cranked up. The more I listened to this disc, the more I enjoyed the recording. Each solo is placed in proper perspective with the soloist front and center, and the ensemble playing has good soundstaging. The rocking guitar-driven *So High* brings to mind George Thorogood and the Destroyers for its high-energy excitement. From this raucous sound shifts with aplomb to the slow and tasteful *Somehow*, capturing the lament of a spurned lover. Every time I listen to this disc, something new and different attracts me. The blues may oftentimes be sad and mournful.

Cajun music makes people get up and dance.

Like the food from his native region, Benoit delivers to the listener a large serving of music that combines different elements into a superb gumbo.

Years ago, I once asked someone if a particular speaker was a 'classical speaker' or a 'rock speaker.' He said if it reproduced music well it was a good speaker. If it didn't, it was not a good speaker. While the genre of this disc may be blues, at the end of the day, it is just good music. Everyone walks (or dances) away feeling better. Speaking of feeling better, Tab Benoit is intimately involved with preserving the wetlands of Louisiana, donating his time, energy, and talents to the Voice of the Wetlands project. So a tip of the hat to a musician who gives back with more than just his musical gift. ●



A quick look at the state of music video television today.

— Joe Golfen

Apparently, no one did anything noteworthy in 2006. Or at least that's what I thought after I saw the that the latest Time Magazine 'Person of the Year' was me, or anyone else who happened to be looking at the slightly reflective magazine cover. Time felt that the most important happening of 2006 was the beginning of a cultural revolution on the internet. Sites like YouTube and MySpace were now so jammed packed with aspiring musicians, film makers and run-of-the-mill weirdos that the way we digest pop culture has forever been changed and now anyone could be the next big thing.

Video Killed the Radio Star, but these days the Video Star isn't so Hot Either.

Perhaps they were on to something. MySpace helped skyrocket the careers of The Arctic Monkeys and Lily Allen to international levels, while power-pop group Ok Go's YouTube-based Treadmills video helped kick their record sales into high gear. It now seems that less and less people are tuning into the radio to get their new music fix. They're trolling the internet instead.

But this could all pass. Back when MTV first launched in 1981, there was a theory that music videos would soon replace the radio as the primary media through which people heard new songs. Of course, that didn't happen and it now seems ridiculous to ever think it would. What would people listen to in their cars?

But Could the Internet Kill the MTV Star?

It could be that MTV and its brethren no longer have anything new to show the world, and the World Wide Web has taken over as the good place to watch videos and discover new music. To test this theory, I spent several, grueling hours in front of the TV trying to see if the music video stations had potential to show me new exciting things, or if I'm better off just looking up videos on the internet.

MTV

The first video to every play on MTV was *Video Killed the Radio Star* by Buggles. The second was Pat Benatar's *You Better Run*, which was terrible, but that's beside the point. Although they looked like clownish nerds, the Buggles provided a catchy tune to launch a pop culture phenomenon, and while videos never really 'killed' the radio, they became extremely popular and remain a music industry staple today.

In 1987 however, MTV began to scale back the number of music videos they played in favor of youth-based TV shows. The network has produced some great cartoons over the years (*Daria*, *The Head AND Beavis and Butthead*) and some truly terrible reality shows (*The Osbournes*, *Laguna Beach*, *The Newlyweds*).

Today, MTV has almost no music video programs exempt for a few hours in the morning and *Total Request Live*, which only plays short clips and then shows some dude with an expensive haircut holding a microphone in front of a horde of screaming girls.

The videos they do play are never anything exciting. It's mostly a smattering of Top 40 pop hits, and pop is at a dark place right now. *(continued)*

The network has produced some great cartoons over the years (*Daria*, *The Head AND Beavis and Butthead*) and some truly terrible reality shows.



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Massive hits like *Fergalious* by Fergie or Justin Timberlake's 10 minute video for *What Goes Around* are nothing more than self-promoting sugar pop. Gwen Stefani ought to be ashamed of herself for the Showtune-stealing corn she's putting out today, and most other artists are pretty forgettable.

But every now and then a good act like The Killers makes it into the rotation and even weaker acts like The Frey provide a relief from the synthesized death march. And then they disappear, it's spooky.

MTV will also occasionally re-hash it's 'Unplugged' program, which was never as cool as it could have been, save a few stellar performances in the mid-90s. (**Ed. Note:** The rock bottom of this little exercise was the KISS Unplugged session, barf!) The latest artist to perform on the program was Korn and that's probably enough said about that.

The rest of the shows on MTV are also getting steadily worse. The Real World and Room Raiders were lame, but at least they were kind of funny. 'My Super Sweet 16' however, glamorizes materialism and general bitchiness among young girls, while 'Underage and Engaged,' a show about woefully unprepared 18 year-olds getting married, is not only extremely boring, it's kind of creepy. Perhaps this is a subtle way that the older generation is trying to brainwash my generation into abstaining from sex...

(continued)

So unless you yearn to live vicariously through dull people, or want to watch six episodes of 'Viva La Bam' in a row, you'll do well to steer clear of the Music Television Network.

VH1

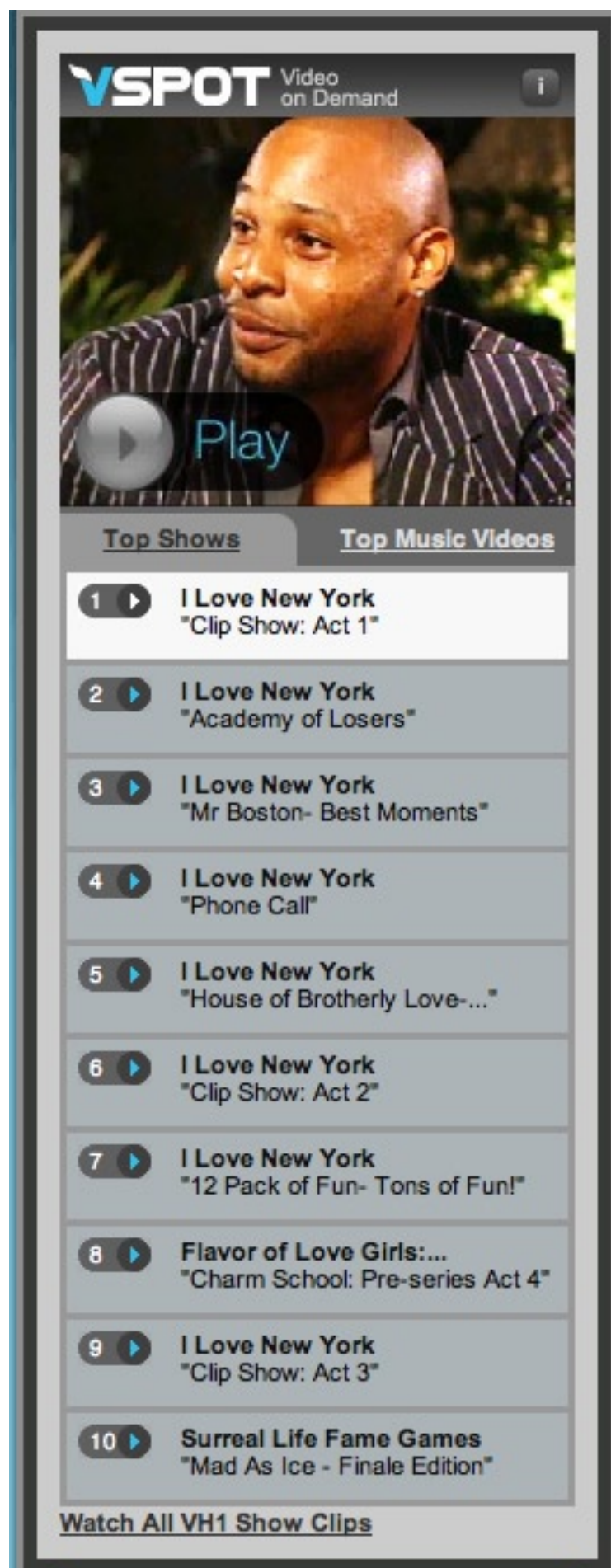
While I've always thought of VH1 as MTV's more mature little brother, it has been slipping lately too. While the network will occasionally run a few hours of the lamely delightful 'I Love the 80s/90s,' most of the new shows are more akin to what MTV has to offer. 'Flava of Love' and its terrible spin-off 'I Love New York' come to mind. But at least VH1 plays more videos, and it's a little better than what MTV's spinning.

VH1 dedicates a lot more time to music videos and the Vspot Top-20 countdown is always a good indication of what kind of stuff the station is playing. Unfortunately, the past few weeks have seen a band called Daughtry dominating the #1 spot, despite sounding like the unholy love child of Nickelback and Staind. The second place spot has recently been filled by a sensitive piano guy named Augustana, who's song was dull but not terrible by any means.

Regina Spektor's delightful tune *Fidelity* has held a high ranking for a few weeks, which is a nice surprise because it is both a very good song and a fun video. It's also nice to see a woman in a video who isn't acting like a lascivious cartoon character.

The countdown doesn't offer too many other surprises, although the Killers are still riding high and the new Blue October song isn't bad. Fall Out Boy, however, has slipped off their already modest perch with *This Ain't a Scene, It's an Arms Race*. They now sound like total Maroon 5 rip-offs, which is probably not the direction they should have headed in.

Mostly VH1 sounds one of those radio stations that plays songs from the '80s, '90s and Today.' Its got all the usual suspects: Nickelback, Nelly Furtado, Fergie, Ludacris



and even the Goo Goo Dolls. Inoffensive stuff to most listeners, unless you happen to find Evenesence very offensive (I do). VH1 still beats MTV hands down in terms of quality music, but it's still nothing to be too excited about. However, you baby boomers might get a chuckle about metal mania or seeing the occasional Peter Frampton video on the Alt-VH-1 station, VH-1 Classic.

FUSE

Fuse has long held itself up as the 'cool' video channel, and it certainly tries harder than the other two. Fuse has a lot more music-based programming than its counterparts, though a lot of that music isn't particularly good. The station seems to feel the need to appeal to the harder-edge rock fans and therefore spends a lot of time talking about bands like The Used, Senses Fail and Avenge Sevenfold. These thrashy Emo-screamo bands are still more palatable than a lot of the dance pop music out there, but it's mostly very derivative and the obvious gothic tendencies are a little too commercial and self-conscious to feel legitimate.

That being said, when I took a look at Fuse's Top Ten countdown, I wasn't entirely unhappy with what I found. The list was pretty hit and miss, covering ground from The Shins to My Chemical Romance. A video by the impressive and relatively obscure British band The Kooks was featured, but it lay side by side with the tiresome 30 Seconds to Mars. The Red Hot Chili Peppers topped the list with their lackluster video for the descent song *Snow (Hey Oh)*, and most of the list was better than what could be hoped for from MTV or VH1.

This list does a good job of showcasing what is good and bad about Fuse. It seems like the station doesn't know what it wants to be. Trying to balance indie rock with Emo and heavy metal usually means the indie fans won't listen and the other fans will be bored while The Shins strum a little ditty.

(continued)

Because so many forms of rock share pop, punk and rock and roll influences, it becomes difficult to decide where one subgenre begins and one ends.



It's an understandable problem, the same one faced by many rock radio stations, magazines and record stores. Because so many forms of rock share pop, punk and rock and roll influences, it becomes difficult to decide where one subgenre begins and one ends. Not that I think music lovers should at all segregate themselves from other music lovers, or that people don't like several types of music. But Fuse comes off as inauthentic, like it doesn't really have an opinion about what's cool, so it just puts it all out there.

Fuse is still the best choice when it comes to finding out about new music though, with shows dedicated to underground artists and new music, and much of what they discover is pretty decent. You probably won't find anything terribly fascinating on these shows, but they're doing a pretty good job of keeping in touch with the rock community.

There are other music channels of course, like MTV 2 and VH1 Classics, which pretty much play videos exclusively, but they are never very exciting. Whenever I tuned into these channels they were showing things like Bob Dylan's disastrous Unplugged session (in which he reworked all of his own songs, butchering them mostly) or a Hall and Oates concert from 1989. There are also non-rock channels like BMT and CMT which play hip-hop and country videos respectively. Don't

even get me started there.

These channels fall into the same trap as the rock stations and play the same 15 videos over and over again. None of these stations, with the possible exception of Fuse, gives the viewer enough quality programming to be worth watching.

THE TUBE

A newcomer on the scene, The Tube Music Network claims to be a 'pure music network' and true to the website marketing hype does not show anything but music videos. But it is a bit sporadic, indeed.

I spent a fair amount of time on The Tube, but got a lot of 'B-sides'. They claim to be a 'bold fusion that crosses multiple formats' but if I see one more Carole King video, I'm gonna vomit.

I did not see a ton of new music clips on The Tube, but I do think it does a better job at being a 'classic rock' station than the others. Lots of videos from the late 80s and mid 90s, that feel good kind of stuff that the 30-somethings might feel right at home with. In their defence, just about when I was ready to change the channel, there was a Prince video, or a rare live clip that I hadn't seen for quite some time, so this is a good station to record large blocks of on your TiVo and fast forward through while munching on some snack treats. *(continued)*

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Rob Fraboni

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



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Those searching for a video fix will have a much more rewarding time typing in their favorite artists on YouTube and looking for videos that way. The site offers fairly good picture quality and a huge array of videos, although you will sometime have to search through a bunch of weird stuff to find what you're looking for.

MTV.com and VH1.com both offer videos on demand and they have a good collection of most major bands and a lot of the independent stuff. They both also offer 'featured' video sections, and those can be a pretty good source of new videos and music. Most video Web sites will offer other videos related to the one your watching and taking the time to navigate through these will yield sweeter fruit than watching TV all day.

It seems like the internet might really take over the world like those nerdy guys in the 90s said it would.

It certainly is more fun to look up good videos right away than it is to wade through hours of televised mediocrity and tripe in the hopes of finding some good stuff. If the internet did kill the radio and video stars, not a jury in the world could convict it.

If you're looking for some good videos to get you started on your internet hunt check out Ok Go's new video for *Do What You Want*, *Dashboard* by Modest Mouse or the hilarious *White and Nerdy* by Weird Al Yankovic.

And while you're at it, buy a good pair of amplified speakers for your laptop... ●

Six of My Favorite Heavy Albums

— Jerold O'Brien

I wasn't sure quite what to call these records, heavy metal, hard rock, acid rock, etc. etc. You may put these records in a different category than I would, so to avoid all the arguing, let's clarify. These are six of my favorite records to really crank up LOUD. When I need to really rock out, these are on my short list.

Granted, I only have a modest system (Vandersteen 2Ce signatures and some vintage Dynaco gear) so these may not be the ultimate in pristine recordings for those of you with golden ears. But hey, most of you with golden ears probably wouldn't hang out at my house and rock anyway... Keep in mind that these are in no particular order from most to least favorite, they are all equally great in my eyes.

But for the rest of you that might, read on. And drop a post on our forum and tell us what your favorite six are! **The best list of six will receive a \$100 gift certificate from Music Direct.** How's that! So as Paul Stanley used to say back in the day: 'You deserve to give yourself a round of applause, lets go!'



KISS Alive!

You would think this crap would have lost its charm by now. My neighbor always says, 'I don't see what you two like about that stuff' when JD and I are under the hood of a car. But we were THERE and it changed our lives FOREVER. For a little more insight into this phenomenon, read Christina's article. The kids still love this stuff and you can see why, it's simple, loud and well executed. And I guarantee it sounds better on an old pair of Cerwin Vegas than it does on a pair of MAXX 2s. Its awesome! Every song on this two record set is a keeper and that is also part of the charm.

Unfortunately, KISS succumbed to marketing madness, which continues to this very day, evidenced by the Gene Simmons reality show. Unlike the Beatles, they refused to call it a day while on top and those of you that may recall, the whole KISS unplugged debacle really sucked. There are some other gems in the KISS catalog (the **Kiss My Ass** tribute CD is one of the best I've ever heard) but nothing captures the raw energy of a band that would truly change the face of rock and roll forever like **KISS Alive**.

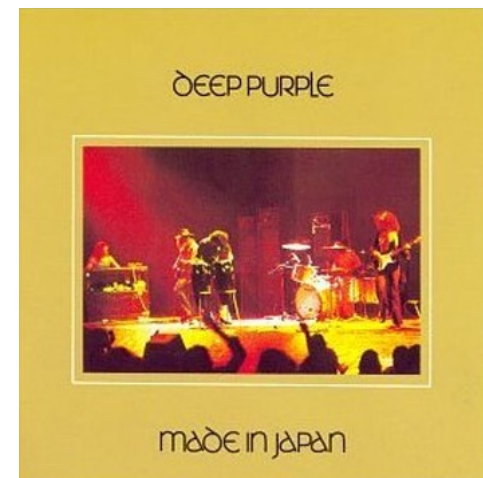


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Deep Purple — Made in Japan

This one is a little bit earlier in the game (1973) than KISS Alive! but it too is a great live rock album. All of you know the story about how *Smoke on the Water* was conceived, so no need to go into that here. Our own Steve Hoffman did a remastered copy on the DCC label, so if you can find one on Ebay, I suggest buying it. It's way better than the originals and even with heavy metal, garbage in, garbage out. Along with a great rendition of *Highway Star*, the epic *Smoke on the Water* MUST be played at maximum volume.

There are those that will argue *Stairway* is a more righteous song, but I beg to differ.

While we are on the subject of SOTW, I think those first opening notes are almost as universally recognizable as the first few notes of *Hard Day's Night*!

Van Halen — Van Halen II

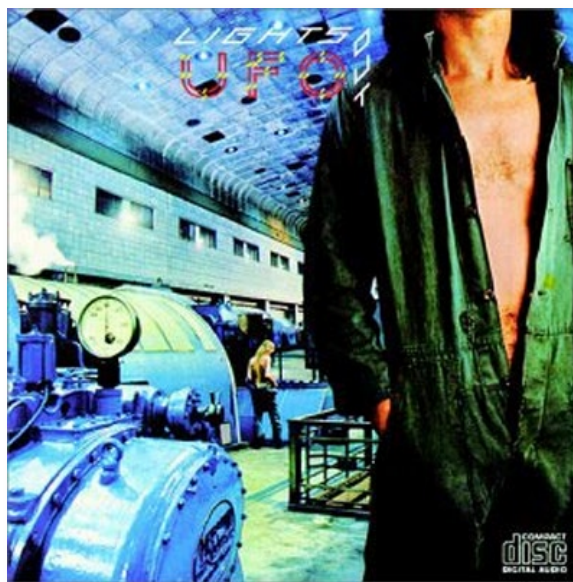
Another band that really changed the way it was done in the world of rock was Van Halen. Love em or hate em (and that attitude can vary, depending on what the present configuration of VH might be at any given moment) there is no denying the genius that was Eddie Van Halen. Personally, I'm much more of a fan of the original lineup. Granted David Lee Roth can't sing as well as Sammy, but these guys were just plain fun.

Most aficionados of rock would probably argue that the original Van Halen album is the purest that they had to offer. This was a close one to call, but *Bottoms Up* and *Somebody Get Me a Doctor* are just damn good rock songs. Guess what, it's my list so sod off if you don't like it. For what it's worth, I thought it showed a great sense of humor that they covered *You're No Good*. That took guts.



However, to the credit of the masses, a quick check on Amazon.com reveals that there are currently 74 copies of this CD available used for as little as 56 cents, so I'm probably in the extreme minority when it comes to liking this one!!

By the next album, **Women and Children First**, they had lost a bit of the fire in the first two albums, but Van Halen would soldier on with a few lead singer changes to become one of the most commercially successful rock bands in history. According to Billboard magazine, their current tour (with David Lee Roth back as lead singer and Eddie's son Wolfgang on bass) is cancelled for the time being.



UFO — Lights Out

Before I dug the Scorpions, I was heavily into UFO. Featuring legendary guitarist Michael Schenker (who later went on to form his own band, the Michael Schenker Group, later came back to UFO and then went back to MSG...) offered up a blazing guitar oriented sound.

UFO had quite a long string of popular records, with most of their hits being on this one, **Obsession** and **No Heavy Petting**. These same albums packaging were designed by the quite clever British design firm Hipgnosis, featuring excellent photography and even a jigsaw puzzle that came inside the **Obsession** album. Oh, the days of record company excess!

UFO combined the beefy vocals of Phil Mogg and the screaming guitars of Schenker for a trademark sound that would continue for quite a few more albums. But my favorite UFO tune, *Too Hot to Handle* is on this one, so that's why it made the list.

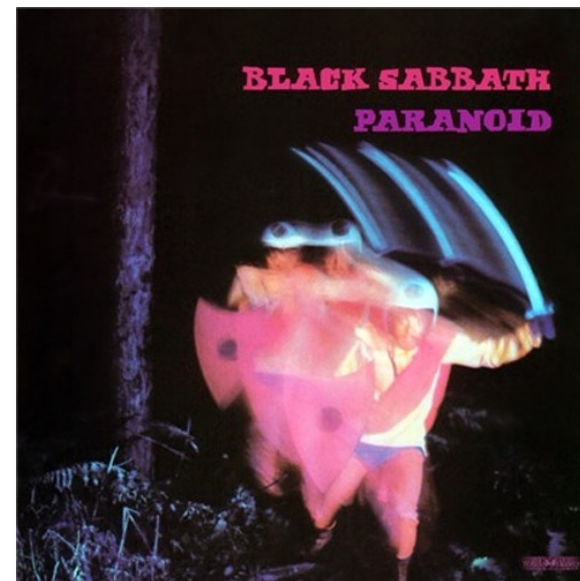
Believe it or not, these guys just put out another album last fall, **The Monkey Puzzle** and have been touring all these years. Well, what else would they do?

Black Sabbath — Paranoid

What really makes this a great heavy album is that even today it will confound and annoy anyone's parents you play it for! That's rock success as far as I'm concerned, it's supposed to piss off your parents, especially when played at a high volume level.

Very much like **KISS Alive**, this record really stands the test of time and enjoys great popularity and strong sales today. It's sort of like the Dark Side of the Moon of Heavy Metal.

This band has had more personnel changes than Spinal Tap over the years, but miraculously now features half of the original members (which is more than we can say for Deep Purple, these days) but lacking OZZY. Considering the commercial success this would be if I were running the band, I'd ditch Ronnie James Dio for Ozzy in a heartbeat. Somehow anyone less than OZZY singing *Iron Man* would just be a big bummer to me.



In an interview, Ozzy once said that when he played the finished album for his Mum, she commented that 'the songs were pretty dark'. Well, this one is where it all began and OZZY still tries his best to stay on the dark side.

For just a half an hour, turn the clock back to 1970, turn the volume up to 11 and crank this record to hear these classic metal tunes. I guarantee it will clear your head out and probably your living room too!



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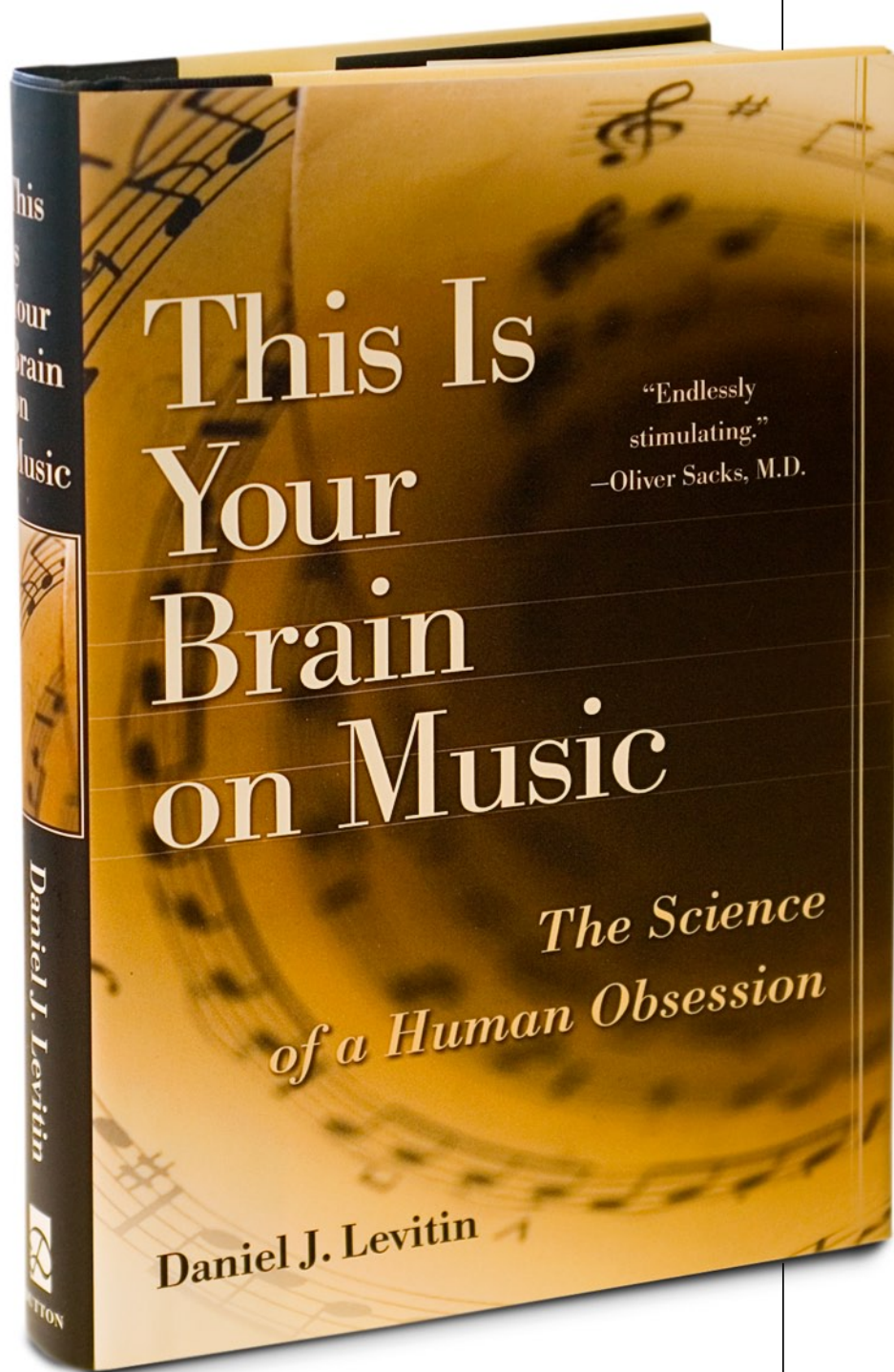
Metallica — Black Album

The most controversial and the most successful album in Metallica's career, the **Black Album** was the one that put these guys over the top. Forget about James Brown, (God rest his soul) but I nominate Metallica for being the hardest working men in show biz, at least for the part of their career from inception to a few albums past this one.

Completely spurned by radio and MTV, these guys completely kicked ass and for a while played harder, louder and faster than anyone (except maybe Megadeth). And they did it day in and day out. Metallica couldn't get anyone to play their stuff, so they went out and promoted it hard-core, gathering some of the most loyal fans along the way.

In the beginning I always thought that they played really fast, but it was a taste that I hadn't quite acquired. When the **Black Album** came out, it forced me to reevaluate Metallica and deem them the Thinking Man's Heavy Metal Band. They proved that they could slow it down a bit and not lose their edge.

While Metallica took a ration of crap for making this record in the beginning, in the end it went on to be a huge success. It's well recorded and sounds great on a good system; the drums in particular really have a lot of sock, which will reward those of you with good subwoofers. ●



Gonna See The Rock & Roll Doctor

Ever wondered why you still like Lynryrd Skynyrd and Molly Hatchet while your friends have moved on? Want to know what musical terms like timbre mean? Curious why you hate it when cover bands play Pink Floyd or Jimi Hendrix?

Well, the answers to these and many other questions are covered in this book from Dr. Daniel Levitin, who is one of the head dudes in the psychology department at McGill University. Levitin used to be in the record business and worked with a number of cool bands over the years, including Steely Dan who he claims to be his favorite band. (Hmmm, what does that say about him, I wonder?)

(continued)



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All the psychology aside, Levitin does a fantastic job of explaining the mechanics of music in a manner that makes sense to anyone. Regardless of whether you are a casual music enthusiast or obsessed, I guarantee that you will walk away from this book with more musical knowledge than when you started. Thanks to a writing style that is very accessible, this was one that I couldn't put down.

However, if you really love music and would not only like some further insights into what makes us tick as far as music thing goes, than this book is a must read. Not only is Levitin very thorough in his analysis, but he is very insightful and pretty funny. I had a chance to chat with him when he was in town promoting his book and lecturing during **Brain Awareness Week** here in Portland, Oregon last month.

A quick perusal of his website, www.psych.mcgill.ca/levitin/ provides a look what's on his iPod right now and that's somewhat illuminating as well; pretty even split between the Stones and the Beatles, which I found interesting. What it ultimately reveals is that this man really lives and loves music; that's a big plus in my book.

If you love music, you need to read Dan's book. It is the most enjoyable book I have ever read on the subject! ●



Current Classics

— Dan Babineau

This issue we have a few fun things that are a little bit off the beaten path; works for trumpet by Bach and some great atonal music from Boulez. Both of these will take a bit more work to listen to than your basic Beethoven, but I think if you spend a little time with them, you will come away impressed.

That being said, the recordings are first rate and you may even end up using them to show off your system to friends. I know our editor has been bitten by both of these! Enjoy.



Modern music from a modern man:

The Three Piano Sonatas — Pierre Boulez
Paavali Jumpanen, Piano DG catalog #00289 477 5328

Pierre Boulez has certainly lived a remarkable life. He's directed some of the most prestigious orchestras in the world: the BBC Symphony Orchestra, the New York Philharmonic, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the Cleveland Orchestra to name a few! He started his musical studies at the Paris Conservatoire under the guidance of Olivier Messiaen and Andree Vaurabourg and merged into the "twelve-tone technique" along with Rene Liebowitz. Boulez became a master of atonality and brought these novel concepts to the limelight. He was deeply involved in musical experimentation both acoustic and electronic. Latter on in life, Boulez even collaborated with another musical genius of sorts – Frank Zappa on a number of "interesting pieces". His focus on the modern repertoire of classical music gained Boulez both respect and criticism. But this is always the case when a composer attempts to stretch the canvas a little further than what is commonly accepted.

The recent release of **The Three Sonatas**, on Deutsche Grammophon help bring into focus these pristine examples of an extended journey of one man's soul.
(continued)

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The first two sonatas were written early in Boulez's life and clearly illustrate a man's attempt to understand life as a whole. Written shortly after the end of World War II, these atonal sonatas turns the piano back into a percussive instrument. There is no lasting melody to hum here but instead an atmosphere is created. For some, atonality can be hard to understand. But in reality, all one has to do to appreciate this form of music is focus of the many sounds and rhythms and let the music draw you in to a different place, surreal and sublime, in this case. Throughout the various tracks of this CD, Paavali Jummanen's performance accurately translates this diverse, chilling emotion packed into each sonata: Anger, violence and destruction breaks down into serenity and then a quick change to light playful passages. These are moods that live within a person's soul and Boulez chooses this music to speak to us.

I like all of the music on this CD, but I especially appreciate the evolution that takes place in the last sonata: powerful, refined and no longer searching for an answer. This is serious music composed by a seriously complex musician. You may be surprised just how contagious these compositions become, just relax, turn off any preconditioned ideas about modern music and enjoy a first class ride into the 'constellations.'

Jummanen's interpretation of these sonatas is as great as the music itself. This is not easy music to play and Boulez's comments on the back of the CD reflect on the technical resources necessary to play these intensely diverse sonatas! A fantastic performance indeed.

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J.S. Bach – Works For Trumpet?

Alison Balsom, Trumpet EMI Catalog #58047

A clear example of the expression: 'Curiosity killed the cat'. I actually purchased this EMI release by relative new-comer Ms. Alison Balsom largely because of its' title: **Works for Trumpet**. (Here's the curiosity part of the equation). In all of my musical training as an oboe player, I never remember any music attributed to J.S. Bach that was composed primarily for the trumpet. And come to find out, Bach did not write music for the trumpet probably because the trumpets of his day were 'valve less' making a trumpeter's tone somewhat inconsistent, to say the least! But I think Bach would have composed many works for the trumpet if he had heard the incredible transcriptions found on this CD.

And, oddly enough some of the music contained on this CD was originally written for; you guessed it, the oboe. But oh, what a difference with the raw power and gorgeous tonality of the trumpet exchanging passages with a very grandiose organ on tracks 1-3, 11-13 and 15-17. There is a little something for everyone on this disc as Alison Balsom is accompanied by several first rate musicians playing violin, viola da gamba, harpsichord, chamber organ and organ respectively.

For the record, (small pun), sometimes when a piece of music is written for a specific instrument a transcription for another instrument will not translate, but not in this case.

I especially like how the majesty of the trumpet compliments or better yet weaves itself into the powerful chords of the organ. These exchanges are not possible with the oboe as the sheer volume of the organ overpowers the organic tone of the oboe. I'll admit to not being a big fan of 'skeletons dancing on a tin roof' a.k.a the harpsichord. I generally like a little more tone from my instrument. But here, accompanied by the brilliance and dynamics of Ms. Balsom's trumpet, it just works. And the refreshing sound of the viola da gamba along with the lightness and air of the violin truly brings us back to the Baroque.

Play this CD early in the morning and you're sure to have an incredible day. I can't get the sound out of my brain. The elegance, tone and power exhibited here in Alison Balsom's playing could easily stop a clock. I fully intend on checking out her other work as this trumpet player will hopefully be around for many years to come!

As mentioned before, first rate playing by all performing on the disc: Colm Carey, organ, Alina Ibragimova, violin, Alistair Ross, chamber organ and skeletons (I mean harpsichord, sorry!) and Mark Caudle, viola da gamba. Record more together, please! ●

From the UK to the US

— Nicole Rice

There is so much music out there in cyber land, it is impossible to reach the end and say that you've heard it all. These days I find that I am absolutely in love with the music coming from England; many of the sophisticated sounds leading the way are coming from London so I decided to try some of them out, but not forgetting to mix in the local stuff from back here in the US. I know that right now it doesn't seem very cool to be patriotic...from either country, but the music still rocks and I have the reviews to prove it!



Are you feeling the desire to brush up on your British accent? Sing along with Lily Allen and you'll sound sophisticated in no time; coincidentally you will learn a few good ways to shoot guys down at the bar and the best technique for threatening catty girls at the local club. I love the idea that the British are proper and tight lipped because it makes me giggle compulsively while listening to her album. **Alright, Still...** Allen's style is fun with chipper beats and melodies but the true intrigue is her brutally honest lyrics that joke about everyone from the guy trying to score at the pub to her own family members. You feel a little guilty at first but her accent and carefree attitude somehow slowly guide you from your reservations. She is cynical and at times rightfully pessimistic but the youth and energy she exudes create her unique sound. In *LDN* she sings about the purse snatchers and crack whores she sees while riding her bike around London because "The filth took away her license." She takes cheap shots at her ex boyfriend in *Not Big* who didn't make her happy but since he dumped her she gets the last word. **Lily Allen seems like the girl standing next to you in line that says something totally inappropriate to get you to laugh.** Grab this album because she's just a riot. Makes me hanker for the days when I used to live there...


 IMOGENE HEAP
speak for yourself


Oh Imogene, despite the low grade production and the sensation of Enya on an eighties steroid kick sound, I found you to be an interesting listen.

Imogene Heap's **Speak for Yourself** from 2005 sounds like it was recorded in a home basement studio but the interesting layers of eighties keyboarding and poetic lyrics make this album worth a listen. Her voice is reminiscent of PJ Harvey with a softer touch and her sound is ardent and timid at the same time. Think Sarah McLaughlin with a hardcore beat and synthesized sound. It is a truly unique sound and definitely worth a listen. *Headlock* opens the album with a good kick and later *Daylight Robbery* shakes out the timidity with the excitement of a night out on the town. Her music probably speaks volumes more to women than men; she comes across as more angelic than sensual due to the Enya-esque style that seems to be making a comeback. If you enjoy Evanescence then pick up **Speak for Yourself**.

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Although my husband and I love each other to no end, when we sing to one another our lyrical style usually incorporates the endearing term of butt sniffer or poop eater. (Ed note: this is not a pretty site to watch...) Not so dreamy I suppose but it gets the point across. Dean and Britta, Dean formerly of Galaxie 500 and Britta the voice of Jem and the Holograms (one of the best cartoons from the eighties) became romantically involved when they were most recently in the band Luna. **Back Numbers** is their second album as Dean and Britta. Britta's voice soothes with the most gentile tone that leads the journey through the atmospheric



clouds. **Together they make ethereal music best listened to after dusk.** They do great covers of Donovan's *Teen Angel* and Claudine Longet's *White Horses* but altogether the album is a homogenous mixture of dreams, slow beats, and sultry voices. The album is serene and hearing them duet is just beautiful. I listen to Dean and Britta and I think about what the Carpenters would sound like if they made music stoned. No disrespect intended.



On a similar wavelength we run into The Winterpills out of Massachusetts. Again, it seems like after dinner music but less lullaby and more contemplation. Phillip Price and Flora Reed make a harmonious sound that is soothing to the ears. They get it moving on *Broken Arm* and *A Ransom*; **when listening to the Winterpills I can't help but want to run through a field of wheat and chase the birds.** *I Bear Witness* is more serious with the issue of trust between friends is challenged. Their songs contain more guitar than the Dean and Britta CD, giving an intimacy that seems secret as opposed to flying to Mars on a fluffy white cloud. I really enjoyed this album and I recommend the Winterpills on rainy days, intimate dinner parties and people who bled their Simon and Garfunkel to a literal death.



The Good, The Bad, & The Queen is the next installment of that guy from Blurr's exquisite musical journey. This band and album bring back into focus Damon Albarn's longtime passion for music that specifically relates to London dwellers. Albarn and a few band members traveled to Nigeria to record some of the music which was then mixed by Danger Mouse; Albarn also recruited the Clash's Paul Simonon which helped create the magic for the album. **The sound is ominous and not an easy listen in my opinion but certainly travels to a depth that many artists aren't even aware of.** The music is well composed and makes you listen for every layer and every sound within the song. Albarn's vision is truly unique and I'm fascinated with his sincere love for his country and speaking to his people.

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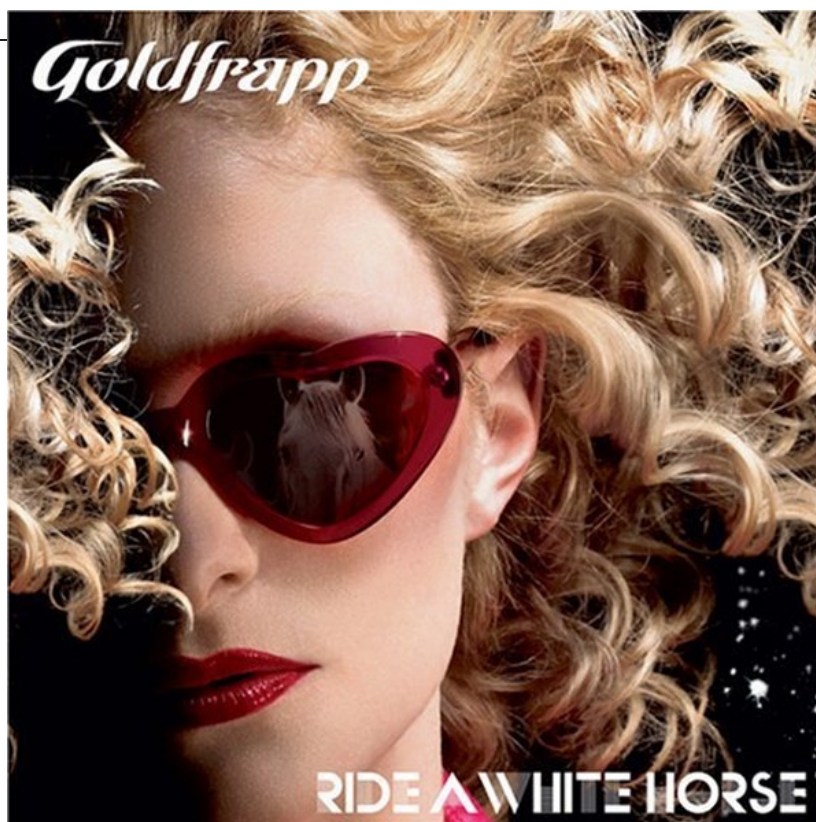
Speaking of London dwellers, Bloc Party presents **A Weekend in the City** that energizes the indie rock culture of kids of the city. Each song develops into full blooms of sound and the lyrics are anything but superficial and cliché. There are many moments of retrospect and a longing to change the past. For an album with such a strong and full sound, I think it is cool that Okereke can be vulnerable and sing about wanting to 'dazzle and outshine them all' in *The Prayer* and not sound fruity. He really puts his emotions out there on multiple tracks and the music acts as his confidence or lack thereof. *Where is Home?* is a charged up song about the passing of life and the question of permanence. **The album has dark moments but the energy is high and a fine representation of the issues on the minds of youth today.** Somehow, the CD cover looks suspiciously similar to the Supergrass cover from last year...



One more London favorite that actually sounds a bit more like Donna Summer with a heavy German accent is Goldfrapp. The disc you see here is kind of a maxi-single and features five versions of *Ride a White Horse* from the **Supernature** CD and a version of *Boys Will Be Boys* that has a bit of a carnival feel to it, almost reminiscent of Lene Lovich. I only did this kind of thing once before when I was in my Depeche Mode phase (for about 4 days) and bought a maxi-single with nine versions of *Personal Jesus* on it. Well, one of these about every five years is all you need! It's worth it for the *Ride a White Horse* video clip!

If Bloc Party sounds like a dark club in the city, then Dr. Dog's **We All Belong** sounds like a great house party complete with kegs and a bonfire. Roll down the windows in the pickup truck and cruise to the easiest tunes that take you back, to last month? **Yes, Dr. Dog is one of those bands with complete disregard for modern sound** and yearns to fit in with your Beatles collection. Can it be done you ask? Hell yes, I say! What a wonderful album complete with lo-fi production and familiar rock groove that fits like a glove. Although the sound is classic the album is unique and each song is polished off just enough to keep it sounding fresh. *Weekend* is a relaxing song about going to the lake with your buddies and your brew; the beat is lively and the lyrics are easy like a conversation with an old friend. If you are a classic rock fan but struggle with living in the past via your music collection, this album is an easy way to get some new music in the rotation without sacrificing your soul.

Music continues to change and musiclovers chase the carrot hoping to cover as much ground as possible. Bands like The Good, The Bad, & The Queen and Block Party still deliver the sense of searching for the intangible while bands like Dr. Dog and Lily Allen just want to have fun. Thank goodness for that. ●



Audiophile Pressings

— Jeff Dorgay

This issue, we are examining a number of recordings from one source, **Eastwind Import**. The owner, Hajime Sato came to my attention out on the Audio Circle forum, where a number of people were talking about the great music he had available. As I am always looking for great jazz CDs to pick up, I headed right over to his site www.eastwindimport.com and was very pleasantly surprised!

Hajime is located in Southern California, so shipping to just about anywhere in the US is pretty quick. I got my first order right away and settled right down to listening! Hajime specializes in Jazz CDs that are unavailable or very hard to get in the US that are from Japanese labels. While his modesty did not characterize these CDs as 'audiophile' discs per se, we all know a lot of really great recordings come from Japan and so far, this first batch is exceptional!

If you love jazz, I can't recommend Eastwind highly enough. The man who runs the ship is a jazz lover through and through and an audiophile as well; a perfect combination in my book! I am hopeful that his business will grow and we can get him to start importing Japanese LPs as well.

Hajime was kind enough to take a few minutes to answer a few questions for our readers. Here's what he had to say:

tone: How long have you been operating Eastwind Import?

HAJIME: Since November 2006.

tone: What gave you the idea? Do you travel to Japan a lot to find all these great discs, or do you have a friend/associate over there?

HAJIME: I have been an avid jazz fan for about 20 years, both in Japan where I grew up and in the US where I moved permanently in 2000. I always knew there were wonderful independent jazz labels in Japan that produced world-class albums, but more recently I found out that some of these CDs are sold at very high prices here, and realized that there might be a niche I could fill.

I also have a Japanese language blog I've been writing since 2005, and through the blog I got to know Mr. Mitsuo Johfu, owner and producer of Marshmallow Records. I learned that he wanted to sell his CDs in the US but didn't have any distribution at the time. So we did a 'handshake' over the Internet and I launched Eastwind Import, carrying about 20 of his CDs.

I learn about Japanese CDs through the Internet and some magazines, with some assistance from a Japanese distribution/export company. I deal directly with the four independent labels featured in my store: Marshmallow, Atelier Sawano, 55 Records and Venus Records. *(continued)*

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TONE: Is this a full time job for you right now or do you have a day job while you are launching it?

HAJIME: I still keep my day job as a freelance translator.

TONE: (if you care to reveal) Are most of your customers here in the US, or world wide?

HAJIME: About half of my customers are from the US, and the rest are from all over the world. I've just processed an order from a customer in Antigua and Barbuda!

TONE: Are you much of an audiophile, or just a music lover?

HAJIME: I'm a music lover first and foremost, but I consider myself a serious audiophile.

TONE: What kind of system are you listening to these days?

HAJIME: Right now I use Ah! Njoe Tjoe CD player with a tube output stage with 24/192 upsampling board; Denon DVD-3900 universal player; Prometheus Transformer Volume Control (handmade in Malaysia); McIntosh MC275 power amplifier (current production model); and Totem Forest speakers.

TONE: Do you attend a lot of live jazz performances?

HAJIME: Yes. At least once a month. Southern California is a great place to be a jazz fan.

TONE: What was your favorite jazz performance that you have attended in recent memory?
(continued)

Hajime: The Wynton Marsalis Quintet in last October. It was such a transcendent experience that I had goosebumps almost throughout the entire performance. Tomasz Stanko Quartet and Kei Akagi Trio also stand out.

TONE: Is there anyone you would absolutely love to see? (past or present)

Hajime: My all-time favorites: Count Basie, Ella Fitzgerald and Stan Getz. Right now, I'm looking forward to seeing Japanese pianist Hiromi next month in L.A.

TONE: Any chance you might ever branch out to importing some of those great Japanese LPs too?

Hajime: If there's strong demand from my customers, I might. The problem is, I don't own a turntable. I admit that with a bit of shame, and my excuse is that I was born in 1969 and did not get into the hobby of audio until recently. As a policy, I purchase a copy of everything I sell at Eastwind Import for myself and listen to it, so I know exactly what it is and how good it sounds. I want to follow this policy, so it may be a while before I can sell LPs with the same level of knowledge and confidence I have with CDs and SACDs.

Hajime Sato is a man with a strong love of jazz and a major commitment to quality. I highly recommend Eastwind Imports and we will be adding a section of their CDs to our website soon, so you can read reviews and go right to Hajime's website to purchase them.

Here is our first batch of CDs, which were all great to listen to:



Jesse van Ruller — Live at Murphy's Law 55 Records

Recorded on July 7 and 8 at Murphy's Law in the Hague (the Netherlands), this features the guitar playing of Jesse van Ruller. According to their website (www.murphysjazz.nl/home.asp) it is 'as cozy as your own living room'.

If this recording is any reflection of that philosophy, I believe them! In 1995, Jesse was the first European musician to win the prestigious Thelonious Monk Competition and was judged by a panel consisting of Jim Hall, John Scofield and Pat Metheny, who said that Jesse was one of the best young players he'd ever heard. He is currently a faculty member of the Conservatory of Amsterdam.

This is a very enjoyable live recording and it really does give you the feel that it is in a small, intimate club environment. Either it was edited out, or the Murphy's Law crowd is very polite, as there was no applause between the tracks!

Definitely a great straight ahead jazz record that should provide those loving the hollow body guitar sound a real treat indeed! I know I've found a new artist to follow.



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



Kiyoshi Kitagawa Trio — Prayer Atelier Sawano

Featuring Kenny Barron on keyboards and Brian Blade on drums, this is a familiar group indeed, with these guys all having played on each others projects in the past. Putting three excellent musicians that have played together frequently is always a good recipe for great jazz and this disc does not disappoint.

Five of the tunes are originals by Kitagawa and the other four are picked from the best; Thelonious Monk, Sonny Rollins, Wayne Shorter and Ornette Coleman. Definitely good company!

Kitagawa is a bass player that possesses a fantastic feel and while the music presented here has a bit more of a freeform groove, a true sign of a group of master musicians is that they never stray too far away from the core tune to lose your interest, just enough to let them all stretch and still be tasty.

Another home run in terms of sonics; you can hear the various players breathing and the detail on Kitagawa's bowing is fantastic! All three of these guys really have a nice touch, which makes me want to investigate their other CD in the Eastwind catalog called **Ancestry**.

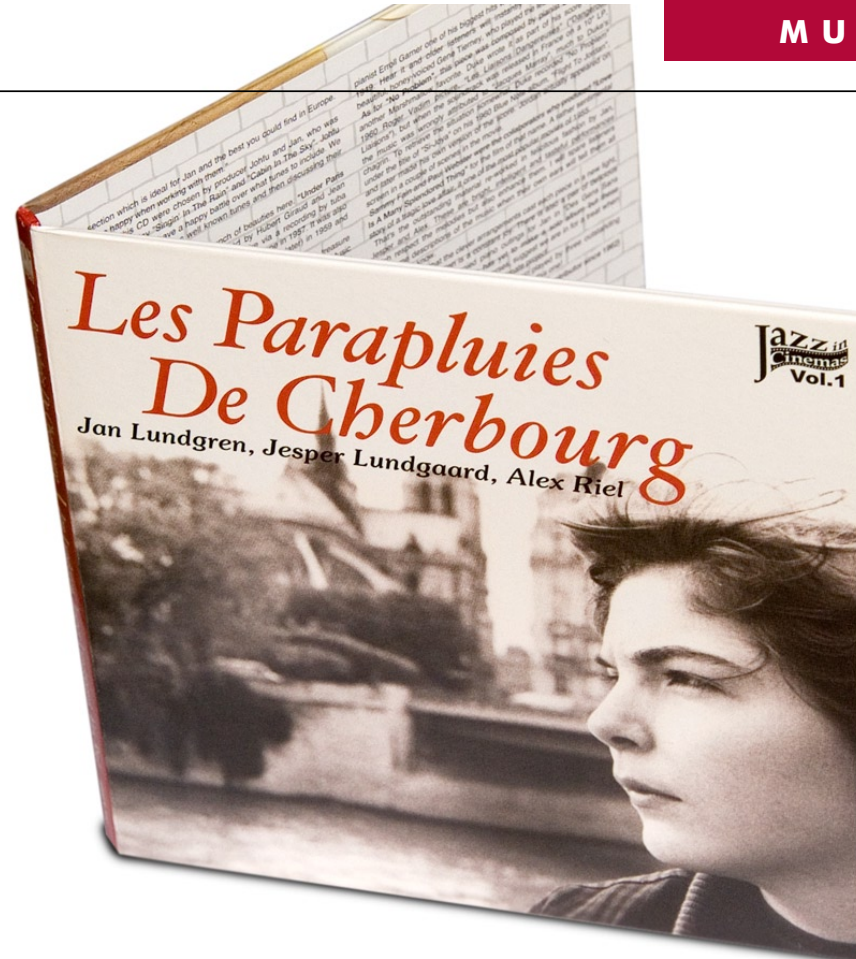
Kengo Nakamura — Re: Standards 55 Records

In addition to a very talented Mr. Nakamura, this disc also features a number of very established jazz cats. (Marcus Printup, Ted Nash and Dan Nimmer) Turns out it was also recorded and mastered by the same people who did a fantastic job on Darrell Grant's current album.

Aptly named, **Standards** features a few tunes we've all heard and starts with *It's All Right With Me* from Cole Porter but also showcases a nice mixture of Nakamura's originals as well. For being a fairly young guy, his classic jazz sensibilities are very high indeed; judging by these compositions (granted this is my first exposure to his work) the originals definitely stand on their own!

One of the things I enjoyed the most about this disc is that Nakamura really shares the stage well with his bandmates. There are plenty of tasty bass riffs, but he never gets too carried away and definitely lets the other players shine as well.

You can find out more about Kengo Nakamura and where he is currently performing at his website www.kengonakamura.com. I wish I could read Japanese, I'd love to read his blog! It looks like he plays a pretty regular schedule in NYC, so I would highly suggest checking him out if you get the chance!



Jan Lundgren, Jesper Lundgaard, Alex Riel — Les Parapluies De Cherbourg Marshmallow Records

For those of you that can't speak French, (myself included) Parapluies means umbrellas. So now that you've had your French lesson for the day, let's get back to the music. Reading the liner notes ties it all together, this is a collection of jazz from various films.

There are some tunes you know, such as *Singin in the Rain* and *Love is a Many Splendored Thing*, to *Boy on a Dolphin* from a forgotten movie with Sophia Loren in 1957. Definitely an eclectic combination of tunes, all nicely done!

Jan Lundgren's style of piano playing has been described as 'sparse and economical'. If this disc is an inclination of the rest of his work, I would agree. Somewhat like Eric Clapton, if we could make the comparison, he doesn't do a lot of rambling, yet he plays as much as is necessary. I guess I would say, he has a very nice touch.

For me, this is definitely early morning music. It's very easy going and relaxing. And like all of the discs so far that I've heard on Marshmallow, the recording is fantastic!!

These are just a few from the Eastwind catalog. Look at our website in about a week and we will have another group for you to peruse. I hope that you enjoy them as much as I did! ●



Conrad-Johnson's Magic Bus

The ART Series 3 Preamplifier

— Jeff Dorgay

Lew Johnson and Bill Conrad have been designing great audio gear for 30 years now and it has all received raves from users and reviewers everywhere. I've been a CJ fan since the PV-1 days and have owned plenty of their gear throughout the years, my current reference being their outstanding ACT2/series 2 preamplifier.

But there is one component in particular from the Conrad Johnson stable that is truly legendary, The ART Preamplifier. Introduced in 1998 for their 20th anniversary, the ART was \$15k back then! (when you could still get a slightly used BMW 3-series for that kind of dough)

Audio writers from around the world have praised the ART (both versions one and two) and some have even used the dreaded B-word when referring to its greatness. In 1998, my whole system was only worth about 20k, so there wasn't anyone I knew that even had one of these amazing instruments!

There were going to be 250 ART preamplifiers made in total, but somehow between the series 1 and series 2 models they only made 225, so there were still some chassis left over. Rumors abounded about another ART surfacing, but it never happened until the end of 2006. Taking what they had learned from the last five years since the updates on the Series 2, 25 ART 3's were produced.

Fortunately for TONE, classical editor Dan Babineau was the first guy on the list after Lew and Bill to get their paws on an ART 3. Dan was fortuitous enough to have the extra scratch on hand to BUY his, because there are only about 12 left. *(continued)*



Thinking outside the box...



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The first words out of his mouth when I asked him how great it really sounded was more of a guttural noise — 'Owwwwwwww', it's really got a big sound, lots of weight!' Ever the scientist, he hardly gets that excited about anything, so I had to jump in the car and head once again down that familiar patch of the I-5 to investigate for myself. Besides, I had to let Mr. B borrow my Meridan 808 for a while and I didn't want to trust it to the man in Brown.

Being pretty familiar with Dan's system that was already based around the same two CJ components I have, I was very curious as to just how much more sound there was lurking than my trusty ACT2/series 2.

Owwwwwwwwww!

Bigger, more open and definitely more weight. As much as I love my ACT2 and my Callisto Signature, this one just reveals another dimension to the music that did not exist before. And I've become really spoiled over the last couple of years.

We just sat there for about five hours listening to disc after disc. Pretty amazing stuff indeed. Is it the best linestage ever made? Could be. I know I haven't heard better. Can mere mortals like you and I have one? No way, but if you have an older ART, you can get it upgraded from CJ if you can afford to write a big check and wait a while. *(continued)*

Besides, I don't think I'd want them to rush a job like this. Should you see an older ART on Audiogon or elsewhere for a reasonable amount of money, grab it and have it updated.

If you have an extra \$25k, move fast, because when Lew and I chatted, there were only 12 left, and that was a couple of weeks ago. And they aren't making any more. Here's what Lew had to share with us about the ART 3:

TONE Tor made it sound like all of the ART 3's are spoken for, is this correct, or are there a couple left out there?

LJ In the end, there turned out to be about 30 serial numbers available (from the original 250). About a dozen units are currently available.

TONE Can ART 1 and ART 2 owners get the update? If so, how much will you be charging and how long do you think they will have to wait?

LJ Updates are available for ART1 and ART2. Update for the ART1 to ART3 will cost \$13,000; the ART2 to ART3 will cost \$12,000. The upgrade includes installing new main pc boards with a large number of very expensive Teflon capacitors.

TONE Wow! Many audiophiles lose track of how much you guys actually invest in parts alone with gear at this level.

LJ You bet, I've seen 2.0 uF Teflon capacitors retail priced at well over \$300 each - the ART3 has 32 of those. *(continued)*



STONE Once upgraded to ART3 status, is it completely identical to a new ART3?

LJ Provided your casework is in good shape of course, an upgraded ART3 is identical to a new one.

STONE Have you noticed ART 1 and ART 2 prices going up on Audiogon as a result of this?

LJ I think that ARTs are relatively rare on Audiogon - none listed at the moment - so it is hard to discern a trend.

STONE Why did you decide on only making 250? If there is huge demand, might you make more, say another 50 or 100?

LJ The ART was originally conceived as a very special piece in celebration of our 20th anniversary (hence the name Anniversary Reference Triode). It seemed appropriate to make this a limited edition so we will stick with our commitment to a production run of 250 units.

STONE Am I correct to assume that the ART 3 incorporates a lot of what you have learned with the CT5 and ACT2 preamplifiers?

LJ The ART3 does incorporate the new power supply architecture that we developed in the CT5 and ACT2S2, the new proprietary CJD Teflon capacitors, and a few other tricks we have picked up in the decade since the ART was first introduced.

STONE Why did you decide to have fixed power cords on a 25k preamp? I'm sure there are people at that level that want to spend another 5k on power cords for their baby....

LJ Detachable power cords are a convenience, both for customers and for us as a manufacturer, but in fact they introduce an additional set of mechanical contacts between the component and the power source. We firmly believe that a fixed, soldered connection is a superior connection. We have gone to some trouble to identify a quality power cord that we believe is competitive with most aftermarket cords - even those selling at extreme prices.

STONE Is there anyone famous or illustrious that you know of owning an ART of any generation?

LJ Yes.

STONE Care to elaborate on that a bit more?

LJ I suppose my answer to the question about celebrities was a bit flip, but I feel that owners are entitled to their privacy.

STONE After spending some time with Dan's ART, I just can't imagine a better sound experience than this! Do you and Bill have something else on the drawing boards, or is this it for the foreseeable future? Are you completely happy with this one?

LJ There is nothing on the drawing boards at this time and I think that it is fair to say that the ART3 represents the best line-stage that we currently know how to make - but we are always seeking to improve. I don't necessarily expect to make huge improvements, but we will keep trying. It is rare that one is able to make a quantum improvement in performance, which I believe we did with the original ART (it has, after all, remained something of a reference standard for a decade).

So there you have it. Lew and Bill aren't that old yet, so who knows, we might still see another quantum leap from the folks at C-J someday in the future. But for now, we have the ART3 to dream about.

(And I wonder who the famous persons that currently own them might be?) ●



The DeVore Fidelity Gibbon Super 8 Speakers

— Jeff Dorgay

I first met John DeVore at the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest almost two years ago and really enjoyed the sound in his room. John DeVore is a very friendly guy that is definitely a music first, gear second kind of person, which appealed to me right away. At this year's CES, they were even spinning 78s in their room! It helps that John is also a musician with a very strong creative background as well.



These are very beautiful, yet simple looking speakers and should fit well in just about any décor; wife acceptance factor is very high with these babies!

The Super 8s are 8" wide, 12" deep and 36" tall, weighing about 40 pounds each. A nice compact package and a relief from some of the extremely heavy stuff I've been lugging around lately! They use a 6" woofer, 1" dome tweeter and have a single set of high quality binding posts on the rear panel, along with a rear firing port. No crossover information or specs are given on the website, so you will just have to trust Mr. DeVore! They do have an efficiency specification of 90db though.

Everything about the Super 8s says understated elegance. These are very beautiful, yet simple looking speakers and should fit well in just about any décor; wife acceptance factor is very high with these babies! The test pair came in the standard cherry finish, but I saw some extremely cool custom and two-tone finishes in John's room at CES, which I believe adds about \$1000 to the price. For me, the standard finish was perfect for my living room, but more about that later... They also feature some small, magnetic grills for those of you that need to protect the speakers from harm, but if you can, I say leave them off and enjoy the gorgeous cabinets!

The Super 8s made their way to our offices a few months ago and I have been enjoying them tremendously. I put them in my second system to break in with the Aesthetix Callisto Signature and the Nagra PSA, where they stayed for the majority of

the review period, with the Wadia 581 and Avid Volvere turntable. When I told John what I was using for the review, he said "do you have any less expensive gear to hook them up to? I don't want people to think they can only enjoy my speakers with the super expensive stuff!" I told you this guy is a cool cat.

Initial Setup

John also told me on the phone, 'Don't be afraid to play around with these when you place them in the room'. I noticed that in my main listening room (16 x 24 feet) they worked the best in two different configurations. Moving them fairly far out in the room, they acted more like giant mini monitors, with HUGE sound-staging, but a bit less bass response than the diagonal placement, which gave a bit more bass,

but not quite the holographic presentation that they had further out in the room. It's up to you what you prefer.

The Super 8s have a claimed frequency response of 38-40,000 hz. My trusty tone generator confirmed that I was really solid down to 40hz, with noticeable rolloff at 35hz, so I'd call this spec on the money.

As I can only hear up to about 17.5k, I had to rely on my favorite terrier, Jerry to see if they would actually go up to 40k. Sure enough they do! The minute I hit the button on the tone generator at 40k, he started barking his head off, so I'd say the Super 8s still have significant output at 40k!! Those of you with canine hearing should be more than happy with their HF response.

With a list price of \$4000, these speakers definitely hold their own, even in a very high resolution system. *(continued)*



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But just to be fair, I gave them a whirl with the 100wpc integrated from Valve Audio (\$1695 from Music Direct) and the new McIntosh MA6300 (\$3000 from McIntosh, look for a review soon). Both amplifiers were a great match for these speakers.

As we all know, efficiency ratings are not always an indicator of compatibility with tubes. Tube lovers rest assured, the 90db Super 8s are a fantastic match with tube or solid state electronics. I gave these speakers a go with the Manley 250s as well as the VAS Citation amplifiers. They will even run with 9 watts of SET power, but I would only suggest this route in a very small room at low volume.

While the Super 8s were able to be placed in a few different types of room configurations, I did find setting the rake angle to be critical in getting all they are capable of delivering. If you just put them in the room level, you may find the presentation a bit dark and uninvolved. But get them tipped back just a few degrees (have a friend help, so you can stay on the couch) and you will find the magic spot. Any of you Vandersteen owners know exactly what I'm talking about...

**Maybe they aren't monkeys
after all, perhaps they are
chameleons.**

John names his speakers after different types of monkeys, however with the Super 8s I felt that they really took on the character of the room I used them in as well as the associated components personality. They easily have enough resolution to convey the character of tubes or solid state gear, so you can tune your system to what you prefer.

(continued)



The \$4000 price point is a very interesting one, because it (usually) offers the music lover quite a good look into what the really expensive gear sounds like and here the Super 8s do not disappoint. You could make these speakers the cornerstone of a good \$7500 system or you could spend quite a bit more on associated electronics and still be very content.

Though the combination of the Super 8s with the Conrad Johnson CA 200 was sublime, I had an amazing amount of synergy with the McIntosh MA 6300 in my living room, which is only 11 x 17 feet. I had the Super 8s a bit more in the corner than might make sense, but it worked fantastic! The smaller room also did very well with reinforcing the bass output of these speakers, with no compromise on the imaging. As a matter of fact, these speakers did a great job at vanishing in the room.

What really turns me on about these speakers is the refinement of the sound I've been hearing.

Staff writer Marc Phillips spent a couple of days here at the TONE mothership and we spent a ton of time hanging out in the living room just spinning CDs and relaxing! Listening to the Kinks **Muswell Hillbillies**, there was a wealth of detail and it was easy to pick out all the layers of backing vocals, right from the first track. Same with Joe Strummer and the Mescaleros **Global A Go-Go**, all of the processed guitars and atmospheric effects just floated between the speakers.

Moving right along to some great jazz standards as well as our favorite guilty pleasures, we were not disappointed no matter what we put in the player. While some smaller speakers I have heard have had a bit of a mid bass bump to give the appearance of more weight, the Super 8s do not have this flaw. However, they will go deep when the music has the notes down there. At first, Marc thought the Super 8s were only chimps until I put on my favorite Mickey Hart CD, **At the Edge**. A quick fast forward to track seven and he was convinced that they indeed had plenty of grunt!

Quite the Level of Refinement

I have heard and owned quite a few speakers in the \$3-4000 category over the years and I must say that the Super 8s are my favorite offering yet in this range. What really turns me on about these speakers is the refinement of the sound I've been hearing. Bass is solid and deep with very good detail and they go right up through to the highest of the highs in a very seductive way.

This is a speaker that is extremely musical and possesses a real freedom from grain that allows you to listen for hours on end with no fatigue at all. *(continued)*

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Again, the Super 8 may not be one of those speakers that hits you over the head, but the longer you listen, I think the more you will enjoy them.

If you have a small to medium sized room, I would not write a check for something else without giving these a listen. If you can talk your dealer out of them for a day or two, you will know if they are your cup of tea. The highest praise I can give these speakers is that the last four reviewers that had them kept them. You can make it five and add me to the list. And you know how hard it is to get us audiophile types to agree on ANYTHING. ●

MANUFACTURER:

DeVore Fidelity
Brooklyn Navy Yard
63 Flushing Avenue Unit 259
Brooklyn, NY 11205
718-855-9999
www.devorefidelity.com

PERIPHERALS:

Digital Source: Wadia 581,
McIntosh MS300 Music server

Analog Source: AVID Volvere
turntable w/SME 309 tonearm and
Sumiko Celebration cartridge, ASR
Basis mini phono stage

Preamplifier: Aesthetix Callisto
Signature

Power Amplifier: Nagra PSA,
Manley 250 monoblocks, Pass
Labs F3

Integrated Amplifiers: Conrad
Johnson CA200, Valve Audio
Exclame, McIntosh MA6300

Interconnects: Cardas Golden
Reference, Audio Arts IC-1

Speaker Cables: Cardas Golden
Presence, Audio Arts

Power Conditioning: Running
Springs Jaco and Haley (with RSA
Mongoose power cords)

AV123 Strata Mini Speakers

— Jeff Dorgay

I didn't see the Strata Maxi speakers anywhere on their website, so I can only imagine how big THEY are! The Minis are actually about four feet tall and weigh about 100 pounds each, thanks to their powered subwoofers. If you aren't man enough to lift 'em, you aren't man enough to own 'em, that's what I say.

So, if I haven't insulted you, read on; you are in for a treat with these speakers.

Mark Schifter, the big cheese at AV123 is probably one of the friendliest guys in high end audio and he has certainly made it a mission to offer products that offer a ton of value for the money. Every bit of their gear that we have heard at TONE-Audio easily passes this test and the Minis are his latest and greatest creation.

For \$1995 (Just under \$2000!!) you can put a pair of these in your listening space, though ground/freight shipping to most of the Continental US runs about \$280, so factor that into your budget when you are selling these to your wife, girlfriend or life partner. Thanks to their dashing good looks, these speakers should be an easy sell. Finished in a dark Rosewood veneer, the Minis are very well built and the footprint is somewhat reminiscent of the Martin Logan Aeries I's I used to own. Fashionistas note: for a limited time you can also purchase a pair of Minis in Piano Rosewood or Piano Black. This is a high gloss version that will be produced in very limited quantities at a price of \$2295.

The Minis are actually a four way speaker system featuring a circular ribbon tweeter, a magnetic planar midrange, 5¼" woofer and a powered 8" subwoofer. No weenie class D subwoofer amplifier here, this is a full blown Class AB subwoofer amplifier with 350 watts of juice! *(continued)*



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Initial Setup

These speakers spent a few weeks in my living room to break in while other work was in progress. Should you purchase a set, don't panic; the Minis sound a bit grainy out of the box but they get better very quickly. By the end of the first day, they were starting to loosen up, but during the day, I just left Sweet's **Ballroom Blitz** on my iPod on repeat ALL DAY. Somehow this song has magical powers for breaking speakers in, it's kind of like the poor man's Cardas Sweep Record. (though Mr. Cardas may disagree with me on this one)

I used the new McIntosh MA6300 integrated amplifier for break in as well as about three weeks of listening, while I was getting used to the sound. I also substituted the Valve Audio Predator and my Pacific Creek 300B SET amplifier, to see if they would work well with low power. Source components were the McIntosh MS300 Music Server and my Squeezebox 3/Benchmark DAC-1 combination. The iPod was only used during the day to facilitate break in. Audio Art cables were used throughout along with DH Labs power cords.

Once I managed to get a couple weeks worth of time on the Minis, they kept drawing me back to the couch with their good sound.

This is a serious set of speakers for the money! While I often vacillate between the minimonitor sound and the panel speaker sound, I find myself needing a good dose of PLAB (plays loud and has bass) in addition to PRAT. Yeah, yeah this is supposed to be an audiophile magazine, but if they won't crank, it's a deal breaker for me. *(continued)*

Extremely Versatile

If you take a look behind the Minis, you will see a ton of connections and adjustments for the subwoofer and that's a good thing. While the very thorough instruction manual suggests that you run a set of jumpers from the speaker inputs up to the high level input for the best sound, you have the option of a speaker level crossover, or a line level crossover, if you have separates or an integrated with pre in/main out provisions.

Thanks to this versatility, you should be able to integrate the Minis into any system configuration. I stayed with the factory suggestions for most of my listening with no problems at all.

The more time I spent listening to the Minis, the more I enjoyed them.

I did not bother to install the supplied spikes until the speakers were well broken in. About fifteen minutes spent fine tuning the bass level, crossover and phase controls going for the deepest bass and best integration (the control on the back goes from 35hz to 135hz and I settled at about 65hz), offered a marked improvement. That's when I put them up on the spikes to get that last bit of bass definition.

The Minis were very easy to place in the room, but I ended up with them about 5 feet apart and about four feet out from the rear (short) wall. Thanks to the adjustable subs, you can place these speakers a bit further out in the room than you might something else lacking powered subs. All told I don't think I spent more than 15 minutes to set the Minis up and they were very forgiving of less than optimum placement. But, like any good speaker, they will give you more performance if you spend a few extra minutes on careful setup.

The Sound

The more time I spent listening to the Minis, the more I enjoyed them. I can't say that I've experienced much at this price point that is a true full range speaker. Running the gamut from solo female vocals to electronic music, I was not disappointed with any type of program material.

Imaging is very good and depending on how much room (and amplifier power) you have to dedicate to them will determine their ultimate sound.

(continued)



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Acoustic Solid

In a small room with a modest amplifier, they will behave more like a pair of minimonitors with a very extended low end. If you have a big room and can get them about 8-9 feet apart with some serious power, I think you will be surprised at how much more can be experienced with the Minis. I moved them to my main listening area (16 x 24 feet) and switched to the Valve Audio Predator that is 200 watts per channel and had a very different presentation from my small living room. Again, I was pleasantly surprised at how well these budget speakers performed.

The Minis offered up a very smooth high end that was free of glare, and they worked well with tubes or solid state amplification.

Mark was showing them off at last year's RMAF with his 38wpc ONIX amplifier, which was a very nice combination. I even had great luck with my 9 watt SET, when I used it with a 65hz cross-over (courtesy of ACI) so that it did not have to reproduce any bass. That's where the multitude of crossover options on the back of the Mini's really came in handy; I could run the output of the SET into the main speaker inputs and then run an additional preamp out to the line level input of the Mini. I would suggest this type of configuration if you have any other low power tube amplifier as well.

Thanks to those powered subs, not only can you get more oomph out of your small amplifier, these speakers will work quite well in a medium to large room. All you need to do is turn up the subwoofer levels a bit. *(continued)*

(gateway sound)

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770 493 1550

www.gatewaysound.net

Even though these speakers only feature an efficiency rating of 86db, they did quite well with low powered amplifiers, a testament to good crossover design. If you don't have a large room and want great full range sound, this is a very viable option.

One of my hot buttons is how well a speaker works at low volume. My old favorites, the Vandersteen 2Ce Signatures are a benchmark in the under 2000 dollar category but they are not a speaker that offers a very detailed pre-

Using the McIntosh MA6300, with 100 watts per channel on tap, I was able to bounce those blue meters up to their peaks with no distortion.

sensation at low volume. I was very impressed at how well the Minis performed when just operating at back-

ground music levels. The sound was still very open and engaging.

Not forgetting those of you that prefer high listening levels, the Minis did very well there too. Using the McIntosh MA6300, with 100 watts per channel on tap, I was able to bounce those blue meters up to their peaks with no distortion. I even spent a little time with the Minis in my reference system and they could take a thrashing from my Premier 350 with no sign of strain. This is indeed a very robust speaker!

Last but not least, thanks to the ease at which they will work with any amplification source and the built in subs, the Minis are a great foundation for a small but mighty home theater system. Whether you are a full blown surround sound person, or would just like a nice pair of speakers for good two channel sound to go with your flat screen, I would highly recommend the Minis here. They have enough energy in the lower registers that you might not need a subwoofer! However, should you go all the way down this path, the people at AV123 can help you out with the rest of the system. And on a tight budget, I might add.



Bottom Line

The Strata Mini offers a tremendous amount of performance for the \$1995 asking price. It will easily integrate into a number of different rooms and listening situations thanks to the built in and highly configurable powered subwoofers. With finish and build quality that is way above par, they will work well with just about any décor too!

Thanks to the 30-day return policy from AV123, you can return them should they not be to your liking. However, this is one of those times where being fickle will bite you; keep in mind the cost of shipping something this heavy back to them! But I don't think you will. Considering that AV123 is only producing 50 pairs of these a month now, I'd get in line. ●

MANUFACTURER:

AV 123

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Suite L
Broomfield, CO 80020
303-543-7500
www.av123.com

PERIPHERALS:

Digital Source: Wadia 581,
McIntosh MS300 Music server

Analog Source: AVID Volvere
turntable w/SME 309 tonearm
and Sumiko Celebration car-
tridge, ASR Basis mini phono
stage

Preamplifier: Aesthetix Callisto
Signature

Power Amplifier: Nagra PSA,
Manley 250 monoblocks, Pass
Labs F3

Integrated Amplifiers: Con-
rad Johnson CA200, Valve Audio
Exclame, McIntosh MA6300

Interconnects: Cardas Golden
Reference, Audio Arts IC-1

Speaker Cables: Cardas
Golden Presence, Audio Arts

Power Conditioning: Running
Springs Jaco and Haley (with
RSA Mongoose power cords)

The Penaudio Charisma

— Jeff Dorgay

As a happy Penaudio owner (the Serenades), we agonized whether I should be the one to review these little monitors or hand them off to someone else on the staff. But hey, being the publisher has its privileges so here we go.





To the casual observer, the Charisma looks like you surgically removed the top 1/3 of the Serenade and made a mini monitor out of it. If that's what you think, you would be half right, as the midrange-woofer in the Charisma is actually the same driver used in the Serenade as just the midrange driver. However, the tweeter is a bit different, it is a smaller soft dome unit. And, a pair of these gorgeous little speakers are a well spent \$3000.

At first glance the finish on the Charismas look just like the Serenades, except the birch veneer is applied so that the stripes (somewhat resembling bamboo) are horizontal.

Again, I must admit bias, as I love my Serenades and they have garnered high praise from a number of other audio publications around the world as well. What I wanted to know was how much of the performance of the large speaker could I get with the baby brother?

If you are not ready to write a \$9000 check, you can get 80% of the way there by starting with the Charisma and then replacing whatever stands you have for the Chara woofer modules. These fit directly below the Charisma and give you a full range speaker system for an additional \$2500, making the total system cost about \$5500. This is very forward thinking because you can start out with a pair of Charismas and as your budget increases, do a very easy upgrade. Or perhaps you have a very small space, fall in love with the Charismas (not hard to do) and then get the woofer modules if you move to a bigger space, again offering tremendous flexibility. Penaudio refers to this as their Progressive Growth Speaker System.

Initial Setup and Tormenting My Friends

The Charismas broke in pretty quickly and after a week of almost around the clock use, settled right down. I started the review just listening to the Charismas without the woofer module, so that I could get a feel for the basic sound.

My system consisted of the Aesthetix Callisto Signature driving a pair of the VAS Citation 2 monoblocks with EL-34 tubes. Now if you are familiar with the Serenades, you know that this is not a terribly tube friendly speaker, (except for something with BIG power like the glorious Manley 250s) but this is the surprise with the Charismas – they sound fantastic with tube amplification or solid-state!

What proved to be a ton of fun was letting everyone listen to the Charismas with the woofer module off. All that experienced these little speakers were floored that the woofers were not connected. I was even quite impressed at how much useable bass energy came out of these little speakers!

I ended up with them on the long wall of the listening area just beyond my desk. The speakers were only about three feet from the wall and about six feet apart, with my listening position about seven feet back. I would suggest this as a good starting position with a pair of these speakers with only a slight bit of toe-in. Once the speakers were broken in, I substituted a pair of filled Sound Anchor stands, so I could really evaluate them without their woofer module.

I'm Loving 'Em

Not the hot apple pie I had at McDonald's, the speakers! In a way I was almost biased against the Charismas because I enjoy my Serenades so much, I felt that there was NO WAY these little speakers would measure up. But I stand corrected. Obviously, there are still a number of reasons to buy the flagship speakers from Penaudio; deeper

bass, more dynamic range, a smoother upper register and the whole package is in just one cabinet. What I really do like about these speakers though is that they have a very

similar flavor, just a lesser quantity of it than the Serenade.

To see just how much bass they did have, I made it a point of playing a lot of my favorite records and CDs that have a more than average amount of information in this area of the spectrum. *(continued)*

All that experienced these little speakers were floored that the woofers were not connected.

I went through my Art of Noise records, Kruder & Dorfmeister and even a few hip hop records. No, they did not defy the laws of physics and move as much air as my REL subwoofer, but there was a pretty substantial amount of bass and what was there was very good and texturally well defined.

I know it's corny, but I still like the acoustic bass line at the beginning of *Easy Money* on the first Ricki Lee Jones album. It just has a very nice groove to it that always tells me a lot about the quality of bass that a speaker can reproduce. The Charismas passed this with flying colors, again revealing a lot more information than I thought these little speakers would be able to muster.

But What Are Minimonitors The Best At?

Imaging! Those of you that are proponents of the minimonitor approach, no matter what your choice of speaker all know that a small high-performance speaker with the right setup can really perform miracles and the Charisma is no exception. I've owned quite a few of them over the years and like panel speakers, I have a fondness for this way to build a system.

I'll jump way out on a limb here and tell you that the Charismas have an airiness about them that is very similar to an electrostatic speaker, the highest praise I can give them. And they were hooked up right next to the Final 600is while I did the test. The Charismas did not have that last bit of seamlessness and smoothness that the 'stats did, but again, a fantastic showing for \$3000! (*continued*)

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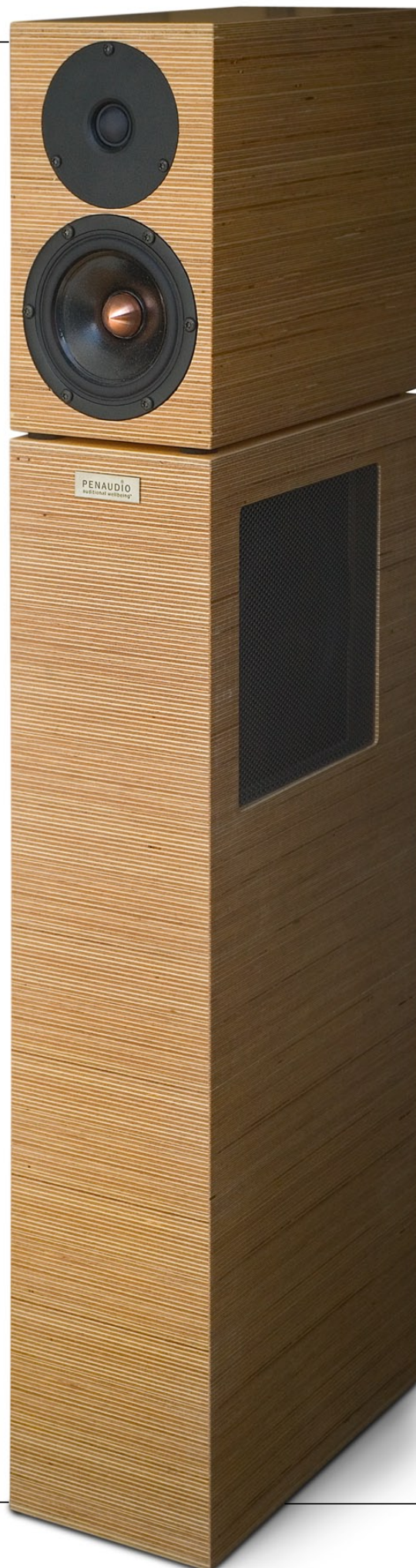
No matter what I listened to, these speakers had a lot of sound coming from way beyond the left and right boundaries. They also threw a very deep soundstage, but I'm going to give a little bit of credit to my Callisto Signature here; it's the king of depth in my book.

Having spent a bit longer time with the Charismas than I normally do, I really enjoyed listening to these speakers. In addition to having more bass than I bargained for, they also possess a nice amount of weight. Ultimately, the top end is just a touch more forward than my Serenades, but not annoying. Val Kratzman from Penaudio USA really likes the Charisma and even though he has both speakers as well, agonizes just like I do over which model offers the most optimum results.

Again, I actually preferred these speakers a bit more with tubes than solid state, but I think either can keep you happy as long as your solid-state amplifier is not on the forward side of the tonal spectrum. FYI, the Serenades were SMASHING with the Pass First Watt F3 amplifier...

How About Some More Bass?

So I've done some pretty major gushing about the Charismas as a mini-monitor, but when you add the Chara woofer module. This makes the combo a full range pair of speakers and has a side-firing woofer just like the Serenades. This also means the same rules for setup apply. Keep the woofers firing out from center and if possible, use these speakers in a corner setup. Because these speakers are a bit smaller than the Serenades, they are easier to integrate in a room with the traditional positioning, but they had a better integration with corner positioning. (Just like my Serenades.)



With some extra juice on tap, the Charisma/Chara combination definitely holds its own with other speakers in this price range that I've heard.

Adding the bass modules really fleshes out the sound and because the whole tower still has such a small frontal area, they do just as good a job at disappearing in the room. There is only one odd thing from adding the Chara and I am guessing it is because of the crossover; they now have the same difficulty being driven with a modest tube amplifier as the Serenades do. (FYI, the Chara crosses over into the Charisma at 180hz, allowing the woofer to become a midrange driver. As a three way system, it now operates at 4 ohms.) Switching to solid-state amplification eliminates this problem and swapping the VAS amps for my Nagra PSA (100 watts per channel) was just what the doctor ordered!

With some extra juice on tap, the Charisma/Chara combination definitely holds its own with other speakers in this price range that I've heard. This is definitely a pair of cone speakers that a panel lover can enjoy! What stood out the most for me with these speakers is the level of resolution they were able to achieve and not at the expense of being harsh or bright. As I switched source components from modest to very high quality, I could definitely hear the differences without trouble.

In the End, a Very Charming Little Pair of Speakers

After a lot of seat time with the Charismas, I would say the name becomes them. This is a great pair of minimonitors that I would suggest with confidence to anyone. In a small room with good source components, you can experience a lot of musical enjoyment with them. Thanks to the Chara woofer module, they are also a speaker that you can grow with as well. ●

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



auricap
inside

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



MANUFACTURER:

Penaudio USA

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Suite 250
Stamford, CT 06902
203-767-9676
www.penaudio.fi

PERIPHERALS:

Preamplifier: Aesthetix
Callisto Signature

Amplifier: VAS Citation 2
monoblocks, Nagra PSA,
Pass Labs First Watt F3,
Manley 250 monoblocks

Analog Source: AVID
Volvere turntable with SME
309 Arm and Dynavector
17D3 cartridge. AQVOX 2
Ce phono preamplifier Teac
4300S with Progressive
engineering Preamplifier

Digital Source: Wadia 581,
Macintosh G5 with Benchmark
DAC-1 USB

Interconnects: Cardas
Golden Reference

Speaker Cables: DH Labs
Q-10

Power Cords: Running
Springs Mongoose

Power Conditioning:
Running Springs Haley



The Sehring S704SE Loudspeakers

— Jeff Dorgay

About six months ago, I got a phone call from Todd Green (a.k.a. Todd The Vinyl Junkie) telling me about this new line of speakers that he was soon going to be importing from German manufacturer Sehring and he sounded pretty excited. Now, for those of you that don't know Todd, he's a pretty relaxed kind of guy, so when I heard this kind of excitement on the other end of the phone, I figured that I better investigate further.





Shortly thereafter, Todd made his way to the TONE studio to drop them off. A quick setup to start playing and we were off to shop for records! After an exhausting day, my rear bumper was sagging a bit from all the records in the trunk but we made it home. Once all the records were unloaded, we took on the task of final setup in my room.

I wish I could give you a bit more background on Sebring, but their website is only in German! The most intriguing thing about these speakers is that you can buy them in a modular fashion, like Legos. As I've said before, I really like components that you can grow with. The 704 SEs are the flagship speakers, but you can start out with the 700s which are minimonitors that sell for \$2500 a pair and start your journey with Sebring right there.

The most intriguing thing about these speakers is that you can buy them in a modular fashion, like Legos.

Only 7" wide, 16" deep and 43" high, the 704s will only take a small amount of floorspace in your room. A Three and a half-way system, they feature a 1¼" dome tweeter, 4" midrange, 5" woofer and an additional 6" rear-firing driver on the back.

According to the specifications, the 704, with this additional driver module on the rear, goes down to 36hz, while they claim a spec (-2db) of 38db for the 703, which is identical except for the bass module. The 704 SEs run \$11,595, while the 703s are only \$7500.

Depending on your room, the 703 may actually be the price/performance bargain, while the 704 remains the all-out assault.

Remember, bass is just not about specifications on a piece of paper, it's about moving air. While I'm sure that all things being equal, you might be hard pressed to hear the difference between 36 and 38 hz, it's that extra weight and body from the additional driver that will make the difference. Again, these speakers are modular, so you could theoretically buy the 700s to get started, move up to the 703s and then finish off with the 704s! *(continued)*

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My test pair came in a matte silver and black motif, similar to what you might have seen on the space station in 2001 A Space Odyssey. Again, think of some big Legos sprayed with silver texture paint. They also came along with a pair of the AP 400 bases that you can use to spread the load out and protect your floor from the spikes; very handy!

A Little Care in Setup Goes a Long Way

The standard configuration of the speakers is very much like I have seen with other European floorstanding speakers, utilizing thin plates and spikes. There was no weight spec on the 704s, but I am going to guess they weigh in the neighborhood of 100-120 pounds each, so make sure you have some help when assembling and moving about.

One of the things I really liked about the 704s was the ease of getting good sound from them, just setting them out in the room. But like any speaker of this quality level, an extra 15 minutes of care will take them from great to exceptional and it's very easy to do.

I suggest finding the optimal room placement for the lower frequencies first. Find a CD that has a bass line in it that you really are familiar with so you will easily know that you have it right. I will often use the James Newton Howard and Friends CD or Kraftwerk's Electric Café to just get a pounding bass line that I can key in on.

Once you have the most solid bass response, a minute or two fine tuning the rake angle will get you the rest of the way and you can sit back and relax. I suggest starting with adjusting the spikes so you are about 2-3 degrees leaning backward. *(continued)*

Go just a bit back and forth with the angle until you hear almost no difference from sitting down to standing up and you've got it!

Todd also brought along the Sehring bases that can work very well if you have a carpeted room to couple to the floor better. As my studio is on a 13 inch concrete slab, I actually got tighter bass without them.

The Sehring bases can work very well if you have a carpeted room.

The 704s can be bi-wired or use the supplied jumpers. I tried a few different speaker cables, but my favorite combination ended up being the dual run of Q-14s from DH Labs. Your results will vary depending on the tonal quality of your system and taste.

Because the 704s are capable of really filling the room, I would suggest using these speakers in at least a medium sized room. If you have a small room, go with one of the smaller Sehring models. For most of my test listening, I used them in my main listening area that is 16 x 24 feet and preferred them on the long wall about ten feet apart, with the couch back so that my ears were 9 feet from each tweeter.

The Sound

According to the specs, the 704s have an efficiency of 86 db. I tried them with a few low powered tube amplifiers with reasonable results, which suggests low loss crossovers and a gentle impedance curve. But you can't beat the laws of physics; once I added more power to the equation, I was much happier. I would suggest at least 100 watts per channel if you like to play music moderately to very loud.

While the 704s did a great job with my ACT2/Premier 350 combination, the presentation was just a bit on the dry side. Swapping the CJ for the pair of Manley 250s that we have in for review was just what the doctor ordered. This was a truly magnificent combination, especially in triode mode.

(continued)



Used this way, the Manley amplifiers still put out 110 watts per channel and on all but playing at concert hall levels, was more power than I needed. This system had a great combination of dynamics, detail and musicality.

As it turns out, Todd uses a pair of Manley Snappers in his reference system (100 w/ch), so I think we were not too far off the mark. For my taste, I found the speakers much more involving with big tube power; that's where I found the magic. Tonally, they are quite good, especially with a lot of power. Again, I would like to emphasize giving these speakers some room to breath. My first impression of the 704s was that they did not have as much front to back depth as I would like. It wasn't the speakers fault at all, but my room and setup. Once I moved them to the big wall, the experience was transformed. If your room is on the smaller side, just get a smaller pair of Sehrings!

Classical enthusiasts will appreciate the accuracy of these speakers and the fact that they do a very good job reproducing timbre. The high resolution of the 704s should keep the most discriminating listener intrigued well past the break in period. What I enjoyed the most about the 704s was their ability to reveal a lot of musical detail and complexity without crossing the line and sounding harsh; extended listening periods were fatigue free.

After quite a few hundred hours of listening to the 704s I kept noticing how well they do with microdynamics. These speakers do a great job at revealing small details in a recording. When listening to my favorite Laurie Anderson records, I kept hearing these tiny little things that she likes to bury deep in her recordings that don't show up on lesser speakers. Same thing with Brian Eno

and Jean Michael Jarre, the most minute details kept popping out at me!

While I would like to see a ten thousand dollar plus set of speakers go down a bit deeper than 36hz, the quality of the bass is excellent, with a lot of detail and texture. For most listeners, this will be more than you ever need. Only on some records with pipe organ or deep synth bass did I ever feel like I wanted a bit more oomph. I would much rather a speaker have quality bass down to 36 hz, than one-note bass going down to 20hz!

Should you be a listener that really likes to rock out, these speakers will not dissappoint you, provided you have the power. When I switched the Manleys to tetrode mode, I found that I could just put on my favorite brain damage music and just keep turning it up without compression creeping in. Whatever your flavor of powerful music, the 704s should have no problem keeping you happy. This is also a very important part of musical accuracy, the ability to capture dynamics and loud transients without distortion.

In the end, if you are someone that has a very wide range of musical taste, you will enjoy these speakers; you can make them a cornerstone that you can build your system around. I used them with some extremely good reference gear and was not disappointed.

Book Your Ticket to Montana Now

Currently, you can only hear the Sehring 704s in Todd The Vinyl Junkie's showroom. So if you need to unwind for a few days, I suggest you hop a plane and go pay Todd a visit. Or buy a set of 700s and work your way up! ●

What I enjoyed the most about the 704s was their ability to reveal a lot of musical detail and complexity.

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PERIPHERALS

Preamplifier: Conrad-Johnson ACT2/series 2,
Aesthetix Callisto Signature

Power Amplifier: Red Rock Renaissance monoblocks,
Manley 250 Monoblocks, Nagra PSA, Conrad-Johnson Premier 350

Analog Sources: SME 10 w/SME 10 arm and Shelter 90x cartridge, AVID Volvere w/SME V arm and Sumiko Celebration Cartridge

Digital Sources: Wadia 581, Meridian 808

Speakers: Tetra 506 Custom, Penuaudio Serenades

Interconnects: Cardas Neutral Reference, Tetra Artet

Speaker Cables: DH Labs Q-14 (biwired)

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

Power Conditioning: Running Springs Haley, Duke

Vibration Control: Finite Elemente Pagode Signature with Cerepucs and Cereballs

Room Treatment: GIK Acoustics

The Harbeth HL-P3ES-2

A CLASSIC BRITISH MONITOR, REINVENTED

— Joe Nino-Hernes



A close-up photograph of the Harbeth HL-P3ES-2 monitor. The image shows the light-colored wooden baffle and the black grille. A small, dark rectangular plaque with the word "Harbeth" in gold lettering is visible on the grille. The background is a blurred, warm-toned surface.

Harbeth



Like a fine bottle of wine, some things just get better with time. The evolution of the legendary LS3/5a into the HL-P3ES-2 is a perfect example of this. The LS3/5a was designed for critical monitoring applications at the BBC. Its design goals were small size, flat response and precise imaging. In the studio, I have always enjoyed monitoring on LS3/5as, and when I heard the new Harbeths at Rocky Mountain Audiofest, I just had to have them.

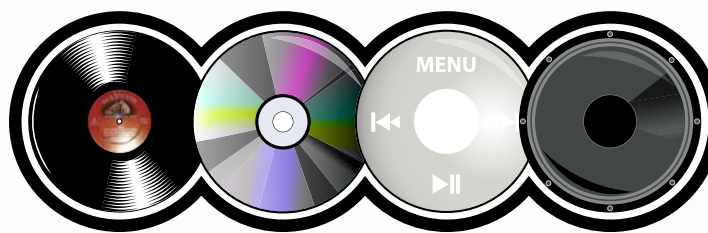
MSRP for a pair of these speakers is \$1850, without stands. (suggested stand height is 24 inches...) As is common practice with high performance minimonitors, the more rigid the stands, the better. When the lower end of the frequency response curve is 75hz, every hz is critical!

Sometimes Smaller is Better

Since these guys are so small, unpacking and placing them is very easy. One of the major benefits to a small speaker system is that they are much easier to physically move around, offering up a few more options to speaker placement, without a trip to the chiropractor.

The HL-P3ES-2s are about the size of a shoebox, (7" wide by 8" deep by 11" tall) but don't let the small size fool you. Build quality is top notch. The drivers are attached to the baffle from the rear rather than from the front. The baffle is then screwed into the cabinet, which is internally braced. Knocking on the side reveals just how well braced these cabinets are. *(continued)*

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To start, I placed the P3s on stands approximately 24 inches off the ground and 4 feet from the wall. These speakers have high quality gold plated binding posts on the rear that will accept most common speaker cable terminals. This is one of the few small speakers that can be biwired or biamped. If you wish to use the speakers in a normal configuration, gold plated jumpers are included and come pre installed.

Putting Them to Work

I put the speakers in my main system with the Modwright SWL 9.0SE preamp and Eico HF-89 power amp, later to be swapped for the Channel Islands D-200 monoblocks once I got them broken in. (watch for a review soon) After getting placement roughed in, I threw on Allison Kraus and Union Station **Live**. If you like Allison Kraus, this 3 record MOFI box set is a must have. Allison's voice sat right in the middle, and it was not harsh at all. Jerry's dobro had excellent attack, and all of his intricate moves were clearly articulated. Everything seemed just right. Nothing struck me as obtrusive or out of place. This is the kind of music that the Harbeth's were really suited to!

I was really impressed how little break in time these speakers need. They sound great right out of the box. I stopped noticing a change after about 10 hours, and the change was very subtle. After fully breaking in, there is a bit more low end extension. **Ed. Note** – I forgot to tell Joe that I put about a week worth of playing time while they were her for photography, so count on about 100 hours for the ultimate sound...
(continued)

Though rated at 83db efficiency (1 watt/1 meter), I found the Harbeths particularly easy to drive. They have a six ohm nominal impedance and were comfortable with solid state or tube amplification. Even my trusty vintage Eico HF-89 did a great job, however I would suggest a minimum of about 50 watts per channel for best results.

Again, going by the numbers was a bit misleading. Though these speakers claim that the -3db LF point is only 75hz, I was particularly impressed with amount of bass they did have and the quality of what was present. They go deep for such a small speaker. When playing large symphonic works like Rachmaninov's Third Piano Concerto, the low notes on the piano are very natural, just as you would hear them in the concert hall. The rich harmonic textures of cellos and basses are reproduced without being boomy or overly colored.

This lack of lower midrange coloration allows you to hear texture and definition in the low end, rather than it being mashed together in a one-note fashion. When set up properly, the HL-P3ES-2s seemed to blend right into the room; I never got the sense that the sound was coming from those two tiny boxes.

The good news is that these speakers are very forgiving of room placement. Despite their small size, they can fill a fairly large room with sound. I tried placing them 6-8 feet apart with the sweet spot being about 6 feet in front of the speakers, and they sounded quite good like this. I played the new Analog Productions 45 RPM reissue of Art Pepper + 11 with the speakers in this position and they just disappeared. You could localize each instrument, but it never sounded as if the source was the speaker.

But since these speakers were designed as small studio monitors, I feel they sound best when listening in the near field, placed about 3-4 feet apart. If you move these



speakers to this position and move your listening chair up a bit you will be rewarded with all of the magic these speakers have to offer!

They present a soundstage that is very large and natural, one of the things that a good minimonitor excels at. I have a thing for 80s rock, so this time it was Bryan Adams **Reckless**. The bass in *Run To You* was powerful but not overpowering, and the reverb trails on the snare drums and vocals never got lost. This level of resolution is the hallmark of a good studio monitor and the Harbeths were always up to the task. Every effect in the mix was clearly audible.

The Limits of the Minimonitor Experience

While these speakers play amazingly loud you can't cheat physics here. SPL is about moving air and a small box and woofer can only move so much; so don't expect to reproduce AC/DC concert levels with them.

They present a soundstage that is very large and natural, one of the things that a good minimonitor excels at.

They sound very good at normal listening levels, and I found myself reaching for the volume control a lot less than with some other speakers that need some push to really get going. Again, another hallmark of an excellent monitor.

At higher levels, they don't get bright or grainy like other small speakers I have heard. Thanks to the small size, they will work well in pretty much any room. If you like a wide variety of music, consider giving the Harbeth HL-P3ES-2 a listen. I usually like big speakers, but these are a rare exception. These speakers are at the top of their class in terms of build quality and engineering expertise. They reproduce with an incredible sense of reality, allowing you to hear the music and not the speakers. The HL-P3ES-2 is a modern day classic cut from the same cloth as its esteemed elders. Don't be fooled by the small size! ●

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PERIPHERALS:

Analog Source: Micro Seiki BL-51 turntable w/SME III tonearm, Benz Micro Glider cartridge, Emotive Audio Circa phonostage, VPI isolation platform

Digital Source: EAD T-1000 transport w/Ultech HDCD-10 DAC

Preamplifier: ModWright SWL-9.0SE linestage

Power Amplifiers: Channel Islands D-200 monoblock amplifiers, Eico HF-89 power amplifier

Interconnects: AudioQuest Diamondback, Kimber Hero, Kimber Tonik

Speaker Cable: Kimber 8TC speaker cable

Power Cords: Clarity Cable

A high-angle, close-up photograph of the Aurum Acoustics Integris CDP. The device is a sleek, silver-colored CD player with a minimalist design. The top surface is a dark, textured material with the 'AURUM ACOUSTICS' logo embossed in a stylized, outlined font. A small, circular silver button is centered on the top. The front face features a horizontal slot for the CD tray, with 'INTEGRIS CDP' printed below it. To the left of the slot, there are several control buttons: 'STANDBY', 'TIME', 'REPEAT', 'REV', 'PAUSE', 'PLAY', 'STOP', and 'FF'. To the right of the slot, there are 'BALL' and 'VOL' controls. The background is a dark, solid color, and the lighting creates soft highlights on the device's edges and controls.

The Aurum Acoustics CDP

System Integration at its Finest

— Jeff Dorgay

One of the biggest things we agonize about when building a system is how to achieve that lofty goal of system synergy, where all the components work together and form something bigger than the sum of the individual parts. We assemble racks, cables and all the other goodies that make a system produce great music.



A Few Problems Solved

You could spend the rest of your life just auditioning power cords and interconnect cables, always wondering if you have made the right choice. Those of you a little bit too far gone when it comes to being OC know just what I'm talking about. I know that in my own personal quest for this very nirvana, I have noticed that often times getting more than one component from the same manufacturer can offer up an extra dose of compatibility.

Derrick Moss of Aurum Acoustics has taken this task to heart and actually offers a complete system with the CDP preamplifier and CD player/DAC in this review as well as a fabulous 300B amplifier matched to active speakers of his own design to round out the package. If you were lucky enough to listen to the complete system in his room at CES, you know that he is definitely on to something good. For this review, we are just concentrating on the CDP, which combines a full function linestage, a CD transport

and a 24bit/192khz upsampling DAC all on one chassis.

While we are on the subject of simplicity, I do like the fact that the CDP does not use a drawer to open, being a top loader similar to the Metronome CD-3i reviewed last year. Granted, we can ponder which type of transport is the best, but I have to believe that eliminating moving parts where something spins at a rapid pace is a good thing. The CD is held in place with a non-magnetic clamp.

I must say that I was (and still am) very intrigued with this concept. At first glance, \$12,000 sounds like a lot of money but when you split it in half, \$6000 for a linestage and \$6000 for a good CD player isn't all that crazy. Then subtract the cost of a \$1000 pair of interconnects and a \$500 power cord (or perhaps even a bit more...) and this is not a bad deal at all!

So, for the remainder of this review and my subsequent listening sessions, I considered the CDP as essentially a \$5000 CD player and a \$5000 linestage.

Eliminating moving parts where something spins at a rapid pace is a good thing.

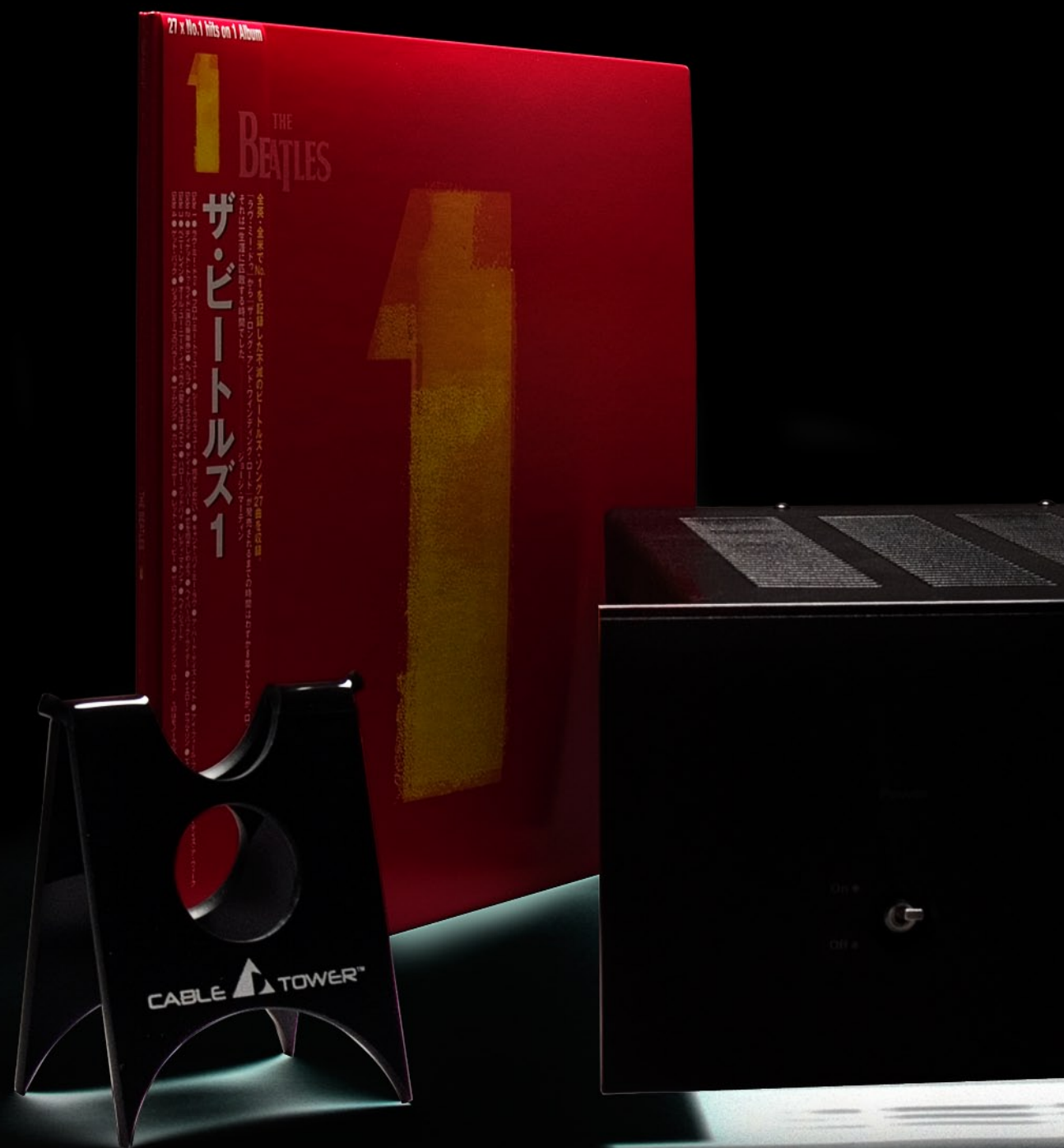
Enough with the new math story problems, let's get on to listening, shall we?

Super Simple Setup

Skimming over some past reviews of this product, I noticed that a number of past reviewers used the CDP more as a CD player, rather than as an integrated CD player and linestage. Running the CDP through either of my reference preamplifiers, seemed redundant, so I followed the manufacturers instructions. Unlike my Wadia 581 that has a digital volume control on it's output, the CDP has a full active linestage built in, that also happens to have five more inputs, three of them balanced, with the others single ended RCA inputs. There are also a pair of single ended RCA and XLR outputs.

Another big bonus with the CDP is that you can also use it as a DAC. At first glance, you might wonder how useful this feature is with a CD transport on board.
(continued)

Hardware. Software. Accessories.



However, this is very handy, especially if you have a digital music server like I do. I used the optical input to jack my Macintosh G5 into the system for casual listening and it has never sounded better. I appreciated the additional functionality that this added to my system.

I have so much music on my computer, it's very nice to just be able to skip through a lot of music during long stints at the computer with iTunes.

For the duration of the review, I used the CDP as it was intended; along with a power amplifier and my Tetra 506 customs to make up a less complex music system than I am normally used to. So that I could get a good read on the voicing of this unit, I used three tube power amplifiers that I am very familiar with: The VAS Citation Monoblocks, the Red Rock Renaissance Monoblocks and the Manley 250s. I also used three solid-state power amplifiers that I am very familiar with: The Pass Labs F3, the Nagra PSA and my main reference, the Conrad Johnson Premier 350.

I felt that these amplifiers ran the gamut from warm through neutral to a bit romantic, so I could see where the tonal balance of the CDP would shake out. For all testing I used a Running Springs Jaco power conditioner, with Running Springs Mongoose power cords. Interconnect and speaker cables were the Tetra Artet cables that I normally use with my ACT2 series 2 linestage and Premier 350 amplifier. *(continued)*



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A few cables from DH labs, Tara and Wireworld were introduced into the equation after I was very familiar with the base configuration to experiment a little bit.

One thing I would suggest in using the CDP (and Mr. Moss himself concurs) is to get some kind of vibration control device underneath it as the stock rubber feet tend to soften the sound a bit. I had fantastic luck with a set of Finite Elemente Cereballs. Once installed, the player definitely had a bit more resolution and clarity in the more faint details of the music.

Extreme Flexibility

As the CDP includes a lineage, I couldn't exactly compare apples to apples, because I was taking my reference CJ ACT 2/series 2 preamplifier out of the chain. And I won't even start the analog vs. digital argument, the more time I spend listening to really good digital reproduction, I feel that it is a different animal from analog. For the record, I like them both when done properly.

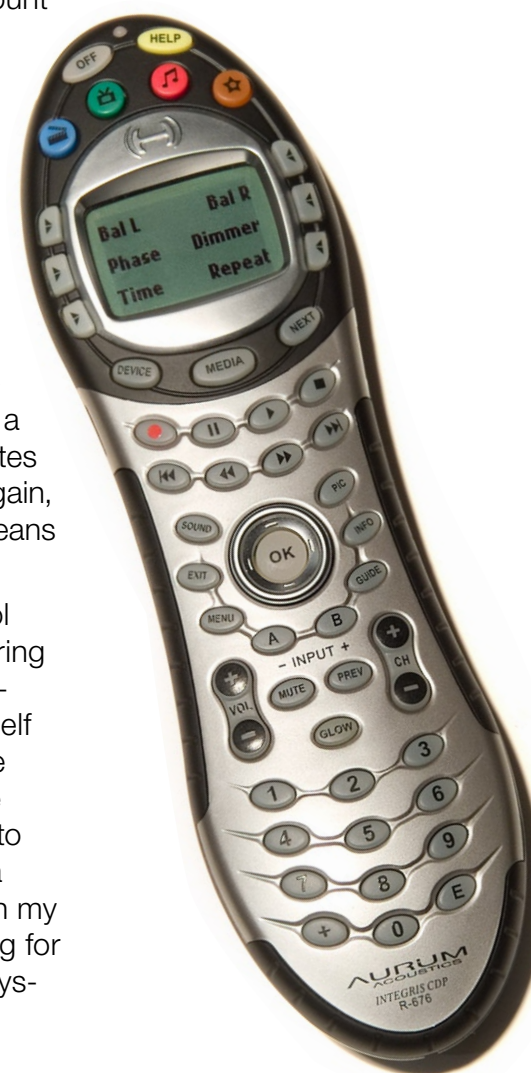
I have spent a lot of time over the last 18 months really trying to seek out some of the better digital players available and scrutinize them to the best of my ability. I have been very excited with what I have heard from

a number of different manufacturers and I must now add another contender to the list, the AURUM CDP. Having spent a fair amount of time at casa Hoffman, it was already well broken in. The quick car trip up the I-5 only required about 24 hours of continuous play to get back in the groove.

But what makes this player different and unique from the others?

I really dig the AURUM concept of having it all on one chassis. The remote was a bit complex, but once I spent a few minutes with the manual, it all made sense and again, only one remote instead of two. (That means one less remote to misplace as well!)

I hinted earlier at what a great control center the CDP was. If you are considering a rack purchase, even if you have a turntable, you can fit everything on a four-shelf rack, which is very nice. Subtracting the cost of a second rack keeps making the CDP an even better value... I was able to fit the CDP, my Rhea phono stage and a power amplifier along with a turntable on my four shelf Pagode Signature rack, making for a very compact, yet high performance system indeed! *(continued)*





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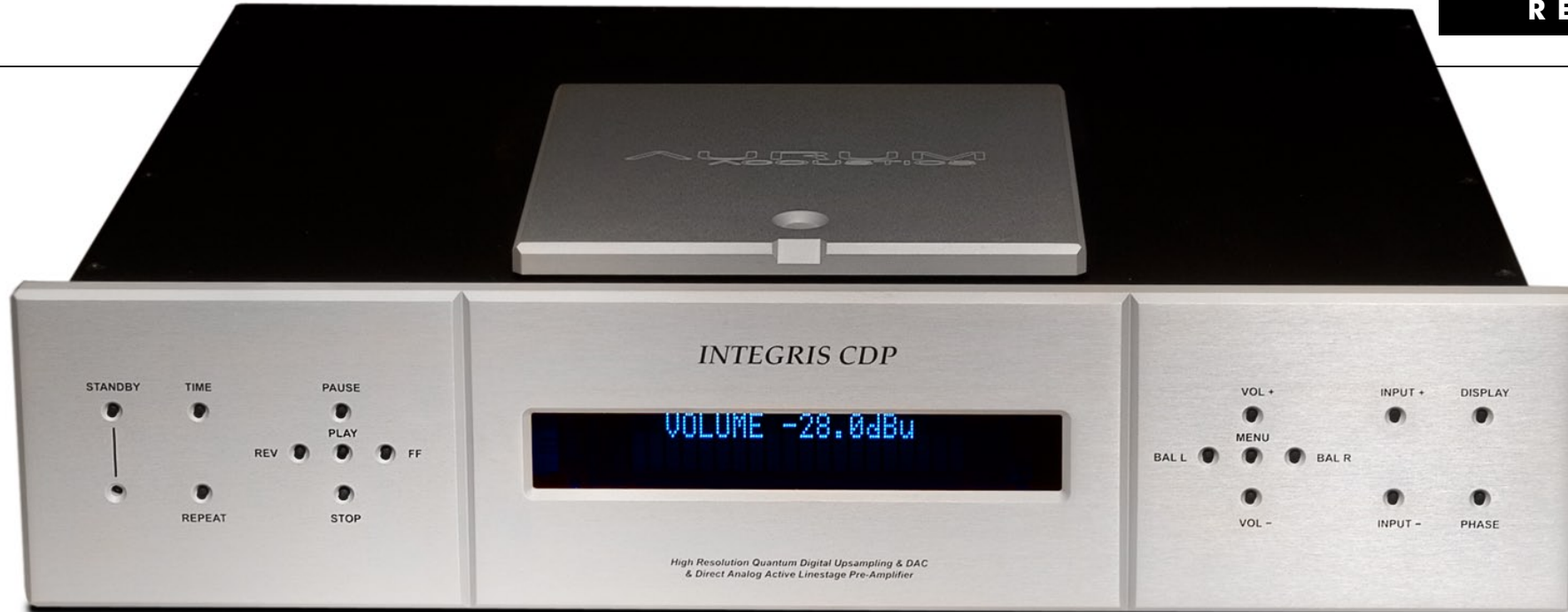
The Sound

In addition to being very easy to use, I really enjoyed listening to the CDP. While one of my hot buttons for digital playback is the ease at which the device in question reproduces music, Steve Hoffman always talks about the decay and echo of a digital player, describing it in terms of 'wetness', often saying the wetter the better. The more time I spend listening, the more I understand this concept in terms of observing the natural decay of an instrument. Plunking away a bit on the piano in the house for a reference, you really can see how the notes hang in the air as they decay to nothing. It's the same with a guitar string or a cymbal.

The more hours I logged with the CDP, the more I enjoyed it. While my favorite flavor was with the Manley 250s, I think a solid-state lover could be very happy with this one too. Mating the CDP with my Nagra PSA and some Cardas Natural Reference interconnects was very palatable, indeed. Your ultimate choice will depend on the exact tonal balance you prefer.

**If I had to throw the CDP
on the altar of audio
judgment, I would call its
character quite neutral and
tonally very accurate.**

I always felt the presentation was right on the money; real instruments sounded very natural to me, yet when I would listen to popular music or even totally electronic music (Wilco, Devo, Radiohead, Kraftwerk, etc.) I didn't feel like the sound was overdamped as some digital players can sound. Just right down the middle, very nice indeed.
(continued)



I played a lot of my tried and true favorites so I won't bother you with a playlist here. The CDP does a great job particularly with music that is a bit more harmonically complex, offering up a lot of detail without the presentation becoming congested. All of the vocal standards, male and female sounded very convincing, with the CDP doing justice to this kind of music as well.

When listening to records or tapes through the line level inputs, the CDP did a fantastic job and worked well with whatever phono stage I tried it with. I particularly liked the combination of the BAT VK-P10SE that I have in for review, as I was able to run my turntable balanced from the tonearm all the way through the CDP out to the Nagra amplifier making for VERY quiet LP playback.

Final Analysis

I really enjoy the flexibility and simplicity that the Aurum Acoustics CDP brings to the table. I think that this component is very reasonably priced in light of the high performance that it offers, and Derrick informed me that very soon you will also be able to order your CDP with a phono preamplifier module as well as a headphone amplifier, (at an additional cost) so that makes this package even more interesting! Hopefully, when he can spare one of these we can do a follow up review later this year and keep you informed. Either way, this one is a winner on all counts. ●

MANUFACTURERS INFORMATION

Aurum Acoustics

10 Minerals Road
Conception Bay South
Newfoundland and Labrador
Canada A1W 5A1
709-834-8244

www.aurumacoustics.com

The Aurum Acoustics CDP

CD player/linestage

MSRP — \$12,000

PERIPHERALS

Analog source: AVID Volvere Turntable w/ Shelter 90x and SME 309 Arm, Aesthetix Rhea phono preamp with Great Northern Sound upgrades

Power Amplifiers: First Watt F3, Nagra PSA, Conrad-Johnson Premier 350, VAS Citation monoblocks, Red Rock Renaissance Monoblocks, Manley 250 monoblocks

Speakers: Tetra 506 Custom with REL B2 subwoofer

Interconnects: Cardas Neutral Reference, Tetra Artet, Tara The One

Speaker Cables: Tetra Artet

Power Conditioning: Running Springs Jaco, with Running Springs Mongoose power cords

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

Room Treatments: GIK panels and bass traps

The Peak Consult Princess Floorstander

— Jeff Dorgay



I used to be married to a princess but I ended up divorcing her because she was a major pain to live with and she eventually became a bit too imposing, but Peak Consult has a pair of Princesses that I could live with forever; the Princess F/S.



If you have ever had the chance to listen to any of their larger speakers and really enjoyed the sound but had a bit of sticker shock, the Princesses may just be for you. As muscle weighs a lot more than an equivalent amount of fat, these speakers look small and unassuming until you try and pick them up! They weigh about 110 lbs each, so be prepared to have a friend help you muscle them around.

With the same drivers as the Princess monitor, the F/S uses a larger cabinet, however you are rewarded with a bit lower bass response (45hz vs. 39hz for the floorstander) and you won't need to purchase stands. Consequently, the F/S are a bit more expensive and will work in a bit larger room. The F/S also has an additional db of efficiency; 88db for the monitor vs. 89 for the F/S. Rated at six ohms, I found them very easy to drive with tubes or solid state amplification. *(continued)*

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I know that hifi is supposed to be all about sound, but these speakers are truly beautiful to behold. As so much great furniture has come from Denmark, the craftsmanship of the Princesses is something that you will always be very proud to display in your home. I have seen very few speakers made to this high standard at any price.

Large Capacitors Equals Long Break-In

I was very smitten with these speakers at this year's CES show and Chris Sommovigo; Peak's USA importer was kind enough to send them our way right after the show was over. The show pair I heard was brand new and designer Per Kristoffersen spent about an hour talking to me about everything but speaker design, so I knew I was on to something good! He did take a couple minutes to show me the giant capacitors in the crossover network; they are about the size of an EGGO waffle with leads coming out of them!

Should you buy a pair of these gorgeous speakers for your home, you need to understand that those large capacitors will take a few hundred hours to break in, and even between 300 and 500 hours, there is still a touch more magic to be had. Right out of the box, they sound a little bit bright and slow, but after about 100 hours you can tell the drivers have done their thing and settled in. The Princesses possess just a touch of brightness until the capacitors have broken in all the way and it's bliss from then on. *(continued)*

How do they get that much sound out of such a small box?

Per Kristoffersen is a genius, that's how. The folks at Peak Consult are master craftsmen and these speakers sound as good as they look. The customary knuckle rap of the cabinets will floor you, there's no resonance of any kind here, it's like you tapped the monolith on 2001.

Take a close look at the front (and rear) panels, that matte black finish is real leather! These speakers are drop dead gorgeous; my test pair came in the upgraded cherry with ash stripes. This finish is available as a special order and you will need to ask your Peak Consult dealer for pricing and availability. Standard finishes are rosewood and ash.

The driver component is a 5-inch woofer and a 1-inch dome tweeter, along with a port on the back. Suggested room size for the F/S is less than 200 square feet, which was perfection in my 11 x 17 foot living room! Keep in mind that even in a large room, they will fare well, but a 5-inch driver can only move so much air! In order to realize all that these speakers are capable of, I highly suggest following Peak Consults directions and use them in a suitably sized room for best performance.

When I took them out to the studio and put them in the main listening area (16 x 24 feet), they still imaged great with a huge soundstage, but they did get swallowed up a bit on the lower end. (However, adding my REL B2 to this system was quite fantastic, even in the large room.)

But It's Really About Finesse

This is what really sets the Princess apart from the pack. If you are from the 'bigger is better' school of loudspeaker owners, you will probably just pass over these speakers. (At your own peril, I might add) What I found absolutely intoxicating about these speakers was the high level of resolution that they possessed without being big or overbearing. *(continued)*

What I found absolutely intoxicating about these speakers was the high level of resolution that they possessed without being big or overbearing.



Sonics by Joachim Gerhard

Finite Elemente

Spiral Groove by Allen Perkins

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So often if you have a small room, you have to settle for smaller speakers that just don't have enough resolution to mate with the best components the high end has to offer. I have heard this dilemma from a number of music enthusiasts who have the budget, but just can't shoehorn a giant pair of speakers into their small rooms, but a small pair of mini-monitors just don't reveal enough music. If this is your situation, your search is over!

In a small room with great gear, I would stack the Princesses up against anything I've ever heard.

Yes, I know they will not move as much air as the Peak Consult El Diablos, but the El Diablos need a big room to work their magic, as do a number of other well-known benchmarks.

Listening to a lot of my favorite records and CDs was a breathtaking experience with the Princesses, because I am somewhat of a detail freak that really likes all of those little spatial things in a good recording, yet I don't want my detail served up with a helping of harshness. This is what the Princess does so incredibly well, the balance is just right.

When I was spinning Bowie's **Black Tie/White Noise**, the title track was amazing. Bowie's vocals were right out front about three feet from my face, with the instruments somewhere in the middle with that distorted 'yow, yow, yow' background vocal about 20 feet back in the distance. Still in the Bowie mode, I switched to Aladdin Sane. I always love the piano solo on the title track and on a great system, it just floats. *(continued)*

This is one of those things that analog just does better than CD and with the Princesses, it's night and day, thanks to all that resolution on tap.

Keeping in the haunting piano groove I spent a good amount of time with the **Three Piano Sonatas** by Boulez, reviewed by Dan this issue. This is the kind of tonality that separates audiophile parlor tricks from the real deal and you get it in spades from the Princesses. Want to increase the level of difficulty? Listen to some violins

for a while. I don't claim to be an expert on classical music, far from it. However, whenever I listen to violins on speakers with great tonal ability, they sound natural. Anything less and they sound screechy, thin and even harsh. Many people consider the piano the ultimate test, but for me, it's the violin. Again, the Princesses passed with flying colors and Anne-Sophie was as she should be.

My first impression of these speakers at CES, was with some Stevie Ray Vaughn. I'm not a real nut about SRV, but as fate would have it before I walked into Chris' room I had heard *Tin Pan Alley* about a dozen times that day, so it was very well locked into my head. Even though these speakers were brand spanking new, I knew that they were fantastic. When you have had a lot of seat time with a lot of speakers, you kind of know how they will progress over time and I was not disappointed at ALL with these.

Now that they were fully broken in, the presentation was amazing! Granted, I didn't have the Continuum for analog duties, but the combination of the Aesthetix Callisto Signature and the Manley 250s offered up a stunning rendition of this album. Don't think that you need tube gear to get the magic; Swapping out the Aesthetix/Manley combination for the CJ ACT2/series 2 and the

Premier 350 was also a great combination, which had a little less air, but a bit more detail and control.

Staying on the Texas side of the map, I threw on some Johnny Winter and played my favorite cut, *Memory Pain* from the Second Winter album. Have no fear, these have the dynamics to play very loud without losing their poise. But loud isn't everything, many speakers that play loud can't play soft. I was always very impressed with how well the Princesses did at low to moderate

levels, indicating a very wide dynamic range with a lot of contrast on tap. Yeah, yeah, female vocals sound great too, no worries.

Both systems were great and really showed what these speakers were capable of with really good gear. With tubes, the Princesses had a bit warmer bass and with solid state they had a little more slam and impact. Whichever flavor you prefer, you can rest assured they are up to the task.

Those of you that use this disc as one of your favorite test records know what I'm talking about, but no matter what I played I just couldn't get enough! The Princesses throw the soundstage wide and deep, just like a good minimonitor, yet they have a lot more weight.

Unless you are trying to squeeze a major orchestra into your small room, these speakers will do it all for

you except for that last bit of deep bass. But if you have a small room, you aren't going to get that last bit of deep bass anyway. Can't fight physics, no matter how hard you try.

Now That's a Manual!

If you think these speakers are fantastic, wait till you see the manual! This is really impressive and it shows you why these speakers are not just a purchase, they are truly an investment. You get a very impressive leather binder, along with a checklist of all the parts inside, including the set of spikes and a bottle of oil to keep those Princesses looking their best. Also enclosed is Per Kristofferson's business card with his DIRECT phone number and an email contact.

(continued)



This is the same level of follow through that you get with a Lexus, BMW or any other fine automobile. I felt it was a very nice touch that would make any Peak Consult owner very confident about their purchase.

This One Wins the Swimsuit Contest and has a Big Brain Too

If you have a small room, the Peak Consult Princess comes as close to having your cake and eating too. It offers up a tremendous amount of detail without fatigue at any volume level within reason and is well suited to any kind of music you might enjoy. In addition to being equally compatible with tube or solid-state electronics, they are very attractive to boot.

I must emphasize again though, that these are extremely high performance speakers for a small room. Do not expect these to work in a big room and have the necessary grunt. If you want that, you need a much larger pair of speakers. (Perhaps the Peak Consult Zoltans...) However, from a quality standpoint, I would have no problem pairing up a set of these speakers with the best components available, they are definitely up to the task.

I was very happy to close the door on the last princess in my life, but I will miss these princesses a great deal. Perhaps there are a pair of Peak Consult speakers in my future! ●



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PERIPHERALS

Analog Sources: SME 10 turntable w/SME V arm and MoFi 3.5C cartridge, Aesthetix Rhea phono preamp with Great Northern Sound upgrades, TEAC 2300SX with Progressive Engineering tape head preamp

Digital Sources: Meridian 808, Wadia 581

Preamplifiers: Conrad Johnson ACT2/series 2, Aesthetix Callisto signature

Power Amplifiers: Conrad-Johnson Premier 350, Manely 250 monoblocks, Nagra PSA

Interconnects: Cardas Golden Reference

Speaker Cable: Wireworld Equinox 3

Power Cords: Essential Sound Products the Essence 'Reference'

Power Conditioning: Running Springs Jaco

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

Room Treatment: GIK panels



The Meier Corda Opera

When I heard that I was going to get a chance to audition the newest headphone amplifier from Meier, I was very excited, because I love their products; they are always very well thought out, feature excellent build quality and offer great value.

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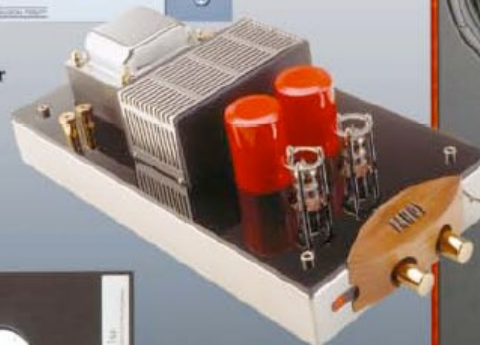
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But the Corda Opera Goes Much Further Than That

In addition to a very versatile headphone amplifier, it also includes two analog inputs, a digital input and a USB input. The Corda Opera is actually a full function preamplifier and DAC all built into a VERY stylish chassis. At about 10 x 10 x 3 inches (27.8 x 27.6 x 8.7 cm), this is offering up an awful lot of functionality in this small package as well.

This is the Headphone Column After All...

So I made sure to spend a lot of time using the Corda Opera as a headphone amplifier, but I couldn't help coming back to what a great entry level PRE-AMPLIFIER this is. I have people always asking me to suggest a good preamplifier for a modest system and now I know what I'm going to suggest-every time!

Much like the Aurum CDP reviewed this issue, I really didn't judge this piece as a thousand dollar headphone amplifier, but as three components going for about \$350 each. Again, considering that for a budget (yet high-value minded) audiophile getting this all in one box, you are saving a couple of interconnects and maybe even a power cord or two by having everything all on one chassis. *(continued)*

After a bit of break-in, I would still describe the character of the Opera as a bit forward, but again much better than I expected at this price point. I used it in my living room system, which currently consists of the DeVore Gibbon Super 8 speakers and the Nagra PSA power amplifier. I also substituted a pair of VSA Citation monoblocks to get the tube perspective on things. Cabling was from Cardas: Neutral Reference interconnects and speaker cable. Power cords and conditioning from Running Springs rounded out the picture, so we had a pretty nice little system going here.

In the end, because of the slightly forward tonal balance of the linestage section of the Opera, I really preferred it with tube amplification. However, you should always audition with your components to get the ultimate impression.

How about the DAC?

The Opera has a built in DAC that offers 24bit/96k functionality when used with the S/PDIF input or 16 bit/48k functionality with the USB connection. Though the S/PDIF has higher performance, the USB port is more than likely the one most of us will use. Keeping this in mind, using the Opera as a very high quality bedside system was a lot of fun, because I could just jack my laptop into it and use iTunes with ease. When you are trying to sneak hifi into the bedroom, the less the better! The DAC performance is definitely adequate, probably on par with a Squeezebox and definitely better than a number of budget players I've sampled. *(continued)*





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For all of my testing, I used my Macintosh G5 computer which has about 1400mb of uncompressed music in iTunes. I am a digital purist and do not even resort to Apple Lossless compression, all of my CDs have been captured uncompressed, to preserve every last drop of fidelity. Watch for my upcoming report on the HP media vault for those of you with large music collections.

The obvious comparison with the Benchmark DAC-1 USB comes to mind and I would describe them this way, with no disrespect to either. The Benchmark product is a DAC first and foremost, with a linestage and headphone amplifier thrown in, while the Opera is a high quality headphone amplifier that just happens to have a USB DAC thrown in and the ability to be used as a linestage.

Make Sure to try Your Phones with Both Jacks

There are a few great features that make the Opera very versatile indeed. There are two separate jacks for low impedance headphones and one for high impedance ones. The first torture test was with the AKG 701s, which have a bit of a notorious reputation and can give some amplifiers fits. No problems here, the low impedance jack gave the amplifier plenty of oomph, with nice bass control and mid-range presence. Just for laughs, I plugged the 701s into the high impedance jack and the sound flattened out considerably and there was not enough gain, even on the high gain setting.

(continued)



Next step, the Sennheiser 650s

These definitely sounded better in the high impedance jack. I listened to a lot of jazz and some rock music with all three of my test phones and noticed the 650s to be just a bit rolled off with the Opera, the opposite of how it sounds as a preamplifier. Switching the cables to a set from Cardas brought the tonal range a bit more back into line, so if you have 650s and are considering this amp, I would suggest budgeting for the upgraded cable as well.

Make Room for Grado too!

To round the picture out, I had to get my trusty Grado GS1000s going as well. Another set for the low impedance jack, I got the best results with the Opera on the low gain setting to boot. On the high gain setting, I found the GS1000s a bit bright for my tastes.

Bottom line, you can use this amplifier with any of these three phones and be very happy.

Overall Performance

The Opera had way more than enough output to drive my three reference phones.

Thanks to its low distortion, I suggest a little restraint with the volume control; it would be very easy to turn it up too loud and start ear damage!

Overall, I would call the sound character of the Opera as a headphone amplifier very neutral. Bass response went down very deep and was well controlled and had good texture and tone. The highs changed a bit depending on what phones I was listening to, but if you have a good set of phones, I think you will be very happy here too.

I thought that the Opera did a very good job with detail and resolution. Listening to a few of my favorite DCC CDs, it was very easy to discern between the originals and Mr. Hoffman's excellent remastering. Best of Badfinger sounded particularly groovy and all of the overdubs and backing vocals came right through! Of course, female vocals were very good, so you should be able to enjoy any of your favorite music with this setup.

We Saved the Best for Last

If the Corda Opera review stopped here, it would be two thumbs up. It offers a great

headphone amplifier performance, a good DAC and a versatile preamplifier. What really sets the Opera apart from the pack is the Meier Crossfeed circuit. The Crossfeed circuit actually tries to simulate the actual human hearing response by mixing a bit of the signal from the left channel into the right and vice versa.

While some of you may prefer that 'mega-separation' effect that you can only get from headphones, I'm not a big fan and can't listen to phones for extremely long periods of time because the spatial cues are just too far away from what I listen to through speakers.

Listening to some of my favorite electronic music (Art of Noise, Radiohead, Tosca) was much more pleasant and at times I almost felt like I was listening to a pair of speakers! This is the highest compliment I can pay the Opera. Just to be sure, I switched the Crossfeed off and I was back to putting the phones down after a short period. To trick my friends, I had them listen to the Opera and didn't tell them what was happening.

(continued)

What really sets the Opera apart from the pack is the Meier Crossfeed circuit.

Everyone made the same comment, that this was a very unfatiguing headphone experience indeed.

I must say the Crossfeed circuit goes miles towards improving this situation and I was able to listen to my phones for hours on end with this feature, so if you have been hesitant about phones for this reason, but the Meier amp right to the top of your list!

Visually Stimulating Too

The manual says that the Opera is a real eye-catcher and I have to agree. The casework reminds me a lot of my Wadia 581 CD player, with the cylindrical corners and the brushed aluminum casework. This one looks as good as it sounds! Bucking current tradition, the LEDs are red instead of the blue that I see on just about everything else. Personally I like the red, but that's a minor point.

A Lot to Offer in a Small Package

In conclusion, the Meier Corda Opera is a great headphone amplifier offering up great sound as well as some great built in accessories. Whether you decide to build a budget hifi system around it or just use it as a headphone amplifier, this component has a lot to offer. What really sets the Opera apart from the pack is the crossfeed circuit, offering up some of the most pleasant headphone listening I've heard in a while! Todd the Vinyl Junkie is the exclusive US importer for these, so give him a call if you are interested. ●



\$185 www.cardas.com

Specifically designed for the Sennheiser 580/600/650 series of headphones, this is a fantastic accessory that will completely change the sound of your Sennheisers. Many people find that this headphone is just a little closed in through the midrange, though a lot will be affected by your choice of headphone amplifier.

Thanks to the plug-in architecture of these phones, you can make an upgrade. (And isn't that what hi-fi is all about?) It's an easy task, just gently unplug the stock cable and plug the new one from Cardas in. As with any wire product, it will take a little bit of break in to get to it's ultimate sound, but right away, I noticed that there was definitely some more midrange ease on tap.

On both my own Woo Audio WA6 and the flagship WA5 300B headphone amplifier, this was a whole new world indeed. I listened to a lot of my favorite headphone tracks and

noticed quite a bit more spatial information floating around inside my head.

For those of you with solid state headphone amplifiers, I think there is a good possibility you will really enjoy this cable upgrade as well. I tried the new 650's with the Meier amplifier as well as the Channel Islands model and definitely noticed less grain in the presentation. Even jacking my 650s into my daughters Pioneer SX-737, I could still tell the difference between the stock cord and the upgraded Cardas cord.

I ran the Cardas break-in record that I've dubbed to CD on repeat for about two days and I was good to go! This is a great way to break in headphones, by the way...

I think if you love your Sennheisers but would like to take them to another level and enjoy a bit more musicality, this is a fantastic option. Way less than another set of phones! ●

It's all about tubes!

Lately, we've all been tube rolling and having a lot of fun. Marc Phillips has been playing with the Bottlehead amps and enjoying the Sophia Electric 2.5V 300B, which is a direct replacement for the 2A3. As you will see, they were great, but not what he expected and that can often be the case with tube rolling!

I have a few of my own tube adventures as well, so read on!



The New Mullard EL-34

When I dropped by Echo Audio last month, Kurt asked me if I wanted to try a set of the “new” Mullard EL-34 tubes that are now made by New Sensor in Russia. Who am I to turn away some new tubes? I have been using the VAS Citation Monoblocks for some time now in my second system with just the stock Chinese tubes that it came with, so I felt very familiar with the sound.

Popping in the ‘new’ Mullards was definitely a step up.

Even while the amplifiers were warming up, there was definitely less noise, which is always a good thing with tubes. But once they had a good hour or so I could hear a substantial difference. Listening to Jeff Beck’s **Blow By Blow**, there was

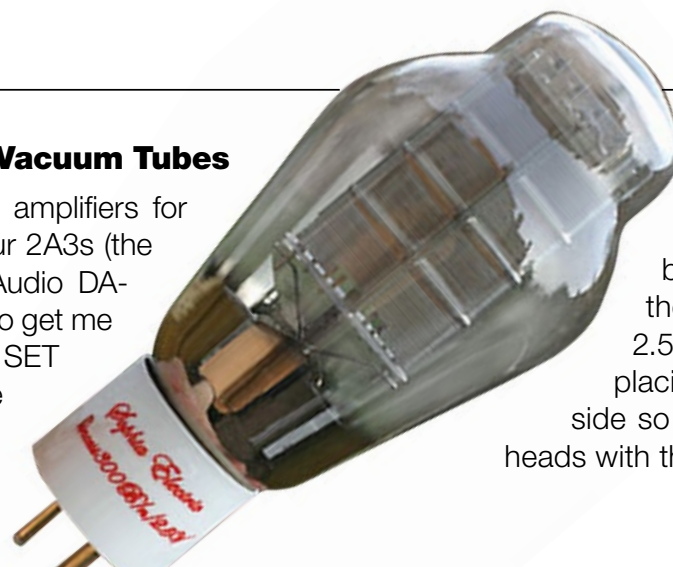
more space to the music, as well as the midrange seemed to come forward just a bit more too. Surprisingly enough, bass performance was about the same.

I managed to borrow a set of NOS Mullards from Mr. O’Brien (VERY pricey for a set of these!) and unfortunately, it wasn’t close. The oldies are still the best and they are going up faster than oil stock these days. A good matched quad of these is fetching between \$1000 and \$2000, but rumor has it they will last forever, so who knows? For the rest of us just wanting a bit more sound than the no-name tubes that came with our amplifier, these are definitely worth considering.

Available at most fine tube emporiums, I suggest calling Echo, they are selling them for \$32 a pair!

The Sophia Electric 2.5V/C 300B Vacuum Tubes

Recently, Jeff dropped off two SET amplifiers for me to use, a pair of Bottlehead Paramour 2A3s (the original version) and a pair of Dignity Audio DA-08SE 300B monoblocks. The idea was to get me acquainted with all the different types of SET amplifiers so that I could properly assume the lofty designation of TONEAudio Single-Ended Guru-in-Residence.



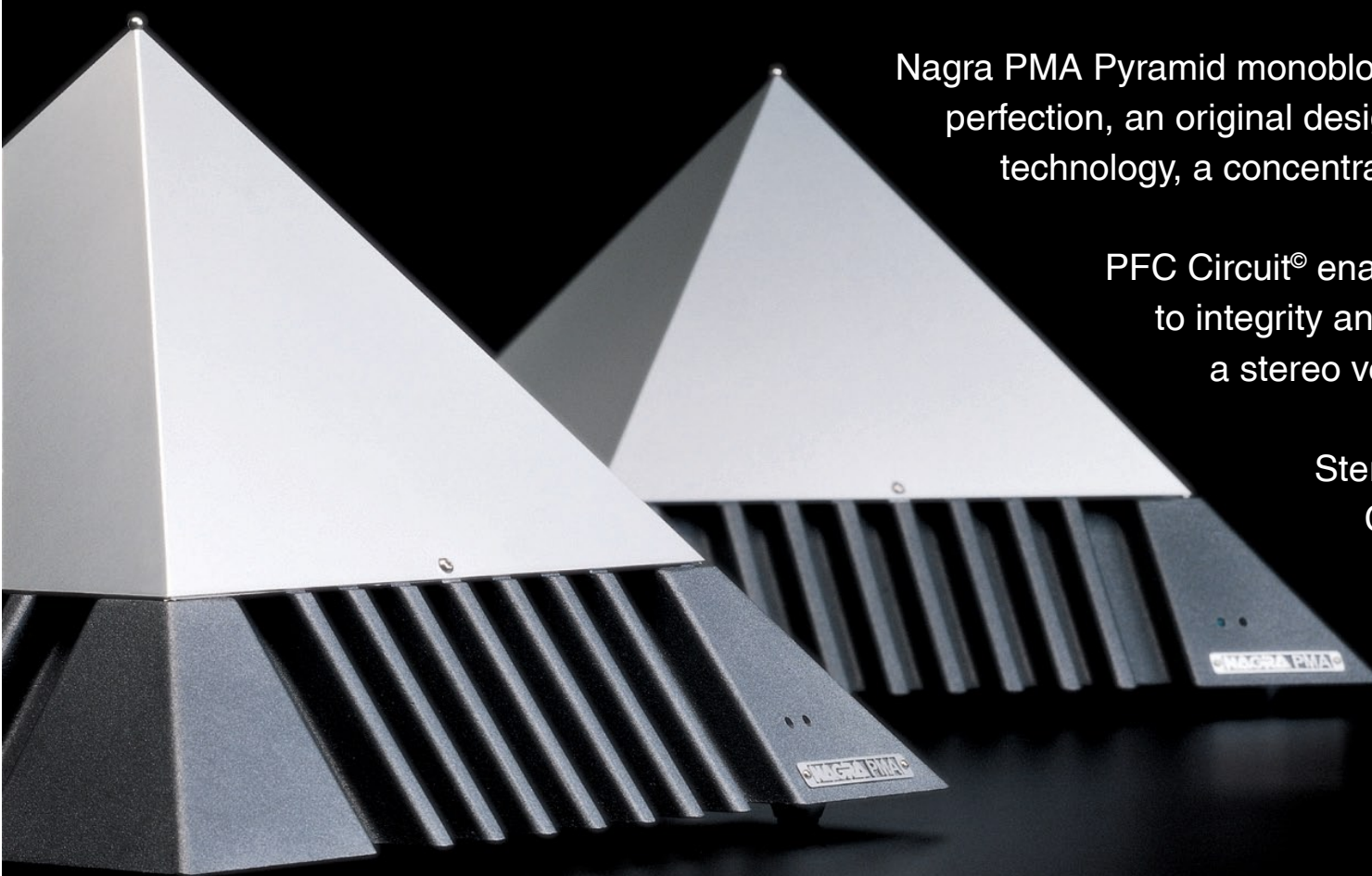
He also dropped off an extra pair of 300B tubes from Sophia Electric for me to try out. I assumed they were for the Dignity monoblocks, but Jeff immediately stopped me, saying no no no, they were for the Bottleheads, since they were the 2.5-volt version. I proceeded, albeit slightly confused, placing the pretty blue Sophia Electric boxes off to the side so that I could acclimate to the sound of the Bottleheads with the Chinese Valve Art 2A3s first. *(continued)*

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This turned out to be a humbling task, because for a few hours I experienced an audio reviewer's greatest fear, that everything was starting to sound the same. When I replaced my beloved Yamamoto Sound Craft A-08S amp with the Bottleheads, the first thing I listened to was the song *El Gallop* from Joanna Newsom's first CD, **The Milk-Eyed Mender**, which also happened to be the last thing I heard on the A-08S. I've been using this song as a reference lately, because it is so

beautifully recorded and played, the most realistic portrayal of a harp I've yet heard in my listening room.

Well, everything sounded exactly the same with the Bottleheads in place, the tonality, the imaging, everything. I came up with two explanations. Either the Bottlehead stuff is really as good as everyone says it is, or I needed to clean my ears out immediately. It was only after a few days, and many different types of music, that I was able to sort out the Bottle-

head's shortcomings in comparison to the Yamamoto. First, the soundstage was smaller overall. Not a lot smaller, but significant for me to be able to pick out each amp in a blind test. Second, I did start to feel some grain creeping into the high frequencies. And finally, the Bottleheads with the 2A3s in place simply had no real low bass. I'm not talking about loose, weak or sloppy bass, but non-existent bass. Low-level information on some recordings simply vanished into thin air. *(continued)*

REGA'S SOUND SENSE



When you first get a **Rega** product home you know that you have something a little different from the crowd. Whether it's a turntable, CD player or speakers you can be sure that your feet will start to tap and the air guitar will come out of it's cupboard. You see Roy Gandy and the folks at Rega have some strange ideas in these modern times of ours.

Rega believes that some audio components actually sound better and more musical than others. That by precision engineering you can get more information off of CDs and albums. That electronics should not get in the way of the musical signal and speakers reproduce the sheer emotion of a recording.

Rega also has a notion that in order to reproduce the emotion of a recording, care and attention has to be paid to how something is built. So all **Rega** products are exactly made in the



UK, and not built off shore to a price.

Furthermore, **Rega** also believes that their products should be sensibly priced, allowing them to easily outperform units many times their price. Strange goings on indeed in the world of overpriced audio.

If these atypical ideas make sense to you, pop along to your local **Rega** dealer. All you need is some music and your ears. Tell them Roy sent you.

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I wondered if using the Sophia 300Bs would return the Bottleheads back to the level of my first impressions. That would be something, I thought, if I could make these \$549 monoblock kits sing like the \$2650 Yamamoto. Sure, installing the Sophia tubes practically doubles the cost of the Paramour, but the combination still comes in at under a grand, which qualifies it a true bargain.

The Sophia Electric 300Bs took the Paramour into a completely different direction, much to my surprise.

The Sophia Electric 300Bs took the Paramour into a completely different direction, much to my surprise. The new tubes gave the Bottleheads a huge, round sound compared to the 2A3s, with a giant soundstage and full, slightly ripe bass. Those lower-octave omissions suddenly reappeared, although not as tightly and well-defined as with the Yamamoto amp and its 45 output tubes. Many people who have not heard the really low-powered SETs imagine that 2 or 3 watt amps sound small and quaint in comparison to higher-powered push-pull tube amps. In reality, both the Yamamoto and the Bottlehead with the 2A3s offer a focused, detailed presentation. The Bottleheads with the 300Bs, however, sounded more like the classic vintage tube amp, with a glorious, seductive sound that's fairly rolled off at the frequency extremes.

That's not to say I didn't like the Sophia Electric 2.5V/C 300Bs. But I was taken aback for a while at how two glass tubes could completely transform the sound of my entire system. There were times when I actually thought to myself, this is probably the most colored my system has ever been. And that kind of thinking will certainly discourage those of us who are searching for accuracy and neutrality (which begs the question of why you would listen to an SET in the first place). But if you're like me, and you just want to have fun, and you like the idea of switching back and forth between two completely different types of tube sound, then the Sophias are for you.

— Marc Phillips



Vintage Tube Services

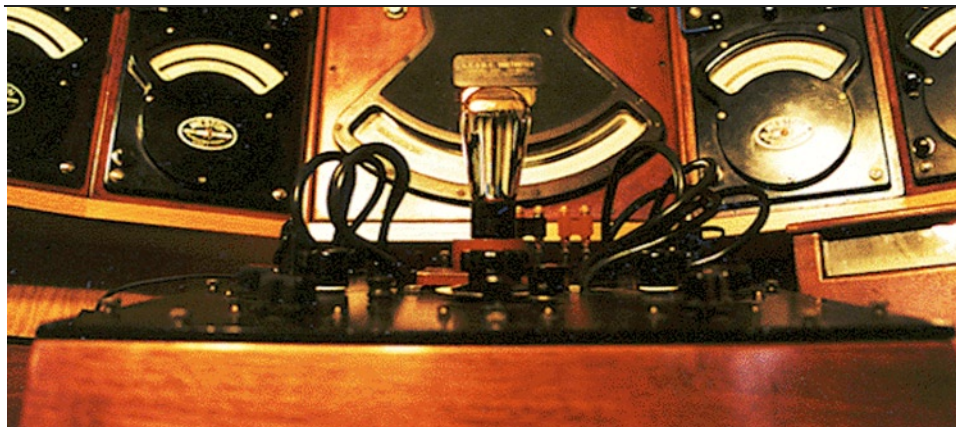
This isn't a review of a specific tube, per se, but a great place to get them. Many of you probably know about a couple of the more popular places to get tubes on the web, but Andy at **Vintage Tube Services** is the best I've encountered yet!

If you take a peek at his website, you can see that this man is serious about tubes and tube testing!

www.vintagetubeservices.com

Using the best vintage and current gear to make sure you get the optimum tubes for your gear is what Andy is all about. He will discuss budget and give you a few good pricing options, so you don't have to necessarily break the bank to get great NOS tubes, but like anything, the absolute top shelf tubes will be priced accordingly.

I went for broke with my Aesthetix Callisto Signature and I must say the results were breathtaking. The Callisto is a great preamplifier, but with these tubes it has gone to another level. *(continued)*



Noise is down, dynamics are up and the sound went from great to the great beyond. Where I really noticed the big difference is in the musical textures. The last layer of grain was gone! So the big pile of tubes you see in my hand is for my Aesthetix Rhea phono stage. You guessed it, magic again!

I can't suggest **Vintage Tube Services** high enough. This man is a true master of his craft. But like any master, things take time. Andy doesn't rush any part of the job, and that's why he's the best. Don't expect to call and get a dozen tubes overnight. If you want it tomorrow, call someone else. If you want the best call Andy and tell him we sent you. ●

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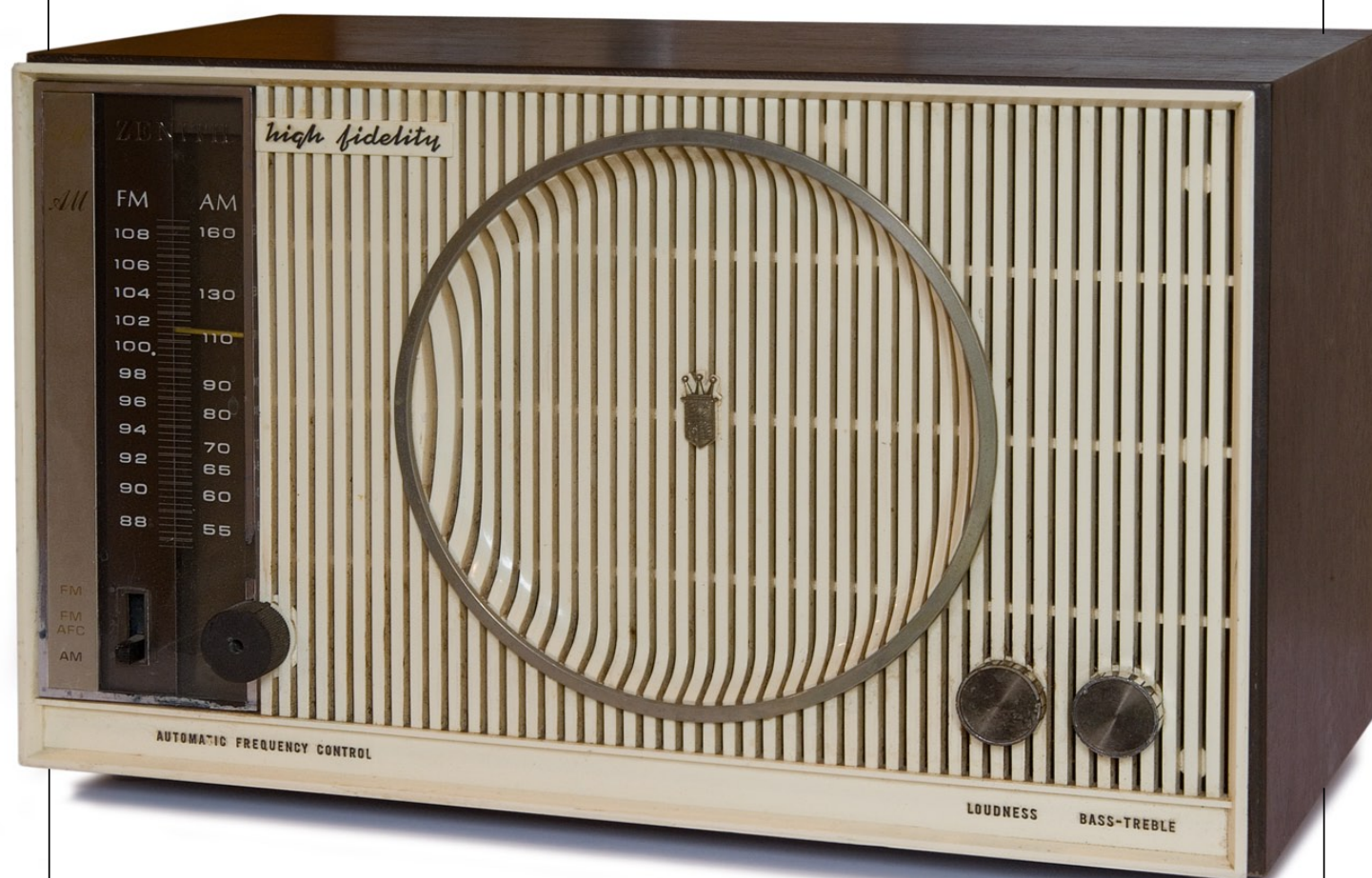
All Verity Audio designs are crafted with a balance of science and art. It is only through this tradition that the spirit of knowledge and craftsmanship come alive.



Slummin'

— Jeff Dorgay

This issue we go way back, to my roots in audio. First, a great table radio from Zenith that I grew up with and then the multimeter that was part of my beginning electronics education in high school. I always wanted one of these, but at 14 years old, 70 dollars was a whole summer's worth of grass cutting!



ZENITH TABLE RADIO — Ebay, \$35

Crazy as I am, why on Earth would I buy a mono Zenith table radio? I'll tell you why, because this was really one of my first introductions to music on a regular basis.

Yep, the trusty X337 was what Mom and Dad had up on the counter in my childhood house. I used to listen to WOKY on the AM dial to hear the top 40 hits of the day. Funny thing is I just looked at the WOKY site and they still have the same music, but now it's oldies music!!

With a big 8" speaker and a tweeter, it still sounds great and sounds much more full than those tiny new table radios with 4-inch speakers! Inside, there are ten tubes so you get the full warm sound! I lucked out on this one, as a quick internet search revealed that these radios in top shape seem to be fetching about 85 – 100 dollars.

Simpson 260 Meter — Ebay \$40

When I first got involved in the electronics hobby, (at age 14) this was the meter I always wanted! I believe back in the day a new Simpson 260 was about 70 bucks at Allied Radio.

The one you see here is in perfect shape cosmetically and works just fine. Comparing it to my digital multimeter, it is still spot on and I felt like I was back in Mr. Trendall's electronics class again working on my lab projects!



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

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