

THE BLUE MAN GROUP

FIRST U.S. REVIEWS!

AVALON ASCENDANT
SPEAKERS

MCINTOSH C2300
PREAMPLIFIER

BEN FONG-TORRES
CATCHES UP WITH
CARLOS SANTANA

JAZZ GREAT
SONNY ROLLINS

VSAC 2008 THE TUBE
SHOW IS BACK

NAGRA'S PL-L
PREAMPLIFIER

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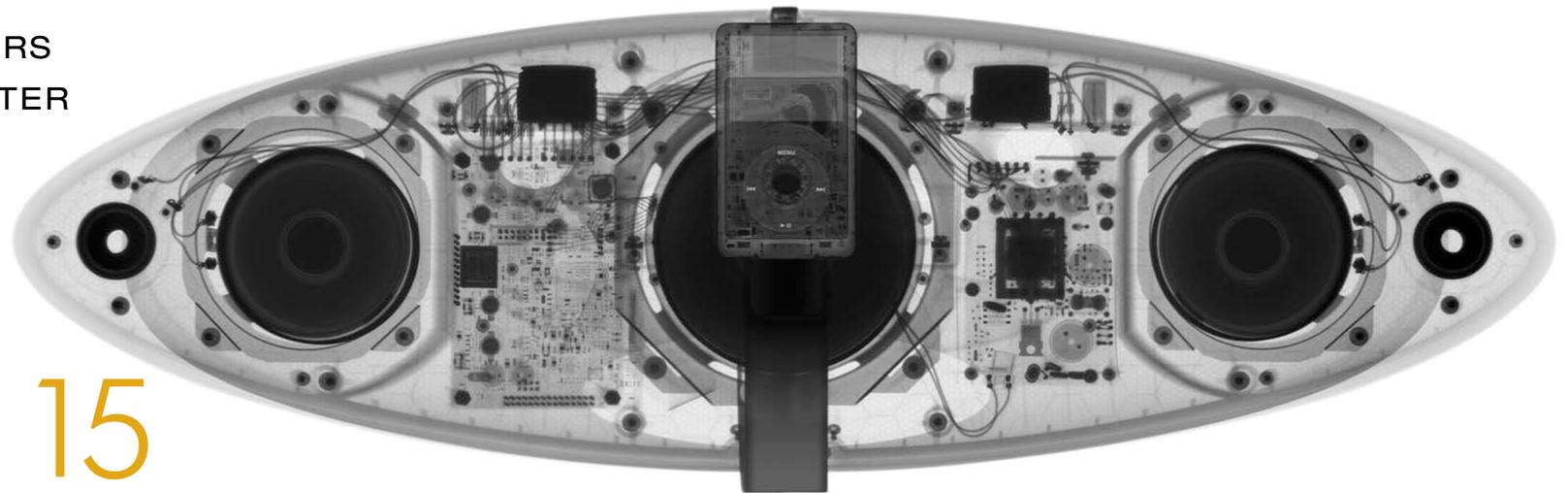
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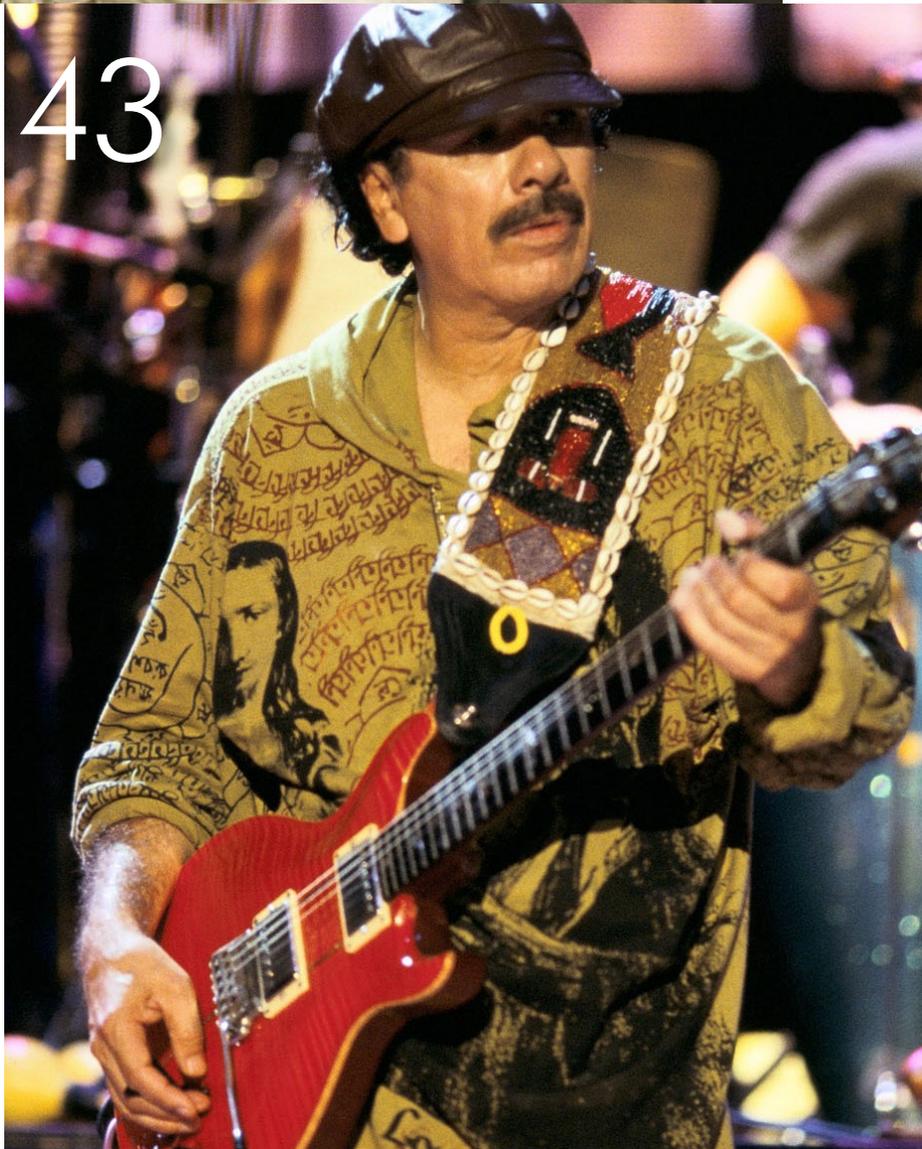
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CHRIS CONNAKER

We are very excited to launch a strategic partnership with Chris and his site Computer Audiophile (www.computeraudiophile.com). Though a little bit controversial right now, I'm with Chris, thinking that this is a good chunk of where the audiophile world is heading. Definitely a music guy first, Chris has a big heart for music and fear not, he has a turntable too!

Presently from Minneapolis, Chris will be our go to person for things related to marrying your computer, music server or iPod to your hifi system. He will be producing a regular column for us, but that's only the tip of the iceberg. We highly encourage you to visit his site for more information if this is your area of interest.

Stay tuned. With his help, we hope to bring you a lot more information from down this path.

PUBLISHER'S LETTER

Thank goodness the holidays and CES are over, whew!

As always, this year's CES was a great time. Now that most of the vendors attending know what they are up against, I think they all did an excellent job at setting up there. The sound from room to room was much better than in years past, so hat's off to the world of high end audio, it was a great show for all that attended.

The biggest difference I noticed this year was the abundance of music servers with quite a few rooms using them as source components. (with excellent results, I might add) The arguments on the internet rage on about compression alternatives and hard drive based playback, but at the end of the day, convenience wins for many of us.

While we were the first to premier the Sooloos music server, the print magazines were quick to follow and they even called it "The Future of Music", which seems to be getting used an awful lot lately. Until my royalty check for use of this phrase arrives and I can cash it in at the BMW dealership, the beat goes on.

Back to information you can actually use. For those of you that have embraced the iPod or other portable digital player, if you aren't taking it with you to the dentist, you should. Without getting into the grizzly details of my recent oral hygiene ritual, I do have a few tips for you when using your iPod in the big chair.

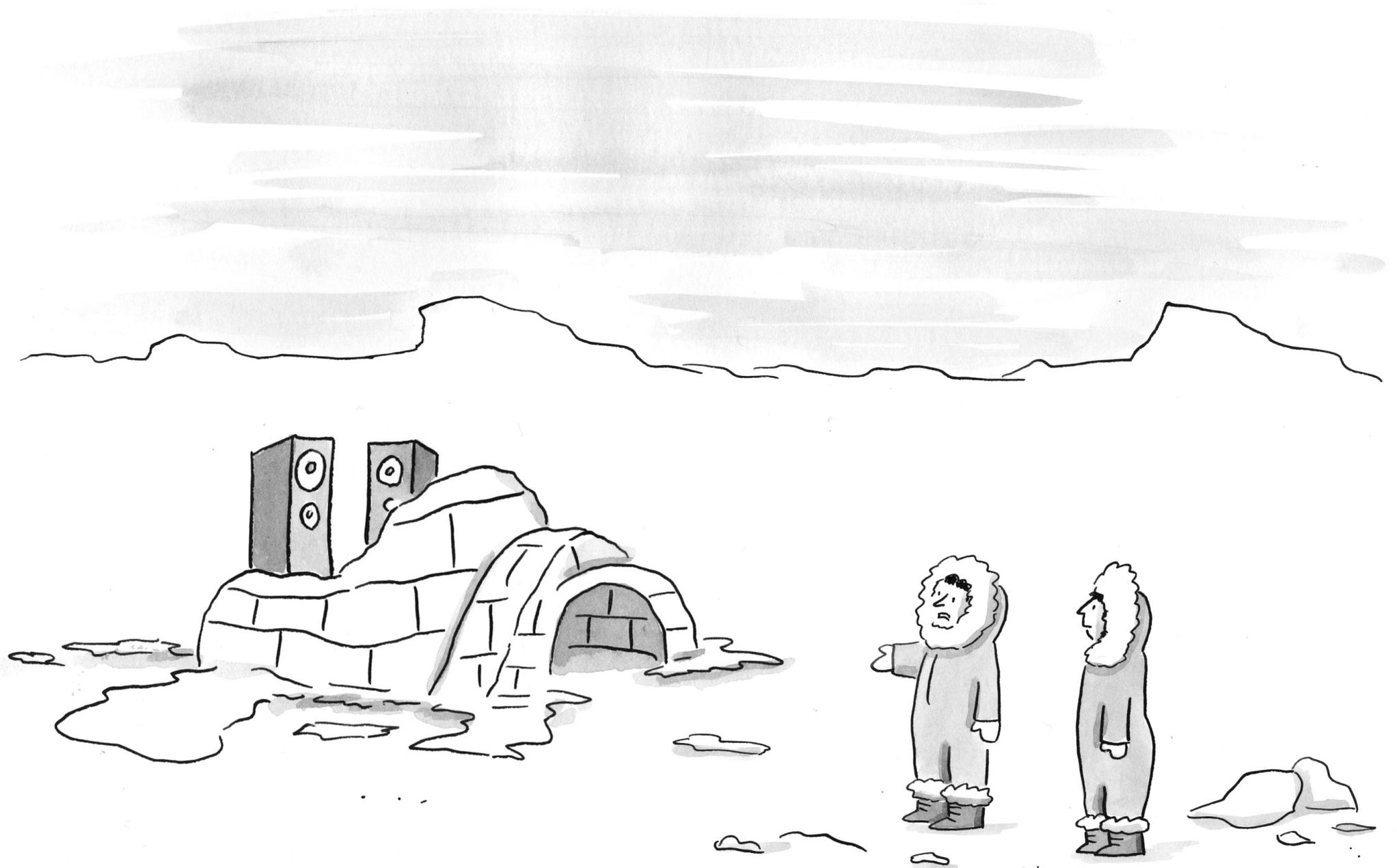
Don't listen to classical music or anything that has a lot of dynamic range because the minute you hit the quiet parts in the music, you will be able to hear the dentist drilling away again, causing your anxiety level to rise dramatically. Now is the time to crank up TOOL or Pantera, something that only has about 2db of range, so it drowns everything else out.

Bud style earphones are not the best choice. Even though you risk looking like a major nerd, drag your Koss Pro 4AA's out of the closet (with a suitable 1/4" to 1/8" adaptor) so you get a good seal around your ears. The more noise you can keep out, the better.

Don't attempt any critical listening for about 24 hours after the experience, if they have had to administer a local anesthetic. Believe it or not, your ears are just as numb as your jaw. I thought I would listen to a little more Pantera just to take my mind off feeling like a stroke victim, but in the end, it was fruitless. Everything just sounded like I had earplugs in! Best bet is to drink some scotch or your favorite adult beverage with a straw (unless you want everyone to laugh at you for trying to drink from a glass) and watch a fairly somber movie, because laughing hurts too.

So keep flossing and remember, the less money you spend at the dentist is more money you can spend on records!





DONNELLY

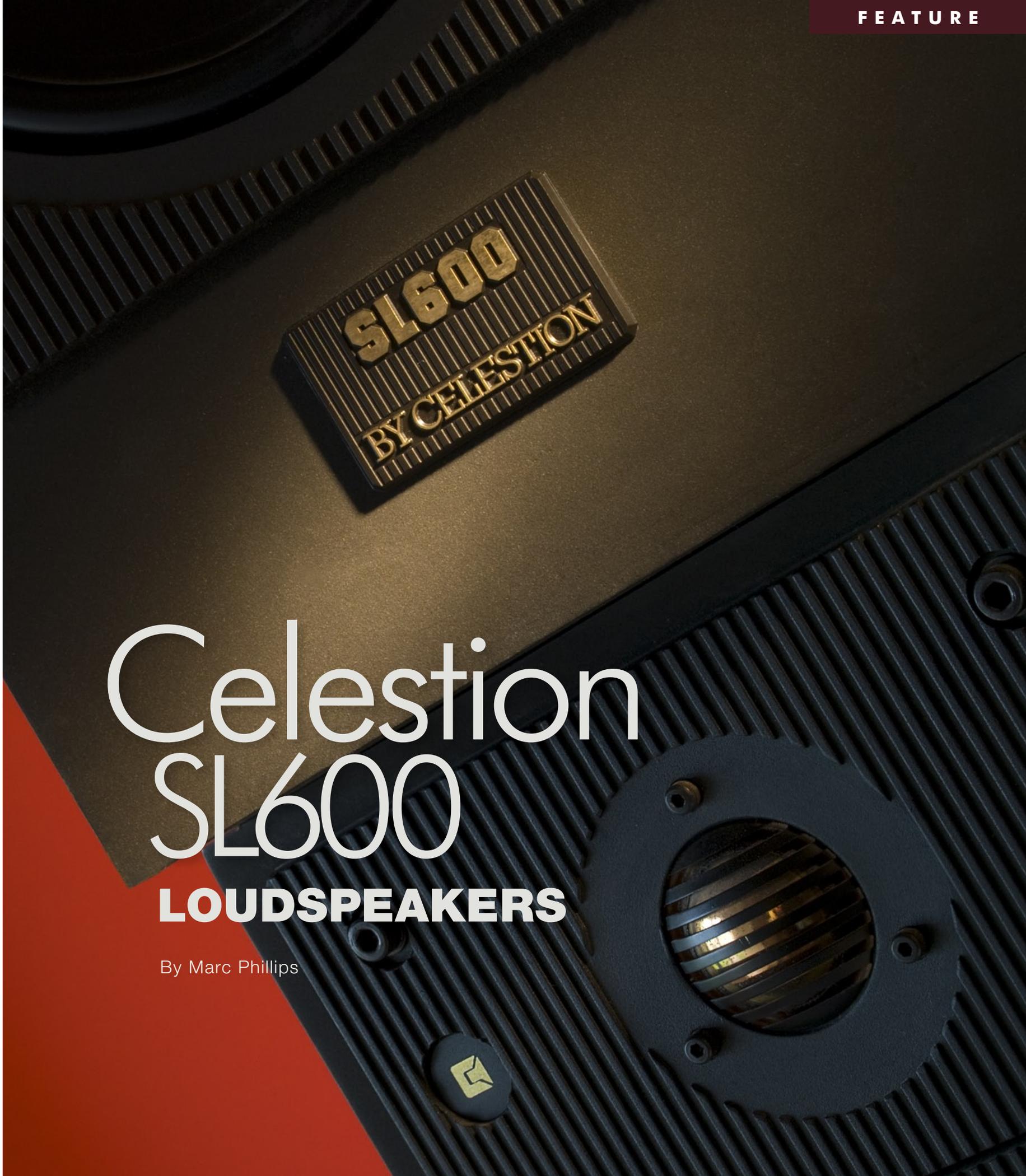
"I told you not to buy those Class-A amplifiers!"

OLD SCHOOL!

Celestion SL600

LOUDSPEAKERS

By Marc Phillips



“Those little speakers
cost how much?”

It seems unbelievable that it's been 25 years since Celestion introduced the SL600 loudspeaker, the first premium-priced mini-monitor. In 1983, a pair of these diminutive speakers, which measured roughly 14 1/2" by 8" by 9" and weighed just a little more than 11 pounds each, retailed for \$1500. By the end of their production run just a few years ago, the price of the SL600s had increased to nearly \$2000 a pair. While most audiophiles are no longer shocked by the thought of a mini-monitor costing well into four (or even five) figures, the arrival of such an assertive, ballsy little creature was certainly a bit controversial at the time.



OLD SCHOOL!

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Once you heard the sonic capabilities of the SL600, however, you usually shut your mouth and listened. Apart from the LS3/5a, the SL600 was one of the first loudspeakers that effectively underlined the idea that small speakers could do some things better than large speakers. For instance, the SL600s could produce holographic images that were consistently believable. The copper domed tweeter produced an open, extended treble that was less fatiguing than other metal high-frequency drivers of the day. The cabinet of the SL600 was made from Aerolam, which was similar to the material used on for the surface tiles of the Space Shuttle, and reduced cabinet colorations to a point then unheard of in small speaker design.

The SL600 did have a couple of flaws that prevented it from becoming the speaker of choice for every audiophile.

It's obvious that all the aerospace engineering in the world couldn't produce a speaker of this size that could produce deep, deep bass (which is why Celestion introduced a dedicated set of subwoofers a few years later). The SL600 is rated down to 60Hz, plus or minus 3 dB, and is not one of those mini-monitor designs that trick you into thinking that you're listening to a much larger speaker (a la Harbeth). In addition, much has been said over the years about the SL600's somewhat recessed midrange. In fact, the first time I ever heard the term "midrange suckout" was in a review for the SL600s.

While spending some time with a vintage pair of SL600s, I was more aware of the former problem than the latter. *(continued)*

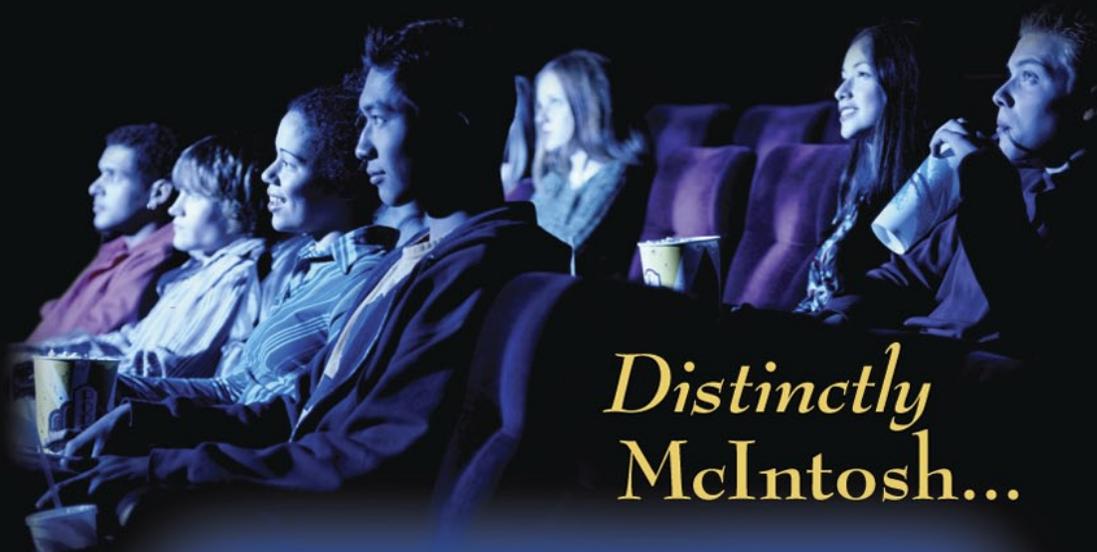
I felt that midrange was smooth and palpable, and that the SL600's biggest strength was in the reproduction of the human voice. In other words, if the midrange was so darned recessed, why did vocals sound so eerily present and lifelike? For me, the midrange performance of the SL600s was decidedly modern, and competitive with today's \$1500 mini-monitors.

The lack of deep bass was a little more noticeable. It's hardly a news flash that the SL600 doesn't deliver satisfying, full-range sound, but I often felt that it was the lower frequencies that sounded disconnected from the whole, rather than the midrange. I thought that the Stirling LS3/5as, which only go down to 75Hz, provided a more seamless musical presentation from top to bottom than the SL600s. For instance, when I listened to Jeff Buckley's *Grace*, the more intimate moments of the album sounded immediate and real. When the band kicked in during more complex arrangements, such as in "The Last Goodbye," I noticed a loss of impact and momentum.

So the real question is whether the Celestion SL600s are competitive with today's \$1500 bookshelf monitors.

Honestly, the answer is no, not quite. For instance, the Sonics Argentas I reviewed in the last issue do everything the SL600s do in terms of imaging and soundstaging, and reach down to 38 Hz as well. (The Sonics are only about an inch larger than the SL600s in every dimension.) The SL600's 82 dB sensitivity rating is a bit daunting as well, even with its 8-ohm impedance. *(continued)*





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I remember seeing many SL600s mated to big Krell and Threshold amplifiers back in the '80s.

While I was able to get decent sound out of the SL600s with the 50wpc Clayton Audio Stereo 40 amplifier, the 250wpc Conrad-Johnson ET250S was a much healthier match, resulting in cleaner, more extended highs, and a larger, almost limitless soundstage.

Here's the catch, however... Celestion SL600s are no longer \$1500 or \$2000 per pair. You can usually find a used pair of SL600s in decent condition for as little as \$300 or \$400 per pair. You will probably be hard-pressed to find a speaker anywhere near that price range that offers the SL600's combination of imaging, soundstaging, and grain-free treble.

If your listening room is small and you have some power at your disposal, this is a very reasonably priced way to get great sound.

At these prices, you may even search for a pair of SL700s or SL700SEs, which offer much more refinement and bass performance in a similar enclosure. I recently saw a used set of SL700ES speakers selling for \$800, which qualifies as a super-bargain in my book.

If you ever considered the SL600s during their production run and thought the price/performance ratio was just a touch out of balance, now is the time to revisit this truly classic monitor. It has stood the test of time very well. ●

The B&W Zeppelin

By Jeff Dorgay

The quandary we've had was to put the Zeppelin in the iPod section of our website or review it as a regular hifi component. After spending quite a bit of time with it, we've all come away with the same conclusion: this is so much more than a fancy set of iPod speakers with a dock, it's really a high performance portable audio system. You can add another digital component via the combined digital/optical input jack, just like the ones on an Apple Power Book. For iPod Video users, there is an S-Video out, so you can place your Zeppelin right below a plasma screen and watch your favorite episode of Desperate Housewives with amazing sound quality!

This is so much more than a fancy set of iPod speakers with a dock, it's really a high performance portable audio system.



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I don't know how B&W is making a penny on these. With the retail price at \$599, the Zeppelin is more than an exceptional value; it might be the hi-fi deal of all time. Where else can you get a pair of 2-way powered B&W speakers with a powered sub in a package like this for such a low price? The demand for these is so high, I couldn't even buy the review sample! They are selling every one they can get their hands on and I know everyone who got one of these under the Christmas tree freaked out.

I had to do this review in stealth mode the minute I found out I couldn't get one for my daughter in time for Christmas...

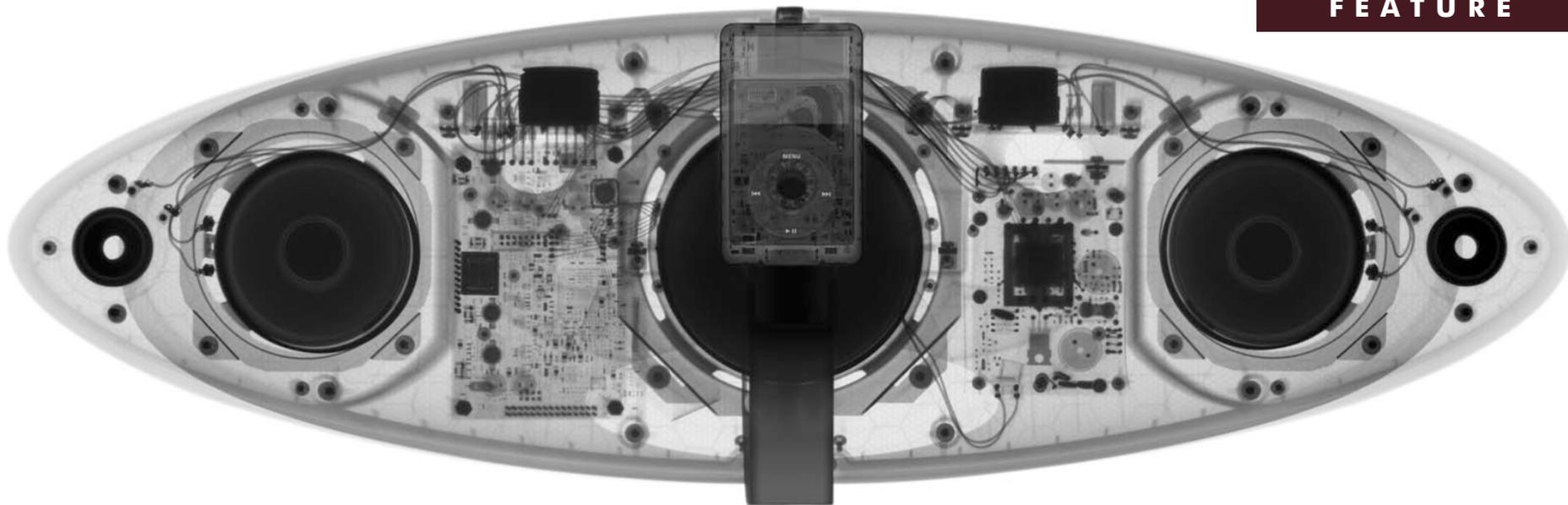
Tech Stuff

As I said, the Zeppelin uses a pair of 3 1/2" glass fiber midrange drivers along with a pair of dome tweeters that are claimed to be very similar to the ones in B&W's legendary 800 series. Each individual mid-range/tweeter combination has its own 25 watt amplifier. Bringing up the bottom is a 5-inch bass driver with a 50-watt amplifier, so this system has a total power of 100 watts! You can find more information at:

www.bowers-wilkins.com/display.aspx?inid=2466

This will give you the complete story of the engineering behind the Zeppelin as well as some great photos.

The Zeppelin is definitely a case of where a picture isn't worth a thousand words. The photos don't tell you is what a substantial piece of hardware this is. When I first unboxed the Zeppelin I was not prepared for how well this is built and how heavy it was! Again, this is not an entry-level piece of gear that's been jobbed out to meet a price point. *(continued)*



The Zeppelin is built to the same high level of fit and finish that B&W's flagship products possess.

The Zeppelin plugs into a standard AC outlet and uses a two-prong AC cord, so it does not have an IEC jack. Just to go over the top, I used an ICE Cube adapter and plugged in a new Shunyata Helix Alpha/VX power cord. This \$1600 accessory takes the Zeppelin a bit out of the "budget hifi" column but it did allow it to be all it can be. Spectacular. For the rest of you with a more level head, rest assured, the Zeppelin sounds fantastic with the stock power cord as well.

The Sound

The comparison to the 800 series is a great one. I just happen to have a pair of B&W 805S speakers in my living room, powered by a stack of Classe components

and there is more than a slight family resemblance going on, especially in the tonality department. For those of you that have B&W speakers somewhere else in your home you can now take it with you. I'd seriously consider having a lined road case built, so I could take one of these with me wherever I go! (That is if there is ever one in the store to purchase!)

With the big connection between B&W and Abbey Road Studios, it just seemed right to make the first thing I played on the Zeppelin a Beatles song; Eleanor Rigby to be precise and the violins sounded fantastic, the timbre was spot on. This is serious hifi.

B&W claims that the Zeppelin is down 6 db at 47hz and 22khz. I imported my

Stereophile test disc into my iPod and ran a low frequency sweep. Without actually measuring it, I can't completely verify this, but the output on the 50hz track was very strong, with some output at 40hz still, so I'd bet they are right on the money. Listening to some of my favorite discs by Tosca, Kruder & Dorfmeister and

Mickey Hart, the Zeppelin has plenty of bass that not only has good extension, but good texture and definition.

The biggest compliment I can give the Zeppelin is that when using uncompressed tracks, this system sounds like you are listening to at least a couple thousand dollars worth of gear. Thanks to that long, Zeppelin shape, the tweeters are far enough apart to give you a very good stereo image. *(continued)*

Thanks to that long, Zeppelin shape, the tweeters are far enough apart to give you a very good stereo image.



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Highs are extended, possessing plenty of detail, but not crunchy. Listening to acoustic instruments was very pleasant and never fatiguing. I felt that there was a lot of air and texture that again was way beyond what I'd expect for this price. The only bad news is that the Zeppelin has more than enough resolution to reveal the difference between compressed and non-compressed tracks with ease. I suspect many iPod users will have a new music experience should they re-rip some tracks in Apple Lossless format or uncompressed.



Conclusion

Usually when someone asks me to suggest a hifi system under a thousand dollars I want to take a shower, because I always feel terrible about what I've suggested. No more, the B&W Zeppelin is a wonderful piece of gear that I have already happily suggested to more than one friend. I am also very happy to give the Zeppelin one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2008.

The Zeppelin does it all. It's well built from a company you know and trust. Its design is stunning, fits anywhere and only requires one power cord to make it work. Best of all, the sound quality is phenomenal and should put a smile on the face of even the fussiest audiophile. There is no better accessory for the iPod than the Zeppelin if you want an all inclusive system. ●

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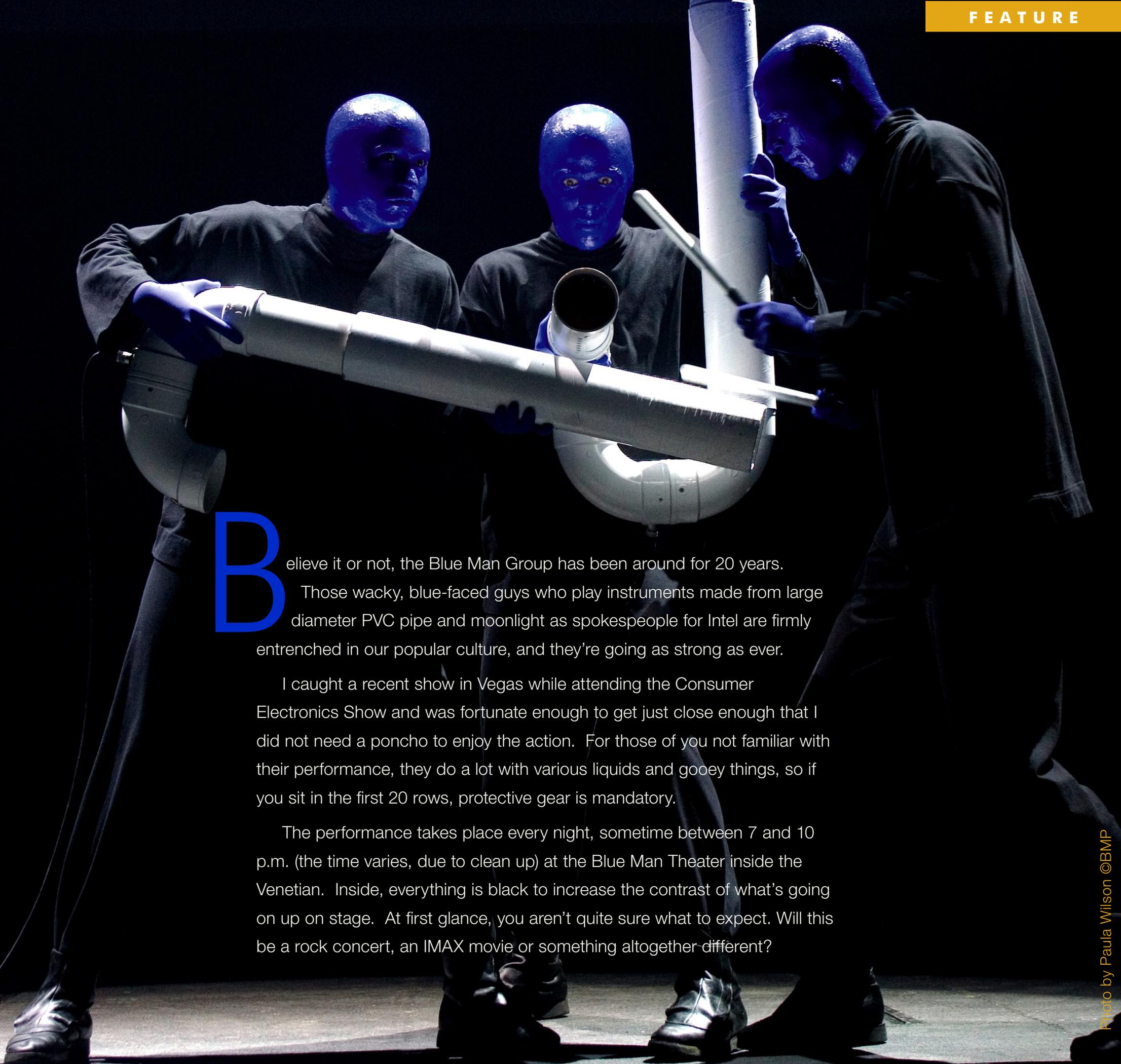


Be Sure to Bring Your Poncho!

THE BLUE MAN GROUP

Las Vegas, January 8, 2008

By Jeff Dorgay



Believe it or not, the Blue Man Group has been around for 20 years. Those wacky, blue-faced guys who play instruments made from large diameter PVC pipe and moonlight as spokespeople for Intel are firmly entrenched in our popular culture, and they're going as strong as ever.

I caught a recent show in Vegas while attending the Consumer Electronics Show and was fortunate enough to get just close enough that I did not need a poncho to enjoy the action. For those of you not familiar with their performance, they do a lot with various liquids and gooey things, so if you sit in the first 20 rows, protective gear is mandatory.

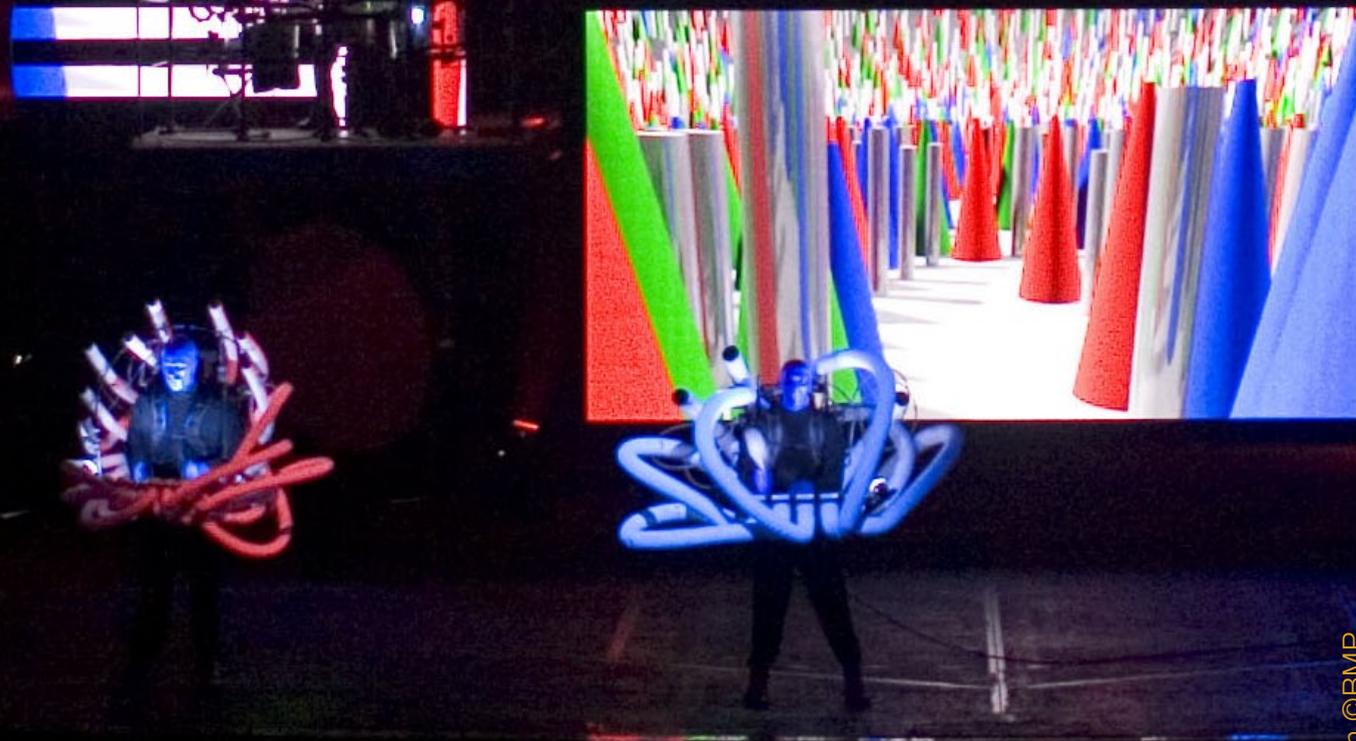
The performance takes place every night, sometime between 7 and 10 p.m. (the time varies, due to clean up) at the Blue Man Theater inside the Venetian. Inside, everything is black to increase the contrast of what's going on up on stage. At first glance, you aren't quite sure what to expect. Will this be a rock concert, an IMAX movie or something altogether different?

Reality Is Somewhere In Between

On my evening there, the Blue Man Group takes the stage at 8, and out of the blackness, four modules that are somewhat like giant Hollywood Squares painted in fluorescent colors come alive like a black light painting in a 60's freak-out room. They are filled with guitarists, drummers and percussionists dressed in costumes reminiscent of the movie *TRON*.

From the minute your blue hosts hit the stage, you are in for a treat. Their two-hour performance mixes music with improvisational theater, along with a bit of juggling and a good deal of audience participation and when they jump off stage, walk up the rows of seats and stalk the crowd, it's a little creepy – yet exciting at the same time.

Although the BMG seem to work off a loose outline, one of their fans told me, after the show, that they improvise enough that every show is a unique performance, except for the need for ponchos. You will get soaked if you sit in the front, every single night. *(continued)*



Heavy On The Drums

The Blue Men still make use of their cool PVC pipe instruments that have been their trademark, but the show is heavily percussion-oriented. They add a great touch to their own drumming by pouring colored liquid on their drums while playing.

The music is a mix between techno and Mickey Hart's *At The Edge*, with some screaming guitars and a few keyboards thrown in. At one point the Blue Men roll out a giant bass drum that is about 8 feet in diameter and pound away.

Between the Blue Men and the four cubicles of additional musicians, there are about 25 people performing at one time. And I thought the Grateful Dead had a lot of drummers! Wow.

A Thrill A Minute

But if this was just a bunch of guys in blue face paint doing techno rock, they wouldn't still be packing the house after 20 years. With all of the fun improv they do, mixed with their intriguing form of music, the two hours zoom right by. Seeing the Blue Man Group was the highlight of my week at the CES show. I won't spoil the ending for you; it has to be experienced. There are BMG shows around the country, and you can find their schedule at www.bluman.com.

Matthew Banks, the director of the Blue Man Group in Las Vegas, answered a few questions about the show:

When did the Blue Man Group first start performing?

It seems like the Blue Man Group have always been; I can't imagine the world without them! We opened off Broadway in New York in 1988 and quickly became the humorous and profound voice reflecting our ever-changing cultural landscape.

Where did the original concept come from?

Chris Wink, Matt Goldman and Phil Stanton are the original three blue men and founders of Blue Man Group. They liked to get bald and blue and go out onto the streets of New York City to see what would happen. Passersby would get excited and curious, which was the catalyst to reach as many people as possible.

(continued)



How did they get their big break to stardom?

There was no sudden outbreak to stardom. Opening in Vegas was a huge landmark which brought Blue Man Group to the West Coast and closer to an international audience than ever before. Having a Grammy-nominated album put BMG on the music industry map and inspired a second album. That's where our more theatrical and rock concert content stemmed from.

What brought them to Vegas?

BMG started in New York City, where we still have a running off-Broadway show. We hopscotched our way across the country from Boston (still running) to Chicago (also still running) and finally Vegas.

How many actual Blue Men are there now, with the tours and various productions?

Almost 70, spanning from Tokyo to Las Vegas.

Do the original three ever make surprise appearances, or are we always seeing second generation Blue Men?

Chris, Matt and Phil are everywhere: TV specials, ads, billboards but you won't see them perform in current productions. They are behind the scenes writing, creating and masterminding their company's future.

I have to believe it's a lot more fun being a Blue Man than working in a cube at Microsoft. Is being a Blue Man a full time job, or a part time gig?

It is a full time job. However, you may see some of us around town playing in bands or sketching up comedy, but you'll never know who we are unless we tell you.

The Pentium ads were very cool. Any chance we will see the Blue Man Group endorsing any other interesting products in the near future?

We were psyched with the Pentium ads, too. We had a lot of fun with those; full creative control and we were very excited to reach so many people at once. We have an international Swatch watch campaign – cool images on cool watches!

Are they called the Bleu Man Group when they perform in France?

In France they are called "groupe bleu d'homme." *(continued)*



If I wanted to be a Blue Man, how would I approach the group? Do you hold regular auditions?

Bluemancasting.com is an awesome Web site to learn about the Blue Men and what it takes to be one, and to find out when and where our next auditions will be. We hold auditions internationally all the time.

What are the main qualifications to be a Blue Man? How long does one have to train once they get the job?

We look for actor/musicians (drummers) who are around the 6 foot range, with an athletic build, and who are willing to catch things in their mouth. It takes about six weeks to train into a show, and from there we dive deeper and deeper into the challenging, fun, egoless, hypersensitive, curious shaman-like hero, Blue Man.

How long does the average Blue Man stay part of the group?

Anywhere from 3–17 years on average. ;)

Do the guys in the backup band ever take turns at being Blue Men, or are the roles cast in stone?

The fourth Blue Man after Chris, Matt and Phil was a sub drummer in the band at the time and is now the Company's Senior Performing Director: Chris Bowen. That is the only time a band member was hired to be a bluemans until right now as you read this one of our drummers is training in New York to be a Blue Man.

How often do you change the stage show?

Because the show is so heavily improv-based, it can seem very different from night to night, as our super fans attest. The larger pieces in the show may change out after a year or so, while there are some signature pieces we just can't do without.

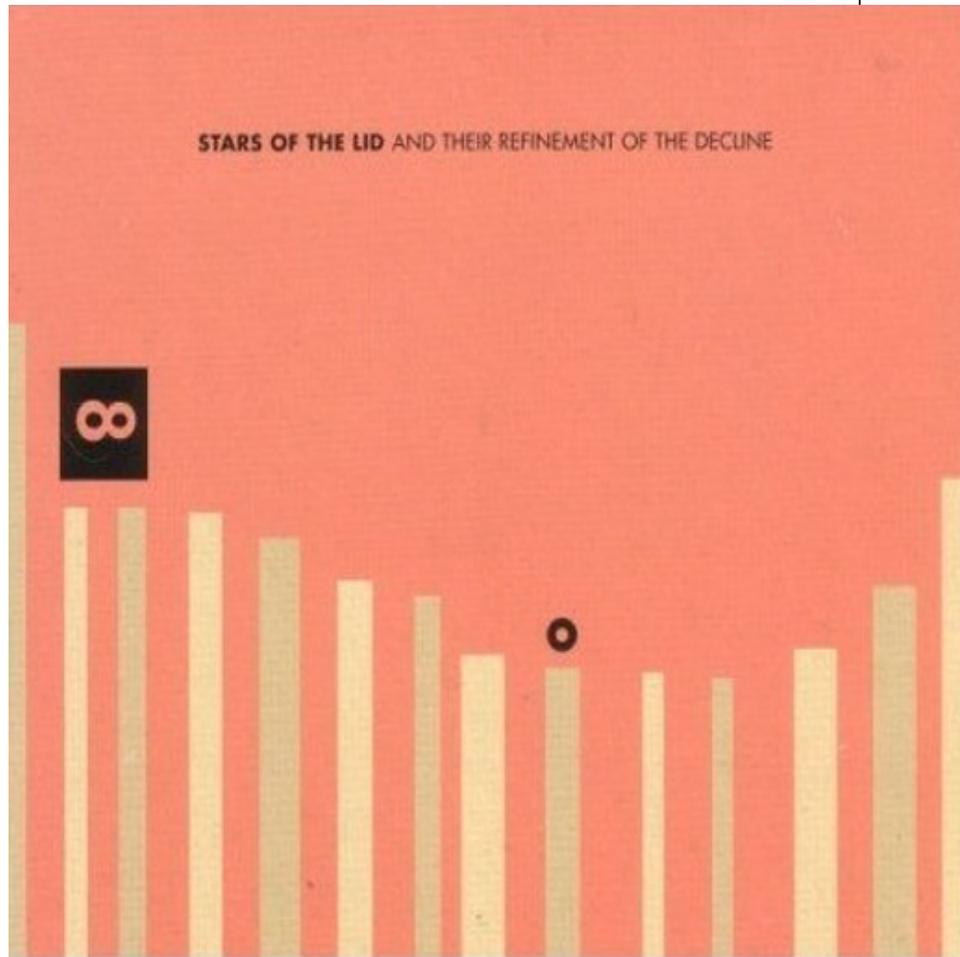
Your Web site says the Blue Men need one hour to get made up for the show. How long does it take to return to being a normal human after the show?

About the same time. There's a lot more teeth brushing and nose blowing at the end, though. ●



Current Releases

By Marc Phillips, Jeff Dorgay and Terry Currier



I'm hoping that there's still a place for this type of ambient music in today's beat-driven, strobe-flashing world. This album is a gentle, electronic oasis.

Stars Of The Lid

And Their Refinement of the Decline
CD and LP, Kranky Records

Stars of the Lid creates the type of electronic music that first attracted me to the genre 25 years ago, when Klaus Schulze and Tangerine Dream were considered ground-breaking artists, and the radio program *Music from the Hearts of Space* was part of the musical vanguard. Their music is more concerned with ebb and flow than beats, with gently undulating musical swells that are simultaneously hypnotic and thrilling. They still bring something contemporary to the proceedings with a lean and streamlined quality that reminds you that we're in the 21st century. I doubt that Schulze would have come up with song titles like "December Hunting for Vegetarian Fuckface" or "That Finger On Your Temple Is the Barrel of My Raygun."

Despite those jarring titles, the music is beautiful. In their first release since 2001's *The Tired Sounds of Stars of the Lid*, members Brian McBride and Adam Wiltzie evoke some of Brian Eno's pioneering ambient work, using synthesizers and string instruments to create something more alive and intricate than a drone, yet dreamy enough to whisk you away after a two-hour commute from the office. While casual listening may yield nothing more than a passing interest in what the duo is trying to accomplish, listening with a decent pair of headphones just might reveal the secrets of the universe.

And Their Refinement of the Decline is a generous chunk of music, available in either a two-CD or three-LP set. If this collection seems a bit repetitive at first, try a couple of tracks at a time so you can slowly digest the music. You've got time, since, at their current rate of production, the next Stars of the Lid record will probably be out around 2013.

I'm hoping that there's still a place for this type of ambient music in today's beat-driven, strobe-flashing world. This album is a gentle, electronic oasis.



Burial

Untrue

CD, Hyperdub Records

I was unaware of the dubstep genre of music until I listened to Burial's new album, *Untrue*, for the first time.

Dubstep has emerged from the London club scene in the last few years, combining a dark, dense and pessimistic sound with samples of reggae, metal and classical music. Dubstep also emphasizes bass, as in deep, deep mofo bass. I first heard *Untrue* in my car and had to eject the CD because the doors were rattling so badly.

If you are not aware of Burial, you're not alone. Shrouded in the secrecy of London's club scene, his true identity is known by few humans. This adds to the mysterious, shadowy feel of the album, and makes you wonder how long someone can receive this sort of acclaim before stepping up to the podium and proclaiming, "I'm responsible." Even if you aren't into most types of DJ music, you may find that *Untrue* will haunt you with its almost post-apocalyptic reach. If you're into minor chord progressions, you'll be in dub heaven.

The jittery and hollow beats that permeate the album are referred to as "grime" in the dubstep scene, serving as a tentative footing to the passing of the gloom in the record. Further research into the genre reveals a fairly rigid structure, and it doesn't take much (a single ray of sunshine, perhaps) to turn it into something else. These simple beats are what make Burial's vision, and it's why he's heralded by many in the scene as a new direction.

Dubstep has emerged from the London club scene in the last few years, combining a dark, dense and pessimistic sound with samples of reggae, metal and classical music.



Nick Cave and Warren Ellis

The Assassination of Jesse James

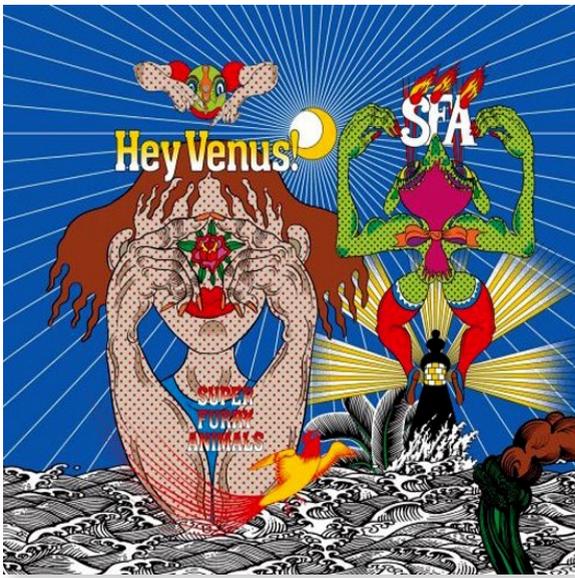
by the Coward Robert Ford

CD, EMI

Nick Cave's rich, brooding soundtrack for *The Assassination of Jesse James* is something of a revelation. With Warren Ellis (a multi-instrumentalist who has worked with Cave since the mid 1990s) alongside, this is Cave's first original film score, and it is promising. You can add him to the list of rock musicians who have found a niche in composing film soundtracks as their stage-prancing days wind down.

This soundtrack is very intimate, with the focus on piano, Ellis' deep and resonant violin, and a fairly reticent string section. "Carnival" betrays Cave's rock roots, with an electric guitar and bass carrying the main theme, keeping in line with the earthy feel of the score.

The absence of the obligatory bluegrass flourishes that seem to be so popular in the last couple of years, frees this soundtrack of cliché. Ellis' violin is almost always front and center, but make no mistake, there is no fiddling going on here. This music is simple and direct, and full of emotion. It takes you back to the open prairie and the sudden outbursts of violence that marked the Old West. So far, this is my favorite original score of the year.



Super Furry Animals

Hey Venus!

CD, Rough Trade Records

The Super Furry Animals have tightened all the nuts and bolts to give us their most succinct performance in years. Sunnier than their last two albums, and more focused and consistent than 2005's *Love Kraft*, *Hey Venus!* borrows heavily from the past, alternating between sweet-natured psychedelia and power pop. It's more textured and surreal than the Lovin' Spoonful, yet more wistful than Moby Grape. On the intro to "The Gift That Keeps Giving," you might even hear a touch of the Del-fonics, not to mention the patter of white suede loafers on the stage. Throughout the record they bounce all over the place stylistically, but manage to keep it fresh.

One look at the cover, with its goofy cartoon aliens and retro graphics, and you'll know that this is not meant to be serious fare, but rather a naked run through a corn field while UFOs fly overhead. Songs like "Carbon Dating" (which does not seem to be about either dating or archeology) or "Suckers!" are deliriously playful, while "Baby Ate My Eightball" and "Into the Night" have more of a sinister momentum that will put you in the mood for a great '50s sci-fi film, such as *I Married a Monster from Outer Space* or even *The Blob*. If you think lyrics such as "This song is a gateway song/Why don't you sing along" are inane, then you're missing the point. *(continued)*

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Hey Venus! was originally intended as a concept album, and while the press info states that the band dropped the idea after deciding to focus on the strength and intricacy of each song, it's clear that the theme remains. This may be the silliest and most fascinating album about alien abductions and Area 51- inspired paranoia since the Pixies' *Trompe Le Monde*. If you're trying to forget about what's going on in the world, and the latest adventures of Britney and Paris aren't cutting it anymore, give this one a spin.



The Helio Sequence

Keep Your Eyes Ahead
CD, Sub Pop

This is the fourth release from the Beaverton, Oregon duo of Brandon Summers and Benjamin Weikel, who have long mated a somewhat whimsical electronic sound to shimmering guitars that seem to have come from the thick of the British Invasion. They are often compared to The Walkmen, and, in these tunes, you might also hear shades of Modest Mouse. This would not be a surprise, since Weikel was the drummer on *Good News for People Who Love Bad News*.

When lead singer Summers lost his voice while touring for 2004's *Love and Distance*, The Helio Sequence almost didn't get a chance to cut a fourth album. When copious amounts of whiskey didn't help, he resorted to a strict regimen of Throat Coat tea, jogging, silence and Bob Dylan. The singer actually regained his voice by learning the entire Zimmerman catalog, which was relatively easy on his vocal chords.

And while his voice may not quite reach the scales he hit regularly on the first two albums, the result is a more sedate and controlled album, which focuses on tighter pop song structures and Summers' ability to vary the moods of his guitar.

When Summers breaks out the acoustic guitar, he may be paying homage to Dylan, but only in the context of the band's more modern sensibilities. As long as Weikel interjects a spacey electronic counterpoint, the music retains its sparkle and eludes any folkish pretenses. Even in the closing song, "No Regrets," in which the duo assumes a wallowing, bluesy growl that might make even Tom Waits ask for another take, the impression is that this is merely an entertaining document of Summers' vocal tribulations. But a bright, optimistic and guitar-driven sound is what The Helio Sequence is best at producing, and there's plenty enough of it here.



Swati

Small Gods
CD, Bluhammock

Using a twelve-string guitar that has been pared down to eight, with open tunings a la Joni Mitchell, the Manhattan-based singer-songwriter Swati creates a very distinctive and percussive sound on her debut album, *Small Gods*. Swati (which is Hindu for "birth of a star" and the name of an influential Pakistani tribe) proves to be a pretty amazing guitarist, as she uses pedal effects to achieve a fairly complex sound. *(continued)*

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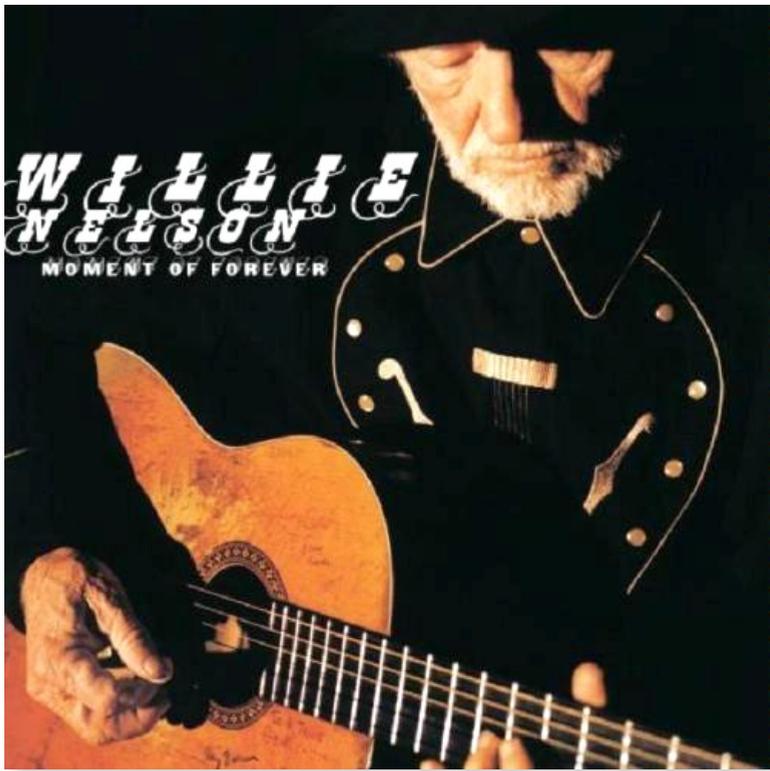
Swati's eastern influences keep her from being lumped in with other female singer-songwriters.

At times her impassioned and improvised picking resembles an Indian *raga*, and other times she retreats into more traditional folk cadences. Then, out of nowhere, she extracts a sound that will make you wonder if she picked up another musical instrument altogether.

With open, clear vocals that sound like a cross between Ani DiFranco and Suzanne Vega, with a dash of *Guyville*-era Liz Phair, Swati isn't following the usual cute-girl-with-a-guitar mold that permeates the adult-alternative scene.

On the song "MF" (the parental warning on the cover should tell you what *that* stands for), Swati bends the strings until she retrieves a guttural sound that almost sounds like it's from a '70s porno. She then repeats that dreaded twelve-letter word in the chorus until she can only utter, "I'm exhausted...I'm exhausted." The effect, however, is exhilarating.

Swati isn't afraid of – and has the chops for – the occasional guitar solo. But she also lets her talent come through in the album's quieter moments, such as on her cover of Springsteen's "I'm on Fire." By dwelling on the lower notes of her guitar to convey sadness and regret, this version can certainly be held up to the original. There isn't a slow spot or weak song on *Small Gods*.



Willie Nelson

Moment of Forever
CD, Lost Highway

Wait...is that The Edge playing the opening guitar notes of the new Willie Nelson album, or has Willie been getting toasted and listening to *The Unforgettable Fire* again? And what about this "Bob" song, in which he sings, "I once knew a pirate named Bob/B-O-B Bob he was a drunken slob"? Sounds like an outtake from a Primus album. And what about this band that's backing him? Is it...a *hard rock band*? Is *Moment of Forever* Willie Nelson's hard rock album?

Not Quite. But the Red-Headed Stranger, at the age of 74, has put together one of the most rock-oriented album of his storied career, and it's a bit of a surprise because it works so well. Willie is still quite faithful to Trigger, his equally legendary acoustic guitar, and he still reaches back into his past to pull out some country-tinged gems, such as "Keep Me From Blowing Away," Randy Newman's "Louisiana," and the quiet and reflective title track. But the album leans heavily toward hard-driving rock with the first single, "Gravedigger," as well as opener, "Over You Again." On "Taking On Water," Willie brings in a horn section so funky that I thought he was going to start singing a duet with George Clinton.

Willie does sing a duet with Kenny Chesney, who produced the album with Buddy Cannon. "Worry B Gone," however, is a slight tune that really doesn't reflect the inspiration the two had for working together. If anything, Chesney's voice grounds the album back into the world of country music, and underlines just how easily Willie can move from genre to genre, especially in comparison to his younger colleague. But by the end of this album, Willie does shift the scales back toward his roots, as if to say, "You've let me have my fun...now it's time to get back to business." As long as Nelson continues to explore different types of music, there's hope for the kids. I'll bet Chesney had the time of his life working with Willie.

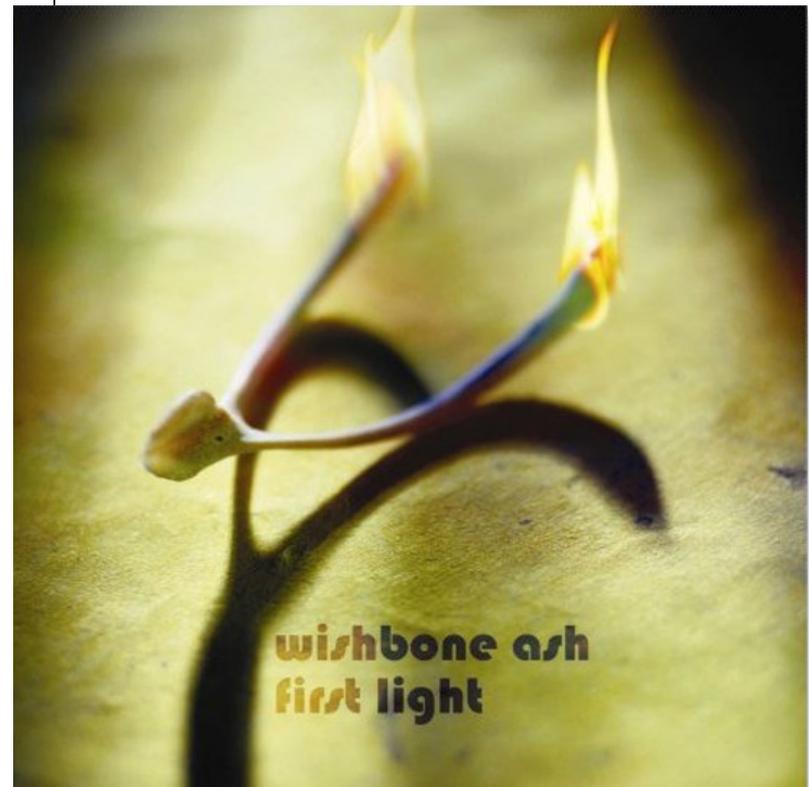
Wishbone Ash

First Light
CD, Sanctuary Records

Remember, without Wishbone Ash, there would have been no Iron Maiden.

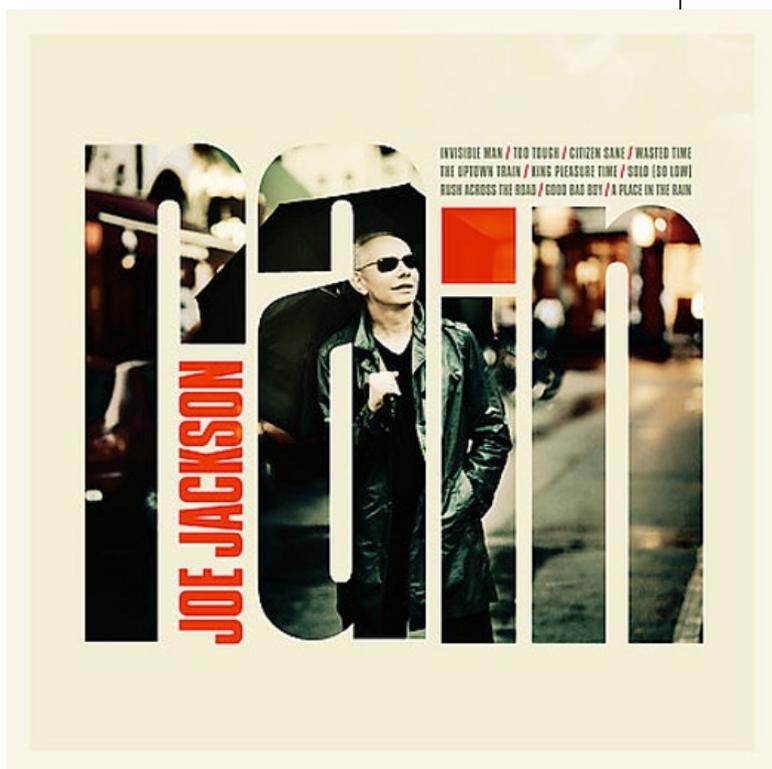
Though the current lineup only consists of one-fourth of the original Wishbone Ash lineup, guitarist Andy Powell, *First Light* is remarkably true to its roots. I'm a sucker for early 70's bands with two lead guitarists, and if you would like to track the variations on this theme, just click here for the full family tree of Wishbone Ash. http://www.wishboneash.com/band_familytree.asp

With a bluesy, jam band feel, *First Light* doesn't take any chances or break any new ground. But if you went to Wishbone Ash shows in the '70s and held up a lighter for those guys, this disc will put a smile on your face.



Joe Jackson*Rain*

CD, Rykodisc



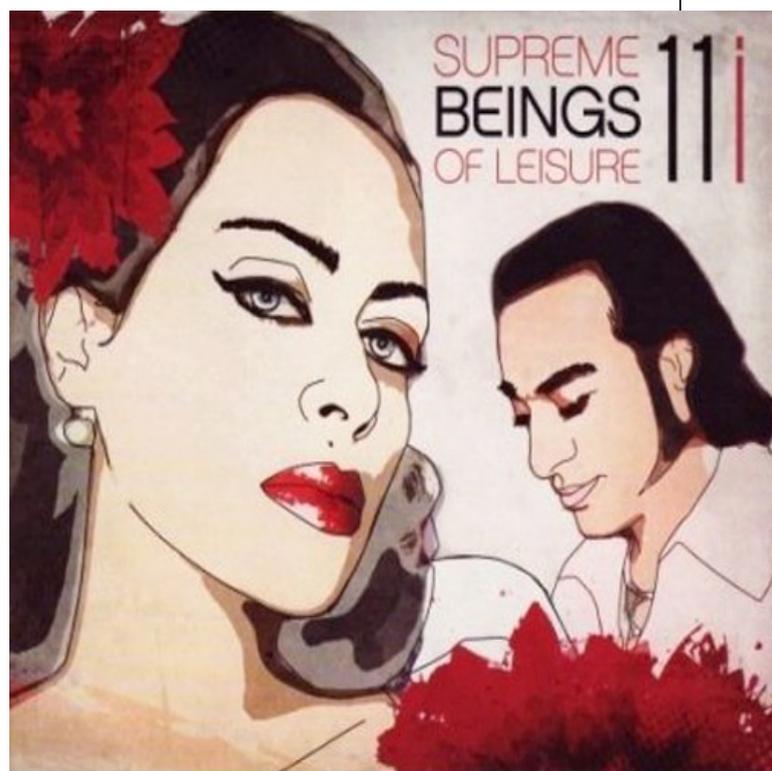
A few bars into *Rain*, I felt as if I had found the long missing second disc of *Night and Day* – the unplugged side. This disc features the tunes that Jackson has been playing in his live shows for the last couple of years accompanied by Graham Maby on bass and Dave Houghton, who have been with him forever. Incidentally, they also played on *Volume 4*, released in 2003, which also has a similar flavor.

The disc is exquisitely recorded and produced with all the arrangements stripped to the bone, just piano, bass and drums. It's not completely unplugged, but there's just enough studio embellishment to give this record a very full sound. The record has very rich feel throughout.

While *Night and Day* had more of a Latin feel to many of the tracks, *Rain* has much more of a straight-ahead jazz groove. A quick perusal of Jackson's Web site (www.joejackson.com) confirms that he's been listening to a lot of Blue Note records over the years. If you go straight to "The Uptown Train," you would swear he's channeling Ramsey Lewis. He also offers up some great falsetto work that would put Dave Matthews to shame. Pretty damn good for an older guy. "King Pleasure Time" pays homage to very early Joe Jackson tunes and has a solid "Look Sharp" feel that should bring a smile to long-time fans.

Jackson says that these are some of the best songs he's ever written and I would have to agree. His piano playing is awfully tasty, too, and it seems like he hand picked every note. This is one of the most fun records I've listened to in quite a while. It has such a timeless feel.

Also enclosed is a bonus DVD that includes a couple of tracks from the current tour and an interview with Jackson.

**Supreme Beings of Leisure***11i*

CD, Ryko

It's been almost six years since the last Supreme Beings of Leisure album, but listening to *11i*, we pick right back up where the L.A. duo left off. The first two albums were heavy electronica mixed with the edgy, processed vocals of Geri Soriano-Lightwood, with a layered effect.

This disc has a more open, spacey, yet more sultry feel than those two discs. Track three, "Mirror," is reminiscent of "Last Girl on Earth" from their first effort. When Soriano-Lightwood sings, "You desire things you can't acquire, if only you could buy it, you know you've got to try it – that's how they sell you," I'm hooked, and just want to light a stack of hundred dollar bills on fire. Same with track five, "Good." When she says that she'll be good – tomorrow, you want to believe her.

While the first two SBL discs were somewhat compressed and harsh, *11i* has a big, open, ethereal sound. There are a lot of great scratches and electronic effects sprinkled in very tastefully throughout the record. I'm putting this one at the top of my list of party favorites. ●



**The Mingus Big Band, Live!
The Iridium Jazz Club**

By Tom Caselli

When the book is finally closed on the greatest composers of the 20th Century, I'm confident that Charles Mingus will be included with the likes of Stravinsky, Ives, Ellington and Gershwin. Since the years following his death in 1979, at age 56, his legend has continued to grow, not only as an amazing band leader and interpreter of contemporary songwriters, but as a composer of a magnificent body of work for large scale bands.



The jazz world owes a debt of gratitude to Sue Mingus for keeping the music of her husband in the public's mind. Thanks to her, the music of Charles Mingus and Eric Dolphy continues to attract new (and younger) audiences, primarily through the performances of the Charles Mingus Big Band, which performs every Tuesday night at the Iridium Jazz Club in New York City. They also tour occasionally; for details, check their Web site, www.mingusmingusmingus.com

I had the great pleasure of attending a recent performance of the Charles Mingus Big Band. The Iridium is a very intimate club in the heart of Manhattan's theater district. Under Sue's direction, the Big Band is a group of some of New York's best jazz musicians.

The power of a 14-piece band in a small club setting is an eye-opening as well as an auditory experience, and it's intensified by the musicians' obvious camaraderie, as they fed off of each other. I was just as impressed by the audience, which was a mix of college students, 20-something professionals and older jazz aficionados.

Alto sax and flutist Craig Handy performed double duty as stage band director and master of ceremonies, introducing each selection along with its soloists. His exuberant personality often made the audience a part of the show.

The Big Band opened with "Love Chant," and the interplay between Wayne Escoffery, a renowned tenor sax player in the New York area and Conrad Herwig on trombone was invigorating. This was followed by "Reincarnation of a Love Bird," a Charlie Parker tribute. This is one of my favorite Mingus tunes, and I thought it might be hard to surpass the version recorded by Mingus and his band live in Paris in 1970, but the minute the trumpet section kicked in, my fears were laid to rest.

Next up was "Sweet Sucker Dance," a ballad that featured young tenor saxophonist Seamus Blake, who took the piece at a slow, sexy tempo reminiscent of Gerry Mulligan. Each note became liquid and hung in the air for us to savor.

I was unfamiliar with the next selection, titled "Pinky." Part of a magnum opus from the 60's comprised of 26 movements and lasting more than three hours, it was performed last year as part of the "Jazz at Lincoln Center" concert series. Apparently it still remains unrecorded. Craig Handy said that if there were any millionaires in attendance who would like to aid in documenting this historic piece, they should come forward. *(continued)*

The power of a 14-piece band in a small club setting is an eye-opening as well as an auditory experience...

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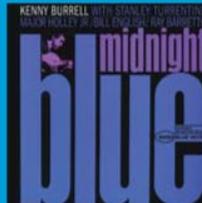
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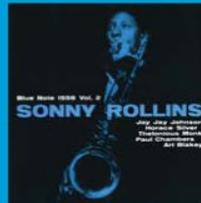
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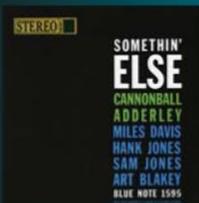
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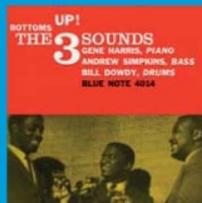
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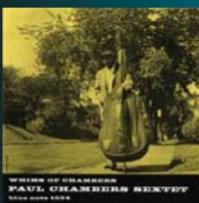
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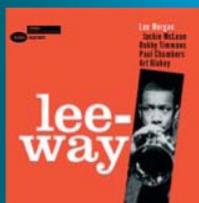
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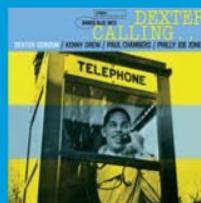
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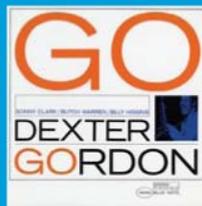
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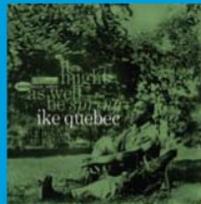
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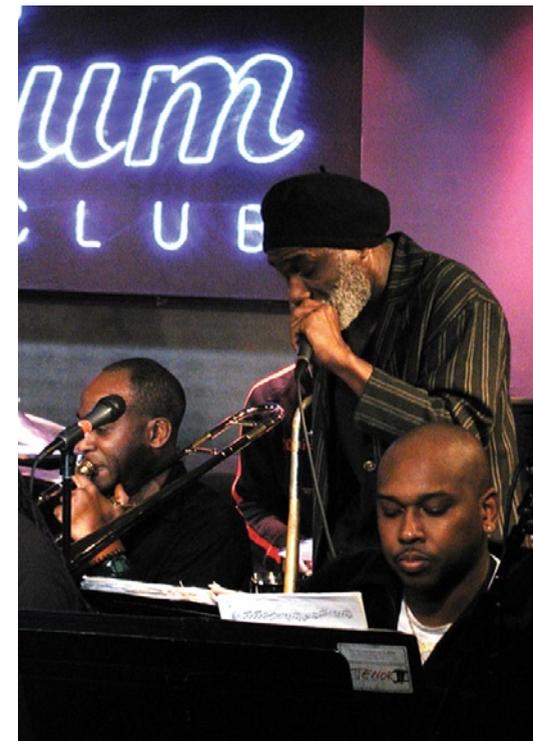
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The evening's performance concluded with "Ysabel's Table Dance," a song from an album that Mingus considered his best, *Tijuana Moods*, featuring some wonderful trombone work from Conrad Hedwig. I'd like to give special mention to David Kikoski, "The Professor," who is one of the finest unsung players that I've heard in a long time. This evening, he played with the dexterity of Art Tatum and the timing of Monk. You can read more about him at www.davidkikoski.com

Seeing the Charles Mingus Big Band perform was one of the top jazz performances I have experienced in a long time. If the music of Mingus is at the top of your list, make the Iridium lounge your first stop in New York City. ●

Photos courtesy of Mingus Big Band Web site.





MORE THAN ZERO:

LFD Integrated Zero LE Mark III

By Marc Phillips

“What a lovely, pastel-sounding amplifier.”

As an audio reviewer, I try to avoid some of the more flamboyant descriptions employed by some of my journalistic brethren. Old vintage Scott amps, for instance, do not sound chocolaty and Yamamoto Sound Craft SETs are not citrusy. I'm not quite sure if a phono cartridge can sound woody, even if it is made from wood. If a tree falls in the forest, and an audiophile is there to hear it, will it sound woody? I doubt it.

But when a noted cable manufacturer visited me at my home in LA a couple of years ago, he used the term “pastel” to describe my LFD Mistral integrated amplifier. And for a second, I knew exactly what he was talking about. The Mistral was certainly light, airy and expansive. It didn't have a vise-like grip on the bass (another common audiophile expression I haven't quite adopted), but it offered an almost impressionistic view of the music. If that makes the Mistral sound blurry and colored and lacking in detail, that's not my intention. The LFD could make music shimmer and glow; I loved it for the three years I owned it.

I do regret selling it those many years ago. But honestly, I felt guilty for using an \$1100 integrated amplifier with a \$10,000 analog front end, and knew I had to make a few upgrades if I wanted to be taken more seriously as some sort of an audio authority. I had a feeling I was making a mistake, however, when I sold the Mistral for nearly as much as I had bought it, thanks to a bidding war on Audiogon. I should have kept it for my bedroom system. I'm sure I'd still be happy with it.

In fact, I tried about five or six amps in quick succession after I sold the LFD, and none of them made the cut. I tried vintage tubed integrats, solid state separates and tubed separates. It wasn't until I had settled on my Yamamoto Sound Craft A-08S 45 amplifier and the CA-03L preamplifier that I knew I had finally surpassed the sound of the LFD...at roughly seven times the cost, of course. For whatever reason, LFD seemed to drop off the map within a few months after I sold the Mistral and it slowly faded from my memory.

It's Back!

I had almost forgotten completely about LFD and the Mistral when I heard from Gene Rubin, my favorite audio dealer in Southern California. Gene has always had great taste and has made me aware of quite a few “off the beaten path” things that I might not have investigated, especially the Mistral.

I must say I was pretty excited to hear that LFD was back with a successor to the Mistral and that the only reason the company faded away for a while was a bit of a parts scarcity to build new units, though service and repairs were always available. The price is \$2695 (a few lucky owners scooped up the Zero at an introductory price of \$2195!)

LFD, by the way, is the brainchild of Dr. Richard Bews, and professor Malcolm Omar Hawksford, who have developed a loyal following among British audiophiles and engineers for decades. The secret to LFD gear has always been simplicity... simple circuitry, simple appearance and sound engineering. While my old Mistral was quite attractive in an understated way, especially with its trademark shiny gold knobs, it was a no-frills kind of British integrated, with a slim chassis, and relatively light weight.

More Than Zero...

Gene wound up shipping his personal amp for review, since he hasn't been able to keep them in stock. When it arrived, I was surprised to find that this wasn't an updated version of the Mistral, but of the LFD Integrated Zero, which was part of a higher line of electronics that was available primarily in the UK. *(continued)*

The new LFD Integrated Zero LE Mark III LE is a different animal inside and out. More substantial all around...



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It sort of looked like my Mistral... it was roughly the same size, and had the same three knobs in roughly the same locations and the same binding posts for the speakers as before.

The new LFD Integrated Zero LE Mark III LE is a different animal inside and out. More substantial all around, the stainless steel faceplate is much thicker and the control knobs are now made out of chrome plated steel. The essence of simplicity, it still lacks a remote but does offer a pair of tape in and tape out jacks, which is a rarity these days. There are five additional sets of RCA inputs.

When I had my original Mistral, I used the outboard LFD PhonoStage, which is still one of the finest \$700 phono stages I've heard. A new outboard phono stage is in the works to mate with the Zero, and it should cost just a bit more than the old PhonoStage. The previous design made you commit to MM or MC operation and could only be switched by your dealer. The new version will have a switch on the rear panel so now you can switch between cartridges with ease!

The Zero III LE is rated at 75 watts per channel, compared to 50 watts per channel for my old Mistral.

My speaker of choice for the Mistral was a pair of Spondor SP100's that had a 90db sensitivity and I never found myself wanting more volume. My current DeVore Gibbon Super 8's have the same sensitivity rating, offering plenty of dynamic range with this amplifier. *(continued)*

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What is the sound of zero hands clapping?

Although Gene had put a few hours on this unit before I got my grimy mitts on it, The Zero III still sounded unpromising out of the box. That pastel feeling came over me in a big way. The overall sound was slight, two-dimensional and very recessed, especially through the midrange. At this point, it was sounding fairly lightweight, but after a few days of constant play, it was a completely different beast.

Once warmed up, the Zero III had deep, authoritative bass with the lower registers smooth, round and deep, almost infinite. Playing my favorite bass test tracks revealed it was anything but pastel. The midrange was as lifelike and present as with the old Mistral, with a bit more immediacy, almost like a good 2A3 or 45 SET amp. And the highs were still airy and exhilarating, much clearer than I remembered the old amplifier being.

As the days went by, I really became smitten with this amplifier. I kept shaking my head at it, wondering how something so small and simple could sound so assertive and powerful. I told myself that if my original Mistral had sounded like this, I would have never sold it. Nor would I have apologized for its relatively low cost. Granted, the Zero III is two-and-a-half times more expensive than the Mistral. But the Zero III is every bit the bargain the original Mistral was, if not more so.

Complaints with the Zero III were few, both

pretty minor. The lack of a remote is a bit of a love/hate thing. Because I've become very used to having a remote around, I do wish the Zero had one, even if it just offered a simple volume and mute button. But perhaps a remote undermines the simplicity of an amp like this? I'm sure it would certainly undermine the price point, so for now manual volume it is.

Second, the RCA jacks on the back panel are a bit close together, making some heftier cables a bit of a tight fit. Not the end of the world, but something to investigate with your cables.

Call now...operators are waiting!

If I've made you curious about the Zero III, I suggest you get a hold of Gene at Gene Rubin Audio, or Walter at Fidelis A/V (who is actually the US distributor for LFD). Do it now. These are the only two sources for LFD products in the United States, and word is that this wonderful integrated will not be made in large quantities, or for an unlimited amount of time. LFD seems to be the type of company that makes a certain product for a few years, and moves on.

If you do wind up buying one, keep it. Don't sell it. Don't feel self-conscious about its relatively low cost in the context of the rest of your system. And if you're looking for a wonderful \$2700 integrated that will be the foundation of a relatively modest system, this is it. ●

Once warmed up, the Zero III had deep, authoritative bass with the lower registers smooth, round and deep, almost infinite.

RETURN OF A CLASSIC!

VSAC 2008

Vacuum State of the Art Conference

May 24-26
Vancouver, Washington USA

By Jeff Dorgay

Memorial Day weekend in Vancouver, Washington. Usually this time of year in my neighborhood is packed with plenty of fun things to do, because the good weather has kicked in for the long haul. A lot of people are getting outdoors and letting a bit of dust settle on their hifi system.

But not this year. On May 24-26 our city is the host to VSAC 2008. For those of you not familiar, it is the Vacuum State of the Art Conference and it's been off the radar for a few years. Thanks to the interest of Carolyn and Michael Kilfoil, Dan Schmalle (Doc B at Bottlehead) and a few others it's back on the front burner again.

If you missed VSAC shows past, this is somewhat of a hybrid event; it's not just rooms full of gear with vendors showing off their wares. Yes, there will be some of that, but quite a bit more. VSAC has always been heavily involved with the DIY crowd and people who like to build their own gear, but it really is a celebration of all things related to the vacuum tube.



They are going to have a number of seminars about how to build amplifiers and even an amplifier clinic, where they will show you how to measure your creation once it is done, reminiscent of the old McIntosh clinics. They have a seminar planned on room treatments and turntable setup too. If you are a hands-on audiophile, there will be a lot for you to see and do. Just click here for the complete list of seminars; I think you will be very impressed. www.vsac2008.com/seminar.html

Ticket prices range from \$20 for a one-day exhibits-only pass to a full three-day pass with access to all of the seminars, meals and live performances. The early bird special for everything is \$135 and will go to \$165 after March 15.

Did I say music? That's right. While all the techie stuff is cool, having five healthy doses of live music is what will really make this a special event. Jacqui Naylor will be performing at Sunday night's dinner to end the show, with Johnny B. Connolly (a button accordion player) on Friday night and John Standefer, a local musician that was the 2002 national finger-style guitar champion to perform Saturday night. Many of us audiophile types don't get to hear enough live music as a reference, so I think this will be a real treat for all that attend.

While Doc B. was one of the founding fathers of the VSAC show, it's been absent for a few years, because he's been so busy with Bottlehead and now Paul Stubblebine and The Tape Project. So thanks to Carolyn and Michael, this show will be back on track. Most importantly, these two are big music lovers and Michael is a tube lover extraordinaire.

I've spent a fair amount of time talking to them about the show and we will be having a room there to say hello to our readers as well. We hope you will drop by and say hello that weekend and have a great time while you are there. Just go to www.vsac2008.com for the dates, exhibits and registration information.

Here's a bit of the recent conversation I had with Michael and Carolyn that I think will give you a bit more perspective on the show:

What was the motivation for picking up the ball on the VSAC show in the first place?

My friends and I always loved VSAC, but it had some limitations. Dan Schmale from Bottlehead got it off the ground, but he was too busy with his business to continue the effort. Finally we started thinking, "Why don't we just do it? And here we are." (laughs). We really wanted to carry on the tradition, so Dan gave his blessing. *(continued)*



Photo by Oliver Heinemann

Jacqui Naylor will be performing at Sunday night's dinner.

Did you attend the last VSAC show, and many of the prior shows? How long of a tradition is this event?

Yes, I attended in 2001 and 2003. The first show was in 1997.

Just how much of a DIY tube guy are you?

Lets just say I have more than enough tubes to last for the rest of my life... I've always got a few projects going.

If this iteration of the show is successful, can we expect the trend to continue for further VSAC shows?

Definitely, but it has to remain an alternative kind of show, keeping in line with the feel that we've already established. I am hoping that it can continue and perhaps even be held in different cities in different years.

How has the registration been going so far?

Initial registration has been excellent, both with vendors and attendees; we've had a lot of interest so far.

Let's chat about the live music aspect of the show.

Yes, we will have something live to see every day, with five performances total. We feel it's a very important part of the show to have a live music experience. We see the live shows as something to cleanse your aural palette between events and bring us back to a reference point.

We were looking for a variety of styles, with an emphasis on musicians that put on a very good live performance.

What is the anticipated mix of vendors? Is this primarily a DIY show or you trying to achieve a mix of DIY and established hi-fi manufacturers? Is the guy who buys an off the shelf still welcome with this crowd?

Definitely. DIY does not necessarily mean that you have built all of your gear completely from scratch. Everyone has to set up their listening room, some just like to tube roll, etc. We want to speak to those people too; the ones who still want to get involved. If you are a hands on hobbyist, this is a great place to learn something.

We will have a lot of smaller craftsmen exhibiting that you won't see at CES, or perhaps even at the RMAF. It's too expensive for some of those guys to attend the bigger shows, so we are hoping to give them a venue here.

(continued)





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How hands on will the workshops be?

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So this is what really makes VSAC different than say, RMAF or AudioKarma Fest?

Yes, we will have more sessions than one person would be able to attend!

Any other special surprises planned for the attendees?

Yes, but if we told you they wouldn't be special...

A bit more about the two of you and your musical taste; what do you enjoy listening to the most?

We have a wide range of eclectic musical taste. No rap or hip-hop though. Not much popular music or popular country. We seek out a lot of local music wherever we go and that's part of what we are trying to bring to the show.

After chatting with these two and hearing about their love for music and thorough understanding of the DIY tube community, this show is in great hands. We hope that you can make it to the Pacific Northwest, see the show and enjoy the event. In addition to all of the things they have going on, Portland, Oregon is just 5 minutes South from the Vancouver Hilton with plenty of great restaurants, shopping and of course numerous great record stores. See you there. ●





Carlos Santana

ALL THAT HE IS By Ben Fong-Torres



2007 may not have been the best of years for Carlos Santana, as his marriage of 34 years, to Deborah, came to an end.

If, as they say, staying busy is a way to get past bad times, Santana should be in good shape. He is on the road every month this year—at least through August. He and his band began in the Far East and Down Under, into March. In April, he's on the Eastern seaboard, and Canada before heading south. He'll be home, in Marin County, just across the Golden Gate Bridge from San Francisco, for most of May and half of June, but then heads off to Europe, beginning in England and France, and winding up in Belgium, Germany, Sweden, Finland, and, finally, St. Petersburg, Russia. That concert takes place on July 20, which will be Santana's 61st birthday.

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Needless to say, Carlos Santana is not slowing down. Last year, he also issued another of his numerous compilations, this one entitled *Ultimate Santana* and offering 19 tracks, spanning his early band's first hit, "Evil Ways" in 1969, to a cut from his 2005 release, *All That I Am*. On that outing, he stuck to the formula that reinvigorated his career in 1999, when he began teaming up with other, often younger artists from all walks of music. *Supernatural* sold some 25 million copies and earned him an armload of Grammy awards. He followed with *Shaman* in 2002, and that one soared to Number One its first week out and scored more hits, including the Michelle Branch number, "The Game of Love."

It was around that time that I visited Santana at his offices in an industrial part of a small city in Marin County. I've known him since the early '70s, when I did a cover story on his band, and on its history of drugs and general dysfunction.

Those days were long behind him. Now, Santana was surrounded by family—besides Deborah, there was her sister, Kitsaun King, and Carlos' guitarist brother, Jorge (of the band Malo), who helped run the office. For years now, Santana has been a smooth-running business, of selling concert tickets, recordings, and merchandise; and of charitable events and foundations. *(continued)*



Seated in a small conference room, Carlos reflected on his past, and on how, as a teenager in Mexico, the United States was the last place he wanted to go to. In fact, when his family moved from Tijuana to San Francisco in the early Sixties, Carlos hid.

While his parents and six siblings settled into the city by the Golden Gate, Santana was happy, playing rock and blues guitar in bars and strip clubs.

The Santana family had moved to Tijuana from a rural village in Autlan state. It was in the rowdy border town that the teenaged Carlos first heard American radio. It was on R&B stations that he discovered blues artists like Muddy Waters, Lightnin' Hopkins, Jimmy Reed, and John Lee Hooker.

A few months after the Santanas settled into San Francisco, Carlos' parents returned to fetch him. "They brought me here kicking and biting," he says. He didn't want to attend school in San Francisco, and, having been raised on the blues, he didn't want to be "bombarded" with American pop music.

"I wanted to stay in an environment in Tijuana where I was around grown-up musicians and prostitutes; I said, this is my university right here, this is where you learn the real music, man!"

He learned about more than music. Life on the streets was fast, he says. "Fast *everything*. I was going toward the path of becoming an alcoholic. It was part of 'the fuel,' as we call it."

In retrospect, he says, he's grateful that he allowed his family to force him to join them. If he hadn't come to America, he told me, "I probably would've been dead by now."

Instead, he settled into San Francisco's Mission District, where he got to know musicians around town, and formed a band.

When Santana discovered the music scene blossoming at the Fillmore Auditorium and the Avalon Ballroom, he was the outsider trying to look and listen in. Although he'd formed a band, he made his money toiling at a fast-food drive-in for \$65 a week, and gave most of his earnings to his family. Hungry for music, Carlos would try to sneak into the Fillmore – "Many times, for Cream, Eric Clapton, Paul Butterfield, Jimi Hendrix" – only to get caught and tossed out by promoter Bill Graham, who ran the concert hall with an iron hand and a tight fist. *(continued)*



"I'd give 75 percent of my money to my parents, so I'd only have money to go to one concert a week, so I would tell Mr. Graham, "Look man, I've only got enough money...", he didn't know who I was, so he would go, "Aww man, you fuckin' hippie!" But later on, after he saw me play, he cut me some slack."

On one of the nights Carlos paid his way in, he got a chance to join in a jam session with the late, great Michael Bloomfield and members of the Jefferson Airplane and Grateful Dead. It was Bloomfield, Santana says, who encouraged him to pick up an axe and join in. He impressed not only the audience and the other musicians, but Graham, as well. As Santana recalls: **"He said, 'Hey, you have a band?' and I said, 'Yeah!' He said, 'Would you like to open for The Loading Zone and The Who?' and I said, 'Yeah!'"**

Graham became a champion of Santana's—and more. He got the band a slot at the Woodstock festival in 1969 and introduced them to the song "Evil Ways," which became their first big hit.

Santana, a melting pot of black, white and Latino musicians, brought a new sound to rock music. It was, simply put, a blend of all their musical influences: Top 40, R&B, Afro-Cuban, Mexican, Latin, jazz and blues.

As Carlos explains: "I'd listen to B.B. King and Gabor Szabo. Gregg (Rolie) was into three things: Jimmy Smith, Paul McCartney, and Mick Jagger. Michael Carabello would listen to Sly Stone and Jimi Hendrix; Michael Shrieve was into Coltrane and Miles Davis, and Chepito (Areas) was into Eddie Palmieri and African music. So if I hung out in anybody's room, it was an education. We all shared with each other."

The resulting mix, of Santana's crying guitar, Gregg Rolie's rollicking B3 Hammond organ, and a battalion of drums, congas and timbales, tore its way onto the radio and millions of turntables. "Evil Ways" and "Black Magic Woman" hit the Top Ten in 1970, followed by "Oye Como Va," "Everybody's Everything" and "No One to Depend On."

Santana knew his band had made it when he saw a football highlights show on television. "All of a sudden they were playing music that sounded just like Santana. And I said, 'Oh...I see!' Next thing you know, Chicago's got congas and timbales. The Rolling Stones, Jimi Hendrix, everybody had congas."

But his band gave him some nightmares, as well. Drugs, physical ailments, financial problems, lawsuits, ego trips — Santana weathered it all. *(continued)*

Carlos freely admits to taking his share of drugs. But he avoided cocaine, heroin, and speed, he says. “I didn’t like being fogged. I like clarity.”

Soon after the band’s string of hits, it broke up. Carlos explored spiritualism, fused jazz into his music, and, stepping back toward the mainstream, had sporadic, moderate hits (including “She’s Not There” and “Winning”) into the early 1980s. He was selling a respectable 500,000 copies per album. Hey, it beat washing dishes and mopping floors in the Mission District.

And then came *Supernatural*.

Santana had been turned away by several record companies when he was signed to Arista Records by Clive Davis, who’d been president of his band’s label, Columbia Records. The other companies, Santana recalls, told him, “No, you’re too old; it’s over!”

In fact, he’d only just begun. Propelled by artists like Lauryn Hill and Rob Thomas, *Supernatural* launched several hit singles (including “Smooth,” his first Number One record ever). “The main word that I heard,” Santana says, “was ‘phenomenon.’”

How did Santana know about the younger artists? He credits his two daughters, Stella and Angelica, and Salvatore, his musician son, who’s now 25. “They told me about Lauryn Hill and Dave Matthews. My son suggested Musiq Soulchild for a song on *Shaman*.” With singers ranging from Michelle Branch and Citizen Cope to Latin favorite Alejandro Lerner and opera star Plácido Domingo, *Shaman* was an instant hit.



Carlos with his son, Salvatore.

While some critics have derided Santana for what they perceive as latching onto contemporary acts as a way to stay relevant—and sell boatloads of records—Santana says he’s doing what he’s always done: keeping his ear open as well as close to the ground.

He can’t be categorized, he says. “I don’t play white or black music. We like our music to stay like a crystal: all the colors are there, but it’s still clear. Like Nat King Cole, Dionne Warwick, you listen to the music and you don’t know if she’s black or white, and it doesn’t matter, it just sounds human. Those are the only things that I do look for it to be on my CD.” On the album *Shaman*, he notes, “we let go of three songs that I know in my heart are number ones, but it wasn’t me, it was more like John Cougar Mellencamp.”

His music is about “unity, harmony, purity and innocence,” he says. “Sex is in there, and spirituality is in there, but that’s not what we’re selling. In rock music, resonant sound vibration, sound and color – that’s what we do and that’s who we are. Show business and entertainment, that’s not who we are, what we do.”

Another thing Santana does, in his music and through his interviews, is preach for love and peace. Sure, they hark back to his early years in the late Sixties in San Francisco. But he’s thinking about all the wars in which the world is mired. *(continued)*

“We all need a serious healing right now,” he says, “from a vibration of anger and fear, over-the-top patriotism that almost borders on blind. I think humanity should have a higher priority than any nation.”

Years, ago, Santana told an interviewer that he was “becoming the people I love,” among them his father (who played classical guitar) and Albert Einstein. “I am becoming my aspirations,” he said.

But, he tells me, he doesn’t mean to say he’s comparing himself with Einstein. “I’m just equating with certain principles. He loved humanity and the world, and spiritual values. He said, ‘God doesn’t roll the dice with life.’ So I know he never lost a connection with a supreme being. There is a supreme being. You know, the beautiful way to conclude this interview, is to say that we live in a free will world. You’re free to doubt God, you have free will to think anything that you want to think. Well, you also have responsibility and accountability for the choices that you make. Thank you.”

And with that, he stood and bade me farewell. ●

Pub. Note: *For the Santana fans in the audience that are audiophiles as well, the first album Santana and the second album, Abraxas have just been released by Mobile Fidelity as a 24kt. Gold CD and 180 gram half-speed mastered LP. Check the audiophile pressing section this issue for a review on the first release.*



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Club Mix

By Scott Tetzlaff

Looking Backwards and Forwards

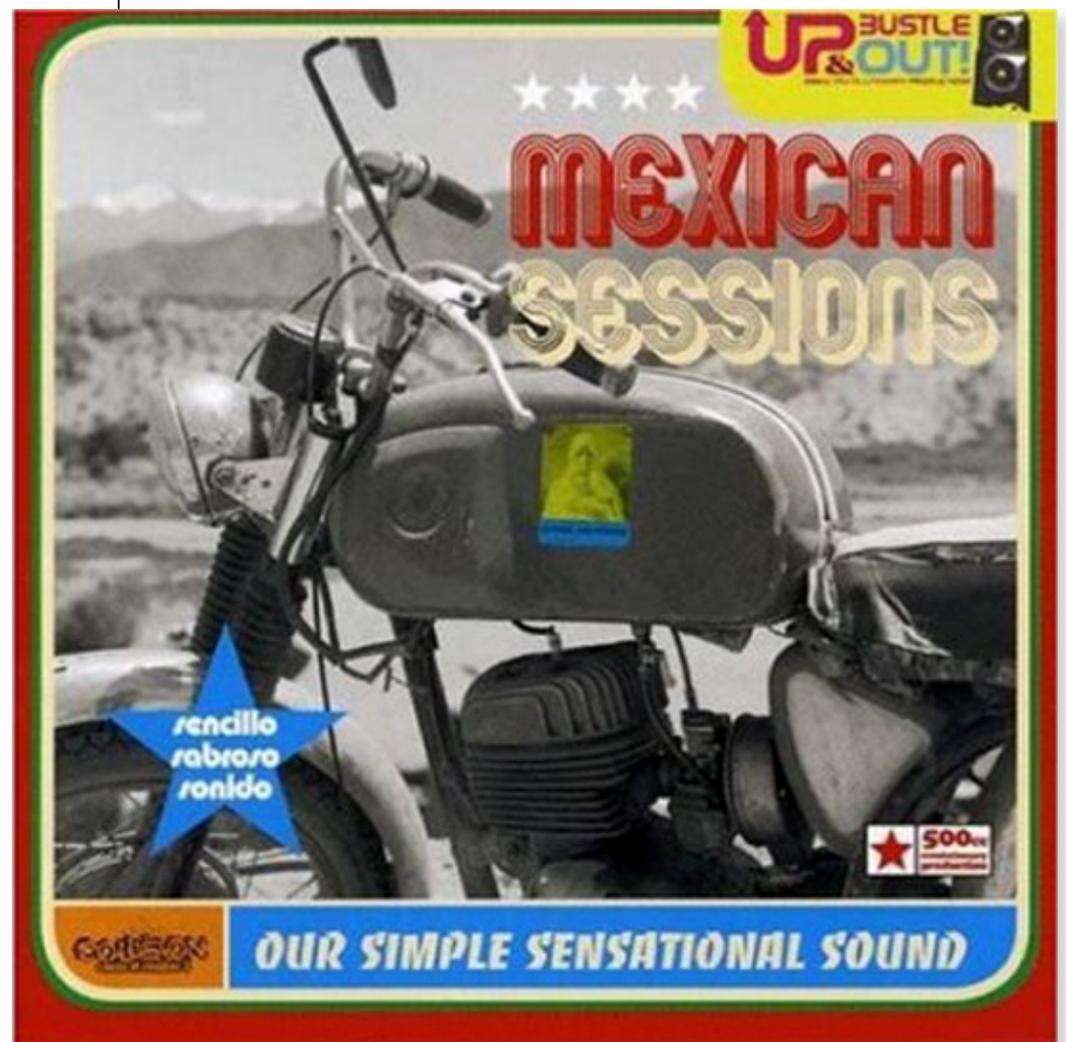
There are many ways to ring in a new year. Very often, people drink enormous amounts of grain alcohol and wake up uncomfortably close to a stranger with an unsightly facial feature they didn't notice the night before. I'm not sure if that actually qualifies as a tradition, though.

In Japan, there's a tradition of spending New Year's Eve performing a thorough house cleaning, followed by a late night trip to a temple to contemplate both the past year and the upcoming year.

That's pretty close to my own ritual. I like to take my haul of CDs from the just-concluding year and spread them out on my living room floor before filing them into tidy alphabetical and stylistic order. If it's been a particularly good music year, I like to roll around on them a bit. But I'm digressing.

Say what you will about 2007 on a political, social, economic, or personal level, but it was a pretty darn good year for music. Furthermore, a surprising amount of the really good stuff seemed to go virtually unnoticed. That's certainly true in the club music scene.

So, I'd like to take a look both back and slightly below the radar. Here are a few things that are new for this year, mixed in with a few things that got passed over last year. There are some new entries you might be familiar with, new solo efforts by some old friends, and a few names that might be new to you.



Up, Bustle, and Out

Mexican Sessions

Collision Cause Chap Records

If you're at all familiar with these guys, you know they are famous for energetic, Latin-tinged dance music that always delivers. Constantly experimenting and expanding their sound, Up, Bustle, and Out, in collaboration with the group, Control Machete, have produced a great new entry for their catalog. If you like dub, Latin dance music or hip-hop, this CD, which was cut in Monterrey, Mexico, should hold your interest rather nicely.

True to my day job in the advertising world, I can just picture this disc bundled with a bottle of premium tequila. My favorite tracks were the perky "A Day at the Bookies," the accordion-laced "Corazon de Leon," and the dance ready "Tinto Tintero." In addition to the great dub tracks, there are a few good reggae beats thrown in.



Stéphane Pompougnac

Hotel Costes X
Pschent Music

Although the *Hotel Costes* series has been a huge influence on lounge and club music for years, it's always exciting when a new release becomes available. *Hotel Costes X* is a bit controversial since it's a slight departure from the previous collections. It's a little softer, a bit more organic, and at times feels like it's bordering on folksy. I applaud M. Pompougnac for making these creative decisions and am quite fond of this CD.

If you are not familiar with *Hotel Costes*, this might not be the first one to choose, as it is not indicative of the series. If you have the whole collection, keep an open mind; this is a strong entry, just not the flavor you've become accustomed to. I suspect the more you listen to it, the more you will like it, just as I did.



Stéphane Pompougnac

Hello Mademoiselle
Waragram Records

Stéphane was quite busy last year. This is his second solo CD, and I'm glad to say there is no "sophomore slump" going on here. *Hello Mademoiselle* is beautifully crafted. The catchy melodies will have you tapping along; yet, there are plenty of hooks and enough structure to keep your Top 40-inclined friends from trying to take control of the stereo.

Hello starts out slow and quiet and builds to a much more rapid pace; this is somewhat of a Pompougnac trademark. Standout tracks include a remix of the old Canned Heat song "On the Road Again," the smooth jazzy title track, and the orchestra infused "Clock".



Blu Mar Ten

Black Water

Koch Records

Blu Mar Ten is a UK-based drum and bass group. Depending on where they go next, we might say they were a drum and bass group, because *Black Water* takes their music in a new direction.

This is a shimmering, smooth, and sophisticated CD with layers of lush vocals. Definitely a departure from their earlier, harder-edged sound. This disc has a cinematic feel to me. I can picture it being the soundtrack for a film with a lot of sweeping, dramatic landscape shots. I had such a good time with this one, it's hard to pick a single favorite, but "Rouge" got the most play around my house.



DJ Ravin

Huvafen Fushi Maldives

Avril Productions

DJ Ravin, long time colleague of the Challe brothers and resident DJ at the Buddha Bar in Paris, has been busy. Besides mixing the excellent selection for the *Buddha Bar IX* collection, DJ Ravin did a project for the Huvafen Fushi resort located in the Maldives. I read that it took DJ Ravin a fair number of "fact finding" trips to get the music selection dialed in to his liking, and he wound up selecting some pretty exotic tracks to match the Huvafen surroundings. **A slow beginning flows into a slow burn, and finally into a vivid mid-tempo plateau – somewhat like the trajectory of a good curry.**

There's a lot of really obscure and beautiful music on this mix – including the bass driven "Circle of Clowns" by Cornucopia and the simple but moving "Anagram" by Dusk.

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Rick Gardner, *Positive Feedback*, Vol. 8 #3

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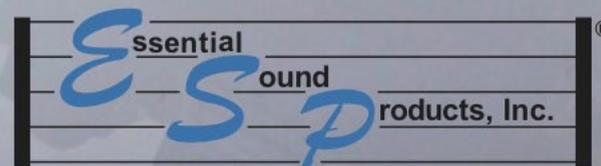
Myles Astor, *The Inner Ear*, Vol. 17, # 4 / 2007

“The phase correct ESP's allow for a fluidity of movement, a continuity of change, if you will, that no longer wakes the mind from its trance of enjoyment.”

Michael Gindi, *Fi*, Volume 1, Issue 3

“Its sound, if “its sound” does exist, has the character of flowing water: clarity with no dominating flavor...”

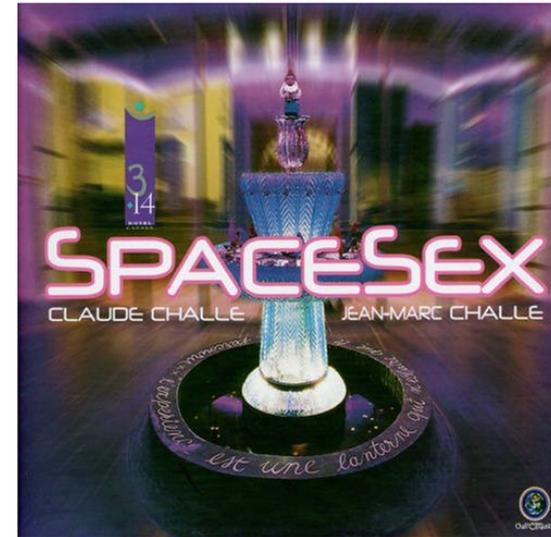
Marc Mickelson, *SoundStage!*, May, 2007



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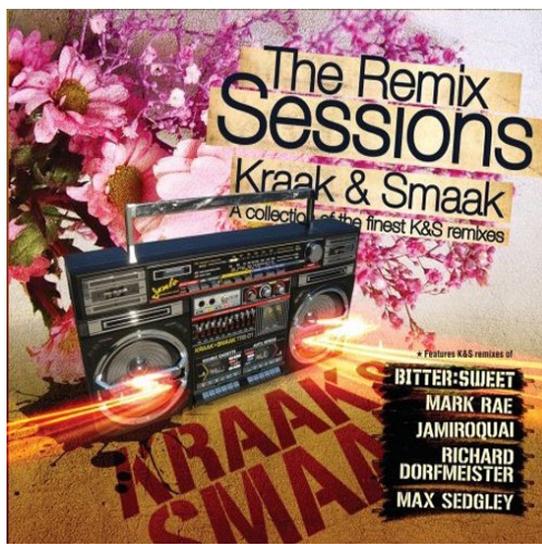


Claude Challe and Jean-Marc Challe

SpaceSex
Chall'O Music

The Challe brothers don't usually take on commercial projects for other people, but they made an exception for the ultra groovy Hotel 3.14 in Cannes. It's a good thing, too – the mix CD they produced for the hotel is quite amazing. The collection of tracks they've put together is a great reflection of the hotel's unique personality – fun, upbeat, exotic, and a little risqué. If you have anything in your collection from Claude, this is cut from the same bolt of musical cloth – if you are a fan, you'll want to have this disc.

Quick tip for our younger readers: If your parents are in the room, you might want to change tracks before the song “Orgasmus” comes on. Enough said.



Kraak and Smaak

The Remix Sessions
Quango

This is another one of those “Party in a Box” CD sets. It’s relentless. Just put both discs in your changer and hit “shuffle.” It starts out fast and fun and stays there. Kraak and Smaak (aka Mark Kneppers, Oscar De Jong, and Wim Plug) hail from the Netherlands. You might be tempted to assume their music would be trance-like and demand the use of glow sticks;

far from it. These are some really nice remixes of some hard-to-find European vinyl.

No endless loops, beeping or clicking sounds involved here. Just good funk, groove, and R&B-driven melodies. The remixes of Mark Rae’s “Medicine” and Max Sedgley’s “Devil Inside” are just indications of what lurks within.

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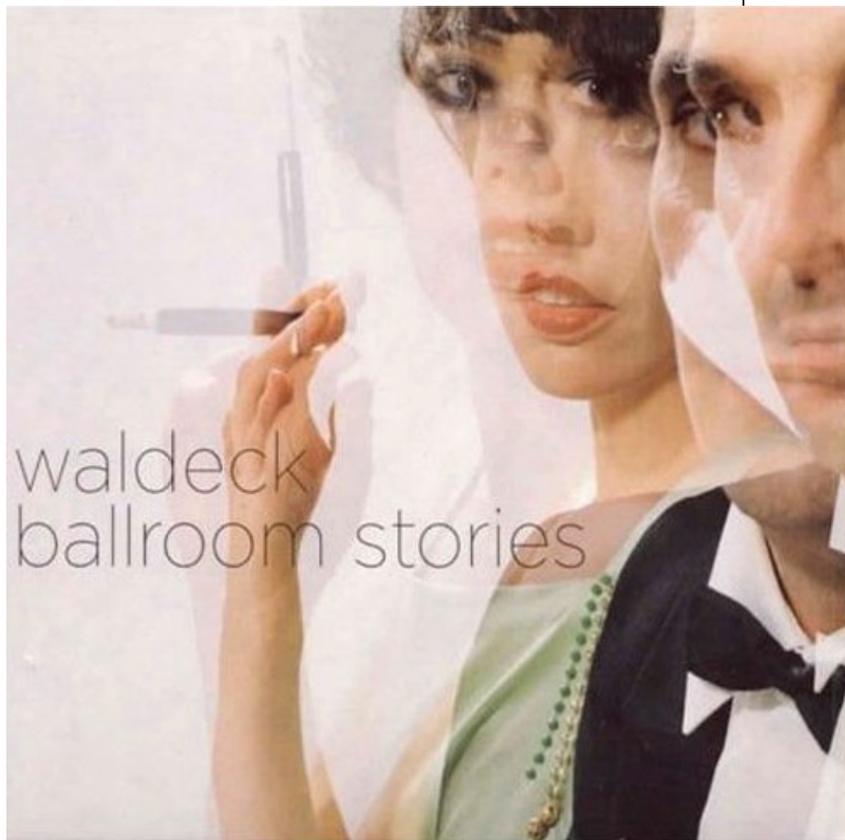


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Waldeck

Ballroom Stories
Dope Noir

Waldeck hasn't put out a CD of all new tunes in a while, but they've more than made up for it with *Ballroom Stories*. A major departure from their 2001 release, *The Night Garden*, the new disc has a decidedly 1920's vibe. Though very modern, there are huge helpings of rat-a-tat-tat drums, muted horns and old school vocals.

I had so much fun with this one I only wish it were a bit longer. Forty-five minutes just isn't enough! Favorite cuts are "Memories" and "Bei Mir Bist du Schon." Both have a heavy duty cabaret feel with some interesting, breathy vocal effects.



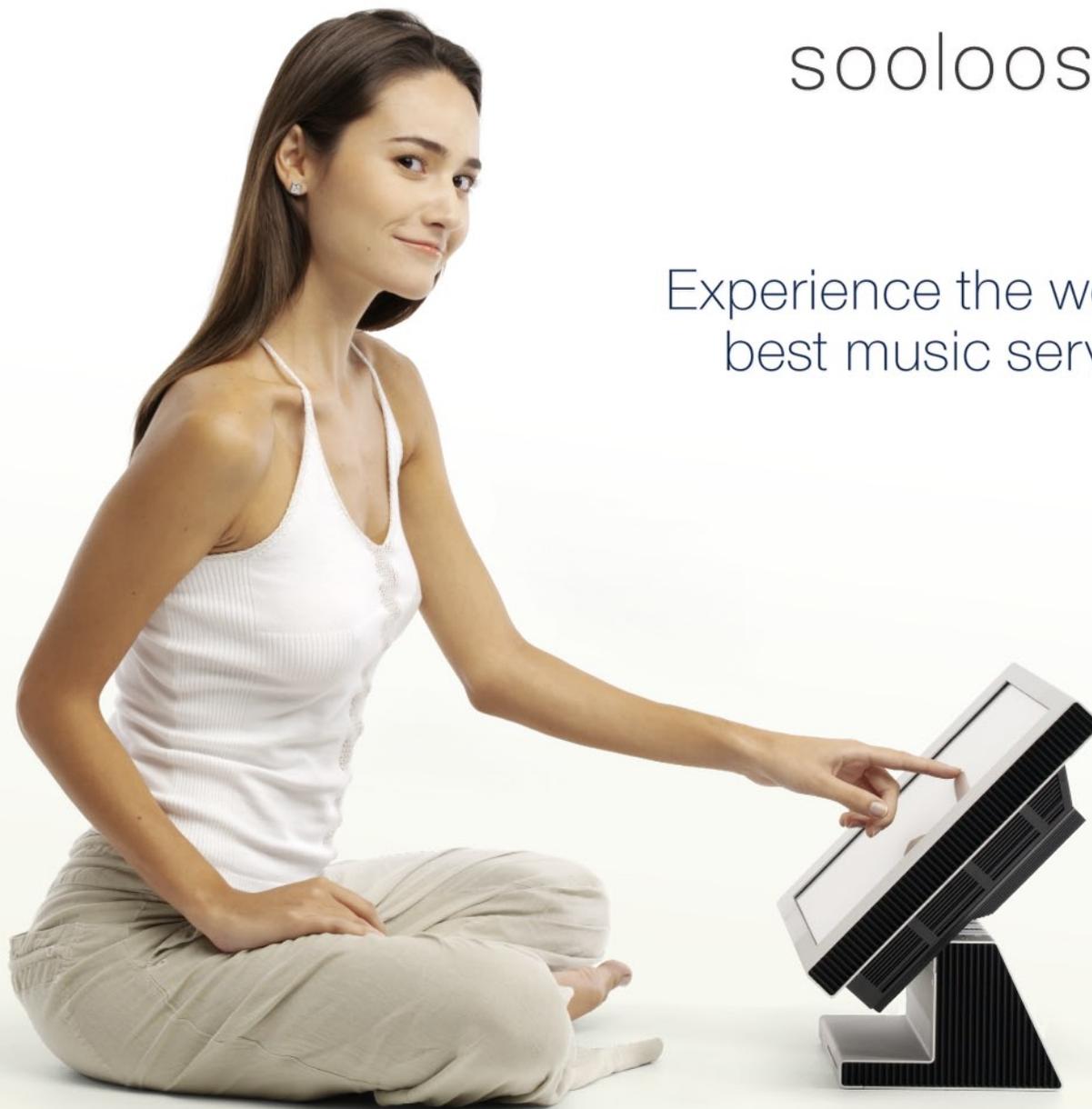
Gare Du Nord

Sex n' Jazz Vol 1
Sweet Lemon

The guys from Gare Du Nord have done it again. This is an amazing electro-jazz disc with just the right proportions of electronic enhancement and classic jazz sensibilities. It's also an excellent showcase for the wide range of musical styles this group can perform – from raspy talking pieces to smooth jazz to beat-driven dance riffs. **I'm quite fond of "Lobster for Love" (and not just because the name is cool), and "Hot Glue."** Here's a smart shopper tip: if you can live with the iTunes download quality, you can pick up the collection there for a lot less than you will pay for this import CD at your local store. Audiophiles in the audience, pretend I didn't say that.

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And my last recommendation isn't a disc. If you're a big fan of mashups, do yourself a favor and go to "Bootie" online (www.bootiesf.com). There, you'll find a link for the "Best of 2007" mashups. It's in the center of the page, about half the way down.

Now the disclaimer:
Tone does not condone pirating in any way, shape, or form. Click *yes* to continue.

This collection of MP3's is not high enough quality to crank up on a good stereo, but is adequate for use at the gym on your digital player. There's some really cheeky stuff here. "Galvanize the Empire" is a mashup of Qtip and the Chemical Brothers with *The Empire Strikes Back*. "Detox" is Britney Spears' "Toxic" mashed with Amy Winehouse's "Rehab." You'll have tons of fun picking out the musical influences while work out at the gym.

That should keep you busy for now. Meanwhile, artists are busy in their studios digging up and creating new sounds and beats. If even half of the rumors I've been hearing are true, the rest of 2008 is looking quite good. I'm off to Europe to investigate. ●

Marc's Movie Madness

By Marc Phillips

What is that song?

You've all been there. You're enjoying a movie, when suddenly you're taken out of the moment by a great song on the soundtrack. If you're watching in a theater, you have to sit through the end of the credits, and even then you're unsure which listed song is the one that got your attention. If you're watching a DVD, you might be lucky enough to find the name of the song in the added features section. If you're watching on regular TV you're totally screwed, since the networks either speed up the end credits or stuff them into a corner so that you can watch a promo for a rerun of *Stargate SG-1* or *The 4400*.



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After about three hours and thirty minutes into watching *Kill Bill*, volumes 1 and 2, it happened to me. *That song*. It came right before the climax, when The Bride is at Bill's hacienda in Mexico, unsure whether or not she should proceed with – well, killing Bill. The song came at the perfect moment, the calm before the storm, when 230 minutes of spellbinding kung fu action would finally reach its conclusion. At first we hear a sample of a dense, lush orchestral soundtrack, a steady beat, and then a woman's voice saying, "My man's got a heart like a rock cast in the sea." Once we sink into its strange, ethereal spell, it shifts into a lugubrious version of the Zombies' "She's Not There." **It was beyond cool. It was perfect. It did take me completely out of the movie, however. I had to know right then and there who recorded that track.**

Thanks to Wikipedia and the pause button on my DVD player, I found out that it was Malcolm McLaren's "About Her." Yes, *that* Malcolm McLaren, the Sex Pistols' former manager and one of the founding fathers of punk and New Wave. I went out and purchased the soundtracks for both films the next day, which officially completed my Quentin Tarantino movie soundtrack collection with the exception of *Grindhouse*, which I haven't seen yet. I played *that song* a few times, just to get it out of my system. Then I moved onto the rest of the tracks, and thought, "Wow, QT really does put the pedal to the metal when he chooses music for his films."
(continued)

In many ways, the soundtracks for both *Kill Bill* films are more oddly disjointed, more mercurial, and more exciting than any other of his movies. You get the usual amusing snippets of dialogue serving as punctuation between the tracks (does anyone other than Tarantino and Kevin Smith do this any more?), not to mention the jarring and deliberately corny insertions of pop culture. For instance, it's pretty hard not to be annoyed with 16 seconds of the faux-siren of the *Ironsides* theme, or to hold more than a passing interest in the sound effects, such as sword swings and axe blows that end the soundtrack for the first film. But what you do get, in spades, is the right song at the right time, which Tarantino seems to do better than anyone else.

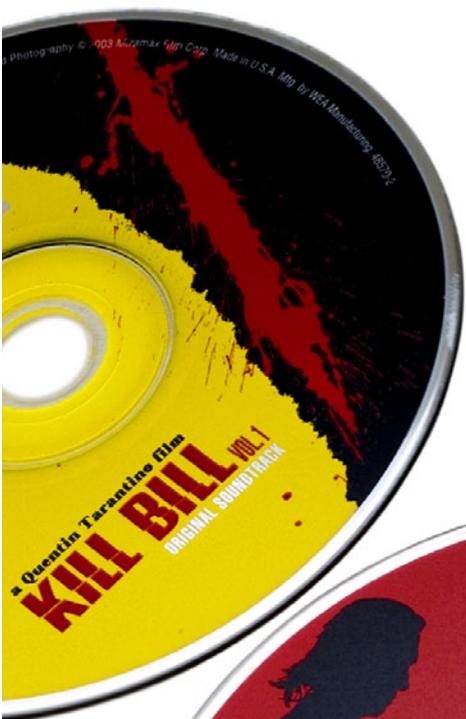
Think back to the beginning of *Vol.1*, which opens with Nancy Sinatra's "Bang Bang (My Baby Shot Me Down)" as we see the silhouette of The Bride in her hospital bed. For me, this is as gutsy a music choice as using "Miserlou" for the opening credits of *Pulp Fiction*. It implies that what we are about to see is beyond hip, and yet it reminds us of the first time we heard that song. If anything, Tarantino's musical choices are visceral, bound and determined to raise your pulse, even if not much is happening on screen.

Part of the fun of buying both soundtracks is to note the difference in mood between them. It's reflective of the films. If you haven't seen both *Kill Bills*, suffice it to say that the action is tilted toward *Vol.1*, and the meaning of it all is revealed in *Vol.2*. (It still amazes me when I meet people who have seen only one of them. It's like pulling the sheets back on your bed, and then sleeping on the floor.) The soundtrack of the first album, therefore, is more energetic, with music from Isaac Hayes, Santa Esmeralda and Neu! We also get the "Woo Hoo" song from the 5.6.7.8s (think of those Vonage commercials on TV), and "Battle Without Honor or Humanity," the ultimate modern theme for those walking down the street on their way to kicking ass (think of those Cadillac commercials on TV). The RZA, from the Wu-Tang Clan, helped produce the album, and supplies the odd bits of original music throughout.

For me, the real jewels can be found in the soundtrack for the second film. Besides that intoxicating Malcolm McLaren track, *Vol.2* is full of music that is much more pensive, full of regret, and more in line with the martial arts films that inspired Tarantino. Old Ennio Morricone themes

are used throughout, infusing *Vol.2* with a combination of the studied, slow mannerisms of the best spaghetti westerns and the sometimes overwhelming sentimentality of recent offerings from Hong Kong. You will have to go back to the *Vol.1* soundtrack, however, to either roll your eyes or succumb to the wistful sounds of Zamfir's pan flute for Morricone's "The Lonely Shepherd."

While you probably won't play these discs on your car stereo while cruising through town, I do believe that the soundtracks to *Kill Bill Vol. 1 and 2* can join the ranks of such albums as Captain Beefheart's *Trout Mask Replica*, the Minutemen's *Double Nickels on the Dime* and even the Beatles' *White Album* for sheer unpredictability, outrageousness and surprises. *(continued)*



No, I'm not saying these soundtracks are as good as those classics, but they are infused with the same anything-goes spirit. **You'll laugh, you'll cry, you'll cut someone's arm off with a Hattori Hanzo sword.**

By the way, I recently picked up a sealed copy of the soundtrack to 1974's *Black Belt Jones*, composed and performed by the immortal musical team of Dennis Coffey and Luchi de Jesus. While this LP doesn't quite scale the heights of the *Kill Bill* soundtracks, it does offer a hefty portion of decidedly old-school Lalo Schiffrinesque jazzy horn sections, mated with snippets of dialogue that use the N-word so many times, even QT himself would be embarrassed. I suggest you try it between the two *Kill Bills* as a musical sherbet to cleanse the palate. Bon appetit! ●

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The Best Albums You May Have Missed In 2007

By Joe Golfen

Unless you have a huge wad of cash, chances are you aren't able to keep up with the endless stream of new music being released every year. Countless bands emerge from the underground, while veterans churn out new material, and you're left to sort through it all. The critics aren't much help; they're always railing about the next big thing while you're still digesting the last album they told you to get. (And, of course, they've declared that disc passé.) Here are four albums that didn't get much play in the media last year but deserve a spot in your collection.

THE HISTORICAL CONQUESTS OF JOSH RITTER



Josh Ritter

The Historical Conquests of Josh Ritter
Sony

Already on his fifth album, Josh Ritter is proving to be one of the most talented and enjoyable artists in modern music. With a joyful charisma and more great songs than any one man should be allowed, Ritter blends his wry sense of humor and colorful wordplay with brilliant melodies, following in the footsteps of Bob Dylan and John Prine.

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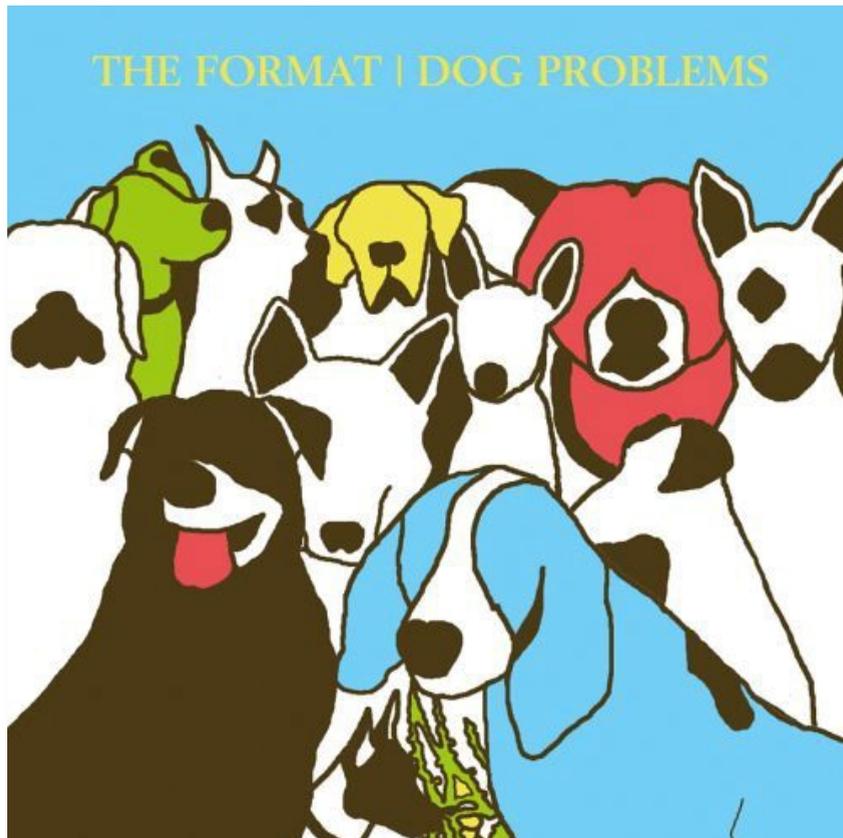
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On his previous effort, *The Animal Years*, Ritter sounded like a broken man. He wore a heavy beard and sang in a raspy tenor about war, loss and sorrow, and the results of that frame of mind. *The Historical Conquests* finds him in better spirits, and willing to lift his head from the deep waters of Americana, and go exploring a vast world of new sounds.

With a swirling guitar and a bluster of poetry, Ritter starts *The Historical Conquests* with a bang. "To the Dogs or Whoever" is an epic poem starring an exotic heroine, and it winds itself through shipwrecks, holy wars and lingerie parties. Ritter and his bandmates then take on everything from the early punk of "Mind's Eye" to the brass band funk of "Rumours," all the way to the country-twined "Empty Heart." Whatever they tackle, they never fail to be brilliant.

But the most beautiful moment of the album comes when Ritter is left on his own. The glorious "The Temptation of Adam" finds him spinning a tale of two lovers trapped in a missile silo during WWII, and wondering if they would really mind if the world above was gone. This track perfectly captures all the humor, heart and greatness Ritter is capable of, especially when it's just him and his guitar.



The Format

Dog Problems

Nettwerk Records

Most aspiring musicians work for the day they finally land the big record deal, but for The Format, who got dropped from Elektra Records after only one album, it was just the opposite. This left them with the freedom to make the lavish, orchestral pop album they had always dreamt of, even if it would not get them on the radio anytime soon.

This Arizona band's first LP, *Interventions and Lullabies* was a polished, guitar-heavy affair, with catchy melodies and lyrics about breaking up and moving away from home. There were some hints of the band's future dive into musical weirdness, but the album was clearly a marketing piece, guided heavily by the hand of some corporate producer. To get the full effect of this band, you had to see them live. That's no longer the case. The new record reflects their real personality.

Dog Problems is all about the collapse of a relationship, and while the lyrics have a downtrodden tone about them, the music is anything but. The Format is rounded off by a cavalcade of horns, strings, bells, whistles and pretty much anything else you would think could be packed into a three-minute pop song. *Dog Problems* plays out like an over-the-top Broadway show with Nate Ruess as the tortured protagonist, complete with wild emotions, outlandish music and melodies you won't forget. A guilty pleasure for shameless lovers of pop.

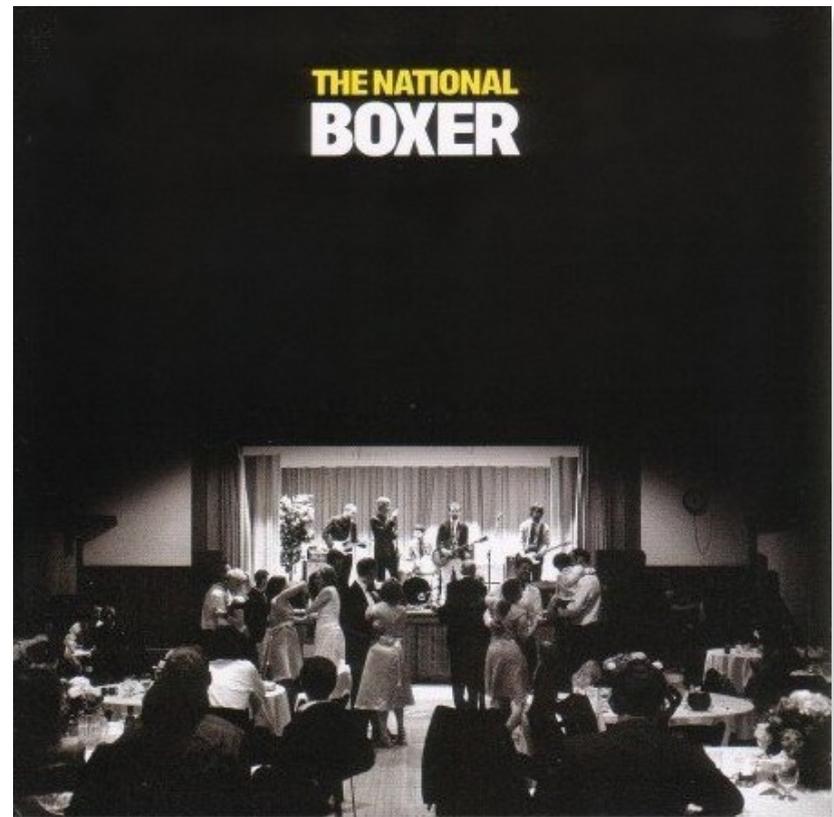
The National

Boxer

Beggars Banquet

After giving up his day job as a graphic designer in New York City to play music full time, The National's frontman Matt Berninger may have thought he was giving up the corporate life forever. But he can't seem to escape it.

The band's fourth album, *Boxer*, is a dark ride through a dark city, where the only light there is comes shining down from the glistening advertisements above. Delivered in his startlingly deep baritone, Berninger's lyrics are laced with phrases such as "blue blazer," "professional," and "my favorite white shirt." And while the rat race may have left an impression on Berninger, he clearly doesn't miss it.



"Mistaken for Strangers" and "Racing like a Pro" are just two of the tracks that capture the morose singer's disdain for the fakeness of the white collar world, with lines like "You get mistaken for strangers by your own friends/ when you pass them at night under the silvery, silvery Citibank lights." Laid atop complex, driving post-punk riffs, these songs deliver a creeping blow that is sure to knock you off your feet.

Boxer is a tragic portrait of modern America, with everyone cleaning up and selling out. Luckily there are still people like Berninger and his bandmates, who cast off social norms and show us what we've become. Music like this reminds me of what really matters, even if it's only for 14 songs.

THE THRILLS **TEENAGER**

1. THE MIDNIGHT CHOIR 2. THIS YEAR 3. NOTHING CHANGES AROUND HERE 4. RESTAURANT 5. I CAME ALL THIS WAY 6. LONG FORGOTTEN SONG 7. I'M SO SORRY 8. NO MORE EMPTY WORDS 9. TEENAGER 10. SHOULD'VE KNOWN BETTER 11. THERE'S JOY TO BE FOUND... THE BOY WHO CAUGHT ALL THE BREAKS

YOU REMEMBER BEING UP AT THE NIGHTS, NIGHTS, NIGHTS, DID YOU TAKE THOSE ELECTRIC SHAKES FOR SHAKES, YOU REMEMBER YOU BELLED YOUR EYES, TEENAGE STYLE, YOU SAID "I DON'T CARE FOR THE PAST... BUT IF I COULD GO BACK, A TEENAGER AGAIN, IF I COULD GO BACK, I'D TRY OVER AGAIN, BUT WHERE WOULD I FALL? AND WHO WOULD BREAK MY FALL?" AND YOU LOOKED AT THE WHOLE WORLD, THE BEAUTIFUL AND LOVED, AND LOVED, BUT WHAT WAS THERE IN STORE FOR YOU? WE'RE STILL WRITING, AND WAITING, I REMEMBER YOU BEING BEAUTIFUL, THAT'S ALL, THAT'S ALL.



This is a great album for anyone who was ever a stupid kid, and for anyone who feels like they still are one.

The Thrills

Teenager
Virgin US

The Thrills spent their last two albums pretending to be what they're not. They are *not* from sunny Southern California, no matter how many towns named for Spanish saints they dropped into their songs. These six guys are from cold, rainy Ireland, and while they haven't given up their Byrds-meet-Neil Young sound, they are ready to be honest. Perhaps that's why they called this album *Teenager*, because they're finally ready to show their insecurities and true selves. The Thrills have finally passed the awkward phase.

Filled with lead singer Conor Deasy's sad-eyed musings and a slew of mandolin chords, *Teenager* is about looking back over a young life, amazed at how many wrong turns someone could take in such a short amount of time. Deasy seems ready to move on with his life, but is unable to get over the past. Much like the girl on the front cover of the CD passionately pouncing on her new lover, surrounded by her childhood stuffed animals and unicorn pictures.

Though Deasy waxes on about hope and disillusionment, with the band filling in the gaps with sunny harmonies and twelve-string guitars, they sound more genuine this time around. It was always a bit too easy to spot their obvious influences in the past. Now, the Thrills are all grown up. They have found their voice and are just being themselves. This is a great album for anyone who was ever a stupid kid, and for anyone who feels like they still are one. ●

MusicGiants, the Stars of CES 2008



It's always a great time to attend the Consumer Electronics show, see the new gear and catch up with all of the people that make the cool things that we all enjoy listening to music on. We could post twenty pages of rooms full of racks with gear, but you can find that anywhere.

What I did notice this year was that the quality of the sound I heard in a lot of the rooms was a lot better than last year. Much like a race team returning to a familiar track with last years' telemetry in their laptops, everyone knew what to expect this year at the Venetian. There is always plenty of jockeying around behind the scenes with gear getting lost, damaged or destroyed, but the high end audio industry came through and put on a great show for all that attended.

One of the most exciting things I saw at the show was over in the main hall at the MusicGiants booth. If you aren't familiar with MusicGiants, they are by far the biggest online vendor of high quality music downloads. We aren't talking wimpy 320kb/sec MP3's, but full CD quality and higher, with some HD releases available in 5.1 surround as well as HD stereo.

Leave it to the MusicGiants crew to take things to the next level. They had five acts performing live in their booth, from 10 in the morning on Monday until the close of the show on Thursday afternoon. As you can see from the photo, they had a full house. *(continued)*

Leave it to the MusicGiants crew to take things to the next level.

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All of the acts they were showcasing are relatively new. They featured Lily Baran, who is actually exclusive to Music-Giants right now and had a very bluesy sound, somewhat reminiscent of an early Roberta Flack or Joan Armatrading. She was a trooper and opened the show every morning from 10am until noon. The next band on tap was Shameus, a local band from Lake Tahoe that featured a bit more of a Nickelback/Jack Johnson groove. They also finished out the day on Tuesday and Wednesday, sounding as fresh at the end of the day as at the beginning.

In the middle of the festivities, we had performances by Rue Melo, Ben Jelen, Mistah Fab and Soufège. Rue Melo is probably the most well known of the group and only did one 45 minute set to a packed crowd. I think the guys from Soufège probably captivated the audience the most, with their acapella style. Think a cross between Boys 2 Men, The Fairfield Four with some Bob Marley sprinkled in and you get the picture.

We give Music Giants and the musicians that performed two big thumbs up and hope that they continue bringing live music to us at future hifi events. You can download all of their music at www.musicgiants.com

Desi On Jazz

A Quick Overview of Sonny Rollins

By Desi Day

I've been immersed in all things Sonny Rollins over the past few weeks, reading and listening. What is it about this jazz master who remains an enigma on so many different levels?



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Mr. Rollins continues to be one of the few towering giants of jazz of all time. He is continuously dedicated to his instrument and his music, and his passion is as alive as when he first began his music career in his teens, almost sixty 60 years ago. His astounding technical skills, knowledge of his medium, innate sense of being in the right place at the same time, and sheer physical strength as a musician has kept Sonny Rollins at the top ranks of the jazz genre.

Sonny Rollins was born Theodore Walter Rollins in New York City on September 7th, 1930. **Growing up in the prestigious Sugar Hill neighborhood in Harlem, in the 30s, Sonny Rollins is a person who was definitely in the right place at the right time for all things jazz.** Don Redmond, Nat King Cole, and the tenor sax great Coleman Hawkins also lived in the same 'hood. Coleman's influence on Sonny Rollins became very significant as he grew up.

Harlem was in a stellar period in the 1930s and 40s for music and art. Rollins' parents, hailing from St. Thomas, had musical and artistic backgrounds. They started Sonny on the piano at a young age but he never quite took to the instrument. His brother and sister were more artistically gifted and both attended the elite academy, The Music and Art High School for classical training. But Sonny liked more contemporary music; he said in an interview that when he first walked by the Savoy Ballroom and Cotton Club, he wished he could go in. *(continued)*

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Since he was not of age at the time, he would make weekly visits to the Apollo Theatre, where there was no age limit, and where he would see many of the top jazz performers of the day, including Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and Fletcher Henderson.

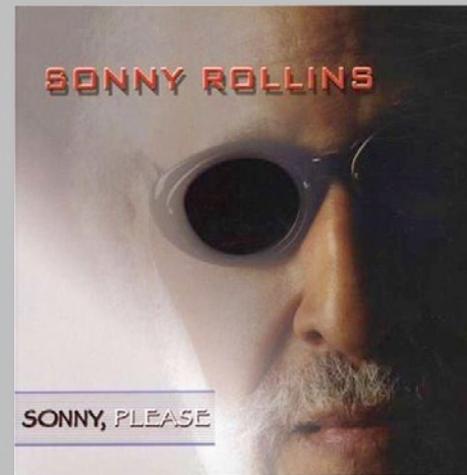
Sonny loved Louis Jordan, a hugely popular jazz and rhythm & blues musician and innovator of “jump blues,” a swinging up-tempo jazz and boogie-woogie (think early James Brown). “Jump” laid down the basics for rock and roll in the early Fifties. Jordan, in fact, did some production on Bill Haley and the Comets’ “Rock Around the Clock.”

On his walk to school each day Sonny was dazzled by the promotional photos of Louis Jordan in the window of a neighborhood nightclub, Barron’s. Rollins loved the shimmer and shine of that saxophone in Jordan’s hands. He decided that this was for him: a shiny sax and a life of jazz.

In Rollins’ early years he was further influenced by some of the key figures of jazz of the 1940’s and ‘50’s, such as Coleman Hawkins, Bud Powell, Thelonious Monk, Miles Davis, Fats Navarro, Art Blakey and Charlie Parker. What is amazing is that all these cats were coming of age around the same time, and Rollins was right in the thick of this mix. Fresh out of high school in 1947, he joined the musicians union and began to rehearse and play every day, becoming part of the be-bop community. **Rollins freely admits because of his youth, he was not aware of the dynamics going on around him and that jazz history was taking place on daily basis.**

Rollins joined Miles Davis’ group in 1951 and also played with other ensembles. During Rollins’ years with Davis, he recorded “Oleo”, which would become a jazz standard. (LP or single?) He joined the Clifford Brown/Max Roach Quintet in 1955 and would work again with Miles. During this time Sonny recorded an album, *Saxophone Colossus*, an album that would put Sonny on the jazz map. The album, recorded with a side group including Tommy Flanagan (known to be one of Ellington’s favorites,) on piano, Doug Watkins on bass, and Max Roach on drums, was groundbreaking for Rollins and brought out what was to become his signature style: working on a basic theme while elaborating on it in many forms. Rollins also recorded *Tenor Madness* with John Coltrane, and it was another towering success.

Rollins was fond of Clifford Brown and was thrown for a loop when Brown, only 25, died at the in an automobile accident in 1956. After the loss of Brown, Rollins had a few bumpy years, even though he was a commercial success, and his following was growing by the day. Rollins came out with three major recordings at this time, *A Night at the Village Vanguard*, *Way Out West*, and *Freedom Suite*. (continued)



In 1959, Rollins took a break from the public music scene. As it turns out, he spent some of his evenings, while on sabbatical, practicing his sax on the Williamsburg Bridge over New York's East River. Rollins said that he needed to regroup and find his own way once again. Emerging in 1961,

he was recharged and playing better than ever. Now, Rollins decided to lead his own bands. **What made Rollins' bands different from other combos was his decision to use a trio: his saxophone, a bass, and drums.** This dramatic change helped to shift jazz, as other jazz artists sat up and paid attention to what he was doing.

Since then, Sonny Rollins has recorded many more albums, won Grammy awards, and continues to tour. His latest CD, *Sonny, Please* was recorded on his own label, Doxy Music, in 2006. If you get a chance to see him in concert, do yourself a favor and GO. You will witness a true jazz legend.

Publisher's Note: *I did just that, and I shot the photos in this article at Sonny's recent performance in Portland, Oregon towards the end of 2007. He put on a fantastic show!*

Sonny In High Res

By Jeff Dorgay

Those of you that are big Sonny Rollins fans and have some older albums in need of replacement, fear not. You can now download almost all of Rollins' catalog from our friends at MusicGiants. At last glance, they had 61 Rollins albums in their catalog, so you should be able to find what you are looking for.

I downloaded the *Sonny Rollins* two-fer, which is the CD version of the famous Prestige series of double LP sets. This was available in the standard HD format (CD quality), and the copy of *Tenor Madness* I downloaded was in Super HD 2.0 format, the equivalent of the SACD of this disc. About five minutes later, I had pristine quality copies on my hard drive, ready to go. If you have some gaps in your Sonny Rollins collection, this is a great place to find them. Many of the older records are in the \$7-\$9 price range at MusicGiants, so this has to be one of the best deals going in jazz! Just head over to www.musicgiants.com and type in Sonny's name. ●

Audiophile Recordings

Presented By Acoustic Sounds

If you would like to purchase any of the recordings featured in this section, just click on the artwork and it will take you directly to the Acoustic Sounds website.

We have three sections for you this issue. The first group features the latest releases from Mobile Fidelity, Classic Records and Naim Records. The Charlie Haden CD from Naim is the only thing in this group that you can't purchase from Acoustic Sounds, but they do have the rest of Charlie's work on LP.

The second installment features the first test pressings of the Blue Note remasters from Analog Productions, and the final installment features the latest vinyl releases from Bernie Grundman's new label, Straight Ahead Records.

PART ONE: Our Regular Suspects

By Jeff Dorgay

Rush

Permanent Waves

Mobile Fidelity 24kt Gold CD and 180g LP

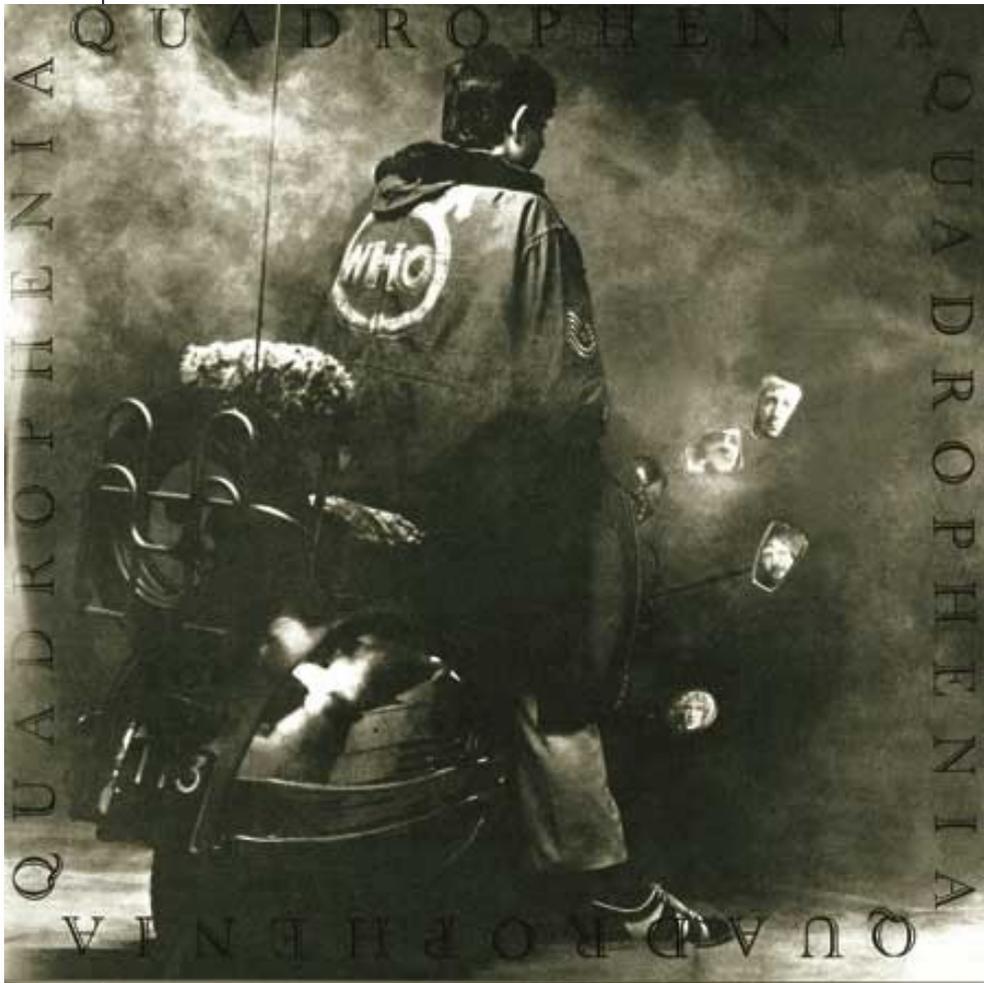
I've always taken flak for liking Rush, but I must admit that *Permanent Waves* is not one of my favorite Rush records. Remember, this column is not one of music criticism, per se; we are judging the sound quality so that you can decide whether you want to buy one of these records again in its newly remastered form.

On that basis, the LP is definitely a winner. My original pressing is terribly compressed, and the upper midrange is pushed way forward for airplay. The MoFi version is evened out quite a bit tonally, and, overall, there is a much more pronounced warmth. The surfaces were extremely quiet, without a single tick, click or pop.

Labeled as a "Prog Masterpiece," *Permanent Waves* includes the hits "Freewill" and "The Spirit of Radio." My favorite tune is "Jacobs Ladder," but Rush was getting too mainstream for me by this time. If you are a major fan, however, it doesn't get better than this.

Can I have *All The World's a Stage* next?





The Who

Quadrophenia
Classic Records, 200g LP

I know there is a cool yet unobtainable British pressing of this record out there somewhere for a four-figure sum that probably sounds better than this one, but for now I'm a very happy camper. This pressing has about three fewer layers of grunge than the MoFi 24kt CD issued back in 1991. So yes, Who fans, you'll be buying this one more time if you are one of the truly faithful.

The good news is that it's finally been done right. Quite a bit of lost dynamics have been restored and you can hear a lot more of the nuance in this record, from the background vocals on "The Real Me" to the little sound effects on "5:15." After all these years, *Quadrophenia* is finally a listenable record! **If you didn't blow your ears out in the early days, this one will put a smile on your face.**

Santana

Santana
Mobile Fidelity 24kt Gold CD and 180g LP

Now we're talking. 39 years later, this is still one of my favorite rock records. Though I was only eleven when this was first issued in 1969, this was one of the first records in my collection that I can say I wore out because I played it too much. Possessing way too much of Columbia's house sound with that big midrange bump and no real high frequencies to speak of, this record was always pretty dismal on a good hi-fi system.

The crew at MoFi have hit a home run on this one. If you love this record as much as I do, click the buy button right now and savor it. The levels on the CD and the LP have been brought down substantially from the originals, so you will have to turn it up a bit, but this record finally has some dynamic range. Thirty-nine years later, you can really appreciate what a true genius Carlos Santana was back in 1969. I'd also like to point out that the CD and LP versions of this are so close in terms of sound quality, it might be a toss-up as to which one you choose to purchase.

I am hoping that MoFi maintained this quality level for the soon to be released *Abraxas*. I'll just keep my fingers crossed that they get *Caravanserai*, too.



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Ella Fitzgerald

*Sings Songs From Let No Man
Write My Epitaph*
Classic Records, 200g LP

Way before Ricardo Montalban played Khan in the *Star Trek* movies, he was a supporting actor in *Let No Man Write My Epitaph*, a movie that featured Ella Fitzgerald as a singing piano player. Thank God they didn't let him sing.

Right from the first few notes of "Black Coffee," you can tell that this one is a winner. This recording has a tremendous amount of width and depth. The music extends way beyond the boundaries of your speakers, and on a great system Ella should be singing about six feet in front of you. **Though I often chastise my audiophile comrades for listening to this kind of thing, Ella will always be a cut above the rest. This one is worth every penny.**



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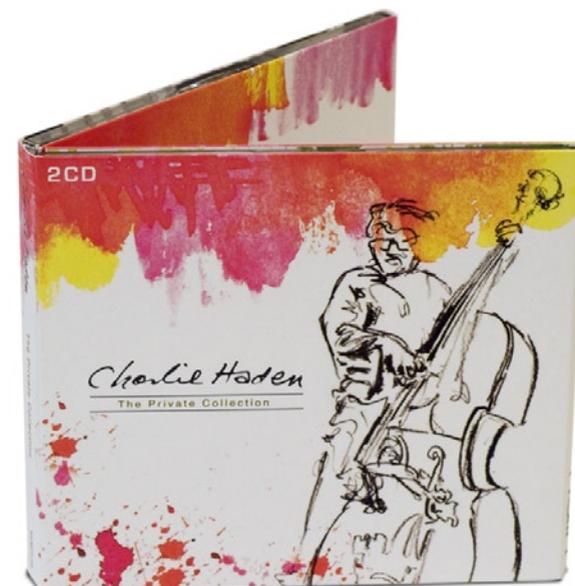
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Charlie Haden

The Private Collection

Naim Records, 2CD set

Think of this recording as *Jazz at the Pawnshop*, but updated with more feeling and emotion. It makes sense that the guys who make one of the world's best CD players would produce a CD that sounds this good. The first disc was recorded on Haden's 50th birthday and the second disc a year later.

Haden performs some straight-ahead acoustic jazz that is very well recorded. Both discs offer up the sonic signature of the venues where they were performed and are miked in an up-close and personal manner. Haden plays a few of his own tunes as well as music from Pat Metheny, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Ornette Coleman, and even Bach.

My first experience with Naim Records has been an excellent one indeed. I know I want to add the rest of their catalog to my collection.

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Audiophile Recordings

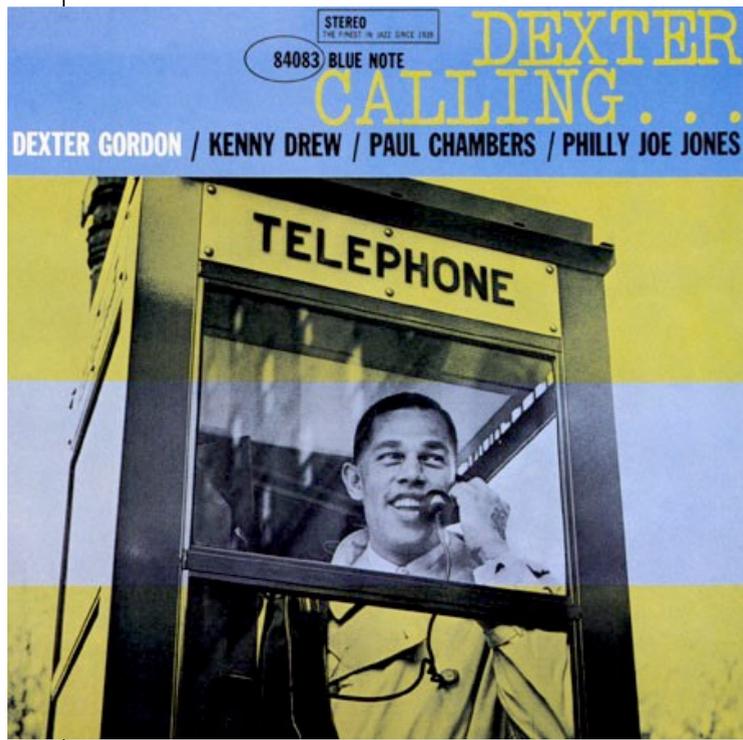
PART TWO: Hard Bop Nirvana

By Dan Babineau

Beep bop, or its latter-day extension hard bop, is one of the most innovative and mind-boggling genres of music ever recorded. Originating in the 1950's, this intense music was developed by some of the most proficient jazz musicians to have ever played a horn, beat the drums, tickled the ivories of a piano or strummed a bass. And these first five Acoustic Sounds Blue Note re-issues are pure bop genius.

For those of you that didn't read our last issue, I spent a day at Acoustech/RTI to observe the re-mastering of these landmark recordings. It was an incredible experience to hold the master tapes for these recordings in my hands! Most of the tapes had Rudy Van Gelder's initials on the reels and I couldn't help but imagine how cool it must have been to lay down the tracks for these museum pieces of American jazz.

The natural symmetry exhibited in these recordings is beyond organic-- it's as if these musicians popped out of the womb holding their instruments. Even after a quick listen, it's obvious that these icons of the jazz world had played together often. The performances and recordings are raw, without special effects or electronic modification. **Rudy Van Gelder** has allowed us to look straight into a segment of jazz history without filtering it. We hear it the way it was and it *was* nothing short of spectacular.



Dexter Gordon, Kenny Drew, Paul Chambers
& Philly Joe Jones

Dexter's Calling

Analogue Productions, 45rpm 180g LP

The best news is that Kevin Gray and Steve Hoffman were keen enough to do nothing more than gently clean up the masters, bringing us even closer to the hard bop edge. The 45 rpm pressings that I received were all super quiet with every last drop of resolution from the master tapes. I had almost forgotten just how good Paul Chambers and Phil Joe were together as the backbone of these groups.

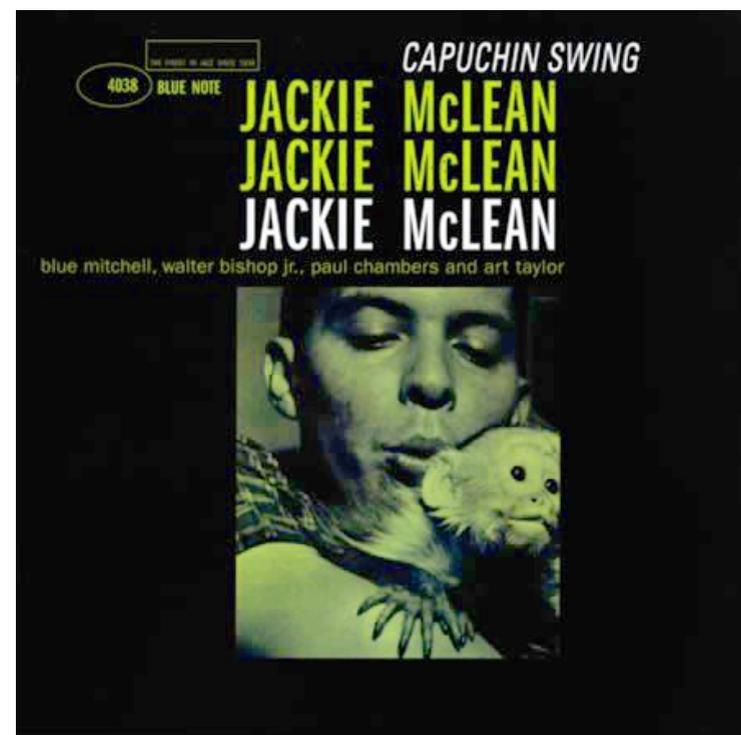
I've always loved this music but I didn't remember it sounding this good! Hank Mobley offers up some brilliant sax bits on one of Kenny Dorham's finest recordings, *Whistle Stop* and Dexter Gordon's performance blew me away as well. The biggest surprise were the Lee Morgan records. **I suggest turning these up loud, since they possess unlimited energy and some hooks that will knock you out. Amazing!** *(continued)*



Jackie McLean, Donald Byrd, Sonny Clark,
Kenny Drew, Blue Mitchell, Tina Brooks,
Paul Chambers & Philly Joe Jones

Jackie's Bag

Analogue Productions, 45rpm 180g LP



Jackie McLean, Bobby Timmons, Paul Chambers
& Art Blakey

Capuchin Swing

Analogue Productions, 45rpm 180g LP

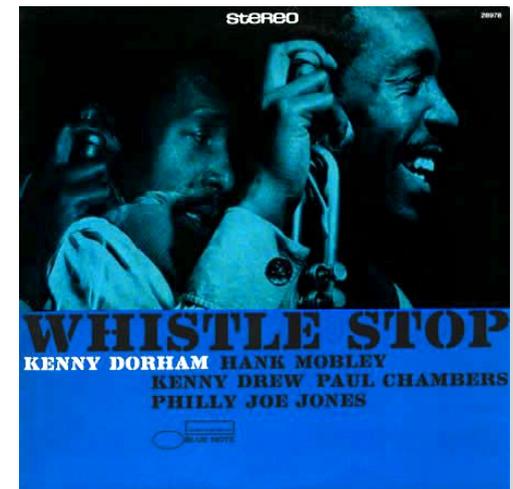
audience



"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**

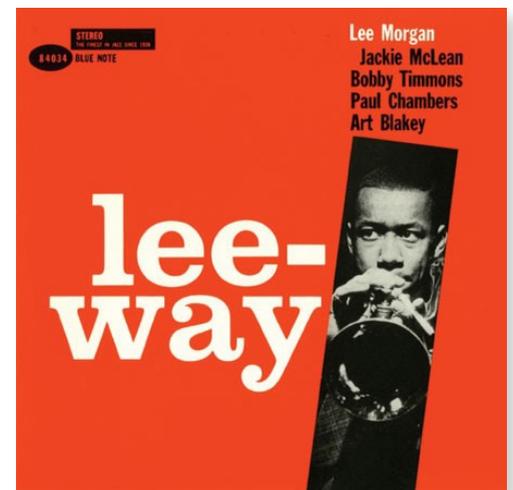


Just a small warning: Once you start playing these Blue Note recordings you will be hooked. The good news is that Acoustic Sounds is working on at least 20 more of these jazz gems. So make sure your turntable has a setting for 45 rpm., clean your stylus occasionally, and get ready to be transported to nirvana.



Kenny Dorham, Hank Mobley,
Kenny Drew, Paul Chambers &
Philly Joe Jones

Whistle Stop
Analogue Productions, 45rpm
180g LPC



Lee Morgan, Jackie McLean,
Bobby Timmons, Paul Chambers
& Art Blakey

Leeway
Analogue Productions, 45rpm
180g LPC

Audiophile Recordings

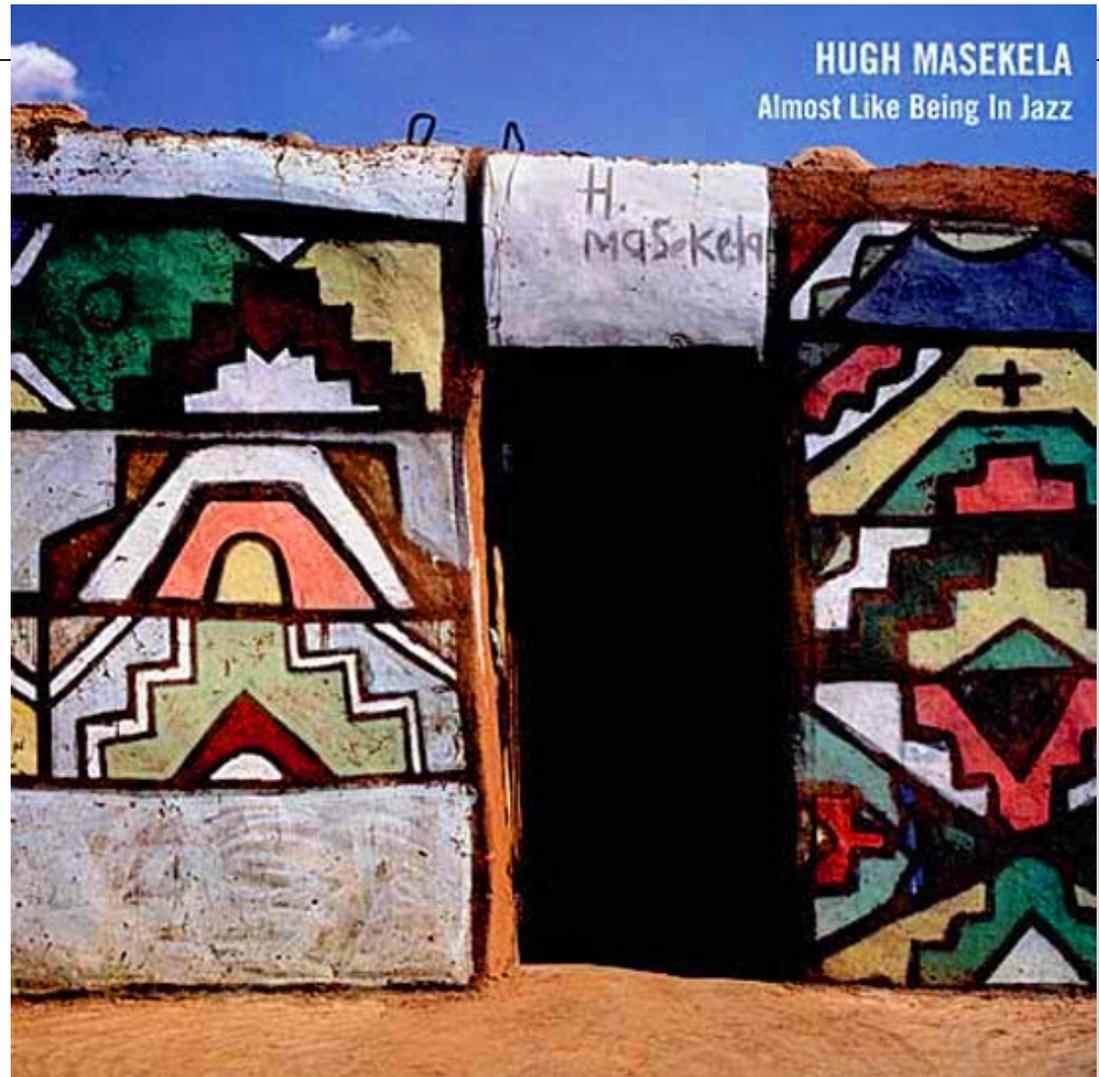
PART THREE: Three From Bernie

By Jeff Dorgay

Bernie Grundman has been in the record business quite some time now, and he has no intention of slowing down. His current project, Straight Ahead Records, has been utilizing his talent as a recording engineer as well as his mastering abilities. These three records were all recorded in his studio as live performances, with simultaneous feeds to analog and digital master tapes for their respective format. It's all done with minimal signal processing, miking and with no overdubs whatsoever.

If you take a peek at his website (www.straightaheadrecords.com), you can learn more about the fanatical attention to detail that makes these titles some of the most natural sounding recordings I've ever heard. No matter what your taste in jazz is, these are phenomenal recordings.

Unlike the other recordings in this column, these are not remastered versions of existing material.



Hugh Masekela

Almost Like Being in Jazz

180g 2LP set, and CD/Dual Disc

Hugh Masekela is a South African musician who is mostly known as a trumpet and flugelhorn player. Those of you who are younger than about 35 probably won't remember his big hit from 1968, "Grazing in the Grass." But that's a story for another day.

In the liner notes, Masekela tells us that a few well-known jazz critics back in the late 1950s said that the kind of music he was playing was "surely not jazz!" Now that said critics have died, he says, he feels that he can record his music without "stirring up their ghosts."

The tracks on this double LP set were recorded live in three days at Bernie Grundman's studio two years ago. In addition to the superlative sound quality, it sure sounds like some great jazz to me. These tunes are all jazz standards, but Masekela makes them his own with some of the most spirited flugelhorn playing I think I've ever heard. My favorite tune on the record was his version of Lionel Hampton's "Midnight Sun," but the rest are all keepers as well.

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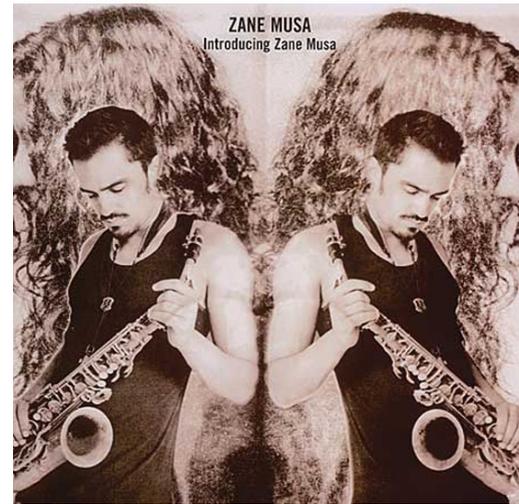
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Zane Musa

Introducing Zane Musa
180g LP and CD/Dual Disc

We are definitely back to bop with this record. A relative newcomer on the West Coast jazz scene, Musa has popped up as a member of the house band on *Last Call with Carson Daly*. Here he plays with Danny Grissett, Carlitos Puerto, Lorca Hart and Tony Austin, all guys he's known since his days at Cal Arts.

Showing great respect for the standards he plays, Musa offers up some great interpretations of work by Coltrane, Monk, Cannonball Adderly and a few others. If you didn't know better, you might even think he was channeling these guys during the performance. I particularly enjoyed the last tune on the LP, "Well You Needn't" by Monk. Keep your ears to the ground for more of this guy in the future, he's got a lot of soul.

This record was pressed as a single 33 rpm LP, but Bernie Grundman's genius still shines through. This is another treat for vinyl lovers.



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Neil Larsen

Orbit

180g LP, 2 LP set and CD/Dual Disc

This recording was reviewed on CD in our last issue, as the LPs had not yet been pressed. If you have to choose between them, I'd suggest the LP because it has that extra weight and presence, or a bit more magic, if you will.

Neil Larsen was a very popular studio player in the '80s and worked with Rickie Lee Jones before recording a few albums of his own, the most memorable being *High Gear* and *Jungle Fever*, which featured a number of jazz fusion greats of that time.

Orbit features some of the best tracks from those two albums and a few new tracks. True to form, Larsen incorporates a few of today's finest jazz fusion artists on this record. Robben Ford on guitar, Jimmy Haslip on bass and Tom Brechtlein on drums make up the core of the band. They jell quite well, but Larsen's keyboard work is the glue that holds it all together. If you were a fan then, pick this one up now. ●

Classical Music A to Z

By Dan Babineau

Sonic Blockbusters

Respighi, Rimsky-Korsakov & Rossini

One of the most memorable experiences I had with high-end audio as a kid was visiting my uncle in Chicago. We went into the city to check out some “hi-fi” gear that he had been aching to purchase and as I was looking at the wall of McIntosh gear thinking how cool it would be to score my own hi-fi system, the fun began.

Merv, the storeowner, dropped the needle on his first selection, Respighi’s “The Fountains of Rome” with Fritz Reiner and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. A sticker on the record jacket proclaimed this recording to be a *sonic blockbuster* and at the volume level that Merv was playing this work, I came away with buzzing ears. Merv had performed the big parlor trick of the time for hi-fi – play it loud and energize the room at the music’s expense! But I *do* remember the music and I loved the pictures that Respighi painted in his music. Oddly enough, after Merv played the Respighi, he tossed on another recording by Reiner and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. This time it was Rimski-Korsakov’s “Scheherazade”. We all melted back in our chairs and drifted far, far away. This was the day I became addicted to “hi-fi”!



Ottorino Respighi (1879-1936)

No one captures the spirit of sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth century Italy for me better than Ottorino Respighi. Looking back was not a unique approach to musical composition; many of the great composers from Britten to Stravinsky made it their wont to re-invent the music of generations past. But Respighi is my favorite when it comes to re-inventing Italian Baroque.



Except for a few little skirmishes with the likes of Mussolini, Respighi was able to live the life of scholar, composer and national hero. Like Shostokovich, he did have to deal with the politics of the time, which had an effect on some of his work. In this case, it was fascism, but history reveals Respighi took it in stride the somewhat flowery treatments of his compositions.

Respighi's Roman trilogy, "The Fountains of Rome, The Pines of Rome and Roman Festivals", put him on the classical map forever as a brilliant composer of *symphonic poems*. These compositions or *poems* are clear-cut examples of how music can transport you to another place and time as we feel the energy and passion of both ancient and modern Italy. "Ancient Airs & Dances", "Church Windows" & one of my favorites, "Three Botticelli Pictures" all have the innate ability to create three dimension images of a great time past. But the sheer genius here is Respighi's re-creation of the music of the Italian Baroque; the dances, the suites and the folk music of much simpler time in Roman history.

When I began studying music, one of my teachers kept repeating the same mantra with the close of each lesson: "in music everything comes together".

This situation is very apparent when discussing the music of Ottorino Respighi, who was greatly influenced by the two other composers that I'm going to discuss latter in this column; Rimsky-Korsakov & G. Rossini. He studied composition for a time with Rimski-Korsakov and reflected back to Rossini in his ballet "Laboutique fantasque". Rameau was the influence for his Neo-Baroque, "The Birds" and jump ahead a little and realize that his studies with Bruch had a great deal to do with Respighi's uncanny ability to pull it all structurally together in one warm glow!

Occasionally looked down on by critics for being a bit contrived or flowery, Respighi wrote a great deal of music in his life. Upon examining the breadth of his compositions and his understanding of the Italian Renaissance, I always come away in awe of one of the 20th centuries most elegant composers.

DAN'S PICKS:

London/Decca cat. #466993

Feste romane, Pines of Rome

– Maazel and the Cleveland Orchestra

RCA Living Stereo cat. #71614

Fountains of Rome, Pines of Rome & Debussy's

– La mer Fritz Reiner & the Chicago Symphony Orchestra

Mercury Living Presence cat. #434304

Ancient Airs & Dances

– Antal Dorati & the Philharmonica Hungarica

Mercury Living Presence cat. #432007

The Birds, Brazilian Impressions, The Fountains & the Pines

– Antal Dorati & the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra/ London Symphony Orchestra

Chandos cat. #8317

Church Windows & Brazilian

Impressions – Geoffrey Simon & the Philharmonica Orchestra

RCA Living Stereo cat. #66419

La boutique fantasque – Arthur Fielder & the Boston Symphony Orchestra

Chandos cat. #9962

Piano Quintet, Quartet for Strings & Pieces for Violin & Piano

– Ambache Chamber Ensemble

Chandos cat. #9453

La Sensitiva, Artuna, and two more pieces for voice and orchestra

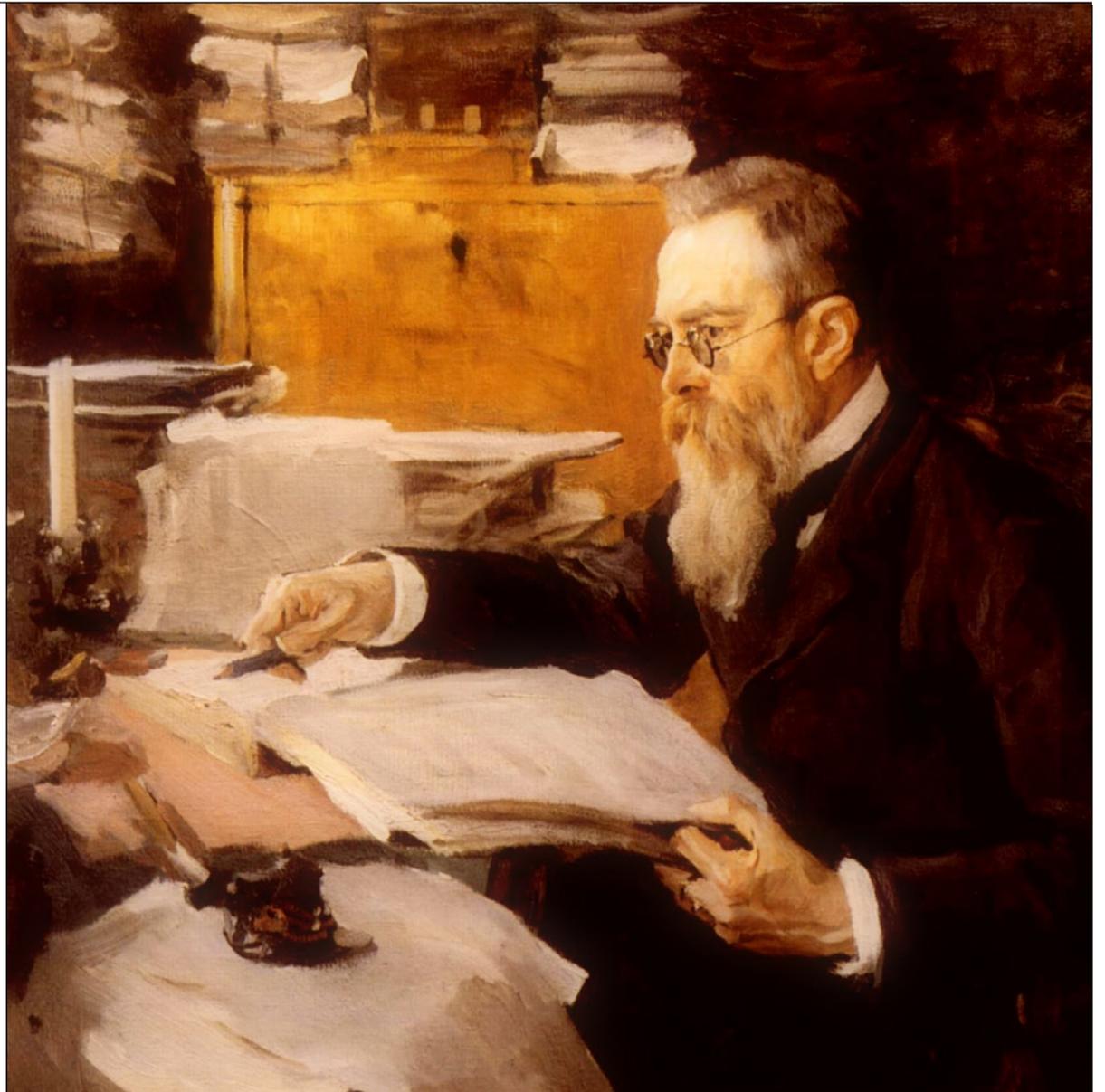
– Richard Hickox & the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908)

Rimsky-Korsakov could well be considered one of the biggest team players in classical music because he had such a profound effect on so many other composers from all over the world. A consummate musical scholar and master of composition, his grasp of large-scale orchestration is considered to be a benchmark of 20th century music by enthusiasts and scholars alike.

It all began with the formation of a music society - The Five, consisting of five notable Russian composers: Mily Balakirev, Cesar Cui, Modest Mussorgsky, Alexander Borodin and Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov. This rather modest group of *self-taught* Russian composers wanted to establish a unique identity for Russian classical music, unaffected by the rest of the world. Their music embraced *their* Russian heritage, the folk music of *their* small villages and the pastoral lifestyle that they had been born into.

The Five made up their own rules for musical composition and cast aside many of the preconceived formulas and musical structures that were widely recognized and put into play by composers such as Mozart or even Haydn. Rimsky-Korsakov is widely recognized as being one of the first Russians to compose an actual symphony. He composed this work while serving in the Russian navy, which is where he met Mily Balakirev. It was on his many journeys abroad that Rimsky-Korsakov began to formulate the themes for his many exotic works. *(continued)*



Portrait by Valentin Serov © Wikipedia

Rimsky-Korsakov is widely recognized as being one of the first Russians to compose an actual symphony.



Once you attend a concert and experience Rimsky-Korsakov's brilliance, it will stay with you forever!

After a time, the Five started to lose momentum, and Rimsky-Korsakov realized that he did not have the technical background to compose at the level that he aspired. He managed to land a position at the St. Petersburg Conservatory where he honed his compositional skills and started to have a profound effect on quite a few other composers. Completing and correcting quite a few of Mussorgsky's compositions after his death, Rimsky-Korsakov was largely responsible for keeping Mussorgsky's work in good standing.

Rimsky-Korsakov suffered from synesthesia, a neural condition in which people can see letters, numbers or musical notes as a color. Many musicologists felt that this condition was a gift that actually aided Rimsky-Korsakov's understanding of complex musical composition.

Rimsky-Korsakov was one of the more prolific composers, completing fifteen operas, a prodigious amount of large-scale orchestral music, chamber music, chorale music and a variety of transcriptions, namely Borodin's "Prince Igor", and Mussorgsky's "Boris Godunov". Rimsky-Korsakov's real strengths lie in his absolute attention to the details that bring together large-scale orchestration. He was a master at weaving melody and instrumentation into one powerful musical statement with perfect tonality. Call it Russian spirit; call it the work of a supreme tactician. *(continued)*



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Srajan Ebaen, 6moons.com



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Once you attend a concert and experience Rimsky-Korsakov's brilliance, it will stay with you forever!

Though "Scheherazade" is grossly overplayed by the audiophile set, its beauty and fortitude stand the test of time, capturing a power and passion that is uniquely Russian. It takes awhile to digest his many operas, but the highlights are extraordinary; from "Ivan the Terrible" to "The Golden Cockerel", we get quite an informative glimpse into ancient Russian Mythology. The sea-fairing "Sadko" really needs to be seen in concert to be fully appreciated and is my personal favorite.

It's amazing how this humble man from the outskirts of St. Petersburg grew into one of the most influential teachers and composers in classical music.

His theories on musical composition were the building blocks for modern day Russian composers like Shostakovich, Miaskovsky, Kabalevsky and even Khachaturian. Stravinsky and Rachmaninoff often commented on the genius and precision of Rimsky-Korsakov's work.

But the true test of time is how the public has responded through the years; "Scheherazade", "Capriccio Espagnol", The Russian Easter Festival Overture" and "Flight of the Bumble Bee" are some of the most popular pieces of classical music ever played and recorded.

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Decca cat. #443464

Russian Easter Festival Overture, Snow Maiden & Other Highlights

– Ansermet & the Swiss Romande

RCA Living Stereo cat. #68168

Scheherazade – Fritz Reiner & the Chicago Symphony Orchestra

RCA Living Stereo cat. #63302

Capriccio Espagnol etc.
– Kiril Kondrashin & the RCA Victor Symphony Orchestra

Bis cat. #1377

Symphony #2 – Antar & Scheherazade Kees Bakels & the Malaysian Philharmonic

Bis cat. 1387

Tale of the Tsar Saltan, Including Flight of the Bumble Bee – Kees Bakels & the Malaysian Philharmonic

DG cat. #66419

Complete Symphonies, Capriccio & Easter Overture – Neeme Jarvi & the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra

Telarc cat. #80131

Symphony #2
– Antar Lorin Maazel & the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra

Telarc cat. #80568

Russian Easter Festival Overture
– Robert Spano & the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra

Meridian cat. #84293

Quartet for Strings etc.
– Lyric Quartet

Asv cat. #771

Sadko #4: Song of the Indian Guest –Loris Tjeknavorian & the Armenian Philharmonic Orchestra

Philips cat. #462618

The Tsar's Bride – Valery Gergiev & the Kirov Theater Orchestra and Chorus

Philips cat. #000661909

Sadko – Valery Gergiev & the Kirov Theater Orchestra

Gioachino Rossini (1792-1868)

It's hard to believe that no one has decided to make a movie about Gioachino Rossini simply because Rossini led one of the most interesting lives of *anyone* in history! His life story reads like the plot of an epic thriller and in the end Rossini always comes up on top. Born into a musical family, Rossini began composing at a very early age and continued well into his seventies despite many perilous circumstances.

Rossini's life was action-packed and full of despair, but you would never come to this conclusion when listening to his music.

As a matter of fact his many operas are some of the most fun you can have with your clothes on (or off). Witty, full of energy and poking fun at whatever or whoever gets in the way, no one will make you feel happier to be alive than Rossini!



After holding many rank positions as a boy, Rossini made his way to Bologna where he studied musical theory and began composing. He learned the Italian opera style here but began creating his own version that clearly separates him from any other composer. Rossini's music is a combination of innate musical genius coupled with spirit that explodes with an undying amount of natural energy. This is the spirit of all things Italian: confident, resourceful and full of life! It all flows so easy and fits together so well that we hardly realize that we've been lifted into the music: these hysterical dramas that almost always end in a positive light. This natural precision is both a gift as well as the result of an arduous study of musical theory and composition. No one gave Rossini anything for free; he earned every note and every scrap of his enormous catalog of work. Whenever I run into a person that says they don't like opera, I play Rossini and watch the smile grow on their faces. *(continued)*

From his early chamber works to his last opera "Guillaume Tell" (William Tell), Rossini's tongue and cheek tempos never fail to entertain. It's almost as if he's telling us to forget our troubles and run away into one of the many absurd plots. Rossini was very playful and the real fun comes in his operas like "The Silken Ladder", "The Italian Girl in Algiers", and "The Thieving Magpie". It is within these bizarre plots that Rossini's genius expounds. Believe it or not, opera *can* be fun and Gioachino

Rossini makes absolutely sure that we are always sitting on the edge of our seats.

Rossini took a snapshot approach to composition that gave his music an addictive spontaneity. It is truly amazing that many of his most loved works were created in just a few days!

Whenever I experience a Rossini opera, I am always compelled to hear more of this genius at work. Due to his popularity, he was able to spend a lot of time in Paris

and travel abroad as well.

Rossini's work is its naturalness, seeming as if it were just picked from a tree. But the more you listen, the more apparent the complexities that are hidden beneath the playful exterior. Many consider "Petite Messe Solennelle" one of the most beautiful pieces of classical music ever written; it's certainly one of my favorites. Do yourself a favor, take in at least one Rossini opera in your lifetime, I know you won't be disappointed! ●

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Current Classics

By Dan Babineau

Anna Netrebko, Valery Gergiev and the Orchestra of the Mariinsky Theater

Russian Album

CD, Deutsche Grammophon

You don't need to understand Russian to enjoy this beautiful collection of songs and arias, but it would give you more insight to the music. On this disc, Netrebko has found a solid foundation to continue her amazing career and play to her strengths. Though not yet the quintessential coloratura soprano, I found this performance of both well-known and relatively obscure Russian music seductive and masterful. Netrebko seems more at home with the collection on this disc than some of her past offerings.

The Glinka, the Prokofiev and even the Tchaikovsky are the standouts here. The excitement and energy that Netrebko blends into this music is captivating, it's very hard not to fall in love from the first note.

The recording is first rate; Valery Gergiev and the Orchestra of the Mariinsky Theater turn in a solid performance that allows Netrebko to draw us into an atmosphere that is filled with both power and grace. I look forward to hearing more Russian music from Anna Netrebko because it is in this musical realm that her talents really ignite!



I found this performance of both well-known and relatively obscure Russian music seductive and masterful.

Yundi Li, Seiji Ozawa and the Berlin Philharmonic

Prokofiev: Piano Concerto No. 2
Ravel: Piano Concerto in G Major
 CD, Deutsche Grammophon

Add the youthful vigor and technical agility of Yundi Li to the award winning Berlin Philharmonic with Seiji Ozawa in command and you have a new perspective on a pair of classical masterpieces. Getting out the magnifying glass, we can argue some of the elements of tempo and attack in both pieces.

Li is no Martha Argerich and tends to romanticize in places that are usually handled in a more haunting manner with the Prokofiev concerto. Not quite as dark as some of the most famous performances, Li's interpretation is fresh and open. His energy is spot on and the Berlin Philharmonic makes a wonderful backdrop for this young pianist, though I could do without the applause at the end. Fortunately, it was not at the end of the Ravel piece.

Be sure to turn the volume down at the close of the Prokofiev piece, as it gets quite a bit more dynamic for the Ravel. Li's interpretation of this concerto is light and playful, as his fingers dance out the jazzy sequences of this work. I would have liked to see a bit more weight and soul in the opening movement, but the second and third movements more than make up for it.

In the end, a great deal of fun.



Li's interpretation of this concerto is light and playful, as his fingers dance out the jazzy sequences of this work.



Bell actually played a red Stradivarius in this performance and his vibrant tone locks you in from the first note.

Joshua Bell, Marin Alsop and the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra

John Corigliano's Red Violin Concerto
CD, Sony

Even if you aren't a fan of contemporary classical music, this will make an amazing addition to your music collection. Originally slated as a film score, this concerto in four movements will take your soul to places above and beyond your own emotional stratosphere. As a fan of Corigliano's compositions, I equate his dark, powerful portrayal of raw emotion with Shostakovich and even Prokofiev. Like Shostakovich, Corigliano interweaves delightful lyric passages that slow down the tempo, giving us a moment to reflect before we get re-energized again. However, he goes much further with an abundance of controlled atonality.

I wasn't sure about Joshua Bell at first, fearing he may have been miscast for this deep seeded music, but after spending a bit of time with the disc I gladly admit I was wrong; all four movements are masterpieces on their own. The hook arrives in the light and airy third movement, immediately contrasted by the loud and boisterous finale. Corigliano excels at percussive grandeur here, with the Baltimore Symphony providing a granite platform that allows Joshua Bell to catapult us to the top of the rafters.

Bell actually played a red Stradivarius in this performance and his vibrant tone locks you in from the first note. The varied atonality here, bound with delightful lyricism creates an energy that is gripping and addictive. Keep your remote ready, as this one is extremely dynamic! ●

Publisher's Forward:

It's not a novelty for nerds anymore; the computer has made some big inroads into the world of the audiophile. Whether you just rip a few of your favorite CD's to iTunes for a road trip, or you use your computer as a full blown music server, this is now a force to be reckoned with.

As intrigued as I am with this world, I don't have as much time to spend there as I would like and I'd be lying to you if I tried to answer all of your questions. Fortunately, we have a guy that we are going to put forward as our man in the trenches that eats and breathes this stuff.

Chris runs his own site, appropriately called:

The Computer Audiophile at www.computeraudiophile.com

Those of you that would like to know more about the marriage of computers, digital audio files and the rest of high end audio will find some helpful information there. I look forward to Chris contributing to this column on a regular basis and answering more of our questions!

The Audioengine 2 Speakers

By Chris Connaker

There's nothing like coming home to find a new pair of speakers waiting at your front door. That is unless the temperature is 11 degrees below zero and the speakers have been sitting there for a couple hours! But once unthawed, I was able to get down to listening to these little jewels.

One third the size of the Audioengine 5's, the model 2's are definitely made for being right on your computer desk and fit exceptionally well on both sides of your laptop (this is how they were displayed at the Rocky Mountain Audiofest when introduced). You can read the rest of the technical information about the AE 2's at www.audioengineusa.com/tech.thm



THE COMPUTER AUDIOPHILE:

The Audioengine 2's are only 6" high, 4" wide and 5.25" deep. Weighing in at only 3.55 pounds each they feature an internal 15-watt amplifier. It's interesting to note that these speakers do not feature a Class-D or T amplifier; it's a real Class AB solid-state amplifier! Cost is \$199 per pair.





Setup Is A Breeze

The AE 2's come with one standard mini-to-mini 1/8" cable and one standard speaker cable in the box. The mini connects from the left speaker to the line out port on your computer and the speaker cable runs from the left speaker to the right speaker.

The left speaker contains the amplifier and the power supply connection. There is also a volume control that allows you to set the volume to your desired level.

The amplifier is built into the left speaker, which connects to the external power supply. In almost all situations there will be no software configuration

necessary, as your operating system will automatically send all audio to the line out port.

Connecting to the AE 2's via the standard RCA inputs may be a little more familiar to the audiophiles in the audience and offers some additional customization. If your soundcard has RCA outputs this is a no-brainer. Unable to resist the audiophile urge to tweak, I grabbed my pair of Kimber Select (KS1011) RCA cables and connected the AE 2's to my Benchmark DAC1 USB, which allowed me to use the volume control on the DAC1 instead of the one behind the speaker. Much more convenient! *(continued)*

The very first thing I noticed was how well these little speakers image.

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The Audioengine 2 Is My Kind Of Speaker

Once unthawed, it was time to listen to some music. The music on my Macintosh computer is saved in AIFF uncompressed format at 16 bit / 44.1 KHz and played through iTunes 7.6 on OS X ver. 10.5.1. First up was Elvis Costello’s album *North*. A perfect album to warm up my ears and get a feel for the speakers.

The very first thing I noticed was how well these little speakers image. Elvis Costello’s voice was dead center between the speakers and right in front of my monitor.

The AE 2’s have a very nice laid-back presentation that suits these desktop speakers very well.

I’ve tried many other speakers in this category and price range. Most of them are computer speakers first with a secondary focus on reproducing music. Many have a very forward presentation that gets right in your face for bomb explosions and machine guns. That’s great if you are a gamer, but I’m a music lover first so that’s my priority.

I let the AE 2’s ease into things a bit with Elvis Costello, but it was time to crank them up a bit. Up next Pearl Jam’s *Riot Act*. The A2’s reproduced the opening guitar riffs on “Save You” very well and reproduced Eddie’s voice on par with some more expensive speakers that I’ve heard.

This album did bring out some aspects of the speakers that could use a little refining.
(continued)

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Sure the crashing of the cymbals was a little bright and the mid range was a little too reserved for my taste, but for a couple hundred bucks these things rock. To finish this album I cranked up the volume on track number ten, "Green Disease." The song has a great drum opening and the AE 2's kept up very well. You don't get this type of performance from just any desktop speaker.

I closed out my listening sessions with Grammy winning duo Mili Vanili from their multi-platinum album *Girl You Know It's True*. I'm only kidding of course. I want to make sure your still awake!

If you're still rockin' out to those speakers built into your monitor it's time for an upgrade.

More Than Worth Their Weight

The Audioengine 2 powered desktop speakers are definitely overachievers. When was the last time you were pleasantly surprised by high build quality from a relatively inexpensive product? It doesn't happen often. The A2's will pleasantly surprise you both physically and sonically. If you're still rockin' out to those speakers built into your monitor it's time for an upgrade. Even if you're somewhat satisfied by your current desktop system you owe it to yourself to audition the Audioengine 2 speakers. ●



The High End is Alive and Well in Seattle

Rolling Stone, The Wall Street Journal and The New York Times have all recently proclaimed that high end audio and the world of the audiophile is a thing of the past. A casual observer might even agree, considering that there aren't as many audio salons as there used to be ten or twenty years ago.



But You Couldn't Be More Wrong

You never would have known it by attending the third annual "Music Matters" event in Seattle at Definitive Audio. The place was packed from 4 p.m. in the afternoon (with a line of people waiting in the rain to get in) until they finally closed down for the evening around 10 p.m. on February 6. Over 500 people rsvp'd back to get a chance to see some of the best gear that the audio world has to offer from Wilson, Linn, Meridian, Ayre, Sooloos, Magnepan, B&W and others.

All the big boys were there: Dave Wilson was demonstrating the new X-2, Ivor Tiefenbrun was showing off the latest from Linn, along with Dave Nauber of Classe, Rob Darling from Sooloos and quite a few others.

They had six individual showrooms, with people lined up waiting to see all of the goodies, demonstrated every half hour. It was truly exciting to see such a large crowd converge to take it all in. When we walked in the door, we were greeted by the latest Linn LP-12 with the Keel upgrade. I knew right away we were in the right place!

The Definitive group certainly knows how to throw an event. They had an open bar and plenty of munchables on hand to take care of the crowd. I would have never had the nerve to have a full buffet table that close to a pair of B&W 803D's but nothing bad happened and the guests were courteous.



Plenty of audio banter was alive and well too. Waiting for the Wilson demo, one customer informed Marc Phillips and I that “Those Wilsons aren’t bad but my B&W Diamond Signatures are much more musical”, while waiting for the B&W demo another customer flatly declared that “The new X-2 is the most amazing speaker on Earth!”

The good news was that there was great sound in all of the rooms and the bottom line was that there was more than enough passion for music and audio to go around.

Mark Ormiston and Craig Abplanalp, the principals of Definitive Audio were on hand to answer questions and mingle with the crowd. After 30 years of this business, these guys have no lack of enthusiasm for audio or their customers and they have a thriving business to prove it. If you live anywhere near Seattle, you owe it to yourself to stop by Definitive Audio and visit one of Americas premier high end audio dealers.



MASTER OF DETAIL

THE AVALON ASCENDANT

By Jeff Dorgay

AVALON

Having recently spent some quality time with Avalon's flagship speaker, The Sentinel, I was very curious to hear just how much of that sound I could expect from Avalon for 7% of the price that the Sentinel commands. After listening to the Ascendant for a few months now, I am very impressed.

The Ascendant aptly named, being at the beginning of Avalon's lineup following their NP Evolution Series and their Symbol Series (which is directed more at the home theater market) is priced at \$9795 per pair in quilted cherry, curly maple or figured walnut. A pair in their premium finishes of myrtle or walnut burl are somewhat higher at \$13,295 a pair. They have a bit smaller footprint than the Eidolon series, only being 10" wide, 13" deep and 37" high. Weighing 75 pounds each, they should not be too difficult to move around in your room, though I would suggest having a little help with unpacking duties. You wouldn't want to put a nick in these cabinets!

Removing the grille reveals a pair of 7" Nomex-Kevlar composite woofers and a 1" dome tweeter in a 2 way configuration. This tweeter uses the same composite neodymium technology that is featured in the pricier Avalon models. The Ascendants come packaged in a very substantial crate and fit like a glove, with the grilles packaged separately in the top pocket. They also include spare posts for the grilles, should one ever snap. This is the kind of attention to detail that makes you feel at ease about spending close to ten thousand dollars on a pair of speakers.

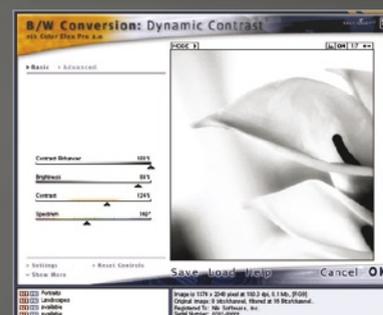
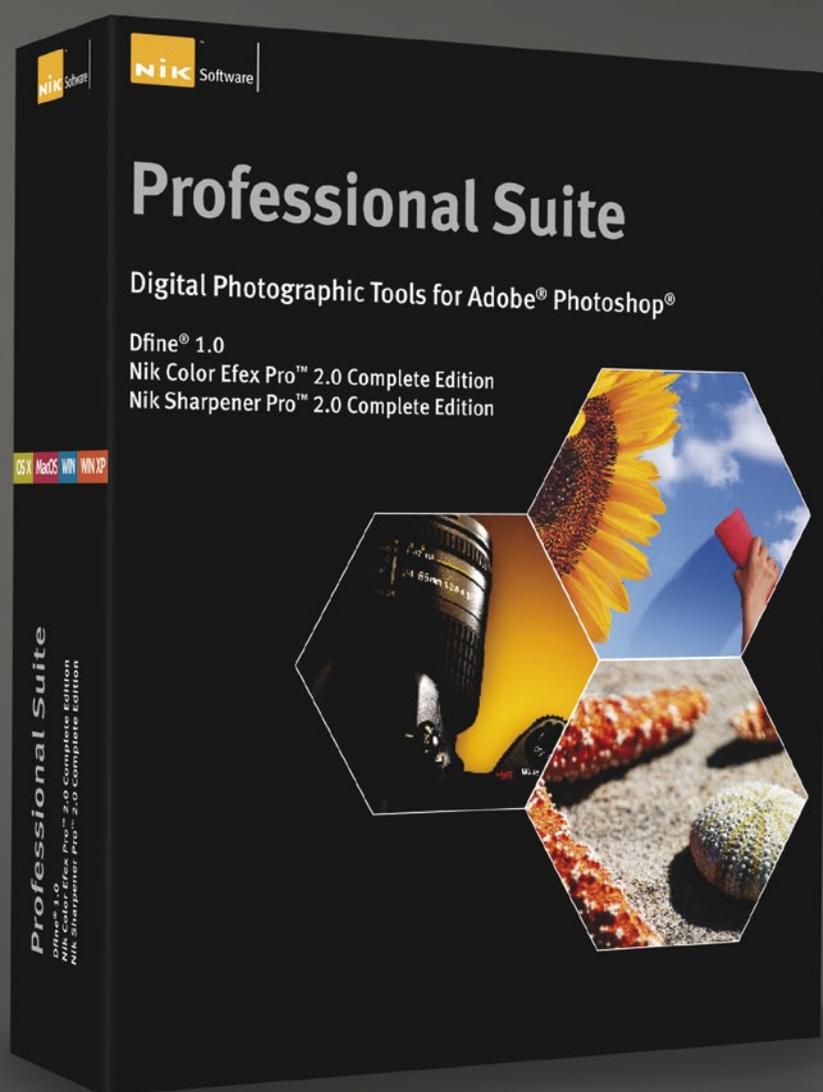


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The Long and the Short of It

Having been at the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest for the week, my test speakers had some time on the clock so they only needed a few days to go from great to outstanding. I am told a brand new set will need about 300 to 400 hours for full break in.

The more time you spend with the Ascendants, the more you realize what masterpieces of fine craftsmanship they are.

A quick knuckle rap of the front panel felt like I was hitting a piece of granite. When Avalon's sales manager Gary Mulder stopped by to take a quick listen of the Ascendants in my room, he pointed out that the front panel where the drivers are mounted is 3 3/4" thick; I must say that these are the most inert cabinets I've experienced. This is what contributes to the detail these speakers are capable of resolving, the music is not smeared at all by cabinet colorations or resonance.

I had very good results using the Ascendants on the long or the short wall in my main listening room, which measures 16 x 24 feet. My trusty Leica Disto made it a snap to get the speakers positioned very quickly and optimize my couch for the perfect listening position. The best position? That depends on what you prefer. If you would like a touch more depth, the short wall is the optimum situation, but if you are like me and want the ultimate in soundstage width, the long wall is the way to go. *(continued)*

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Both were so seductive, I had a hard time deciding but after about a month of moving the speakers back and forth, I settled on the long wall. Normally, I sit about 8-9 feet away from my reference speakers, but I found that the optimum spot for the Ascendants to be about 10 feet back, so plan your listening area accordingly.

Bottom line, the Ascendant is very easy to set up. If you don't have the skill or the patience to completely finesse the installation, they will still offer up an extremely engaging performance. That last hour of getting them in the exact position will yield a bit more precise imaging and a bit more depth if you want to spend it, but these are not fussy speakers in any sense of the word.

Once that perfect spot is located, the spikes are mandatory. The Ascendant is ported on the bottom of the enclosure and getting them up on the spikes will maintain the proper distance from the port to the floor. The three machined spikes are easy to install, just tip the back up and install one at each corner, then slip the third one under the middle of the cabinet in front. Don't step on these, or you will be in pain!

It's All In The Mix

With an 89db sensitivity rating and a 4-ohm impedance, these speakers are very easy to drive. While I did the majority of my evaluation with my reference Conrad-Johnson Premier 350SA amplifier (solid-state, 350 watts per channel), I tried about eight different amplifiers that ranged in power from 30 watts per channel on up to get a good feel of just how well these speakers would work in any situation.

I particularly liked that the Ascendants would offer up very musical sound no matter what I pair them up with, from the Prima Luna Prologue 1 all the way to the Premier 350. Many people tend to build a system around their speakers so if you are in this camp, rest assured that if you can comfortably build your system around the Ascendants. I would not shy away from using these speakers with the best source components available. As I improved the quality of the source and amplification, they just got better. *(continued)*

**As I improved the
quality of the source and
amplification, they just
got better.**



The whole Avalon line excels at achieving a perfect balance of dynamics, transparency, coherence and above all tonality.

My Bias Exposed

The whole Avalon line excels at achieving a perfect balance of dynamics, transparency, coherence and above all tonality. These speakers reproduce acoustic instruments so well that you feel as close to the music as recorded music gets. And for me, that's what it's all about. I've heard almost all of the other speakers in the Avalon line and they all do a superlative job in these areas. Including the new Indra which we will also be finished reviewing shortly. Remember, I'm the panel guy that loves transparency, coherence and midrange magic, so a dynamic speaker has to be exceptional to get my attention.

I'm also a tough customer because I listen to an incredibly wide range of music and my mood changes like the wind. One minute I want to listen to opera and the next I want to listen to Metallica. For me the perfect speaker has as much detail and resolution as I can get without being harsh or offensive, but I want as much musicality as I can get without things getting muddy. This is a very fine line that few speakers can walk, but the Avalons do it with ease.

This balance drew me back to the Ascendants every time I would substitute another speaker in their place. That extra layer of guitars, or that extra backing vocal track that I wasn't quite hearing before was easy to discern with the Ascendants in the system. Having this kind of clarity available is easy to get used to, no matter what kind of music you enjoy.

These speakers also did an outstanding job at conveying spatial cues in all dimensions and offer up a stereo image where you can just pluck things out of the air. Again, one needs to listen to some acoustic music to get a better picture of this "rightness" that the Ascendants possess. A drum kit takes up a certain amount of acoustic space in a room, as does a piano or any other instrument. If you have a friend that is a musician, spend a little bit of time listening to them play their instrument in a room for you and listen carefully. Close your eyes and try to save that mental picture. When you listen to the Ascendant, you'll see what I mean.

(continued)

That's what the Ascendants always delivered a big dose of in my room; they had spot-on tonality but not quite the sheer size that the real thing delivers. You will have to step up to the Sentinels to get all of that! If you dig the Avalon sound, you just get a smaller helping of it with the Ascendant than with their bigger speakers. (As you go up the model range, you get more with each one) For those of you that don't have the room for a pair of Sentinels, the Ascendant will put a big smile on your face.

Tone, Tone, Tone!

Often the best test of tonality is to listen to acoustic instruments, but sometimes speakers that do a good job here fall down when they are asked to play complex, dynamic music or heavy rock music. I went through quite a few of my favorite records and was consistently impressed with the fine balance of rendering musical detail along with the tonal accuracy they provided.

Listening to the Blue Note test pressings reviewed in this issue was a real treat. When Dexter Gordon blasts his sax on "Dexter's Calling" at 45 rpm, it's damn convincing. When the backing female vocalists chime in saying "Six in the morning, yeah" on Snoop Dogg's "Gin and Juice" it's spooky, it sounds like they are ten feet to the left of the left speaker!

The final hurdle for a great speaker to overcome is the way it handles musical contrasts. The Ascendant's ability to start, stop and control the musical waveform is what gives it such a window of clarity on the music. This is when you have those rare moments listening to your system where you get fooled into thinking it just might be the real thing. The clarity and lack of distortion is what made listening to these speakers for eight hours at a time a great pleasure.

Definitely A Music Lover's Speaker

Even in the ten thousand dollar range, there are still some compromises to be made, but the Ascendant doesn't ask you to make many sacrifices. The only real compromises I feel you have to make with this speaker is just that last touch of ultra low bass (the Ascendant is rated -1.5db at 28 hz) and the ability to play at ultra brain damage levels. If your musical diet consists of only rock music that you need to blast at all times, this may not be your cup of tea. But that would be like getting mad at a Porsche because it can't go down the drag strip as fast as a fuel dragster. The Ascendant is about finesse.

If you enjoy a wide range of music, you will be thrilled and if you happen to listen to a lot of classical music you will be in heaven. Let's face it; *Morph the Cat* is going to sound pretty decent on anything, but handling the violin section has a higher degree of difficulty.

In the end, the Avalon Ascendant is on my very short list of all time favorites. ●



For those of you that don't have the room for a pair of Sentinels, the Ascendant will put a big smile on your face.

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DH Labs Red Wave Power Cord

By Jerold O'Brien

I'm the last one to the dance when it comes to the expensive power cord thing for a number of reasons, the most important being cost. My system isn't worth much more than about ten grand on a good day, so the idea of spending what I could buy a good used BMW 2002tii parts car for is just stupid in my book.



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JEFF DORGAY
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So, for the last few years I've been using the Power Plus cords from DH Labs. At \$220 for a 2 meter cord, they offer decent improvement from the stock cord that comes with your gear at a price that won't have you eating at Jack In The Box for the rest of the month.

And I was happy in my little world for a long time, sticking my nose up at the mega power cords that happened to zoom through the *TONE* office. I didn't even *want* to know, to be honest with you. Big dough for a spare Kugel-fisher injection pump, no problem, but power cords? Not me.

But now that I traded in my faithful Vandersteen 2Ce Signatures on 3A Signatures, I felt that I might be able to get more resolution elsewhere too. It's a sickness I tell you, once you get hooked; there is no stopping it! As fate would have it, DH Labs had sent a pair of their new Red Wave cords for review just as my Vandersteens were well broken in. It was a normal day of being a pack and ship mule at HQ when I spied the DH Labs box.

"Mine!" Was the first thing out of my mouth and I tore the box open to behold a thing of beauty.

(And in my favorite color, no less)

I must have these power cords because they match my car! Just that easily the review assignment fell into my lap. As I was hauling ass home up the I-503 towards my mancave, it dawned on me, "Just how much is there to say about a power cord anyway?" At that moment I realized our publisher had won. *(continued)*



SILVER SONIC

Swapping a pair of Red Wave cords into your system would be about equivalent to going from a cheap pair of Chinese tubes to your favorite spendy NOS vintage tubes.

Change Is Good

As hesitant as I am to change my system, it's undergone a subtle metamorphosis over the last year. Thanks to those Vandersteen 3's and more power on tap thanks to a nice used ARC VT100 mk. III that I picked up at Echo Audio, it was pretty easy to hear a difference between my old Power Plus cords and the new red beauties. Fearing the wrath of our technical editor, I proceeded with scientific accuracy (one thing in, one thing out as he likes to say) and replaced the cord on my power amp first.

Without question, there was more music getting through to my speakers and the quality of what was getting through was a bit less grainy. I could instantly hear the bass tighten up and have a little bit more control. Up high, the presentation was cleaner, even when listening to my favorite Japanese pressing of Judas Priest's *Screaming for Vengeance*. Yeah, yeah, you guys listening to Eva Cassidy will go bonkers over this power cord, but you won't catch me listening to that stuff.

Replacing the power cord and moving it to the preamp I noticed the same changes, but not quite to the same extent as putting it on the power amplifier. If I had to quantify it, I'd say I got a good bump by swapping the cord on the power amp and almost the same from the preamp swap. But now I wanted more and used those red devils with both amp and preamp for about a week. Upon removing them and going back to stock power cords, the sound definitely collapsed somewhat, losing a bit of pace and picking up a noticeable amount of grain. Putting my old Power Plus cords back in place got me about half way back to the presentation of the Red Wave cords but that's all.

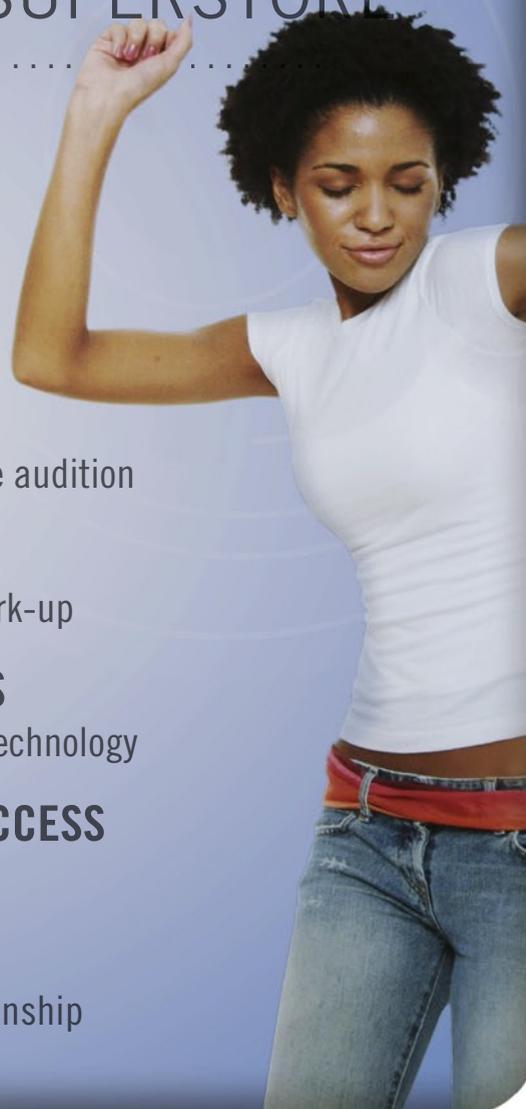
For those of you that would like a more accurate quantization, I would compare swapping a pair of Red Wave cords into your system would be about equivalent to going from a cheap pair of Chinese tubes to your favorite spendy NOS vintage tubes, if that helps. *(continued)*

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OK, I'm Hooked

Trust me, I'm the one at the company Christmas party that pokes fun at the rest of our writers with their zooty power cords, expensive interconnects and various ways to control vibration. I'm a simple man, I drive a 34-year-old car, and I said I would never cave in to this, but the Red Wave power cords are damn good!

Eight hundred bucks a pop is not small potatoes for a power cord and I'm guessing those of you that are obsessed will probably need three or four to cover your whole system. But considering what a good set of 8 NOS 6550's set me back for my VT100, this is not a bad upgrade for the money. One or two great power cords won't transform a crappy system into an amazing one, but if you have everything else dialed in and you would like to get to 11, I can't think of a more worthwhile upgrade to your system than the DH Labs Red Wave Power cords. ●

MSRP: (2 meter) \$800

MANUFACTURER

DH Labs Inc.

9638 NW 153rd Terrace
Alachua, FL 32615
386-418-0560

www.silversonic.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source: Rega P3 w/
Groovetracer mods, Rega Apheta
Cartridge

Digital Source: Naim CD-5i

Preamplifier: ARC SP-6 with
Great Northern Sound updates

Power Amplifier: ARC VT100
mk. III

Speakers: Vandersteen 3A
Signature

Chicken/Egg

**THE RED WINE AUDIO 30.2
SIGNATURE AMPLIFIER**

By Jeff Dorgay



Red Wine Audio

The biggest dilemma facing new audio manufacturers is how to get the word out on the street about their products. It's a story we've all heard before, that you can't get the job without experience, and you can't get any experience if no one will hire you for the job. Well, it's the same thing in the audio press. Many magazines won't take a chance on new manufacturers for fear that they will not be around in a couple of years, therefore angering the readership for betting on a loser. But what if you find a real winner?

One of the benefits of being in this game for thirty years is that I remember when most of the big guys of today were in the very same shoes. Yep, I bought my PV-1 from Conrad-Johnson when they had only been in business for a year, and that turned out to be a pretty smart move! I can say the same for Krell, Naim, Meridian, Rega and a few other companies that ended up becoming proverbial pillars in the world of high-end audio. Sure, a handful of my favorites went belly up, but none of them would have made it at all if we audiophiles hadn't expressed both our faith and our enthusiasm after purchasing their products.

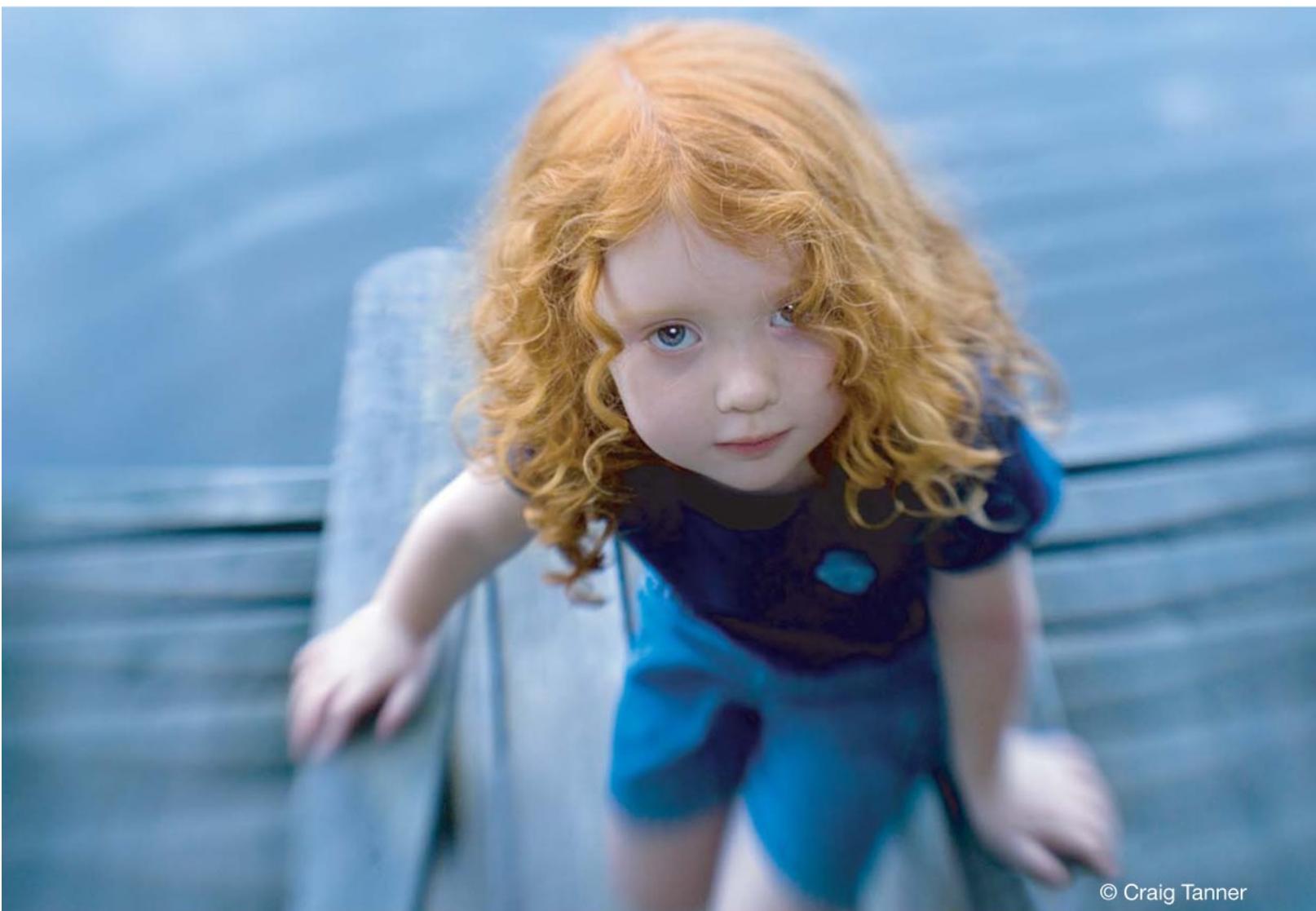
This brings us to the RWA 30.2 amplifier. Red Wine Audio is headed by Vinnie Rossi, who started the company three years ago by doing modifications to CD players and, more recently, iPods. I happen to own his iMod, which was done to my 4th generation 80gb iPod, and it is quite good indeed.

The 30.2 Signature amplifier is available in two versions. For \$2100, you can purchase it as a power amplifier. For \$2500, however, you can get the 30.2 as an integrated amplifier, which features a Goldpoint stepped attenuator (with remote control), as opposed to a full active preamplifier stage. Our test version had the attenuator and was used both as a standalone integrated and a power amplifier by feeding it from a few different active preamplifiers. The integrated has a 20k input impedance, while the power amplifier version has an input impedance of 100k. Thanks to an additional high level output (also controlled by the attenuator) you can use a powered subwoofer too. *(continued)*

Many magazines won't take a chance on new manufacturers for fear that they will not be around in a couple of years, therefore angering the readership for betting on a loser. But what if you find a real winner?



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Taking the 30.2 Signature out of its box reveals a relatively compact package. At 12" wide and 3 ½" high, the 30.2 is also just 9 ½" deep in as a power amplifier, so it will fit just about anywhere. (Add an extra inch in depth for the volume control if you purchase the integrated version.) Perhaps it's the density, but it feels heavier than the claimed 14 pounds. Only available in black, that is also an easy choice.

A New Take On Class T Amplification

In the past I have not been a big fan of chip amplifiers, but my recent positive experiences with the Sonicweld and Salagar powered speakers have made me rethink my position. I have been a huge fan of battery-powered hi-fi gear, and have enjoyed what I've heard when the AC grid is taken out of the equation. The deep black noise floor that results from many battery-powered components is very addictive!

So, Mr. Rossi decided to put these two features together. Because the chip amplifiers are so efficient, a pair of 30 watt modules wouldn't require much power to operate, and mating them with a power supply based on SLA (sealed lead acid) batteries would offer a decent playback time of 12 – 24 hours, depending on the volume level and speaker impedance. This is the same approach to battery power that ASR takes with their Emitter amplifiers and the Basis Exclusive phono preamp. *(continued)*



Care and Feeding of the SLA Battery System

The 30.2 comes to your doorstep with a full charge so that you can enjoy it right away. The new Red Wine Audio SMART module built into the 30.2 continuously monitors the battery voltage, and should it drop low enough, will automatically turn the 30.2 off and begin the charge process. This makes it very simple to care for the batteries, keep it fully charged and not cause any damage to the cell itself. Since these are lead acid batteries (very similar to what is in your car or motorcycle), they can be charged from any point in the charge cycle without harm or memory effect.

Red Wine Audio claims a 12 to 24 hour cycle for the batteries, which I found was right on the money. Since the Signature 30.2 has taken up permanent reference in my living room system, it often runs 8 to 10 hours with no problems, even when my daughter decides she needs to blast a Basement Jaxx marathon with her friends. Just to confirm battery life, I got out the stopwatch and put the Sooloos music server into shuffle mode until the 30.2 ran out of gas. At a moderate volume level this took just over 26 hours, and by playing the system at a pretty high volume it took just under 14 hours. Turn the 30.2 off and it immediately goes back into charge mode, as indicated by the red LED on the AC charger. Red Wine Audio insists that you leave the charger plugged in at all times.

The best news about the 30.2 is that you don't need

an expensive aftermarket power cord or line conditioner to make magic. You'll still need it for the rest of your system, but I always appreciate it when you can get off the grid completely!

A Diverse Audition

The current crop of chip amplifiers seem to be a bit more finicky than your average high current solid state amplifier when it comes to finding synergy with your speakers, so I made it a point to audition the 30.2 with about ten different sets of speakers just to see how it would react with each pair.

Again, the 30.2 did a better job at driving complex loads than any of the others I've heard, but with a few very low efficiency speakers you just need more than 30 watts per channel, no matter what configuration. If you keep your speaker sensitivity choice in the greater than 86dB/1-watt@1-meter range, you should be very happy indeed. A couple of speakers that have been traditionally more difficult to drive with tube amplifiers (my Penaudio Serenades and the B&W 805S) presented no problems at all to the 30.2.

I also tried the 30.2 with a very wide variety of source components. The volume control, of course, made that much easier. I had the same experience that I have had with every other amplifier we've auditioned using a passive volume control; some components mated very well with the 30.2, while others lacked a bit of air and depth. *(continued)*

Red Wine Audio claims a 12 to 24 hour cycle for the batteries, which I found was right on the money.

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I had a particularly good experience with the PrimaLuna ProLogue 8 tubed CD player, which turned out to be my favorite overall match for the 30.2. This is yet another reason to test-drive this baby with your system first...to find out if you really need a preamp, or if you can just live with the volume control.

Speaking of Preamps...

Coincidentally, Mr. Rossi is in the final stages of completing his Isabella preamplifier, which uses tubes and offers an optional on-board DAC with USB, optical, and coax digital inputs. The Isabella will also be fully SLA battery powered. Personally, I can't wait to hear the Signature 30.2/Isabella combination!

While I appreciate the minimal approach of the 30.2 with the volume control as an all-in-one solution, you aren't getting all the performance this little jewel has to offer until you mate it with a great preamp, especially a great tube preamp. Fortunately, I just happened to have a few on hand. My favorite combination involved the outstanding Nagra PL-L. This took the performance of the 30.2 to another level indeed, offering up a level of delicacy that I can't say I've ever heard with a chip amplifier. For those of you on a bit tighter budget that can't wait for the Isabella, the ModWright 9.0 SE is also a fantastic match for the 30.2.

The Sound

Once the 30.2 had about 100 hours on the clock, it was very open, musical and fast. After it was well broken-in, and I had spent a couple more weeks experimenting with different speakers, I spent the rest of the review listening with the Nagra PL-L preamplifier, the matching Nagra CD player and my Sooloos music server. *(continued)*

Speakers were the new Tantos from Gemme Audio. I've really been enjoying the Tantos, and they had great synergy with this combination.

I'm not sure if it's the simplicity of a lower-powered output module or RWA's overall implementation, but I'll stick my neck out and say that the 30.2 offers the most musical presentation I've yet heard with this type of amplifier, and one of the most musical I've heard at this price point, period. So much for the theory that you can only get musicality with a specific type of amplifier, the 30.2 delivers the goods!

The tube lovers will still claim that this amplifier does not have that last bit of magic that those glowing bottles possess, but it does have a dead-quiet noise floor and better control of the lower register that you will never get from a tube amplifier in this price range. This is what gives the 30.2 its signature sound; not quite traditional solid-state, but it wouldn't be mistaken for tubes either. Very unique indeed.

The 30.2 also does a great job with acoustic instruments and your favorite female vocals. Going through all the familiar standards, the 30.2 threw a very wide presentation, but was not always as deep as its tube brethren. Piano and violin both sounded lifelike, with great attack and just the slightest bit of rounding off on the trailing edges. Remember, however, that we are talking about a two thousand dollar amplifier, and it was consistently best in class when I compared it to other amps both in and slightly above its price range.

If you're listening for bass and dynamics, the 30.2 is outstanding. Whether I was listening to Mahler's 5th or Emerson, Lake and Palmer, this amplifier did a great job of reproducing the lower registers with control, weight and authority. If you pair up the 30.2 with a speaker capable of full

range response, you will be very happy indeed. For instance, the 30.2 did a fantastic job with the Verity Audio Rienzi's, the new KEF 203/2s and the Avalon Ascendants. All three pairs of loudspeakers have a rated sensitivity of around 90db, and cost about \$10k per pair.

I was very fond of the amount of resolution that this amplifier offered. It never lost its composure when I listened to complex music, whether electronic or acoustic. Revisiting some of my Frank Zappa recordings was a treat, and the nuances that I've experienced while listening on my reference system were somewhat diminished with the 30.2 but not lost. Most amplifiers at this price point have nowhere near the detail I found with the 30.2.

Conclusion

I think the Red Wine Audio 30.2 Signature is a great little amplifier. In fact, I think it is an incredible little power amplifier. (According to some of my headphone enthusiast friends it's a stellar headphone amplifier for AKG K1000's, but that's another article) The battery system is very well thought out and worked flawlessly at all times.

As with any good component, the burning question is always, will it get out of the way of the system and let me enjoy the music? This is a test that the 30.2 Signature passes with ease.

Whether you decide to buy one with or without volume control is up to you, but we certainly liked it enough to make it part of the permanent collection here at TONEAudio. I think the 30.2 offers a perfect blend of sound and build quality. It will make a great anchor to your system if you are looking in this power and price range. I also think you just might get hooked on the sound of battery power as well!

I think the 30.2 offers a perfect blend of sound and build quality.



A few words with Vinnie Rossi from Red Wine Audio

Long before this review started, I've had the pleasant opportunity to talk to Vinnie Rossi at Red Wine Audio on more than one occasion. He's a great guy with a real passion for his work. I was immediately impressed with his skills after I took delivery of his iMod, figuring that anyone that can perform brain surgery on an iPod was a pretty sharp guy!

HERE'S OUR CONVERSATION:

When did you start Red Wine Audio?

February 1, 2005

What used to be your day job?

I was working as a test engineer for a company in Massachusetts that designed and manufactured high-end marine GPS units. Prior to that I was developing test systems for high speed fiber optic transmitters and receivers at Lucent Technologies. *(continued)*

When did you build your first amplifier?

I was about 12 years old when I built the first kit from a local electronics store. It was a fairly simple design that used a dual opamp input stage and BJT's for the output. It was only about 3 watts per channel, but sounded better than the amplifier in my 1980's boombox; I was hooked!

These days, how much do you listen to music when not working? Is it still a lot of fun or has it become work?

In the evenings after my wife and I put our daughter to bed, I try to catch up on emails on my laptop while listening in the sweet spot. I do put the laptop down at times so I can just focus on enjoying the music. Since I started Red Wine Audio, it has actually become more fun because I really appreciate listening to all kind of music more than ever... especially on prototype builds of new designs that I am playing with.

Where do you get your inspiration?

It seems to happen at random...usually when driving or doing something unrelated to audio, etc. But there are times when I can't sleep because my mind is still processing a new idea!

What is your favorite kind of music?

Especially the last few years, I've been listening to a lot of jazz. The cross pollination of jazz with other genres around the world keeps me hooked. There is so much I would still like to explore.

You started as a mod guy. Was it hard to make the jump from mod guy to full blown manufacturer?

Not at all and I really wanted to make the transition. Modding is a lot of fun, but starting with a clean slate and doing your own thing from scratch is a lot more fun. We will continue to develop and manufacture our own products. We are looking forward to the future!

When did it hit you to go to battery power? Were you pretty excited when you heard the first prototypes?

I quickly realized the potential of SLA battery power when I brought home one of the very first Ack-dAck units by Chris Own of Ack Industries. Chris and I used to email each other frequently and I was a big supporter of what he was doing and was very excited with the results of going "dc direct" with high-current SLA battery power. The sound was so natural and I have always been in favor of simplicity in circuit design.

When the SI T-amp hit the market, a generous customer sent one to me to play with (back when I was modding Toshiba 3950 dvd/cd players) and with a few mods to the t-amp board and powering it with SLA battery, BIG improvements were realized. Our first product, the 6-watt per channel Clari-T-Amp, followed along with SLA battery mods to other pieces.

What's the most remote place you've sent your products to?

I have shipped to over 50 countries. For examples, I have shipped to iMods to Malta, UAE, Jordan, Morocco, Peru, etc. It is so global these days with the internet and I like how the world continues to shrink in this regard. Who knows, one day we might be shipping goods to a different planet! "I would like my Signature 30.2 shipped via Overnight space shuttle with a tracking number, please." (laughs)

What is your favorite non-hifi thing to do? Can you shut it off at the end of the day, or is audio always front and center in your brain?

These days, it is playing with my daughter (who is turning 1-year old right around the time of this issue) and spending time with my wife. Audio is always on the brain to some extent, but I am working on how to achieve more balance in my life and my wife has been very supportive and helpful.

If you had to quit the audio world tomorrow, what would your next career path be?

I would like to pursue teaching electronics, physics and/or math at the high school level. ●

Your website mentions your engineering background, what are your qualifications?

I'm an EE.

Have you always been into audio and music, or did one come before the other?

I've been interested in electronics since I was a little kid. My father purchased a SONY rack system when I was about six and it consisted of a turntable, cassette deck, EQ/pre-amp, power amplifier and some large 3-way speakers. Not to mention one of the first CD players!

He played music all the time and the more I got into listening to music, the more I became fascinated with the electronics that reproduced the music.

Just what kind of chipset does the 30.2 use?

The Signature 30.2 is a Class-T amplifier (based on the Tripath 2051 chipset) It is a Red Wine Audio designed board with custom input and output stages. All parts were carefully selected to obtain the sound I was looking for.

MANUFACTURER**Red Wine Audio**

34 Hidden Pines Circle

Meriden, CT 06451

203-440-4944

www.redwineaudio.com

PERIPHERALS

Digital Sources: Sooloos music server, Red Wine Audio iMod, Nagra CDP, Rega Saturn, PrimaLuna ProLogue 8

Preamplifiers: ModWright 9.0 SE, McIntosh C2300, Nagra PL-L, Conrad Johnson PV-15, Conrad Johnson ACT2/ Series 2

Speakers: Penaudio Serenades, Gemme Audio Tantos, ACI Sapphire XLs, B&W 205S, Celestion SL600s, Avalon Ascendants, KEF 203/2s, Verity Audio Rienzis, Harbeth Compact 7ES-III.

Speaker Cables: DH Labs Silver Sonic Q-10, Shunyata Orion

Interconnects: Cardas Neutral Reference, Shunyata Antares, Kool Cables Silkworms

Power Conditioning; (rest of system) Running Springs Haley

Power Cords: DH Labs Red Wave



cardas.com



The McIntosh C2300

Infinite Possibilities

By Jeff Dorgay

While I appreciate today's modern preamplifiers with their high-tech minimalist approach that take darn near everything out of the signal path in the quest for the highest fidelity, there isn't always a place to plug everything in! That's when I miss my vintage McIntosh C26. Back in the mid 70's McIntosh called them "control centers" and they certainly were. They had tone controls, a zillion inputs along with two tape monitor inputs, which was a blessing for those of us that actually *did* have two tape decks. You could even dub from one deck to another while listening to your turntable.

The new C2300 continues down this path with eight inputs, though there are no tape monitor jacks on the back panel anymore, there are inputs for a

DAC, CD player, DVD player and a music server. Should you be a relic like me, there is a record output for a music server, so you can still plug your trusty reel to reel deck into your C2300 if you don't have a music server yet. Four of the six high-level inputs are available with your choice of XLR or RCA jacks. The big bonus is a *pair* of phono inputs! Not missing a detail, McIntosh even includes a pair of ground posts, one for each input. This is great news indeed for analog lovers.

In addition to the plethora of inputs, there are a number of data and control ports so that you can inter-

face the C2300 with other McIntosh components, whether they are on the same rack, or in remote areas of your house. The only current McIntosh component that cannot be

turned on remotely is the MC 275 amplifier. The remote control is typical McIntosh issue, with cool blue

backlighting and a rubbery texture. Note to Mc owners: Do not confuse this remote with the one for your MS series music server; though they look almost exactly alike, they are not compatible! You can't control volume or inputs with the MS remote, though you can control basic music server functions with the C2300 remote. Bottom line, you will need both handy if you own both components. (*continued*)

In addition to the plethora of inputs, there are a number of data and control ports so that you can interface the C2300 with other McIntosh components...



Gorgeous and Built to Stay That Way

If you are a McIntosh fan, you were probably drawn to the bold faceplates, with the sexy backlighting and of course, the big blue meters. You can have it all with the C2300 and thanks to their LED/Fiber optic lighting, that front panel will be just as bright 40 years from now when this preamp is sitting in your kid's living room as it is today. (McIntosh owners have a history of hanging on to their gear forever...) By replacing the bulbs in the front panel with LED's and going to silent electromagnetic switching, McIntosh eliminated a service issue for long term owners and got rid of a bit of noise in the signal path to boot. The C2200 that it replaces used light bulbs to keep its front panel lit, so this is a good step up.

While we are on the subject of style points, the C2300 also shows off its tubes on the top of the case, angled back and bathed in a soft green LED light.

You're going to love this or hate it, but count me in the love it column. I suggest putting this one on a top shelf, so you can bask in the tube glory at all times. On a practical side, it also makes the tubes very easy to change. (Or swap out for your favorite NOS 12AX7)

Besides the lighting upgrade, there are a few major changes from the last preamp. First, there is a reduced tube complement going from six 12AX7's and two 12AT7's in the 2200 to six 12AX7's in the 2300. While there was some concern about going to fewer tubes in the new unit by end users, the folks at McIntosh felt it was an improvement of the breed. McIntosh CEO Charlie Randall told me at CES that the new circuit in the C2300 was "a substantial refinement of the past design".

If you aren't a turntable owner, or only own one turntable, you can reassign the other phono input(s) as aux inputs, which will shut that respective set of 12AX7's off, saving tube life on the unused tubes and making sure you always have a spare pair of tubes handy. *(continued)*

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Did I Say TWO Phono Inputs?

In the past, McIntosh has been criticized for not offering a MC phono section in their preamplifiers. Maybe it's just that they pay attention to their customers or perhaps it has something to do with them offering a turntable of their own now, but the C2300 has a separate MC and MM phono stage, not just one that you switch back and forth between. Keep in mind that the MC stage uses a solid-state gain stage ahead of the pair of 12AX7's in the MC stage, which contributes to its exceptionally low noise.

This phono stage is a big improvement from the one found in the C220 or C2200, coming from the flagship MC1000 preamp.

While those with the most exotic analog rigs will still opt for an out-board phono preamp (that probably will cost as much as the C2300!), the majority of you with real world analog setups should be just fine.

But McIntosh didn't stop there; both inputs are adjustable from the comfort of your couch! I loved this feature on my Aesthetix Rhea and I applaud McIntosh for adding this feature to the 2300. I hate having to pull the top panel and fumble with tiny DIP switches when I want to swap cartridges. While you might think it lazy to make the changes from your couch, it is much easier to hear the effect that loading has (or capacitance if you are using the MM input) on sound instantly. If you feel guilty about not getting any exercise in this process, run around your listening room three or four times *after* you have the sound dialed in. *(continued)*



MM capacitance is variable from 50 to 750 pf in 50pf increments, so you can easily fine tune and save the optimum setting for your MM cartridge, again from the comfort of your chair. MC impedance is variable from 25 to 1000 ohms (at 25, 50, 100, 200, 500 and 1000 ohms). Gain is fixed on both inputs; the MM input offers 40db and the MC is 60db.

I tried both inputs with a variety of cartridges with excellent results, but I would like to see both inputs completely variable in respect to loading. Those of us with a low output moving magnet or moving iron cartridge like my favorite Grado Statement having a 47k impedance but only a .6mv output will be out of luck. Should you have a very low output moving coil cartridge in the .1 – .25 range the MC stage still does not have adequate gain.

If you fall into one of these camps, you will still need an outboard phono stage, but most cartridges should work just fine.

Break In and Setup

Like every other McIntosh component I've used or owned, the C2300 did not require a ton of break in time. I'd say it was at about 85% out of the box, and after 100 hours it was at it's full potential. While I tried it with plenty of other components, it just seemed to make sense putting it in a mostly Mac system, consisting of the MC275 power amplifier and the MS300 music server. I also used the Meridian 808 CD player along

with the JLTi external phono stage and a plethora of turntables! Thanks to that tape output my trusty TEAC 6300 reel to reel deck got plenty of use with the C2300 too and I made some great mix tapes.

As with any other manufacturer, the synergy of similar components is tough to beat. Most McIntosh customers tend to end up with all McIntosh in their system, but regardless of the power amplifier you own, the C2300 is a worthy match. By the way, you can hook three power amplifiers to this baby and switch two of them from the front panel!

The majority of my listening sessions were done with the new KEF 203/2 speakers as well as the new Harbeth Compact 7 – III's. Both are a fantastic match for the MC275 in case you might be speaker shopping.

The Sound

I would describe the sound of the 2300 as 60% classic McIntosh and 40% modern day hifi. In other words, it has all the romance you've probably come to love with the McIntosh sound, but with more detail and resolution, so it's a pretty nice combination. Kind of like a new C6 Corvette, it's still a small block under the hood but thanks to today's technology, it makes more power and gets better gas mileage to boot! *(continued)*

It has all the romance you've probably come to love with the McIntosh sound, but with more detail and resolution, so it's a pretty nice combination.

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

The C2300 has a very neutral presentation, when used with my MC275 tube amplifier, the overall sound became a bit warmer and more relaxed, but when paired up with any of the solid-state power amplifiers we had on hand, the sound was more powerful and defined, so I'm sure that tube and solid-state McIntosh enthusiasts can live happily ever after with this preamp.

As so many of us grew up with McIntosh, I just got into a 60's and 70's rock mood with the MC2300. I had a blast listening to a lot of music that I haven't visited in some time. My favorite Talking Heads, Steely Dan, Pink Floyd and Supertramp records sounded great! Somehow the tonality of the McIntosh gear just really tends to suit this music perfectly, offering up a very wide soundstage with tight, powerful bass and a high end that is smooth but not rolled off. This is not a wimpy sounding preamp by any means!

No matter what kind of music I was listening to the MC2300 seemed to add just a touch of warmth to everything and I found it very pleasant.

Vocals and acoustic instruments really came alive, especially with the MC275 power amplifier. My favorite combination of interconnect with this pair was the DH Labs Revelation cable. This is a silver coated copper cable that in some cases can be a touch on the bright side, but with these two it offered up the perfect combination of detail and musicality. I used the DH speaker cable with the same result and would highly suggest this for any McIntosh owner. *(continued)*



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If you have some recordings that could stand a little help on the top or bottom, you are really going to enjoy having these controls at your beck and call.

Tone Controls, Heresy or Hooray?

I'm sure there are quite a few audiophiles that would rather eat a power cord than use a tone control, but once you try it, it's not so bad after all. Again, this will really depend on your music collection. If you have all pristine records that have been perfectly recorded (not my record collection) you will leave the defeat button engaged at all times.

But if you have some recordings that could stand a little help on the top or bottom, you are really going to enjoy having these controls at your beck and call. Almost all of my Who records are pretty flat sounding and I think every Todd Rundgren record I own has almost no bass, so though I felt guilty for about five minutes it didn't take long to get over it. They also really came in handy when listening through headphones, which is another treat on the C2300. Ron Cornelius told me that the headphone circuit on the C2300 utilizes the tube circuitry in the preamp, which accounts for the excellent headphone performance.

A Very Versatile Preamp, I Mean Control Center

A couple of folks at McIntosh told me off the record that I should "find at least a few things wrong with the C2300 in the review, or no one will believe you..." but I have to confess that I really couldn't. It's really a matter of perspective and flavor, which do you prefer?

The only criticisms I can come up with for the C2300 would make it cost a lot more money. Sure, I'd like adjustable gain in the phono stage and there are times when I would like a bit more resolution, but what it would cost for a pile of better capacitors and resistors would mean they would have to scrimp elsewhere, discard some of the features I love or jack the price up. So it's really trading one feature set for another. You can't have it all even for \$6000.

So in the end, if you are looking for a preamp that offers tremendous versatility, a great built in phono preamplifier section and you like the McIntosh design aesthetic, I can't imagine a better choice. Also keep in mind the sound of this preamp is a touch on the romantic side, so that's also a consideration.

(continued)



Sonics by Joachim Gerhard

Finite Elemente

Spiral Groove by Allen Perkins

Lyra Connoisseur

Lyra



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If you want the last word in detail and resolution, there are a couple of other choices that might be better for you, but for a lot of people the C2300 will be just what the doctor ordered. ●

The McIntosh C2300 Preamplifier
MSRP: \$6000

MANUFACTURER

McIntosh Laboratories

2 Chambers Street
Binghamton, NY 13903
607-723-3512

www.mcintoshlabs.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog Sources: Rega P9/RB1000 with Grado Statement cartridge, Rega P3-24/RB301 with Shelter 7000 cartridge, Technics SL-1200 with Shure M97 cartridge, Teac 6300 tape deck.

Additional Phono Stages: ASR Basis Exclusive, JLTi

Digital Sources: McIntosh MS300 music server, Meridian 808 CD player

Power Amplifiers: McIntosh MC275, Conrad Johnson ET 250, Conrad Johnson Premier 350, Nagra PSA, Red Wine Audio 30.2 Signature, Clayton S50

Speakers: Martin Logan Summit, Avalon Ascendant, KEF 203/2, Harbeth Compact 7 model 3

Interconnects: DH Labs Revelation

Speaker Cables: DH Labs Silver Sonic

Power Cords: Essential Sound Products The Essence "Reference"

Power Conditioning: Running Springs Jaco

The KEF 203/2 Speakers

STUNNING BEAUTY, STUNNING SOUND



The KEF 203/2 is the entry floorstanding speaker in their new Reference Series and it is gorgeous. Even when we were unpacking these, I was admiring the fit and finish. I don't think I've seen a more attractive speaker in some time. My test pair came in high gloss cherry with a dark gunmetal grey metallic round tweeter pod on top. They are also available in high gloss walnut, black and sycamore, so you should be able to find a color combination that will work in your home.

I know the question lurking at the back of your mind; who cares about how they look if they don't sound great? Read on.

The 203/2's retail for \$10k per pair. They feature a pair of 6.5-inch woofers and a 6.5-inch midrange incorporating KEF's UNI-Q technology, where the tweeter is placed right in the center of the midrange for better time alignment. They measure 40 inches tall, 10 inches wide and 15 inches deep, so the footprint is no bigger than a pair of modest minimonitors on a stand.

A Breeze to Setup

Moving around the back you see not one or two, but three separate pairs of speaker binding posts, so in theory, you could tri-wire the 203/2's! Jumpers were supplied, so I ran them with a single set of TARA One speaker cables, which ended up being a great match.

Because the 203/2 offers a few different settings for bass level and hi-mid frequency balance, this is one speaker you should definitely spend a little bit of time reading the manual so that you can fully optimize them to your environment. True to my audiophile nature, I fiddled with the settings to see the range of adjustment, but the factory default settings ended up being a perfect fit in my main listening room.

These adjustments proved to be right on the money for the Luxman 590A - II integrated as well as all of the other solid-state amplifiers I mated the 203/2 with, but it was handy to bump the HF level up a notch when using it with the McIntosh MC275 tube amplifier. The bass level adjustment proved to be very useful when auditioning these speakers in my small living room; I was able to cut it down enough to make them useful in that space. Most floorstanders I've used in my living room actually have too much bass, because I only have room for a semi-corner placement, so I appreciate the versatility that the 203/2 offers.

Final placement in the main listening room ended up being about 8 feet apart and about 36 inches from my rear wall, again with the factory settings intact. Though I experimented with a few different amplifier combinations, my two favorites ended up being all tube, with the McIntosh C2300 pre/MC275 power combo or the Luxman 590II integrated, which features solid-state, class-A power. Thanks to a sensitivity of 89db, you should be able to mate them with a very wide range of amplifiers.

The 203/2's were not at all fussy to setup. 15 minutes of searching for the spot in your room with the best balance of bass and midrange and you will be set. Toe in to taste and order a pizza!

Detail and Smoothness, What a Combination!

The real key to what makes these speakers so much fun to listen to is that they offer up a lot of resolution without being harsh, grainy or forward. Thanks to this,



you can make your electronics do the work and fine-tune your sound from there. As I mentioned, the 203/2's work equally well with tubes or transistors. If you like your presentation a bit more on the mellow side, your favorite tube amplifier will do nicely. If you would like a bit more control and punch, insert your favorite solid state amplifier here.

I had a ton of fun listening to all of my 70's and 80's favorites with the McIntosh system in place. You name it, I played it and I played all of my favorite Doors, Kinks, Grateful Dead and Led Zeppelin discs louder than I should have! The McIntosh/KEF combination was a rock and roll lover's dream system!

(continued)

Moving around the back you see not one or two, but three separate pairs of speaker binding posts, so in theory, you could tri-wire the 203/2's!

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Switching to the Luxman offered a bit more detail and a touch tighter bass extension, but thanks to its full Class – A operation still completely grain free. I did enjoy listening to classical music and well recorded vinyl a bit more on this system; it showed off more of what the 203/2's were capable of in terms of throwing a very wide and deep presentation in the room.

A recent raid on a rural record store yielded a number of RCA shaded dogs and a few London titles, so I was listening to a lot of classical music during the test.

Thanks to our classical editor, I've become a bit of an opera fan, so my two favorites were Pavarotti with the Berlin Philharmonic performing La Boheme and The Rome Opera House and Chorus performing Verdi's Il Tovatore.

Great When The Going Gets Tough

Bear with me for being a newcomer to the world of classical music, but what always turns me off to this music through a set of speakers is the way they respond to fairly dense musical passages, something usually ends up going away, whether it's detail or tonality. The KEF's did a great job with both. The individual vocals held their placement as the orchestra came up in level and it was very easy to hear them in their own separate space on stage. Stringed instruments sounded particularly tasty, no matter what kind of music I was listening to.

This level of detail really helped when listening to Eddie Van Halen or The Decemberists. *(continued)*

The ability to convey nuance this well makes the difference between hearing decent high-end sound and being able to forget about the gear and just dig the music.

The 203/2's did very well at all volume levels. Again, a number of speakers I've auditioned are not always as good at both ends of the range, but these came through splendidly. When I had to turn the volume down, plenty of detail was still on tap. As much as I did enjoy really cranking them up, the experience was not diminished playing them at a low level.

I have to believe that the midrange/tweeter alignment of the UNI-Q system is a big part of what made these speakers sound so effortless and unfatiguing. Bass, midrange and treble had excellent coherency, there were times I felt I could have been listening to a panel or single driver speaker. Male and female vocals had that extra sense of realism that makes you happy that you wrote the check.

Bring Up The Rear

The only thing about the 203/2/s that really puzzled me, but in a good way was their bass performance. KEF claims that these speakers are down 3db at 55hz and 6db down at 40hz, which is not terribly low, especially for a floorstanding speaker with two woofers. I compared them to a couple of other similarly priced speakers that are claimed to only be down 3db at about 35hz and was getting nearly identical bass extension, both with recorded music and my test tone disc.

Bottom line, these speakers have great bass response, so don't let the published specs fool you. Dragging out *Dark Side of The Moon* and playing the heartbeat in "Money" and some of my favorite hip-hop CD's did not find these speakers lacking any authority in the lower registers. The bass was always powerful and well defined. I was very pleased that the bass had a balance that I really enjoyed, neither over nor underdamped with a lot of texture and definition.

A Great Experience

I could blather on for paragraphs about these speakers, but to make a long story short, I played a ton of music with them, often for 12 hours a day while working on the last two issues. And I must say that this is a pair of speakers that I will miss tremendously.

When a company asks ten thousand dollars for a set of speakers, they move out of the "impulse buy" range to most of our readers, so I expect a lot. I don't want to have buyer's remorse after an expenditure of this magnitude and I'm guessing you probably don't either. *(continued)*



The KEF 203/2 delivers everything I would ever need in a speaker at this level: Resolution, Imaging, accurate tonality and great dynamics.



The KEF 203/2 delivers everything I would ever need in a speaker at this level: Resolution, Imaging, accurate tonality and great dynamics.

The musical presentation is wrapped in a visually stunning package that is as equipment friendly as it is attractive. This is a speaker that you should be able to live happily ever after. ●

KEF 203/2 Speakers

MSRP: \$9750 per pair

MANUFACTURER

KEF America

10 Timber Lane
Marlboro, NJ 07746
732-683-2356
www.kef.com

PERIPHERALS

Digital Sources: Meridian 808, Wadia 521, McIntosh MS300 Music Server

Analog Source: Rega P9/wRB1000 Arm and Shelter 9000 Cartridge

Preamplifiers: Conrad-Johnson ACT2/Series 2, Nagra PL-L, McIntosh C2300

Power Amplifiers: Conrad-Johnson Premier 350SA, Nagra PSA, McIntosh MC275, Red Wine Audio 30.2 signature

Integrated Amplifiers: Prima Luna ProLogue 1, Naim SuperNait (w/Highcap PS), Sim Audio Moon I-7, Luxman 590-II

Interconnects: Shunyata Antares, RCA and XLR, Cardas Golden Reference

Speaker Cable: Tara Labs RSC 1 Vector, Cardas Golden Reference, Shunyata Orion

Power Cords: Running Springs Audio Mongoose, Shunyata Anaconda Helix Alpha

Power Conditioner: Running Springs Danielle

Room Treatments: GIK, Sonex Classic

Racks: Finite Elemente Pagode Signature

Accessories: Finite Elemente Ceraballs and Cerapucs, Shunyata Dark Field Cable Elevators

A Small Revolution The Wadia 170

A BRIEF ENCOUNTER

Ever since the first Apple dock for the iPod appeared on the scene I've been pondering why none of them had a digital output so that you could really hear what that little player could do. Turns out, it's not that easy after all. The only solution that currently lets you use your iPod as a transport costs almost ten times what the Wadia 170 does.



TIDAL Audio

Piano



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So This is a Pretty Unique Little Product Indeed!

The Wadia 170 dock is the first iPod dock that gives you the ability to take the digital data stream from your iPod and feed it into your DAC of choice without modifying your iPod. This allows you to retain all the functionality of your iPod so that you can use it with headphones, plug it in to your car, etc. but when you bring it home get true audiophile sound in your main system.

The only caveat to this is that you have to have a current generation iPod to take advantage of this functionality. It will also work with the new iPod Touch, iPhone and all three generations of iPod Nano. If you have less than a current iPod, the 170 will not give you a digital datastream. More about this in the full review.

It's About Time Someone Did This!

What we have here is merely a sneak peek. Wadia was kind enough to let us take their final prototype home from the CES show and have a few days with it. John Schaffer, CEO of Wadia told us that the one you see here is 99.9% finished, but they wanted to finalize silk screening on the back and change a connector or two before the full production models would ship. So, next issue we will have a full report.

But I can tell you this much, it sounds fantastic. **The dream of the iPod being a true audiophile component has now been realized and the sound of your iPod is limited only by the DAC you own.** Our initial listening was done with the Wadia 521 DAC, that is very similar sonically to their 581 and 781 CD players. *(continued)*

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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.

Their full-blown players still have the edge in ultimate detail, but the iPod through the 170/521 combination fooled a lot of people at my place into thinking they were listening to a five figure player.

A Bridge Between Worlds

We can blather on about specs and features until the cows come home, but what truly makes this such a brilliant product is that it bridges the gap between the old and new school. As much as we would like the new generation to embrace LP's and turntables, it's not going to happen in significant numbers. I know, I've tried it. A few come into the fold, but not that many. But now, we can meet them on their terms and from the response I got from my daughter's friends they were all pretty excited. (and yes, the kids all have the latest iPod...)

So stay tuned for the next issue of TONEAudio, where we will have a full in-depth review with a final production model of the Wadia 170. It's going to be exciting. If this product looks interesting to you, get down to your Wadia dealer right now, write them a check and get on the list for when the 170 becomes available, because I anticipate a backorder situation for a little while! ●

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THE NAGRA PL-L

A Compact Powerhouse

By Jeff Dorgay

Nagra has a legendary status among audiophiles, almost enigmatic.

The first thing I usually hear when I bring their name up is “I can’t afford that stuff, it costs a fortune!” Let’s separate myth from reality; though they are a bit penalized by the current US dollar situation (as is every other European manufacturer), Nagra gear is no more expensive than any other high end brand these days and it’s less expensive than quite a few I can think of.

Four or five years ago, \$8495 would have been at the top of the preamplifier price scale. Today with quite a few preamplifiers in the five figure range, this is not an outrageous sum and considering the sound the PL-L offers, I think the asking price is quite reasonable. Our review sample had the optional transformer coupled balanced outputs that can offer a full floating balanced output. This is an additional \$500, bringing the price as tested to \$8995. It comes with a full-featured remote that will work with other Nagra components as well, so if you have their CD player, you can control everything with just one remote.

The PL-L is very compact, only about 12 x 10 x 3 inches and weighs seven pounds, without power supply. The box is machined from aluminum and is clear anodized. It has an external power supply similar to the Nagra CD player and phono stage, which has just arrived as we go to print with this review, so stay tuned for our take on that very soon!

Often we think of hi-fi gear as serving a utilitarian purpose, but Nagra has elevated their industrial designs to be works of art. This is evident as you look at all of the details on this preamplifier, from the sculpted shapes of the controls to the beveled edges and corners of the case and of course the modulometer. For those of you not familiar with Nagra, this meter is a very precise, multifunction meter that is identical to the ones on the legendary Nagra portable tape recorders. It can be used to keep tabs on channel balance, power output and monitoring the power supply voltage. I must say this is my favorite design element on Nagra gear!

Often we think of hi-fi gear as serving a utilitarian purpose, but Nagra has elevated their industrial designs to be works of art.





Removing the top panel of the PL-L reveals Swiss engineering at its finest. 24kt gold circuit traces, and top-quality parts throughout. There is heavy shielding where the power enters the circuit board and a layout that redefines efficiency. A complement of three tubes (2-12AX7's and one 12AT7) makes for a simple yet effective layout; just like peeking inside a fine Swiss watch!

The next thing you notice after the modulometer, is that the inputs and outputs are located on both sides of the PL-L, instead of on the rear panel.

While this is a bit different than what we audiophiles are used to, it harkens back to the portable Nagra tape recorders, which also had their jacks located on the sides. In a location recording environment, it made for a much shorter signal path between components. Once again that Swiss precision! Personally, I really enjoyed this feature as a reviewer, because it made it much easier to switch gear into and out of my system. Another very handy feature is the ability to switch between the two outputs from the front panel. *(continued)*

A complement of three tubes makes for a simple yet effective layout; just like peeking inside a fine Swiss watch!

Surprise At First Listen

I'm not sure why, but because the PL-L is so compact, I wasn't prepared for the BIG sound this small preamplifier produced. When the PL-L arrived, my two reference preamplifiers (C-J Act 2 and the Aesthetix Callisto) were, well, so much bigger. Don't let the size fool you, the PL-L will go toe to toe with the world's best. I was instantly captivated by the sound of the PL-L, which was big, spacious and powerful.

Which led me to another pleasant surprise. My Nagra PSA power amplifier has a tonal character that I would characterize as "precise". It is very accurate and clean. It does not sound dry or forward, but it does not embellish the sound in any way at all. The PL-L is very neutral but it has just a drop of extra harmonic richness that lets you know you are listening to tubes instead of transistors, very much like my Conrad-Johnson Act 2. The PL-L provides that little bit of airiness that solid-state can have a hard time achieving.

Thanks to just three tubes under the hood, the PL-L is quick to warm up and get down to business; 15 minutes and you are enjoying the full measure of it's sound, so you won't have to warm this one up for two hours before you can enjoy a listening session.

Big On Personal Style Too

One of the things that shouldn't be overlooked these days when assembling a decent hifi system is aesthetic value. Granted, I would never forgo musical ability for good looks, if you can have both it will make putting said hardware in your living room a lot easier.

The Nagra gear succeeds brilliantly on both counts, with the sound to match its beauty and this is where the small size really comes in handy. A stack of Nagra gear with a PL-L, their CD player and even the new phono stage only requires a minimal footprint, so it will not intrude on your living space at all. *(continued)*



I was instantly captivated by the sound of the PL-L, which was big, spacious and powerful.

Eventually, the Nagra gear made it's way to my living room and a few of my good friends in the design world went absolutely bonkers when they saw it there.

The Glorious Sound Rules The Day

As attractive as the PL-L is though, what kept me glued to the chair was the sound that it produced. I used the PL-L with quite a few different power amplifiers, both balanced and unbalanced. While the balanced outputs were very handy, I found the single ended outputs had just a touch more sonic purity. Imaging was a tiny bit more precise and I felt that there was some more air to the presentation, especially when listening to acoustic instruments. If you live on a steady diet of popular music, you might not even notice the difference.

I nominate the PL-L for membership in the hall of stratospheric preamplifier performance because of its superb performance in a few key areas. It has the weight that only the best preamplifiers possess along with a highly evolved ability to resolve dynamic contrasts. Not only can it give you the heave-ho of a big bass drum, but it has the control to make it sound convincing not bloated. Listen to the big kettle drums in your favorite Bax, Mahler or Shostakovich symphony. On a lesser preamplifier, those drums just plod along, but with the PL-L they set you back in your seat if you have a full range set of speakers.

This is where the speed and precision combined with the excellent tonality convinces you that you are listening to something quite special. For the Rock and Rollers in the crowd, drop the recent MoFi Megadeth CD *Countdown to Extinction* in the player and crank it up until that modulometer is showing some major velocity and you get that extra bite and width from Dave Mustane's Marshall stacks that puts a big smile on your face. Ok, female vocals sound pretty good too.

Of course the first track that I had heard on the Nagra gear was Tom Waits' "What's He Building in There?" and it was so haunting that it cleared the room at the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest. But this track is another favorite that can really show off soundstage size in all three dimensions and another test that the PL-L passed with ease.

A Tough Act To Follow

In the last three years, this has been the first preamplifier that I haven't taken out of my reference system immediately after the review and gotten back to business with my Act 2. I would have to put the Nagra PL-L up on the list as one of my all time favorite preamplifiers. It certainly will give you a big percentage of what the cost no preamplifiers offer at a bit more reasonable price. Only three common tubes inside make it very easy to care for in the years to come, even if you want to stash a few sets of expensive NOS tubes away. When you factor in Nagra longevity, build quality and style this makes the PL-L a class leader. ●



I would have to put the Nagra PL-L up on the list as one of my all time favorite preamplifiers.

500 SERIES

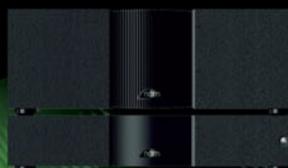
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The Nagra PL-L Preamplifier
MSRP: \$8495-8995, depending
on configuration

MANUFACTURER

Nagra USA

357 Riverside Drive
Suite 230C
Franklin, TN 37064
615-726-5191
www.nagraaudio.com

PERIPHERALS

Preamplifiers: Conrad-Johnson ACT2, Aesthetix Callisto Signature, McIntosh C2300

Power Amplifiers: Conrad-Johnson Premier 350, Conrad-Johnson ET 250, Nagra PSA, McIntosh MC275

Phono Preamp: ASR Basis Exclusive

Speakers: MartinLogan Summit, Martin Logan Descent i

Digital Sources: Naim CD555, Meridian 808, Sooloos Music Server with Wadia 521 DAC

Analog Sources: Oracle Delphi V w/SME IV.Vi arm and MoFi 3.5C cartridge, Rega P9 w/RB1000 and Shelter 9000 cartridge

Interconnects: Cardas Golden Reference, Shunyata Antares, Audioquest Sub 3

Speaker Cable: Shunyata Orion

Power Cords: Essential Sound Products The Essence "Reference", Running Springs Mongoose, Shunyata Anaconda Helix Alpha

Power Conditioning: Running Springs Jaco & Danielle

Room Treatment: GIK 242 panels, GIK Tri-Traps, Sonex Classic

Racks: Finite Elemente Pagode Signature

Accessories: Furutech LP Demagnetizer, Finite Cerapucs and Ceraballs, Shunyata Dark Field Cable elevators



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The Maestro And Conductor:

A GREAT PAIR FROM AUDIENCE

By Marc Phillips



The Audience Maestro interconnects and speaker cables occupy the middle line in the California-based audio company's offerings, placed strategically between the acclaimed Au24 range and the value-oriented Conductor cables. Attractive and rugged, the Maestro cables are also relatively slim and flexible, which is due to their fairly simple construction. According to Audience, this is to achieve "a greater sonic purity" so that a "natural musical timbre is realized."



The Audience Maestro interconnects and speaker cables occupy the middle line in the California-based audio company's offerings, placed strategically between the acclaimed Au24 range and the value-oriented Conductor cables. Attractive and rugged, the Maestro cables are also relatively slim and flexible, which is due to their fairly simple construction. According to Audience, this is to achieve "a greater sonic purity" so that a "natural musical timbre is realized."

Over the last few months, the Maestro interconnects and speaker cables quietly became my cabling of choice for my reference system for that very reason. Presently I have quite a few choices in my home when it comes to cabling, but the Maestros have spent more time in my system because they are so easy to work with. The Maestros were simply a dream to use because I was able to maneuver them into the tightest of corners without having to rip apart my entire system.

For example, the Paradigm S1 Signature speakers have binding posts that are recessed rather deeply into the back of the cabinets. The Maestro speaker cables were the only cables fitted with spade lug terminations that truly fit the Paradigms with a minimum of fuss. I had a similar challenge with the Stirling LS3/5as and their somewhat unconventional binding posts. The bi-wiring rods are a bit obstinate and can prevent proper tightening on spade lugs. Through careful positioning, I was finally able to achieve a secure fit with the Maestros.

My only issue with the interconnects is that they are a bit thick just prior to the termination points, which can be a problem with some of my favorite British integrated amplifiers. The LFD Zero that I reviewed this issue was a bit too tight of a fit as well as a few others. Ninety-five percent of the time it's smooth sailing, especially on current US made gear, which usually allows plenty of room for audiophile cabling. *(continued)*

The Maestro speaker cables were the only cables fitted with spade lug terminations that truly fit the Paradigms with a minimum of fuss.

The Audience Maestro and Conductor cabling was ultimately so satisfying and suited to my needs that I'm very curious about the upscale Au24 line.



I've never been an audiophile that chooses convenience over sound quality, so the Maestro's are a perfect fit; they offer superb sound and a relatively modest price. Though sonic neutrality isn't the end all for me, I prefer a cable that doesn't inject much of its own flavor into the mix if at all possible. I have my favorites to use as tone controls, but I preferred the Maestro cables when everything sounded "just right" and I didn't want to alter the tonal balance.

When I used the interconnects between the Conrad-Johnson ET250S power amplifier and the Nagra PL-L line stage, and the speaker cables on the Harbeth Compact 7-ES3s, I experienced some of the most enjoyable sound I've ever had in my listening room. Substituting similarly-priced cables into the mix always seemed to shift the overall voicing toward one extreme or another. In fact, when I placed a rather expensive pair of interconnect in place of the Maestros, the balance became so hot and harsh that I removed them after just a couple of days (I had already put a number of hours on them in another system, in case you were wondering.) The Maestros restored balance and order to the system.

Speaking of balance, I did have a chance to use Audience's Conductor balanced cable with a few different power amplifiers as well. Mind you, the Conductor is from Audience's entry-level line. Again, I had been using a much more expensive XLR cable, and while the Conductor certainly didn't trounce this lofty competitor, it was a bit more difficult to make a clear decision. *(continued)*

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The other cable provided a bit more clarity and detail, and seemed altogether more relaxed, but the price difference between the two made me seriously reconsider if these subtle gains were worth it.

While this decision would be strongly dependent upon the amplification being used, I'd recommend trying the Conductor first before you lay down the green for something that may not offer the same value.

The Audience Maestro and Conductor cabling was ultimately so satisfying and suited to my needs that I'm very curious about the upscale Au24 line. All three Audience cable lines are designed for low eddy-current resistance and neutral tonal balance. Thanks to their compact physical dimensions, they are extremely easy to place and use, which is a big bonus. It was easy to see the family resemblance in sound between these two, so I am anxious to try their top of the line Au24 cables next and see what improvements they offer. ●

The Audience Maestro

Interconnects:

MSRP: (1 meter, RCA) \$299.00

Maestro Speaker Cables:

MSRP: (2 meter) \$499.00

Conductor Interconnects

MSRP: (1 meter RCA) \$239.00

MANUFACTURER

Audience LLC

120 N. Pacific Street #K-9
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A Great Pair of CD Players From REGA

Absolutely everyone that heard I had both the REGA Apollo and the Saturn in for review asked me the same questions: “Which one is better?” “Which one should I buy?” “Is the Saturn really that much better?” The answer to these and other similar questions are as simple or as complex as you would like to make them.



For those of you not familiar with the players in question, the REGA Apollo is a \$1195 CD player and the Saturn is REGA's offering at \$2595.

Perhaps the best way to look at their approach is to compare it to the way they make turntables. REGA tables have achieved a reputation for offering great sound at down to Earth prices. As you go up the range, each model reveals more music than the last, yet with a core group of strengths and design parameters implemented with higher quality materials and more attention to assembly as the price increases. On one level you could say that the P9 is the concept of the P3 taken to its highest level. Their two CD players are the same way.

They are both built around the same chassis and transport and neither uses a fancy, machined remote, yet what is offered is quite functional. REGA chose to invest the budget in custom chips for the analog section and high quality power supplies. Considering how many P3 turntables are still in use every day (my original P3 is about 28 years old now and still spinning records at a friend's house daily) I am sure that this reputation will follow them to the arena of digital playback as well.

How do we define better anyway?

The ultimate answer to that question for me is always does product A reveal more music than

product B with all other things being equal. Does said device in question offer up more dynamics, more tonal range, more accurate tonality and extract more information from a disc (analog or digital) than the device I'm comparing it to. That's the best one in my book.

Well we know that's as clear as mud. Comparing different products from different manufacturers is even more difficult, but in this case with both machines coming from the same brain trust it wasn't all that difficult.

Judged on their own merits individually, both the Apollo and the Saturn are excellent products in their price class, offering top of the range performance. We've listened to a lot of CD players over the last few years and have some decent players for reference. To define this a bit further, I don't expect a CD player to replace a turntable, but what I do expect a good (even great) CD player to do is offer up a musical experience that I can enjoy just as much as spinning an LP. Granted, this doesn't always happen, but I've heard great players all over the price range that offer up some very satisfying digital playback. *(continued)*

Judged on their own merits individually, both the Apollo and the Saturn are excellent products in their price class, offering top of the range performance.

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cable can be."*

-Dave Clark
Positive Feedback

**The most difficult
part of these questions is:
"Which one should I buy?"**

I'm sure the folks that sell REGA would prefer I tell you the Saturn, but the answers aren't always so obvious.

I must admit I'm a subscriber to the school of "get the best source you can" for a couple of reasons. If you aren't retrieving the information from the source, upgrading everything downstream will only give you a finite amount of results. When you upgrade the rest of your system, if you have fantastic sources, chances are good those new speakers will sound a lot better than if you just have an average source!

**So you should buy
the Saturn, but wait...**

I also have become a lot more convinced that if any one part of your system is way better than the rest, perhaps you are wasting some resolution and that extra money could be spent on more music, or even a vacation. I've seen a lot of systems where the proud owner has a mega CD player or turntable feeding a very average system, while another has a super exotic preamp or power amplifier that is way beyond the capabilities of the rest of the system and I always think why bother?

I won't violate the prime directive and tell you what to do, but how about if I make some suggestions and let you decide for yourself what makes the most sense? After all, this hobby is supposed to be about investigation, not just listening to me tell you what to buy. Right?

(continued)

Pretty Similar From The Outside

As you can see from the outside, these two players look almost identical (the same enclosure as the power supply from my REGA P9 turntable...) and it would be pretty easy to mistake them until you picked them up – the Saturn is a lot heavier. That's where it starts.

While both of these players have a similar design, it ends at the transport; everything else inside the Saturn is taken to a higher level.

Comparing the two is really like parking a standard BMW 3 series next to an M3; at first glance they look identical, yet one has a bigger engine, beefier brakes and more purpose built suspension. Both will do just fine on a run to the grocery store and back, but the M3 will get you around the track quite a bit faster than the base model. If you spend your weekends at the racetrack, the M3 is a must, but if you only go back and forth to work every day, the base model is all you may ever need.

The Saturn has a more substantial power supply, a pair of Wolfson 24 bit DAC's where only one is used in the Apollo and a more elaborate output stage. It possesses a larger capacity power transformer, as well as higher grade parts throughout. That's where the extra cost comes from.

While the difference is in the listening, it is definitely in the details.

To make the job easier, I made identical CDR's of about thirty of my favorite digital tracks, including a wide range of music. Both decks were used in three systems: my reference system, what I considered a "real world" system, made up of the new Naim SuperNait and a pair of Harbeth Compact 7 – III's, and last but not least my Prima Luna ProLogue 1 and a used pair of ProAc Tablettes. *(continued)*





Both players have a very analog – like presentation with a healthy amount of resolution on tap...

Standard power cords were used along with a two-meter length of Cardas Golden Reference interconnect on each player.

For each listening session, I started both players at the same time and switched between them. I had a friend hook them up and not tell me which was which. I repeated the session for a few other people, some audiophile types and some not.

Again, like going back and forth between the respective BMW's one notices a definite family resemblance. Both players have a very analog – like presentation with a healthy amount of resolution on tap and not at the expense of shaving the edges on the musical details. Listening on a very casual level, one might even be fooled into thinking they sound pretty similar, but when you sit down and listen to your favorite recordings, especially if that involves music with acoustic instruments, the difference becomes apparent fairly quickly.

The Apollo does a fantastic job with the fundamentals. Pace, timing, tonality, it's all there and in great quantity for this price point. I haven't heard a CD player in this price range that does this good of a job at being musical and that includes the much touted Cambridge player that's been getting so much attention in the press lately.

The Saturn takes it to another level. To use my favorite comparison from the world of photography, it's like going from ISO 400 film to 100. Everything comes into a bit sharper focus, with fine details rendered better. Colors are a bit more

accurate and there is less grain in the presentation with the Saturn. It also brings you a bit closer to the music, seeing further into the presentation than you can go with the Apollo.

Both have excellent tonality and acoustic instruments are reproduced in a very realistic manner. The Saturn has more weight to the lower registers and more clarity from the midrange all the way to the top. But again, it costs quite a bit more. If I had to compare it to the analog realm, it would be like comparing a P3 to the P7, offering a similar jump in detail and resolution, but you would never think these two players came from a different manufacturer.

So, which one should you buy?

As always it depends on your budget. Never the one to possess restraint, if we were having a beer I'd probably tell you to just buy the more expensive model, because I want to see REGA stay in business forever.

But seriously, it will depend on how good your system is, how much you listen and how much you listen critically. If you are one of those people that music is the backdrop to your life and you don't ever really sit down and engage the listening experience, the Apollo is quite all you will ever need. If you are an analog fanatic and only listen to CD's now and again, but would still like as good of a player as you can get for a reasonable price (and yes, I do think the \$1000 asking price for this player is very reasonable) the Apollo will serve you quite well. *(continued)*



I would like to point out here that even with the very modest Prima Luna based system, I could still hear a difference between the two, and found the Saturn more musically satisfying, but I realize that you just might not have the extra \$1600 to spend. On the Naim/Harbeth system, it was pretty apparent which one was which to all but the most inexperienced ears and on my reference system; it was night and day between the two. Everyone who compared the two in that listening environment correctly identified the players every time.

So ultimately, the Saturn is a more musically revealing player, but it is 2 ½ times more money than the Apollo, which leads us back to the original sets of questions. Only you can answer them and decide which one makes more sense for you. **The ultra critical ear will not be able to settle for anything but the Saturn, while the more casual listener might feel that the Apollo is just fine.**

So get down to your REGA dealer and give them both a listen! ●

The Rega Apollo and Saturn CD players

MSRP: Apollo: \$1195, Saturn: \$2595

MANUFACTURER

Rega Research Ltd.

Essex, England

www.rega.co.uk

US DISTRIBUTOR

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Dallas, TX 75207

972-234-0182

www.soundorg.com

PERIPHERALS

Preamplifiers: Conrad- Johnson ACT2/series 2, Nagra PL-L

Power Amplifiers: Conrad- Johnson Premier 350, Nagra PSA, McIntosh MC275

Digital Sources: Naim CD 555, Meridian 808, Sooloos music server w/Wadia 521 DAC

Analog Source: Rega P9 w/RB1000 arm, Shelter 9000 cartridge

Phono Stage: JLTi phono, ModWright 9.0SE, ASR Basis Exclusive

Speakers: Martin Logan Summits w/Descent i subwoofer

Interconnects: Cardas Golden Reference, Shunyata Antares

Speaker Cables: Shunyata Orion

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

Power Conditioning: Running Springs Jaco, Danielle

Vibration Control: Finite Elemente Pagode Signature racks

Room Treatments: Sonex Classic, GIK panels, GIK bass traps

Accessories: Finite Elemente Ceraballs, Cerapucs, Shunyata Dark Field Cable Elevators

Slummin'

By Jeff Dorgay

Sorry troops, no good garage sales or Ebay finds this issue. I did find a couple of things you need though at bargain prices in an unlikely place. This time it was Apple Music in Portland, Oregon. www.applemusicrow.com An Ebay transaction gone bad sent me to Apple and while I was there, both of these little goodies grabbed my attention.

Tascam CD-D 4000 Duplicator — \$149

About a year or so ago, these used to be about \$1200. Now you can buy the new model for about \$379 and it duplicates CD's at 52x speed. But we all know that 52x burns sound like dog crap on your high zoot audiophile CD player. This Tascam burns at 1x, 2x and 4x to make pristine copies of your favorite 24kt gold CD's. Leave the rarities in the plastic bag and make a CD-R for in the car. If you can find one of these left on the shelf, buy it, you won't regret it.

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