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PUBLISHER Jeff Dorgay

EDITOR Toni McQuilken

ART DIRECTOR Jean Dorgay

MUSIC EDITOR Ben Fong-Torres

ASSISTANT Desi Day MUSIC EDITOR

MUSIC Terry Currier

VISIONARIES Norwood Brown

TECHNICAL EDITOR Dan Babineau

CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

SENIOR Marc Phillips

CONTRIBUTING Tom Caselli

WRITERS Kurt Doslu

Anne Farnsworth

Joe Golfen Ken Kessler

Christina Kratzman

Jerold O'Brien

Todd Sageser

Richard Simmons Scott Tetzlaff

Randy Wells

UBER CARTOONISTS Liza Donnelly

Michael Maslin

ADVERTISING Jeff Dorgay

SERVER SUPREMO Nate Silva

On the Cover: Photo by Sheryl Wilson



tonepublications.com

Editor Questions and Comments:

tonepub@yahoo.com 800.432.4569

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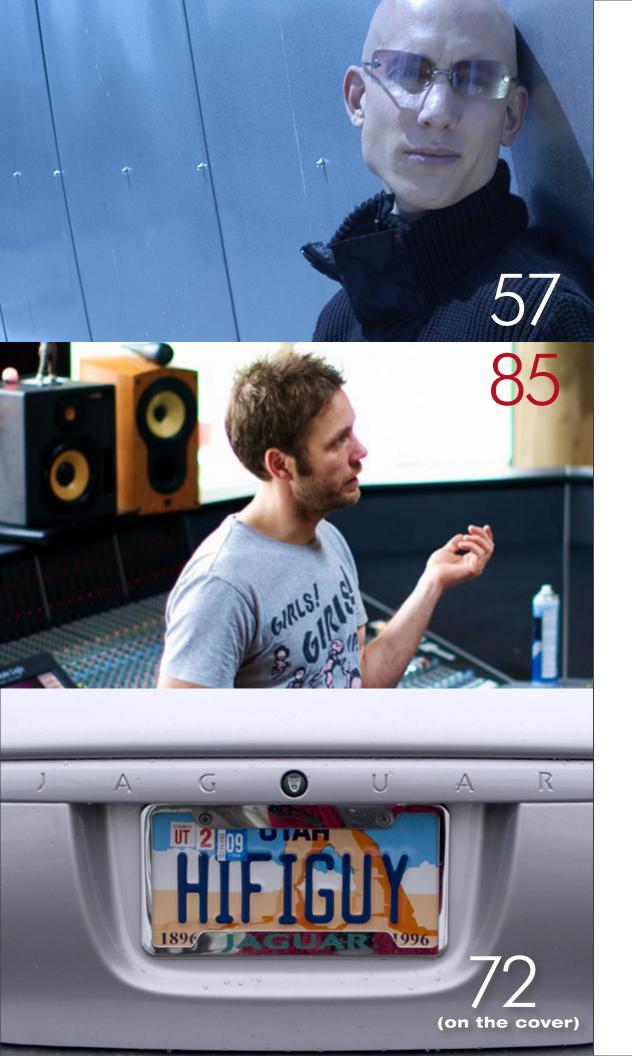


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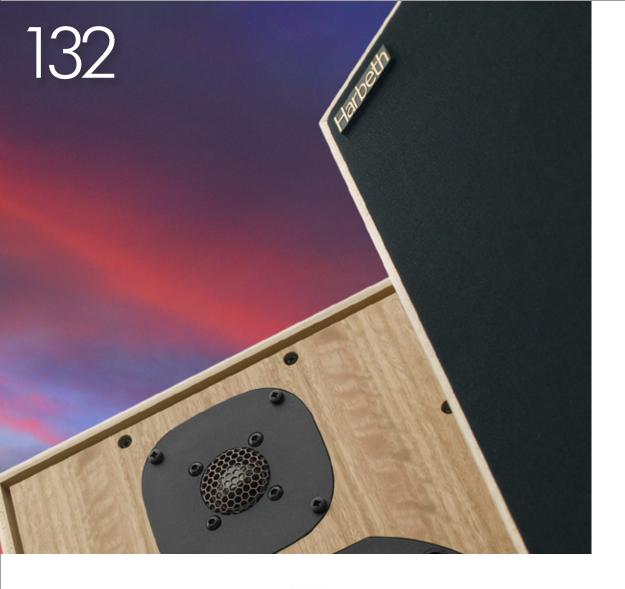
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new in tone this issue



ANNE FARNSWORTH

Our newest addition to the Tone staff, Anne brings a wealth of knowledge from both keyboards. When she's not teaching jazz technique at the USC Thornton School of Music, she's out performing and has worked with Harry "Sweets" Edison, Johnny Griffin, Jaki Byard and Herbie Hancock.

She has a monthly column for **concordjazz.com** and has contributed to All About Jazz-Los Angeles, Jazz Notes, Windplayer and Billboard. You can pick up her CD, *Saturday Morning*, from your favorite online CD vendor.

THE HIFI CHICK

We start a new column this issue, appropriately titled "The HiFi Chick." A few good friends of the magazine that just happen to be female, confirmed aficionados of good sound and women who work in the industry would like to express the female perspective of our world. You might think you know one or all of them, but perhaps not. We're not fessing up to anything.

PUBLISHER'S LETTER

Music lover or stamp collector, which one are you?

Seems like every time I jump on an online forum or pick up a hifi magazine, someone is going on and on about getting kids to listen to vinyl. A number of people in our industry are really pushing hard to try and drag kids into this wacky world of vinyl that we crazed audiophiles know well and love. Everyone's dancing around with glee because the music business sold 1.6 million records last year and you can go into a supermarket (Fred Meyer up here in the Pacific Northwest) and buy albums again.

But as the limo driver in Spinal Tap said to Marti DeBurgi, "This is a passing fad".

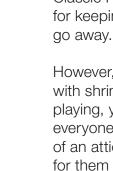
Don't get me wrong, I love records. I've got a ton of them. Actually if my calculations are close, 7500 records works out to about 2500 pounds, so I've got more than a ton. We all have a debt of gratitude to pay to the folks like Michael Fremer, Chad Kassem, everyone at Mobile Fidelity, Classic Records and the other audiophile labels for keeping LP's alive. I don't want to see them go away.

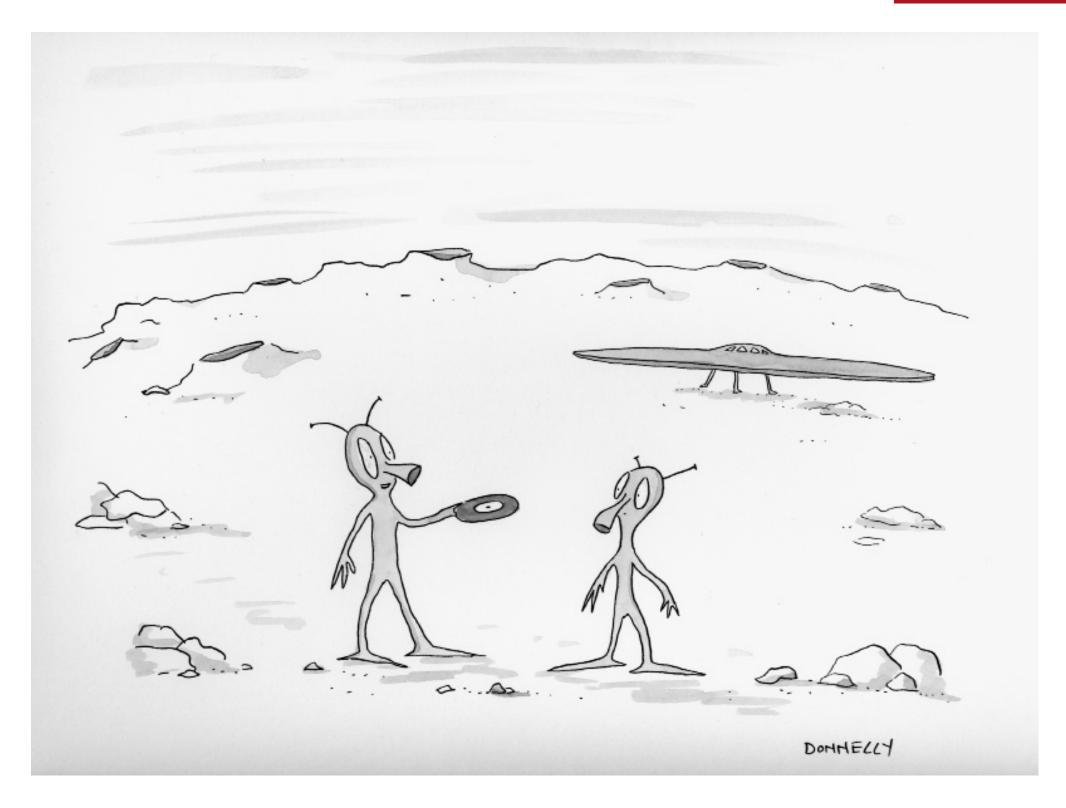
However, if you've got records in your collection with shrinkwrap on them that you won't or aren't playing, you are part of the problem. That's why everyone with a pile of lousy records they dug out of an attic or basement wants ten bucks a pop for them now, when you could get records like this for a dollar or less, ten years ago. I used to spend my time at the used record store, because they cost *less* money than new ones, so I could buy more records.

I remember the day about 15 years ago when I bought a new, unopened BC-13 Beatles box set and tore it open as I was paying for it. The horrified record shop owner said "you aren't going to play those, are you?" That's where it begins. I don't want to deny anyone their right to make a living and I'm completely familiar with the concept of laisse-faire economics, but these are records. They are meant to be enjoyed. I have to believe that every musician out there wants you to listen to the music they made, not keep their albums or CD's in shrinkwrap in a dark room somewhere.

So when I see copies of Steely Dan's *Aja*, or Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* selling for \$600, it makes me want to vomit, because some kid could be listening to that record and really digging it. I was talking to a friends 19 year-old son and when the topic turned to vinyl, he said "are you nuts, who would pay \$50 for one album?" Needless to say we didn't start talking about interconnect cables.

At the end of the day I say bully for vinyl. There are more awesome turntables, cartridges and phono preamps than ever before. The audiophile labels are healthy and the indie labels are pressing records again. But if you think our next generation is going to carry that torch forward, I'm not putting my money on it. And if you want to slow the progress of the decline, think twice when you decide to pay way more than a record is really worth, or choose to leave it in the shrinkwrap.





"Those Earth people must have been really tiny to fit in this."



cut from whole cloth?



Alexandria is framed by the spoils of the solid four-inch sheet of X material from which the side "wing" of the speaker was cut.

In the fifteenth century, English tailors would advertise clothes as being "cut from whole cloth," that is, from the fresh bolt of broad or "whole" cloth as it came from the loom. It was a claim of quality and authenticity.

How the expression—particularly in the United States—acquired the exact opposite meaning (of something specious and false) remains a curiosity to lexicographers, but some suggest it was the result of deceptive advertising. Tailors, looking for greater profits, would claim their suits were made from whole cloth when, in fact, they were cleverly (or not so cleverly) pieced together from scraps.

In the market, value is a function of perception—at least until it becomes apparent to enough people that your claims are "cut from whole cloth."

Wilson Audio loudspeakers have consistently been *sui generis*. Market research is anathema at Wilson. We, instead, endeavor to create our own market. We believe the value of our products is readily perceived in the listening. That alone justifies the costly materials and processes that go into their manufacture. Wilson's proprietary X material, for example, costs 14 times as much as MDF, the material judged "adequate" by most other speaker designers.

Alexandria is the pinnacle of Dave Wilson's passion to create loudspeakers that reproduce the ineluctable beauty of live music. The value of any "flagship" loudspeaker rests not in what you name it, clever market research, where it's priced, or even in what it looks like. The proof of value lies ultimately in how it sounds.

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While many of you have fond memories of your MV-50, it was the MV-75 that was C-J's first power amplifier. Using a pair of 6550's for the output stage with a pair of beefy output transformers, this amplifier would make C-J a "full-line" audio company with a preamplifier and a power amplifier in their lineup. Rated at 75 watts per channel, from 30-15,000hz with no more than 1% THD, it was rated pretty conservatively.

My first C-J tube power amplifier was an MV-50, purchased brand new from Esoteric Audio in Scottsdale, Arizona back in 1987. The owner, Gary Hjerpe prodded me to "take it home for the

weekend." As I walked out the door harrumphing that I wasn't the least bit interested in a tube power amplifier, he just laughed. I'm sure he thought I'd just come back on Monday with my checkbook in hand.

Sure enough, that's what happened. About an hour into the listening session with my Acoustat Spectra 2200's and I was hooked. Sure, I had wished for a bit more juice, but that lush and inviting midrange really sucked me in. I had that MV-50 for about three years until a good friend sold me an Audio Research D-79 (another story for another day), but I gained a new appreciation for tube amplifiers.

I ended up owning every one of the other EL-34 based amps; the 45, 52, 55 and the 60. I always wanted an MV-75 though, because it was their first and I'm kind of irrational when it comes to vintage tube amplifiers. (continued)

Fast forward to just a few weeks ago when the Vinyl Anachronist and I were poking around at Echo Audio, here in Portland, Oregon looking for something fun for the "Slummin" column.

There it was, the fairly shiny MV-75 you see here, and it just happened to be an MV-75-a1, which was the last generation of MV-75's. Kurt Doslu, the owner of Echo said "just take it home for the weekend." Hmmm, Déjà vu. I was looking for a little bit of extra warmth for my desktop system, where the Stirling Broadcast LS3/5a's with external Cicable crossovers have been living quite happily. Warmth and tone I wanted and that's what I got. No one will mistake this amplifier for an ET250, but boy is it fun!

When I told Lew Johnson about my purchase the other day, he said "that's still a great amp!" He always says that when I buy another piece of C-J gear, but he's allowed. He went on to tell me that when they first showed the MV-75 at CES in 1979 that they used a pair of Chartwell LS3/5a's with a pair of Snell model E's as subwoofers.

If you just want to chill and enjoy music, you can actually buy an MV-75 for a lot less money than a pair of Dynaco Mark III's and it's a much better amplifier. Expect to pay about 5-700 dollars for a good one. Not to mention that you can still send your MV-75 back to C-J should anything ever go wrong. "We don't see too many of them these days, but we can still service it for you. Don't worry about upgrading anything, just run it until it fails and send it in."

For now this almost 30 year old amplifier still runs great, so I'm not going to worry about it. ●





A Great Anchor For A Small System

The Decco By Jeff Dorgay



his issue we are combining the Budget Gear column with The Computer Audiophile, because the Decco makes so much sense in both categories. At \$819 it's a 50 watt per channel integrated amplifier that includes a tube preamp and DAC that can work with RCA, optical or USB inputs, making it a perfect hub for any of your digital devices.

The Decco weighs a little over 20 pounds, so it's rather hefty for a budget piece of gear. It comes with a decent remote and it has a slot in the back for a Sonos ZP80, should you have a Sonos based music server. There is a variable output as well, should you hook this up to a subwoofer.

Staying in the budget mode, I did just that, hooking up a pair of Aperion 633's, a Tannoy TS8 and my favorite budget turntable, the Audio Technica PL120 with the Dynavector P-75 (reviewed this issue). I used all cable from Art Audio, so the total system came in at about \$2500.

Should you not have the room for a subwoofer, or want to use the Decco for a desktop system with a pair of small speakers, there is a switchable bass boost that offers a 5db bump and 55hz. This turns out to be just the right amount of boost on a desktop, but be careful not to crank up your little speakers too far, or you might be blowing woofers!

A little bit of tubey goodness inside

When you power up the Decco, you will notice a small vertical window to the left of the volume control with a clear window revealing a tube! It reminded me of my old Luxman Brid amplifier from the 80s. Popping the Decco out of its glossy black wood case to take a closer look, this tube is a Chinese 6H23, which is a direct replacement for a 6922/6DJ8.

While poking around, I noticed a very substantial power transformer and a discrete output stage instead of chips. Very impressive.

Set up is a snap, plug it in, hook up some speakers and thread a USB cable over to your PC and go! The Decco also has a headphone amplifier built in, so those of you that are in a very small space will have that option at your disposal. (continued)

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bend • lock • fine focus



I gave the Decco a try with my reference phones and would give it a solid C+ for headphone performance. It was a bit rolled off at the extremes, and not as dynamic as some of my external amps, but they cost a lot more! (some as much as the Decco) Again, convenience factor: A.

Warm, Relaxing Sound

In my small living room that measures 11 x 17 feet, with small speakers and the subwoofer, the Decco did an excellent job at providing a musical experience. If you aren't pushing this thing too hard, it is very pleasant. To put it in perspective, pairing the Decco with your favorite pair of \$500 dollar speakers and this combination exceeds the performance of a comparably priced BOSE player by a long shot, and it's much more attractive to boot.

Remember, this is an inexpensive integrated amplifier with a DAC built in.

The key is convenience and the fact that the Decco offers up pretty darn good sound too is a real bonus.

Playing a bunch of my jazz favorites or boomer rock at modest volume was really the way to go. The sound is a little bit veiled, but considering the price, excellent. Fundamentally, the Decco does nothing wrong, offering up a very satisfying musical experience.

Later on, the rabid audiophile got the best of me and I just had to swap that tube out for a Bugle Boy that I had in my toolbox. Should you buy one of these for yourself or a loved one, swap that tube out right away. *(continued)*

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One good NOS 6922 will only set you back about 50 bucks and it really adds a lot of life to the Decco, eliminating a lot of the aforementioned veil. It won't turn the Decco into an ART 3, but it sounds way better than you would expect for the money.

Flexibility Is The Key

When I swapped out my sattelite/sub combo for the Gemme Audio Tanto full range speakers that I normally have in my living room, the results were again very pleasing. (especially with that tube upgrade) I found the Decto to have enough drive to play these 92 db speakers as loud as I needed to go.

Where the Decco really shines is being part of a computer or digital based system. Sure I had fun spinning records, but being able to jack my laptop or the Wadia 170i in and use my iPod with the internal DAC was really the most fun. I suspect that is how most people will use the Decco, as the central component with a computer and two speakers. If you have a 17-24 inch monitor, the Decco even fits perfectly right on your desk with a monitor on top and the speakers right on the side! I also had great luck using it with an inexpensive, older CD player and the digital input.

Where I suspect a lot of people will put the Decco to use is via USB from their laptop, PC, or perhaps remotely via an Airport Express. I tried this in my garage and it was awesome, hooked up to my big vintage Polk monitors, using my laptop as the music server.

Wrap It Up And Take It Home

If you need a compact hifi system, I'd suggest putting the Decco at the top of your list. It offers great performance, excellent flexibility in a stylish package. It will become the foundation of a great little system, having good enough sound to keep audiophiles happy and easy enough to use to keep newbies happy as well. ●





t's been said – Oh, all right, I've said it myself once or twice – that I was the last American journalist to interview Jim Morrison before he took off to Paris, on March 12th, 1971, to join his girl friend, Pam Courson, who'd found a spacious Beaux Arts apartment for them in the lower Marais district. And it was there, in the early morning hours of July 3rd, that he died at age 27.

I do know that no other reporter—American or otherwise—has claimed to have spoken with him before he left, or in the three months he spent in and around Paris.

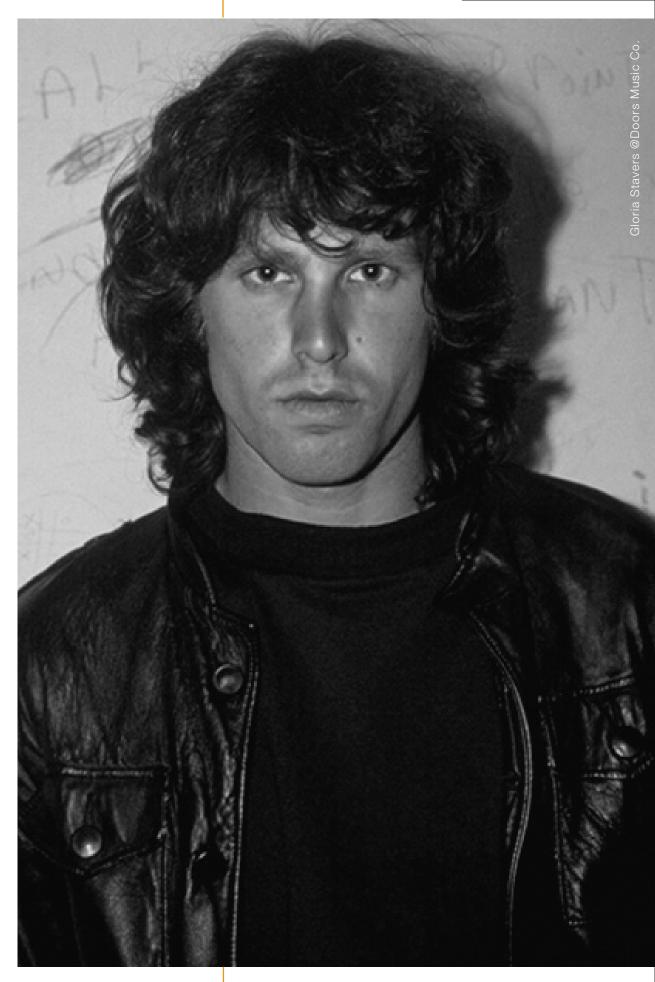
But I didn't exactly interview him. We did talk, for more than an hour, and I got to know him a little. But I hadn't planned on it, and it was only out of habit that I turned on a tape recorder, captured our visit, and turned part of it into a short news item for *Rolling Stone*.

Here's what happened.

One afternoon in February, I was hanging out with Diane Gardiner in her apartment in West Holllywood. Diane worked for a big PR company, and her specialty was rock. Her clients included Jefferson Airplane and the Doors. Coincidentally, her apartment was just downstairs from Pam Courson's, and they were buddies.

There was a rap on the door. It was Jim Morrison, and he was looking for Pam. She wasn't home, Diane said, and invited Jim to stick around and wait for her.

I hadn't met Morrison before—Our L.A. correspondent, Jerry Hopkins, had done most of our coverage of the band—and I didn't know much about what was going on with The Doors, aside from the fact that they were working on the album that would become *L.A. Woman*, and some gossip that he was heading off to France. With his full beard and the beginnings of a beer belly, he didn't look much like the rock star of old. Almost reflexively, I invited him to chat, perhaps for an article. We hit it off right away; even got into this parody of a TV talk show. I played the part of Dick Cavett, who had a show on ABC, opposite Johnny Carson. Jim played—well, a rock star named Jim Morrison. *(continued)*



We set up a couple of chairs. No sooner did Jim sit down than he told an obscene joke that would've knocked Cavett right off the air.

But, soon, we settled into a pretty sober conversation—or reasonably sober, considering that, about 15 minutes into it, when Pam showed up, he got up and ordered gin and potato chips from a nearby store. We continued with our chat, and Pam joined in, too. Despite his reputation as a wild man, and his busts for obscenity and for exposing himself on stage in Miami, Morrison had struck me, in interviews, as an intelligent, thoughtful guy who just happened to be at home on the edge.

Here, in a modest apartment in West Hollywood, on the eve of leaving the country, he lived up to my expectations. He was reasoned. He was realistic about rock, and about the ebbs and flows of fan worship. He was relaxed.

And hey, why not? We were just doing a TV talk show.

Here are a few excerpts:

How much longer do you have with Elektra?

Well, we're at work on our last album for them.

Do you see far beyond that?

I can't see too much beyond that. You know, it's a day-to-day thing. I think with this album we're at kind of a crossroads in our career. So, we'll know within the next five or six months what the future will be.

What's in the immediate future? Any concerts?

No, we're kind of off playing concerts; somehow no one enjoys the big places anymore, and to go into clubs more than just a night every now and then is kind of meaningless.

A few years ago, we were probably right on for the age of people who would go to large concerts, whereas now we may appeal to an older audience, maybe still the Fillmore crowds. But I would say it would be an anachronism for the younger people.

Do you think you'd be classified among the people who signify what some people insist is the "death of rock"?

Well, I was saying rock is dead years ago. Twenty or thirty years ago, jazz was the kind of music people went to, and large crowds danced to, and moved around to. And then rock and roll replaced that, and then another generation came along and they called it rock. The new generation of kids will come along in a few years, swarm together, and have a new name for it. It'll be the kind of music that people like to go out and get it on to.

Each generation wants new symbols, new people, and new names. They want to divorce themselves from the preceding generation, and so they won't call it rock, they'll invent some new name for it. *(continued)*

Date: offeno from DIANE GARDINER ROGERS, COWAN & BRENNER, INC.

In Ben Fong-Torres' book, The Doors by the Doors, poet Michael C. Ford, a buddy of Morrison's, says Jim wrote "L.A. Woman" with Diane in mind. On her notepad, he jots down some words that would wind up in the song.

How about Miami? Will that whole thing affect whether you'll play any more concerts?

I think that was the culmination, in a way, of our mass performing career. Subconsciously, I think I was trying to get across in that concert —I was trying to reduce it to absurdity, and it worked too well.

When did it stop getting to be fun?

I think there's a certain moment when you're right in time with your audience, and then you both grow out of it and you both have to realize it; it's not that you've outgrown your audience; it has to go on to something else.

You see blues fitting in with this?

No. It's just getting back to more of what we enjoy. What we actually personally enjoy. Not that we've ever played music that we didn't like. When we were playing clubs, I'd say over half of what we did was blues, and we used our own material on records, but I think the most exciting things we did were basic blues. I like them mainly 'cause they're fun to sing.

(While Jim was on the phone ordering refreshments, Diane, Pamela and I chatted.)

Why have you gotten fat, Jim? That was the question we were discussing.

Pamela: Who says he's fat? I like it!

Jim: I guess it's just a natural aging process ... Maybe it's not being as physically active. I think it's mainly just filling out. Some people have that kind of build.

Does touring and running around doing that kind of thing make you lose a lot of weight?

Jim: I would say if you performed a lot and sweated a lot and moved around.

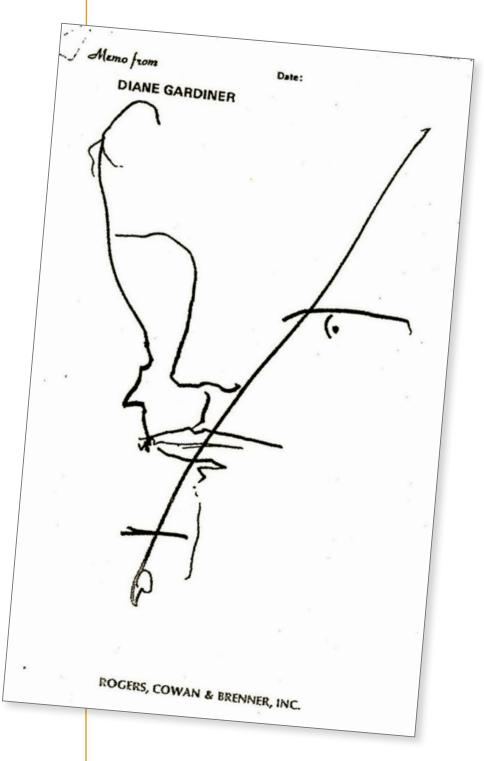
Pam: It's mainly drinking.

Jim: I drink a lot of beer. While I'm recording, especially. If you drink hard liquor when you're recording pretty soon you're so out of it, you can't do anything anymore. But beer – it gives you a little energy and you can keep going all night. Beer puts on the pounds.

What did you do in Miami during your spare time? Weren't you sort of captive in the city?

Jim: Yeah, sometimes it would be two days, sometimes three days a week. I had a chance to do a little waterskiing. I learned how to scuba dive. I went to Nassau for a weekend. They have beautiful underwater natural parks. Have you ever scuba dived? It's a beautiful trip. You're just floating. It's an intrauterine experience.

One thing I was interested to observe: Every day we would rush home to watch ourselves on TV; they couldn't film in the courtroom, but going and leaving they'd film it, and we'd hear the reporters' views of what happened. *(continued)*



Diane Gardiner, the Doors' publicist and a friend of Jim Morrison and Pamela Courson, told Ben Fong-Torres: "Sometimes he'd just drop by, and if I was busy, he'd take a notepad and start drawing."



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The first few days it was kinda the old-line policy, what people had been thinking for a year and a half, but as the trial wore on, the reporters themselves, from just talking to me and the people involved in the case—the tone of the news articles—and even the papers – became a little more objective as each day went on.

[Later, the talk turned to the Beatles. Jim had been reading Rolling Stone editor Jann Wenner's two-part interview with John Lennon.]

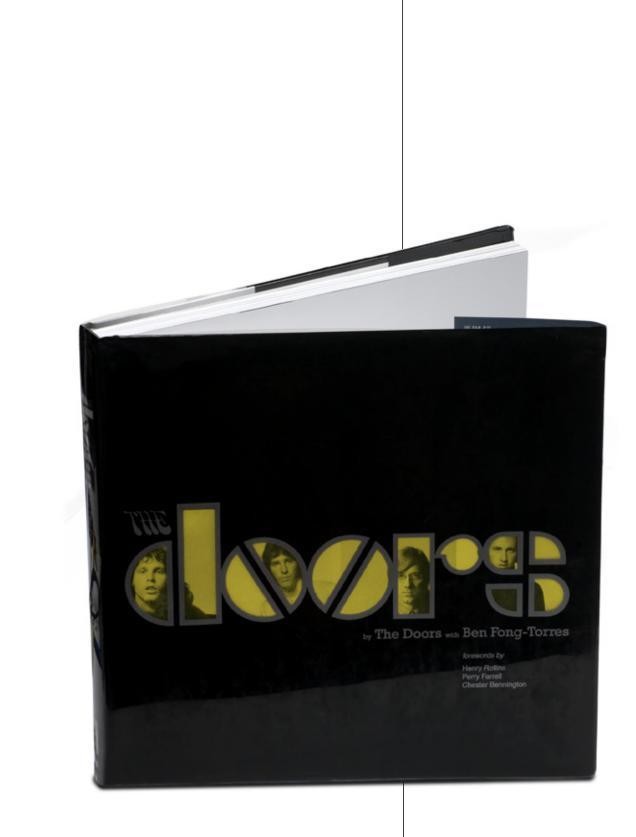
Jim: In a way, we came along at a weird time, at the tail end of the rock revival from England. You know, they'd already done it. I think it was the success of those English groups that gave hope to a lot of musicians over here, saying, "Sheee-it, we can do the same thing!"

And so they did. The shock is how long they managed to do it for, considering that Morrison was acting up and out even before they finished their first album.

But when Jim told me that he didn't see much beyond *L.A. Woman*, and that he felt done with touring, it was news to the rest of the band—keyboardist Ray Manzarek, guitarist Robby Krieger, and drummer John Densmore.

As Manzarek told me for my book, The Doors by the Doors, the three of them stayed busy while Morrison was in Paris. "Robby and I and John are working on songs," he said, "getting together and rehearsing two times a week. Nobody's heard from Jim."

In the end, Morrison had the last word—without even having to say anything. ●



Beyond the Music:

The Doors By the Doors
By Ben Fong-Torres

A number of books have been written about this band, but this one is a collaboration between Ben Fong-Torres, The Doors and the people closest to the band. Ben states in the introduction, "I'm here as your master of ceremonies, and it won't be easy."

The master of understatement, Fong-Torres does a very thorough job of taking us through all the phases of The Doors' career, from when the members met, to the current day. It tracks their path from film school and offers snapshots of what they were doing when each album was produced, along with some insightful comments from Jim Morrison's family, along with material from Morrison's interviews with various journalists, including Fong-Torres.

Written in interview format with a lot of rare photos from the Doors organization, this book should provide enlightenment for Doors fans, new and seasoned.



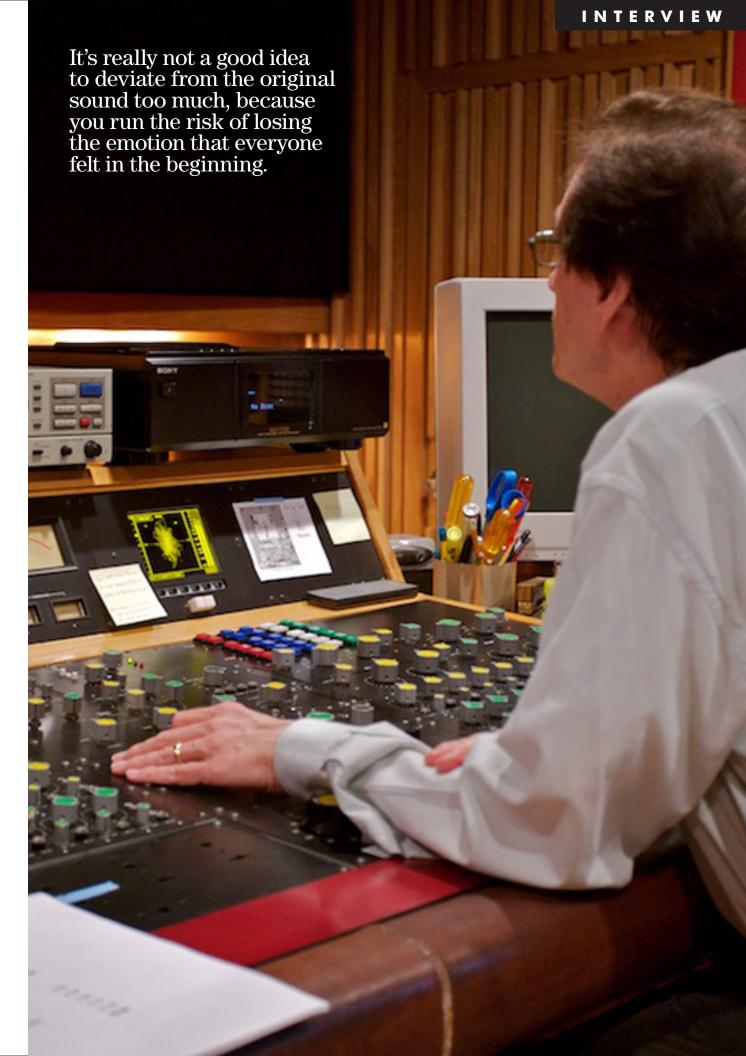
If you take a peek at any music-related Internet forum these days, you'll find a lot of chatter about the Doors' seven-LP box set that Rhino recently released. Restoring these classics was handled by Bruce Botnick, the studio engineer responsible for recording them the first time around, and mastering genius Bernie Grundman, who mastered the original version of *Waiting for the Sun*. Bruce was kind enough to let us use the photos from the session you see here, and Bernie offered a few comments on the project.

With a project like this that has such historical significance, when do you finally say "That's it!" and stamp the vinyl?

We actually went over it from start to finish twice. The first time we were being a bit too intellectual about it and took all seven records as a whole. Once we made the test pressings, we decided to rethink the group concept and take each recording more as an individual thing. That's when we decided to do the whole thing over.

When you step over the line from remastering this kind of work to restoration, how hard is it to resist cleaning it up too far? You mention in the liner notes that you had originally corrected the speed variations on The Doors.

It's really not a good idea to deviate from the original sound too much, because you run the risk of losing the emotion that everyone felt in the beginning. It takes a fair amount of trial and error to capture that balance and emotion, so you have to stay very sensitive to the music.



At the end of the sessions, we all looked at each other and knew we got the most out of the performances. (Laughs) Back in the 60's and 70's, there were times we would speed up a recording slightly to give it a bit more life and make it a bit more exciting.

As the mastering engineer on the original version of Waiting for the Sun, you have a long history with The Doors. Is the Doors catalog something you have listened to a lot over the years, or was this an old friend that you came back to?

I've done a few things for Bruce over the years, with the various repackagings of the Doors catalog, so I wasn't completely out of touch. I still had a strong memory of how this music used to sound, but in many ways this project made the Doors' music new to me again.

How heavily does the hardware affect the project?

While we always try to use the best judgment we can without compromising the final product, I'm pretty old school; I feel like I'm only as good as my tools. A recording is always a combination of balance, ego and the signal path!

We used an all tube cutting system on these records, and everything that we haven't hand built has been extensively modified by us to our specifications. We tear everything apart and pay careful attention to wire, power supplies and the like, using the best parts we can get our hands on.

My first priority is always the *quality* of sound; I try to use the minimum amount of equipment that is necessary to achieve a natural sound. Some of the kids today that are using so many computers don't always achieve that balance, but you can get it with modern tools if you have the patience. And the ears!

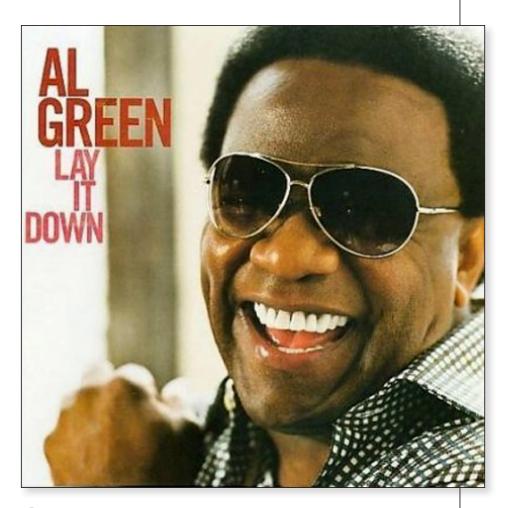
Are you much of an audiophile at heart?

Definitely, I'm the original audiophile kid who used to hang out at the stereo store and spend every dime I had on records and hifi gear. I've always appreciated a good system. That's why I take so much care with the records.



Current Releases

By Ben Fong-Torres, Marc Phillips & Jeff Dorgay



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Al Green

Lay It Down
Blue Note Records

By Ben Fong-Torres

We're hearing a lot about "neo-soul" these days, a lot of it coming from young British singers like Amy Winehouse, Duffy, Adele, and Kate Nash.

They're all fine by me, but I'm just as happy with plain old soul—especially when it's coming from Al Green, who's sounding better than ever on *Lay It Down*, his third CD since returning to secular love songs (while continuing to preach, and to sing gospel, as the Rev. Al Green at his own church in Memphis).

Green co-produced the first two of those albums with Willie Mitchell, the fabled composer, arranger and producer who brought Green to stardom in the early '70s with a string of silken, achingly romantic songs. Don't need to list them. You know 'em; you love 'em; you've probably even made love to 'em.

After getting Born Again, and leaving those songs—and Mitchell—behind, he returned in 2003 with *I Can't Stop* and 2005's *Everything's OK*, which were more than OK. But the new CD, with co-producer batons handed to Ahmir "?uestlove" Thompson of the Roots and keyboardist James Poyser, is stunning. They've brought in John Legend, Corrine Bailey Rae and Anthony Hamilton to lend vocal support, but, track after track, the right Reverend shows that he don't need no help—nor any contemporary, hip-hop flourishes Ahmir and Poyser might bring.

And so the new guys play it subtle and celebrate Green by taking all the musicians—and all of us—on a joyous ride in the wayback machine, with gorgeous strings and grooving horns embellishing songs that sound familiar, yet are fresh as tomorrow morning. And you've got Green fluttering or exploding into his patented falsetto; cooing a between-the-sheets love song ("Take Your Time") with Rae; matching up beautifully with Hamilton on the title track and with Legend on "Stay With Me (By the Sea)," and lapping up the music around him, from the Dap-Kings Horns to his all-star backup vocalists. You can hear Green laughing and pushing them on, just as if it was Sunday, and he was in church.

Love and happiness, all over again.



SpiritualizedSongs in A&E
Fontana Universal



Spiritualized has always been one of those elusive, hard-to-pigeonhole indie bands, and is known for a dense, complex sound that seems to occupy a space all its own. Jason Pierce (aka J. Spaceman) has been the only constant in the band since it was formed after the collapse of the influential '90s band Spacemen 3. His near-death experience with pneumonia in 2005 almost prevented *Songs in A&E* from ever seeing the light of day. Pierce's vocals sound weary, worn and thankful as a result, and the songs bring to mind what an energized Keith Richards would do if he were fronting the Polyphonic Spree.

I've always felt that the term "space rock," which has been attributed to both Spiritualized and Spacemen 3, is somewhat undeserved. While these 18 tracks are often marked by strange electronic noises, the overall effect is much earthier and more bound to traditional rock and roll forms than Mr. Spaceman would lead you to believe. "Death Take Your Fiddle," for instance, has a revival meeting momentum to it with the controlled deep breathing of a coma state to mark the tempo. "Sweet Talk" evokes an elegiac quality, complete with bells and a heavenly choir, that suggests that Pierce may have been closer to the bright light than he's willing to admit. These images of space may not be too disparate from glimpses of heaven; this is obviously an album that's about healing and recovery, not interstellar travel.

In case you're wondering, A and E chords figure prominently throughout this album (as do A minor and E minor). Pierce's vision for this album is wider and more varied, however, and while no one will ever call this music ground-breaking or revolutionary, it is revealing and deeply personal. The moniker Spiritualized has remained an enigma to me over this band's existence, but after *Songs in A&E*, I think I finally get it. – *Marc Phillips*





Death Cab For Cutie

Narrow Stairs WEA/Atlantic

If your band is lucky enough to have a breakthrough album, there are several follow-up strategies you can adopt. The first involves following your muse and challenging your fans by releasing difficult and provocative music that will cement your reputation as a critic's darling (also known as the Kid A plan). Secondly, you can return to your roots and cut an album that will reward the fans that were there from the beginning (Accelerate, anyone?). Or, like Death Cab for Cutie, you can release your most accessible and consistent collection of songs yet, and then stand at the top of the mountain and drink Champagne and laugh about the old days when you had to live on Ramen and 49-cent bean burritos at Taco Bell. (continued)

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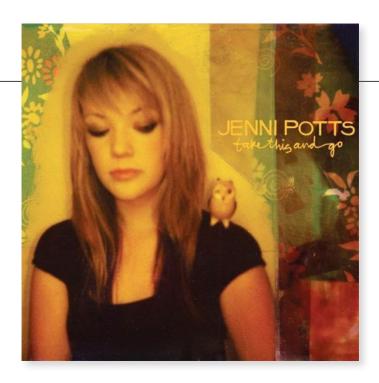
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Their new CD, Narrow Stairs hit Number One on the Billboard charts in its second week, (a first for the band). It's hard to tell what the long-term success will be. I have a feeling it will do more for their reputation than their last two albums, 2003's Transatlanticism and 2005's Plans, put together. One of the many reasons why music downloading is spreading like wildfire is the vague disappointment most fans feel about the album format, and how an album made completely from first-rate songs is an incredibly rare occurrence. This, however, is one of those unlikely beasts - an album full of memorable, catchy tunes that are also dark, gloomy, and challenging enough to appeal to a majority of indie music fans. I can't name a single song here that wouldn't be appreciated on an alternative radio playlist.

The real gem here is the first single, "I Will Possess Your Heart," which glides along in shadowy, furtive jam for close to five minutes before launching into the version that you're probably hearing on the radio. This swirling intro, a hybrid of the piano notes of Wilco's "Heavy Metal Drummer" and some lost classic from Echo and the Bunnymen, marks a distinct new direction for the band as gifted instrumentalists. The drum work of Jason McGerr, in particular, is inventive throughout the album. The rest of the album is unusually literate (several references are made to my hero, Jack Kerouac), and singer-songwriter Ben Gibbard is finally at the point where he is providing a unique and stalwart signature to indie music. Highly recommended for alternative music fans, and one of the most satisfying albums of the year. - Marc Phillips

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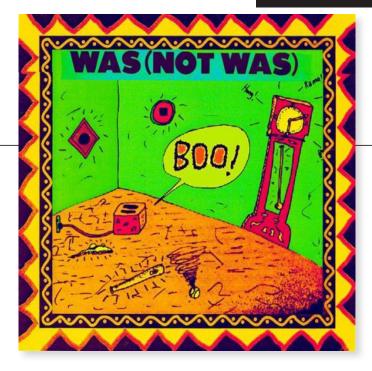
Jenni Potts *Take This and Go*Clickpop

According to her press release, this Bellingham, Washington native wrote most of the lyrics of her first full-length release to ease the pain over a recent miscarriage that resulted in a suicide attempt. Before you quietly excuse yourself and run from the room, you should know that these folk-rock songs escape any "woe-isme" drudgery and are actually quite exhilarating. Potts' high-pitched and breathy singing voice occasionally shifts into a sudden and alarming wail, not unlike a siren, but these are notes of catharsis rather than lament. Don't be fooled into floating along with some of her dreamier passages; she will make you jump more than once.

Much of *Take This and Go* does follow the cute-girl-with-an-acoustic-guitar aesthetic, but Potts breaks out from the pack by keeping you on the edge of your seat. For instance, "Last Night" begins with her trademark delicacy comprised of her acoustic guitar (much of her strumming will remind you of Pink Floyd's "Dogs"), accompanied by cello. Halfway through, all hell breaks loose with a wall-of-sound that would make Phil Spector stop cleaning his guns and take notice. When it's needed, Miss Potts can definitely rock.

As for the sadder elements of this album, they do exist without the proper cushioning or side-stepping. On "The Fourth" (a direct reference to the anniversary of the miscarriage), Potts confronts her partner and even comes out and asks, "Do you even mind that I lost our baby?" The pain here is unusually lucid, culminating with the observation that "love's an illusion projected by sex." There's no avoiding the fact that this is a young woman with big issues. Fortunately, she's working them out, and the result is a rewarding, contradictory and thoughtful collection of songs that deserves your careful attention.

- Marc Phillips



Was (Not Was)

Boo! Rykodisc

Ive always had a soft spot for Was (Not Was), the ongoing project of producers Don and David Was (Don Fagenson and David Weiss). Back when my sons were mere toddlers, I trained them to walk around the house saying, "I'm in jail, Dad! I like it here!" I once serenaded a girl by singing an off-key version of "Zaz Turned Blue." To this day, I still think "Earth to Doris" is the funniest thing I've ever heard while driving, and I nearly died in a car accident as a result. When I heard that Was (Not Was) had released their first album in nearly 20 years, I raced out to buy it.

Unfortunately, the news is not good. Was (Not Was) has always been about three things: great guest stars, exceptional production quality, and a wild, quirky sense of humor that always bordered on the absurd. The new album, *Bool*, falls short in each category. While a list of guest stars such as Kris Kristofferson, Wayne Kramer, Marcus Miller and Booker T. Jones can hardly be considered disappointing, I miss the calculated audacity that put Ozzy Osbourne and Mel Torme on the same album. The sound quality reminds me of that ultra-clear and ultra-harsh presentation that marred early digital recordings through much of the '80s. Finally, I didn't laugh or even smile once through the entire affair, much less swerve into oncoming traffic. (continued)

It's not that Boo! is such a terrible record. It's just terribly tame. The majority of tracks settle into a rather ordinary funk, blues or R&B groove that sounds suspiciously like the soundtrack for an alternate version of The Blues Brothers 2000 or a compilation CD of hits from an early version of the Saturday Night Live house band. I know there's still an audience for this kind of music, but why did the Was brothers feel compelled to return to the studio after a 20-year absence to make more of it? You'll have to excuse me...I need to listen to Born to Laugh at Tornadoes to get this taste out of my mouth. - Marc Phillips



Robyn Purchase HD Download Robyn
Konichiwa/
Cherrytree/Interscope

With a hearty "Konichiwa, bitches!" Robyn has landed squarely in the world of pop and hip-hop, kicking ass and taking names. The self-proclaimed Queen of Queen Bees (who, according to the intro, "Curriculum Vitae," has sucker-punched Einstein, outsmarted Ali and still has time on the weekends to act as a stunt double for Jackie Chan) knows that sex and attitude sell, and delivers both gleefully with a baby-doll voice that will make you, or at least parts of you, stand up and take notice. (continued)



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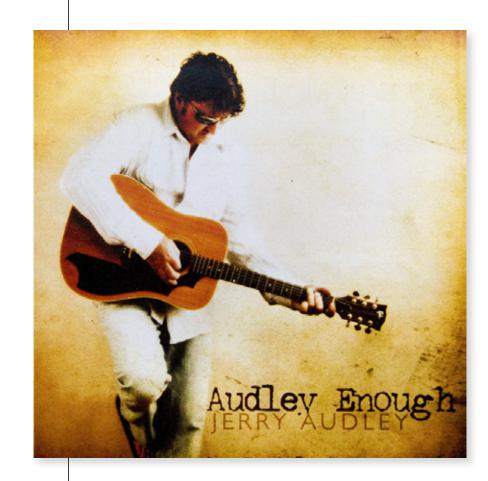
Ferrari
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If you're allergic to the majority of today's pop music, especially the variety that features marginally-talented young women who resemble products more than people, you may not "get" Robyn during a casual listen. While her debut album does start off with an amazing dose of sheer sexual attitude, the excitement does trail off as she moves away from Li'l Kim and starts sounding more like Janet Jackson. Madonna (one of the songs is even called "Who's That Girl") and, God help her, Britney. As with Lily Allen, however, the secret to understanding the overwhelmingly positive critical response to this album is to pay close attention to the intelligence that hides just beneath the surface.

I'm leaving one detail out, which may explain a big chunk of Robyn's appeal. It may surprise you to find out that Robyn is not a streetwise woman from a large urban American city, but a tall blonde from Sweden. (In fact, this album was released in Sweden back in 2005, and is just now making it to our shores.) It's becoming evident that the Swedish music scene is becoming very adept at mining authentic results from a variety of genres such as progrock (Dungen) and shoegaze (Serena-Maneesh). Why not bubble-gum pop? As for me, I'm still torn. I keep returning to the blatant horniness of the first three tracks, which are more rap-oriented and poke fun at the whole gangsta girl mentality. The rest of the album is much less interesting, unfortunately. But Robyn is definitely on my radar. - Marc Phillips



Jerry Audley *Audley Enough*

If you're one of those country music fans who rails against the polished and pop-oriented direction this genre is following, then Jerry Audley may just be your cup of Texas Tea. Coming out of the Hank Williams Sr. school of tradition and earnestness, Audley, who hails from North Texas, traveled to Nashville to record *Audley Enough* with the dream of expanding his popularity in the Lone Star State to a national level. A self-proclaimed "graduate of Hard Knox University," Audley slept in his truck and showered at rest stops during the sessions. This is the stuff of legends, folks.

While Audley isn't breaking any new ground when it comes to pure honky tonk, the level of commitment and gratitude shines through. While his voice suggests a more sedated, less nasal Randy Travis, the musicianship on this album is well above average. Audley is more than generous with his backing band, allowing them to improvise and break out on nearly every song. The interaction between Audley, guitarist Jerry Matheney and dobro player Mitchell Smithey is unusually rich and loose.

While his music is decidedly old-fashioned, his marketing strategy is right out of the 21st century. Audley is marketing this CD, in addition to the obligatory T-shirts and baseball caps, on his web site, **www.jerryaudley.com.** For a veteran like Audley, this is a fantastic way to keep his dream of national exposure alive. Back in Hank Williams' day the dream might have been sacrificed to a day job and a family. Here's hoping that Audley finds his audience with *Audley Enough*. – *Marc Phillips*



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Judas Priest

Nostradamus Sony, LP and CD By Jeff Dorgay

The great prophet Beavis once said, "I like Priest but this sucks!"

Nostradamus is beautifully packaged, but at the end of the booklet as you peruse the credits, you don't have to be a prophet to suspect the music inside might not live up to the hype. Two words give it away:

"Synthesized guitars"

What the hell are synthesized guitars doing on a Judas Priest record? After listening to the new 3LP/2CD box set *Nostradamus*, I'm left cold. I will say this; *Nostradamus* is the best *sounding* heavy metal record I've ever heard. The CD's offer much better than average sound quality, but the LP's are awesome, with lead singer Rob Halford's multitracked vocals sounding like he is Nostradamus back from the dead. I just wish my copies of *Screaming for Vengeance* and *Defenders of the Faith* sounded this good.

When guitarists Glenn Tipton and KK Downing are playing real guitars, they still have their blistering edge. However I fear this is a rock opera at best, and something I'd expect from Dream Theater, not one of the worlds' heaviest metal bands.

As you may have guessed by now, *Nostradamus* is Judas Priest's concept record that centers around their musical interpretation of the prophecies of Nostradamus. The band refers to this project as "their most ambitious musical adventure to date". The work starts out with a slow introduction, "Dawn of Creation/Prophecy" and carries through to the final cut, "Future of Mankind" where Halford reassures us that "the secret treasure is here".

After listening to *Nostradamus* a couple of times, I'm still not sure whether to praise them for such an ambitious effort, or punish them for deviating so far from their roots.



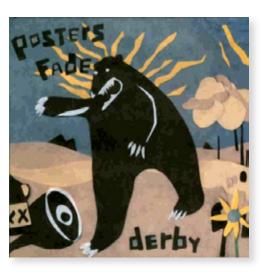
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Derby

Posters Fade
Green Submarine Records

Derby's MySpace page describes them as sounding "instantly familiar, yet 100 percent original." Thinking of how many times I've heard that before, I pushed play and tried to keep an open mind. These three guys from Portland, Oregon give me hope for the next generation. This is a brilliantly crafted album full of great pop songs.

The whole record has an 80's British pop groove, with a layered harmonious sound and some very tasty guitar and piano textures throughout, but then on track 7 they take a bit of an "Eleanor Rigby" turn with "Hopes" and move right into a 10cc meets Neil Young thing with "Tree Tops," featuring some great pedal steel riffs behind about 20 layers of overdubbed vocals.

The effort Derby has put forth with *Posters Fade* is mature beyond its years. The songs are clever and engaging, and the arrangements are just the right balance of density and sparseness with musicianship to match. Derby will be playing in West Hollywood at the Roxy on June 28th, so if you are anywhere near, I suggest checking them out. – *Jeff Dorgay*

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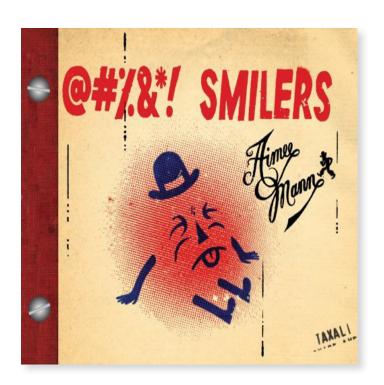
The Duke Spirit Purchase HD Download Neptune
You Are Here Records

Boy meets girl in art school, they grab some friends and form a rock band. Where have we heard this story before? At least she doesn't play bass. Achieving most of their success the hard way by taking their act on the road, The Duke Spirit hasn't had much airplay or other promotion, though they played a very successful set at Coachella in 2006.

After a number of singles and a few EP's, they've released their second album. Their first, *Cuts Across The Land* had its moments of alt-punk intrigue and numerous style changes, but the band is much more focused on this record, with a very hard driving sound throughout. The vocals from lead singer Liela Moss are much more consistent throughout *Neptune*, and she can really growl like Patti Smith or Chrissie Hynde at their best.

Don't be fooled by the ethereal opening track, "I do believe." This album really rocks hard from start to finish, except for "Wooden Heart," which is the token slow ballad on the disc. Twenty-somethings will dig this record for its energy. Those of us that been hanging around since the post punk scene of the 80's will be happy to add another great band to our list.

- Jeff Dorgay



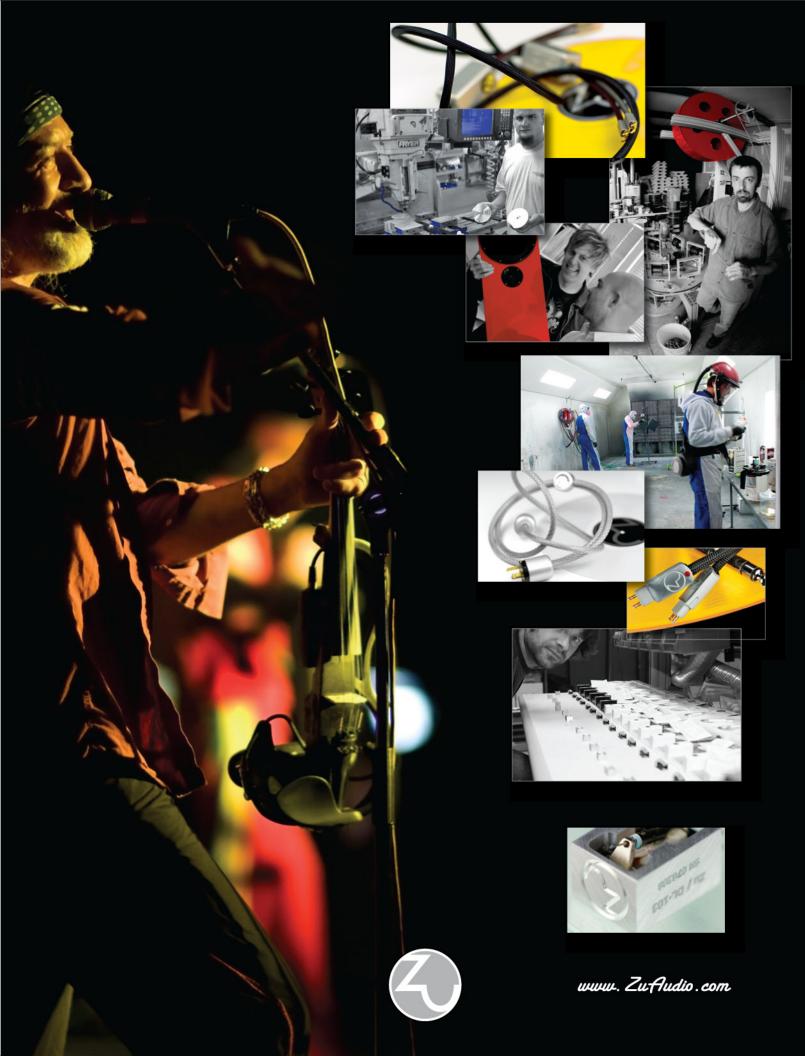
Aimee Mann @#%&*! Smilers SuperEgo

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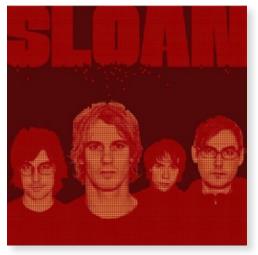
I just want to give Aimee Mann a big hug. Life can't be as desperate as she paints it; at least I hope not. The disc opens with "Freeway," a tune she played in Portland as part of her Christmas concert. You have to love her painfully accurate description of the human condition, when she sings, "The road to Orange County leaves an awful lot of leeway, where everyone's a doctor or a specialist in retail". Keep in mind; this is the *happy* song on the disc.

@#%&*! Smilers builds on the textures of her last album, The Forgotten Arm, but in a more acoustic vein, with more strings and organ bits than before. As in all of her past releases, meticulous care has been paid to the recording and mastering, so this one is full of surprises on a big hifi system. The sound is big, open and organic, with a lot of texture. Mann's voice has a lot of air and is more solid than it was on the previous two discs.

Mann's voice keeps getting better, and her songs have stayed clever. Melancholy has never sounded so good. – *Jeff Dorgay*



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SloanParallel Play
Yep Roc Records

This record could not be more aptly titled, as the four members who make up the band work individually, creating their songs (occasionally enlisting other band members to play) in private and then meeting to decide which ones make the cut for the album, finishing it up in the studio. Band member Patrick Pentland says "I think we create better separately than when we try to do it together."

I'm not sure how this works in a tour situation, but it works quite well on the record.

Though Parallel Play definitely changes tempo often, going from a mellow slacker rock groove on the opening track "Believe" to driving power pop on "Burn for It". No matter what your definition of pop is, these guys have covered all of the bases. This record has such a diverse group of styles, you will either think that they are geniuses or suffer from ADD.

I'll stick with the genius idea and head back to the store to catch up on their past work. – *Jeff Dorgay*

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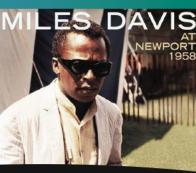




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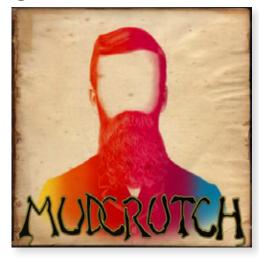
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Mudcrutch

Mudcrutch Reprise

The Tom Petty box set, *Playback*, included five original Mudcrutch tunes that not only gave you a feel for Petty's musical roots (Dylan and the Byrds among others) but showed what a major talent he was from day one. Mudcrutch was a cool band that moved from Florida to Los Angeles and morphed into Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers. If you have had your radio on for the last 30 years, you know the rest of the story.

Petty said in a recent interview that, by making the move to reunite his original band, "he was going with his gut and wanted to do something fun." And fun it is, with Benmont Tench singing lead vocals on "This is a Good Street," with Tom Leadon taking lead vocals on a few tunes as well, and with Petty playing bass on the entire record.

Granted, Petty has been playing with Campbell and Tench for a long time, but this whole band sounds like they've played and toured forever. Where his last release, *Highway Companion* had more of a Dylanesque feel, *Mudcrutch* is straight forward Southern rock, with a bit of twanginess, yet possessing a ton of sophistication at the same time. I nominate Mudcrutch as the thinking man's Southern rock band.

Jeff Dorgay

TONEA36 NO.16 2008



Alejandro Escovedo

Real Animal
Manhattan Records

Don't let the first track on this album fool you. "Always a Friend" starts out slow and almost has a Los Lonely Boys feel to it, but the similarity stops there. The rest of the record has a lot more of an edge, with some blistering guitar riffs and an even blend of 70's rock and punk mixed in.

A founding member of The Nuns and Rank & File, Escovedo has more than enough credentials to go down this path. Produced by veteran Toni Visconti (Bowie, Morrisey), Escovedo even enlisted Ian Hunter at the end for a bit of songwriting advice. You will note that he's had some good advice.

This record is an autobiographical effort for Escovedo, so when he tells you "there's a creature in my body, there's a creature in my blood" on "Golden Bear" you take him very seriously. Escovedo almost died from a bout with hepatitis C a couple of years ago. "Hollywood Hills," in which Escovedo utilizes a string quartet and reminisces about getting out of Southern California. The next cut, "Like an Animal" is the killer track on the disc, full of energy with plenty of blazing distorted guitars and a big wall of sound, bringing you to attention. I'd buy the CD just for this track!

This guy's been to hell and back, and he still rocks. – *Jeff Dorgay*



Drumattica

Train Out of Time
Last Match Records

We close out the new releases with one more band from our hometown, Portland, Oregon. I must admit I bought this CD (as I have with about 20 percent of my record collection) because I really liked the art on the cover. When the guy full of tattoos at the counter gave me a big smile and said "Dramattica, cool..." I figured I was probably on to something.

Train Out of Time is somewhat on the dark side, but Jennifer Folkers Folkers' vocal duets with Robert Wynia pull you in to their creepy melodies and hold you there with a great mixture of techno beats. The whole record has somewhat of an early Roxy Music and King Crimson vibe, with a bit of the Cure thrown in for good measure. All of the songs have a musty, seductive feel about them. If they ever produce a sequel to 9½ Weeks, I nominate Train Out of Time for the soundtrack. This is one of the most texturally intriguing records I've heard in a long time.

The recording is awesome, with the guitars having a lot of air as well as some killer synth-bass bits. If you have a good subwoofer in your system, this will get everyone up off the couch and bouncing around! – *Jeff Dorgay*

The Return of Return to Forever



hen Chick Corea introduced his seminal fusion band *Return To Forever* in 1972, did he foresee the prophetic nature of its name? Thirty-five years later, Corea and original members bassist Stanley Clarke, guitarist Al DiMeola and drummer Lenny White, have reunited, and are in the midst of a world tour of concerts that are thrilling its original fan base and turning a new generation on to the sound of what is arguably the last significant innovation in jazz.



Jazz has always drawn its inspiration from the culture at large. In the early 20th century, New Orleans musicians added improvisation and the syncopated rhythms of ragtime to the instrumentation and march tempos of Sousa-style military bands. Big bands of the Swing Era inserted improvisation into their dance-friendly offerings. The bebop revolution rewrote the melodies of those swing tunes and sped up the tempos, creating a new sound that was as technically challenging to play as it was intellectually challenging to listen to. Along with original compositions, the standard jazz repertoire has always included songs from the hit parade and Broadway.

So it was natural that the juggernaut of the '60s rock revolution would impress itself on the jazz community. Merging the improvisatory and virtuosic elements of jazz with the instrumentation, rhythm and volume levels of rock created the jazz-rock fusion of the late '60s and early '70s.

This jazz hybrid was revelatory to young musicians, for some even life changing.

Richard Smith, chair of the Studio Guitar
Department at the University of Southern California
and a guitarist who frequently tops the international
polls and smooth jazz charts, credits a Return To
Forever concert he heard at the age of 14 with setting the course of his career, calling it "the single
most influential musical event of my life."

When the concert ended he rode his bike home as fast as he could and made a late-night call to his girlfriend "to break up with her [because] I wanted to dedicate myself to a professional music career." He then set out to stay up all night practicing guitar. "I made it to about 4 a.m.," he recalls with a chuckle. The next morning found him "desperately trying to get back together with my girlfriend." He didn't succeed but within a year was playing in local jazz bars. "I never looked back," he says.

Miles Davis is most often credited with spearheading the jazz/rock movement. His late '60'sera albums, *In A Silent Way, Filles De Kilimanjaro* and *Bitches Brew*, are considered to be the first full-blown fusion records. *(continued)* Davis had an uncanny ear for emerging talent; most of his sidemen from that era went on to lead important bands themselves. John McLaughlin's Mahavishnu Orchestra, Herbie Hancock's Headhunters and the late Tony Williams' Lifetime are prime examples of the seeding of the movement by Davis band alumni. Although Weather Report's Joe Zawinul and Wayne Shorter originally met and played together in Maynard Ferguson's big band in 1959, their contributions to the ... Silent Way and Bitches Brew recordings tie them artistically to the Davis school.

Chick Corea joined Miles in the fall of 1968, taking over the piano chair from the departing Hancock.

As a leader, he had already released albums that were influencing younger musicians with his own forward-thinking musical concepts. Peter Erskine, the internationally acclaimed jazz and studio drummer and a former member of Weather Report, calls Corea's early '68 recording, Now He Sings, Now he Sobs, "an album I considered to be some sort of 'postcard from the future', that seemed to say this is what's possible with music."

Return To Forever's first incarnation was Latin-influenced, featuring Brazilian singer Flora Purim and her husband, percussionist Airto Moreira, in addition to Clarke and saxophonist Joe Farrell. Purim and Moreira left to start their own group, with Farrell moving on as well. Corea tapped Lenny White and guitarist Bill Connors to join himself and Clarke, changing not only the instrumentation, but the style as well. The band's sound became a more melodically and rhythmically complex distillation of American rock, taking influences from and interweaving perfectly with the long-form progressive rock of groups like Yes, King Crimson and Genesis being played on college and the new "progressive rock" FM radio stations. (continued)





Although it was Corea's vision and compositional style that formed the basis of this more sophisticated electric sound, Clarke's innovative approach to the bass was an important element.

He and his contemporary Jaco Pastorius are credited with expanding the historical role of the bassist from timekeeper to melodic and harmonic focal point. Clarke also integrated and expanded the slapping technique popularized by funk bassist Larry Graham of Sly and the Family Stone, fusing it with his own classically trained virtuosity. Those innovations along with his writing and subsequent headlining of his own tours are what put Clarke at the forefront of the 1970's "bass revolution" that brought the instrument to center stage.

Al DiMeola was 19-years-old when he joined RTF in 1974. Erskine recalls, "Al DiMeola inspired the rest of us young musicians that it was possible to get into a really cool band just out of school." DiMeola grew to become one of fusion's most important guitarists and one of the first "shredders," practitioners of the rapid fingering technique that in circular fashion crossed back over to the world of rock and heavy metal. DiMeola has gone on to record some 21 albums, many of which emphasize Spanish and Latin American-influenced rhythms and harmonies, echoing Corea's original RTF recordings.

Drummer Lenny White began his recording career playing on *Bitches Brew*, and has been quoted as saying his major influence is co-Miles alumnus Tony Williams. Along with his own projects, he has played with and produced a variety of artists like Dianne Reeves, Chaka Khan and Rachelle Farrell. He stays on the cutting edge working with hip-hop artists like Big Daddy Kane and writing soundtracks for television and movies.

Considering the activity and prodigious output of these four award-winning musicians - playing, producing, composing - it's remarkable that they were able to coordinate their schedules to create this tour. According to Corea, the logistics took some time to organize.

"The speed and intensity of our conversations increased and the desire got kindled more and more until we finally just said, 'Let's nail down the summer of '08'," Corea told Bill White in the Seattle Post-Intelligencer.

And what should audiences expect to hear at these shows? "We have chosen the compositions we like to play," says Corea, "which seem to agree with what the fans like to hear. Our approach to them is definitely different than it was in the '70s, but they are basically the same songs." (continued)

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(tormer senior editor at Rolling Stone)

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Trumpeter John Thomas toured with RTF in 1977. "We rehearsed for three weeks, five hours a day," he recalls. "There were moments where a musical climax would bring goose bumps on all of the band members' arms, every time, during rehearsals and concerts. The audience would have the same reaction and sometimes would leap out of their chairs and scream with excitement."

And what of Corea's classic keyboard sound? "The meat of my keyboard sound is my Fender Rhodes from the '80s," he tells Bill White. "It's been tweaked into a practically new instrument and sounds great. I've also got a new model of the old mini-Moog called Voyager, which I just started fooling around with about a year ago."

In honor of the tour, Concord Records has released The Anthology, a remixed and remastered collection of 20 RTF favorites personally selected by the band.

Grammy-award winning producer Mick Guzauski took the original master tapes down to the basics, carefully restoring them with studio tools not available when the cuts were originally recorded. The result is an enhancement of the original sound, not the loss of quality that often happens with digital transfers.

Peter Erskine speaks for all fans when he says, "I have very fond and grateful memories of listening to and being inspired by Return To Forever. I'm glad that they're all here, in good health and playing together again."

Return to Forever

June 8, 2008 Arlene Schnitzer Hall Portland, Oregon

By Jeff Dorgay



Al DiMeola put it perfectly when he said, "I get another chance in current time to execute my 30 years' worth of experience that was not there when I was 19." With Brand X and Weather Report long gone, the opportunity to see Return to Forever, in their original form for the first time in almost 30 years was monumental for fusion fans. When they came out on stage Chick Corea took the mike and thanked the crowd for "remembering and still caring." Stanley Clark said that it was great to be playing and hanging out with his good friends again. Al DiMeola and Lenny White looked at each other and smiled.

Two weeks earlier when they kicked off the tour in Austin, Texas, lead guitarist Al DiMeola tore up the stage, jumping around as if he was in a heavy metal band. Slightly calmer in Portland, his playing was still very spirited, displaying his trademark blistering speed, but with just enough restraint that he gave the notes a little extra time to breath. Remember, before Eddie Van Halen, Al DiMeola was the original shredmeister.

RTF started with an electric set, took a brief break, and came back to perform an acoustic set. An encore was a combination of both, so the audience got its money's worth.

Though the band members were more relaxed by the time they got to Portland, the audience here was just as wild as the one in Austin. The Portland crowd carried on like they were at an AC/DC show and screaming for Angus Young.

I've seen the band numerous times in their heyday, and their playing is better than ever. Their solos are shorter, yet each member still had ample time to stretch out and express himself. All four members have benefitted from their various projects since RTF disbanded in the early 80's. Al DiMeola put it perfectly when he said, "I get another chance in current time to execute my 30 years' worth of experience that was not there when I was 19."

The show began with "Hymn of the 7th Galaxy" and ended almost three hours later with "Space Circus." I don't know who was more drained at the end, the players or the fans, but both sides seemed to be happy about the return of Return to Forever.

Muthu:
An Opening Act
Closes In On
Success

By Jeff Dorgay

As the audience at the Aladdin Theater in Portland waited for Joe Jackson to take the stage, the MC announced the opening act, a young guy named Mutlu, who was "from Philly and full of soul..." I thought to myself: how many times have I heard this before, and I hope he only plays about five songs, because I came to see Joe Jackson. The bad news was that he only *did* play five songs. The good news is that the MC was right. He has a *ton* of soul.

Mutlu Onaral, 27, has a groove going that is highly reminiscent of early Hall & Oates, with some heavy reggae and hip hop influences as well. His new disc, *Livin' It*, will be available for purchase on July 22 and features duets with Daryl Hall, Amos Lee, G. Love and Raheem DeVaughn. If you would like a taste of what he's up to, you can see three clips of him performing with Daryl Hall and T-Bone Wolk on *Live From Daryl's House*. (www.livefromdarylshouse.com)

In the clips, Mutlu carries himself like a veteran performer, and the interaction between the players is very mellow. He and Daryl Hall appear to hit it off quite well. By the time these clips were taped, Hall had already sung on his album, so the vibe is natural. Mutlu said, "Doing the show was easy. The more I've had a chance to get to know Daryl, we really line up quite well musically."





Just after Mutlu finished a series of dates with Jackson, I caught up with Mutlu for a chat.

He has been playing music since high school, and he got his first break with local Philly talent Amos Lee. They met when he was doing some open mike events and became fast friends. Soon, Lee asked Mutlu to join him on a few short tours as his opening act. Still in college working on a marketing degree, Mutlu knew that this was the push he needed to make a career change. Music was his focus from this point on.

The next big break was the invitation to play with Joe Jackson. Mutlu laughs as he says: "It was definitely one of those my-manager-knew-hismanager kind of things. I sent over a CD and Joe really liked the music, so I got the job."

Next for Mutlu is a few dates with Daryl Hall through July, and some more touring. He's planning on opening for a few more artists before venturing out as a headliner. My Space and You Tube have been pivotal getting the word out on Mutlu.

"It's really helped me to have a much more personal connection with my audience than you could have before the Internet got so popular."

This is evident when you see people lined up after a Mutlu show buying his mini-CD, which sells for \$5. Not only has this given him a great opportunity to his fan base, but selling about a hundred CD's a night has helped to offset the touring costs and make use of his marketing education. When I asked him what else he'd like to do, the response was instant. "I'd really like to pursue acting someday. I just go out on the street and play a lot and I'd love to take it a step further and cross over into the movie world; I'm a big movie nut!"

Makana In the traditional slack-key style each string of the guitar is treated like a separate instrument.

Spreading the Slack

May 15th, 2008 **WoW Hall Eugene, Oregon**By Marc Phillips
Photo by Jean Dorgay

Makana strolled quietly onto the stage and picked up his guitar, Evening Star, with a set goal: to expose the audience to a night of slack rock, his own musical innovation that combines a traditional slack key sensibility with a modern, pop-oriented sound.

He began with a brief tutorial, playing four traditional slack-key songs, breaking them down and explaining the complex style of each. Carefully explaining the tunings for each song, he told us that in the traditional slack-key style each string of the guitar is treated like a separate instrument, and that a slack key guitar can sound like six regular guitars in the right hands.

His virtuosity was a delight to witness, as we watched him bend chords with a quick sweep of the inside of his forearm or plucking out a deep bass foundation with a deft touch of his thumb. Makana played an impassioned set, full of the innocence and beauty that comes from spending a lifetime in paradise. Fluid and bracing, accessible yet relentlessly complex, the sounds that Makana produced were mind boggling.

Makana told me after the show that he plans to return to the mainland again soon for another tour. Check his web site (www.makanamusic.com) for upcoming shows, and treat yourself to a completely new and innovative voice in music!

Local Hero Returns

An Acoustic Evening with Dan Reed

May 24th, 2008 The Aladdin Theater Portland, Oregon

Text and photo by Jeff Dorgay

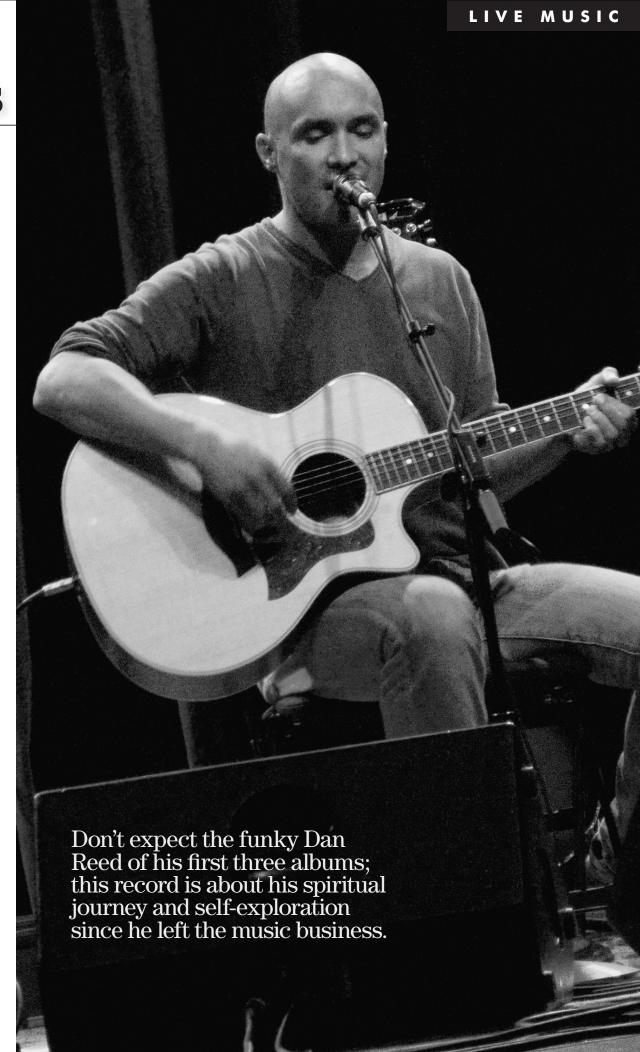
In August, 1988, *Rolling Stone* gave Portland, Oregon native Dan Reed's first album, *Dan Reed Network*, four stars, but after a few years of touring with various major acts (Bon Jovi, UB40 and the Stones in 1991), he fell into obscurity for about fifteen years. But his hometown clearly hasn't forgotten or forsaken him. An hour before his show at the Aladdin Theater, people were lined up around the block and down the next street waiting to get in.

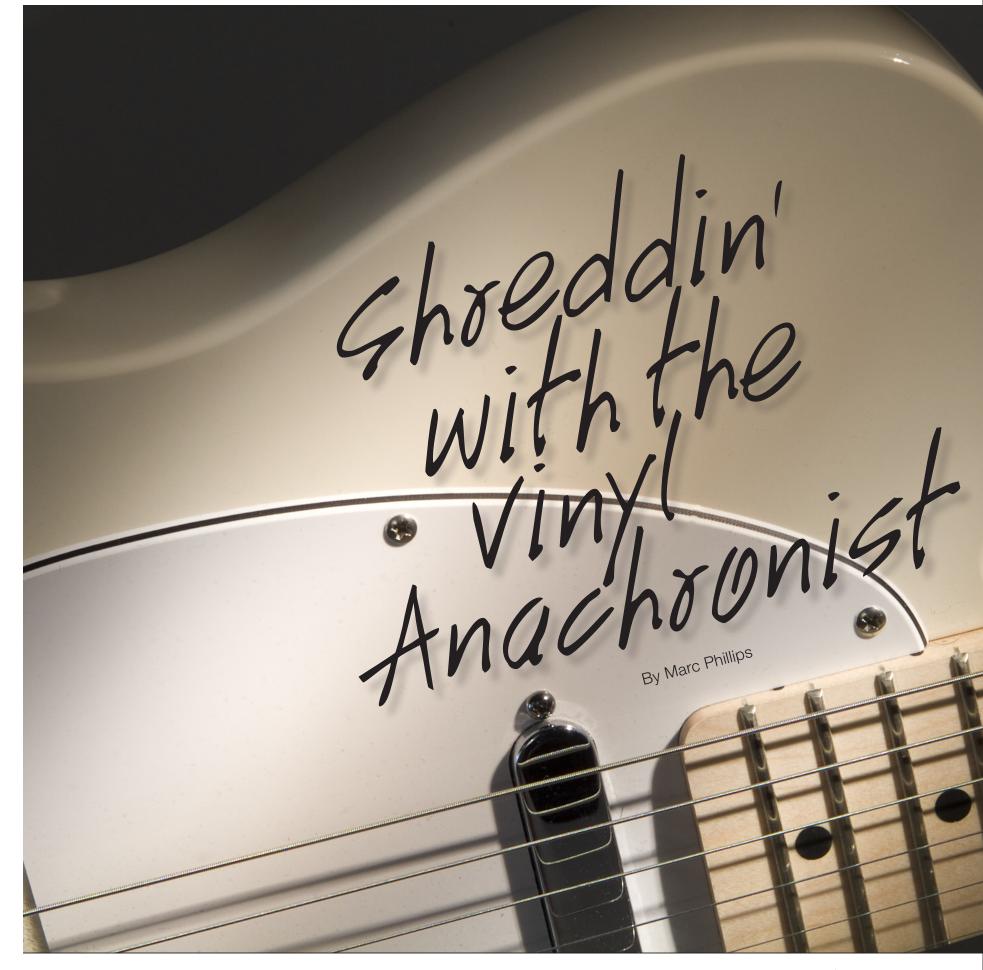
Reed has just finished his new record, *Coming Up for Air*, at his Jerusalem studio and is spending time in New York assembling the band that will accompany him on his U.S. tour. Don't expect the funky Dan Reed of his first three albums; this record is about his spiritual journey and self-exploration since he left the music business.

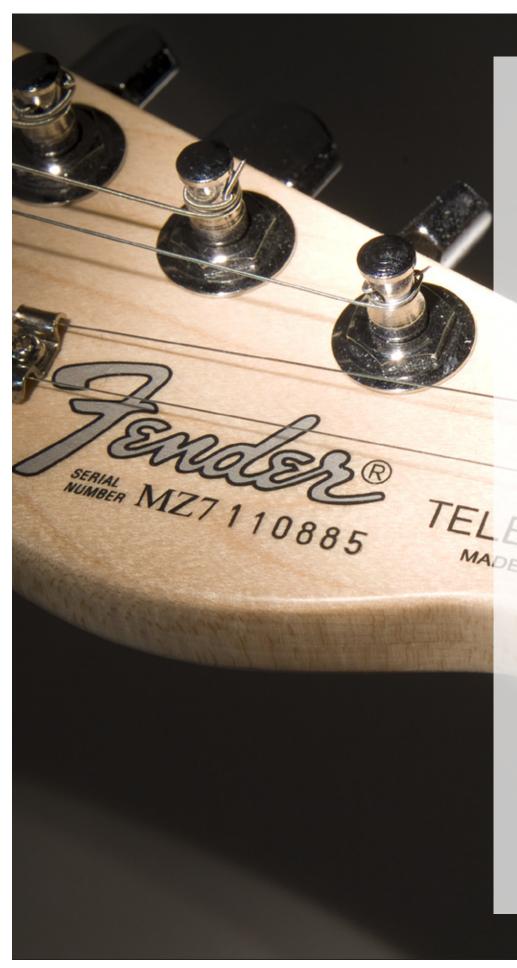
On stage at the Aladdin, Reed's former bandmate, Blake Sakamoto, introduced him to the capacity crowd of just over 600. Reed said he was back in Portland to "give the new songs a try before I take them on the road."

Despite the concert's billing as "an acoustic evening," Reed was accompanied by Keith Shriner (from Auditory Sculpture) adding some ambient electronic keyboard sounds, Mike Collins playing percussion, Ben Rader (a local Portland songwriter) on acoustic guitar and Rob Daiker contributing electric guitar effects in an Adrian Belew kind of way.

Though some of the audience might have been surprised that they were not going to get an acoustic version of past Dan Reed Network songs, Reed toyed with the crowd while one of his guitarists had to stop and change the batteries in a pedal by starting to sing a few lines of "Resurrect," from his first album. He stopped and laughed. "Can anyone help me with this?" he said. "I don't know the words any more." Once the technical difficulties had been corrected, he went right back to the new material and he had the audience in his pocket for the rest of the night.







"I don't know about you guys, but I'm gonna go listen to some music!"

You've probably heard this retort dozens of times before, most likely on audio discussion groups on the Internet. When arguments about hi-fi gear get particularly heated, someone always has to trot this cyber-cliche out as if to say, "Hey, I haven't forgotten what this is all about, unlike you guys." Well, I'm about to impart a truth here...those guys are lying. They're not going to go listen to some music. They're simply going to switch surfing gears, and check out YouTube or Craig's List or Wikipedia for an hour or two before they return to start another audio argument.

How do I know that these guys are lying? Because I've been one of them for years. As someone who works on a computer from home, I know how hard it is to stay disciplined without a boss looking over your shoulder. If you work exclusively on a computer, you probably know that you're supposed to take a 10 to 15 minute break from staring at a computer monitor at least once every 90 minutes. Unfortunately, spending that break playing online poker or Mah Jongg (my weakness) isn't going to save your eyes in the long run.

So...listen to some music already!

Much to my chagrin, I'm unable to work and listen to music at the same time. I need complete silence to type the words you're reading right now. I've received an email or two from readers over the years saying something like, "Man, it must be cool to sit and write and front of your awesome stereo all day. What a way to make a living!" In the real world, my work time and my listening-to-music time do not mix. For me, the creative process comes to a screeching halt whenever someone says something to me, or the TV is turned on, or the phone rings. Therefore, a large part of my day is spent in relative silence, with the exception of the noisy and obnoxious squirrels outside my office window whose incessant alert calls sound like demented quacking at times. Ah, nature.

So why can't I just listen to music on my super-awesome stereo on those scheduled breaks? Because like most audiophiles, listening to music involves some ritualistic, time-consuming behaviors like warming up equipment, cleaning records and toying with VTA and speaker placement. That 15 minute break can quickly turn into three hours of playing DJ for an audience of one (myself). I needed to find something to soothing to occupy my breaks while giving my eyes a well-needed rest. I also needed something to keep the creative juices flowing, so I wouldn't need to play a game or three of Bejeweled 2 just to get back into the swing of

Before you suggest that I merely go outside and stand in the sunlight, I have to remind you that I live in the Pacific Northwest. It's raining right now. If you don't believe me, check the weather forecast for my area. See...I told you.

writina.

Put the Keyboard Down and No One Will Get Hurt

My younger brother Mat came to the rescue. He owns his own computer hardware business in Fairfax County, Virginia, and he's been diversifying lately out of boredom. Over the last few years, he's been collecting guitars, mostly Hamer and PRS, and recently started selling them. I found this surprising, because out of my two brothers and me, he's the only one who didn't play as a kid. (My older brother Greg is a fairly accomplished slack key guitar player, and was responsible for getting me that interview with Makana in the April issue.) (continued)

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"To say that I thoroughly enjoyed my time with the Naim system would be a **massive** understatement ... Very highly recommended."

Nels Ferre, EnjoytheMusic.com, September 2007

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Wayne Garcia, The Absolute Sound, December 2007

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"Here's the secret to enjoying an expensive hobby," Mat told me over the phone a few weeks ago. "Start selling whatever you need to enjoy that hobby. That's why I have 20 guitars right now. I play them, have fun with them and then sell them off." I told him that I knew guite a few audiophiles who did the exact same thing.

Anyway, Mat's been bugging me to buy a guitar for guite a while now. To my surprise, it's been 14 years since I've owned a guitar (an angry exgirlfriend reclaimed my last Fender Strat, which was a Christmas gift in 1993). I've been playing a ukulele off and on for the last few years, but it hasn't been quite enough to satisfy my musical longings.

Whenever I see a guitar in a room, I have to pick it up and start playing it. Sometimes I don't even ask first...the attraction is that strong. For years I've been telling myself that it's a moral imperative that I start playing again. To tell you the absolute truth. however, it's difficult to buy a decent guitar when you've been spending all your money on stereo gear and LPs...and rent and food and new shoes for the kids.

Mat made it easy. "Just tell me what you want, and pay me whenever." It's hard to argue with that. If a few high-end manufacturers had the same philosophy, I'd be a very happy guy!

Congratulations...it's a Telly!

colored Fender Telecaster, which is plugged into a little 30 watt Orange amplifier. No, it's not a vintage 1952 Telly, or anything close. It's one

of the modern Mexican versions which cost just a few hundred dollars. I think it's a little too late to start my career as a rock star, so I just wanted something simple and easy to play to get back on track. Mat recommended this version of the Telly, telling me that it was surprisingly well-made.

I've set everything up right next to my workspace so that I can easily reach over, plug everything in, and start playing during those 15 minute breaks. It's amazing how I instinctively discover a new riff almost every single day. I've never been the type of guitarists who learns other people's songs. I just play in my own instinctive and uniquely crappy way.





For more info check out Gamut Audio, Denmark www.gamutaudio.com

I've noticed, however, that different guitars bring out different playing styles. In the past, I played primarily on acoustic guitars (I first learned how to play on a 12-string Washburn, surprisingly enough) and produced a full, folky style of music that was based mostly on strumming open chords. With this Telecaster, however, I'm playing in a much more spare and bluesy manner than before, bending notes and waiting an extra beat or two before resuming. The Telly wants me to play it that way, it seems.

The best part about rediscovering the guitar, however, is the fact that I no longer feel like I'm wasting time during the day. Every minute is now productive. Every day I get better, the callouses on my fingertips grow tougher and I'm thinking more about the structure of music, and how it is created. Now, when I listen to my stereo system, I enjoy a greater depth of understanding how the music is produced, and the distinct physical movements that create every single sound, not to mention every single breath. A great majority of the audiophiles I know do play some sort of musical instrument. But for those who don't, I seriously recommending that you start playing something, anything, even if it's a kazoo.

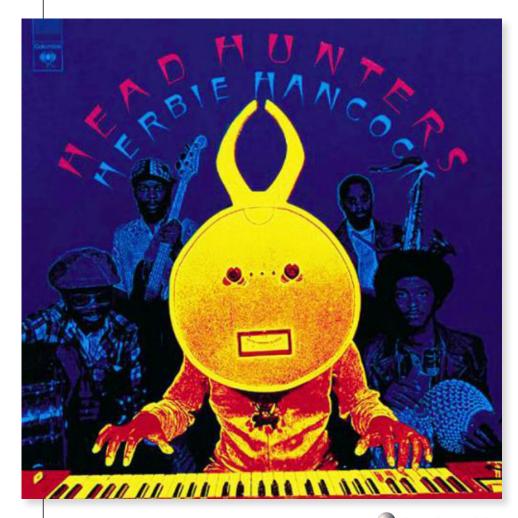
I don't know about you guys, but I'm gonna go play my guitar! ●

Audiophile Recordings

By Jeff Dorgay

Presented By Acoustic Sounds

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



Herbie Hancock

Headhunters Sony Legacy, 180g LP Purchase LP

We can't talk about Return to Forever, as we do in this issue of TONE, without mentioning this classic fusion album. In 1973, this record introduced me to the genre, with the single, "Chameleon," getting heavy late night airplay on AOR stations. Once I became an audiophile, *Headhunters* got pushed further back in my record rack because it was pretty crunchy sounding in the upper registers.

The new version is still somewhat compressed, but it's gone from heavily to slightly crunchy, making this fusion masterpiece welcome on a decent system. Revisit your fusion roots and see why *Headhunters* was one of the best selling jazz albums of all time.



Joni Mitchell

The Hissing of Summer Lawns Speakers Corner, 180g LP

This is my favorite Joni Mitchell album, so my expectations were very high for this pressing and they have been exceeded. Joni recruited a lot of heavy jazz cats on this record to produce a work that was nothing like her previous efforts.

While the original is very sterile and compressed, the Speakers Corner pressing is fantastic. Unfortunately the opening drum lines of "The Jungle Line" are still heavily distorted, so this must be embedded in the master tape, but this is the only disappointment.

If you love this record as much as I do, it is a must have. Now you can finally hear – really hear – all of these great musicians at work.

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U2

The Joshua Tree Universal Records, 180g LP 20th Anniversary Remasters Series

U2 fans finally have a recording that does this epic album some justice. Why one of the biggest bands in the history of rock and roll has always produced such dreadful sounding recordings always left me puzzled.

Now stretched out to a pair of LP's, this version of The Joshua Tree is fantastic from start to finish, with every aspect of the recording dramatically improved. The uppermost part of the treble region remains slightly crunchy, but I can accept this slight imperfection.

There is so much more information on these two LP's; there are layers of guitars, harmonies and subtle instrumental touches that were nonexistent on the original. The result is a treasure. I hope that Universal will choose to remaster the rest of the U2 catalog in this manner.





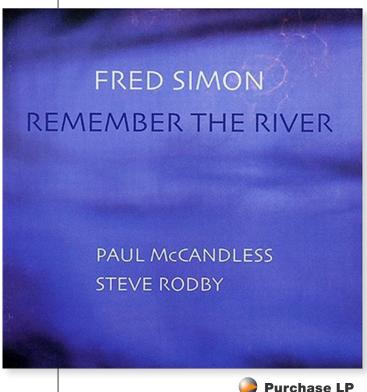
Fred Simon

Remember the River Naim Records, 180g LP

Like many audiophiles, I like to use the piano as an instrument to evaluate a system's ultimate tonality, but I also find the sounds of the oboe to be guite handy. Remember the River gives you a healthy dose of both, with some very tasteful acoustic bass playing by Steve Rodby (Pat Metheny Group) for good measure.

Recorded by Ken Christianson, this is an outstanding recording with a lot of air and natural decay. Simon has a very delicate touch on the keyboard and this is very relaxing to listen to. Stylistically, Remember the River is on the laid-back side of the jazz scale, somewhat reminiscent of the early Windham Hill records.

It's interesting and encouraging that a company that makes one of the world's finest CD players is doing such a great job with vinyl.





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Three From MoFi Now On LP

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Little Feat



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Linda Ronstadt



Don't Cry Now Purchase LP

Because we have already reviewed these recordings on 24kt CD in issue 12, only a brief comment is in order for the newly released LP versions of these rock classics. MoFi engineer Shawn Britton has done an excellent job with these records, and they succeed on two levels.

First, they do not deviate terribly from the CD versions, which is a testament to his engineering prowess. Second, no matter how great the CDs are, the LPs manage to reveal even more music from these master tapes. With a first rate analog rig, you will definitely notice a fuller sound, and all three of these are incredibly quiet. If you passed on the CD versions, waiting for the LP's, you will be rewarded. The pressing quality is outstanding.



have known about singer-songwriter Stuart Davis for over a decade, ever since a friend of mine bought me the Nomen Est Numen CD as a Christmas present. I'd never heard of Davis before, and I assumed it was another one of my friend's pet projects, another struggling unknown musical act he had decided to befriend and support. I still remembered how the great '80s party band The Splitters played at his wedding reception. You've never heard of The Splitters? That's okay...no one else has, either. But they were areat.

I was ready to throw Davis into the same camp until I actually sat down and listened to the CD. I immediately noticed the intelligent lyrics, which were evenly balanced between the playful and the knowing.



I'm not talking about Sting-throwing-out-random-literary-references intelligence, but a deep and abiding brilliance that comes from exploring the universe and understanding its duality. I'm talking about reverence and silliness, passion and objectivity, and the breaking of the heart and the stirring of the loins. After listening to the CD, I knew a Buddhist was afoot, and he was one funny dude. Take these lines, from "Stephen's Exhibition:"

'Cause Stephen's exhibition is a masterpiece to see

It's a series done in oil of his wife in bed with me

In really wild positions, all throughout his home

We cluttered every room with empty tubes of paint and foam

He's done good work before but this is closer to his heart

I'm glad that I could help out my friend Stephen with his art

Needless to say, I was highly intrigued with this tall, thin and bald Danish man. But for some reason, I let Davis slip away and moved on with whatever pseudo-grunge-electronica I was into at the time. A few years later, my friend asked me if I wanted to see Stuart perform live, just him and his acoustic guitar. "Oh, yeah," I thought, "I remember that guy. He still around?" My buddy rolled his eyes and said yes, he was still around and better than ever. So I tagged along and was treated to one of the most original and exciting live performances I've ever seen. I'd never been so utterly entertained by just a man and a guitar. Not only was Davis an inventive musician and a talented singer and songwriter, but his banter between songs rivaled material from the best stand-up comics. Like most people who've seen Stuart for the first time, I wondered why we were seeing this guy in a small club instead of a big arena. Why wasn't Stuart Davis famous?

After the show, Stuart circulated through the audience. He saw my buddy and his eyes lit up. He came over and gave him a big hug and thanked him for coming out. My friend then introduced me, and I started to shake his hand. Stuart brushed my hand aside and gave me a big hug. This was a rock musician that I was embracing, one that I'd just paid to see perform, and I suddenly felt like a kid. That feeling of innocence and glee stayed with me for the rest of the night. That was the best hug I'd ever had...from another guy, that is.

Is You Is ...

Since 1993, Stuart has released 15 CD's and he's still around. He's always been outwardly proud of the fact that he's an outsider in the music industry, and that he's done things his own way. The word "pariah" has popped up, with defiance, once or twice on his web site. Still, I always sense he's a little miffed at being so relatively unknown. It's that duality thing again. Through his own labels (first Post-Apocalyptic Records and then Dharma Pop), he's been able to provide listeners with an undiluted chunk of his mind for more than 15 years. However, his most ardent fans would probably have trouble with a Stuart Davis who's been compromised by the music industry. So maybe things have worked out for the best. (continued)



After all, there's more to Stuart Davis than the music. For instance, what would a major record label do with an artist who has created his own language and integrates it into his songs? That's right, Stuart has developed his own native tongue, so to speak. He calls it "Is." It comes complete with its own characters and its own logic. Stuart's art, which is made with rice paper and a gently-applied flame, is adorned with "Is" calligraphy, and it's quite beautiful. Using the Krishnamurti quotation "Love has no opposite" as a launching point, this language is deceptively simple and was first featured in his 2003 album, Bell:

As we were
Before we were
Is
As we are
After we are
Is
We are
Is.

Before you dismiss Davis as another New Age poet, however, you have to find the other side. On the very same album, Stuart makes fun of the darkest corners of his soul in the hilarious and sinister "Wizard," which exposes the sick, twisted, yet honest longings of some sort of demon. After uttering one of the most evil yet funny lines I've ever heard in a song - "I'm stuffing babies into catapults to bomb the cathedrals" - he chants, "I am love, I am love," revealing the starkest contrast to that duality. In other words, fans of Enya should probably look elsewhere for their easy-to-digest dose of vacuous synthesizer noodlings. Davis has an edge that's both razor sharp and covered with sticky goo. (continued)



If you listen to Stuart's latest work, however, you'll discover that he believes that there's more than two sides to everything. For instance, his You Tube-based "The Stuart Davis Show" (which is currently being shopped to cable networks) is hosted by Stuart and his two clones. They represent the belief that each person is really three different people. This reflects the fact that Stu is not so much a Buddhist, but a student of Integral Theory, which states that all religions as well as science come together to provide pieces of the ultimate truth. To be a Christian or a Jew or a Buddhist is to only know a small section of reality. (In fact, Stuart is a member of the art branch of Ken Wilbur's Integral Institute, and even married Wilbur's ex-wife and raised two children...talk about integration!)

21st Century Stu

So after the CDs, after the calligraphy, after the *Love Has No Opposite* T-shirts, after the books (a new one, appropriately titled *Sex, God and Rock 'N' Roll*, is set to be published by Shambhala and distributed by Random House later this year), there's Stuart the live performer. Experiencing him on stage is mandatory in order to fall under the Stuart Davis spell. It's a bit more difficult to see him live these days since his children were born, but you can catch a glimpse of his impromptu humor and storytelling prowess by checking out his DVDs, *Between*

the Music Vol. 1 & 2, as well as his spoken-voice CD, Love Has No Opposite. Pay special attention to the stories concerning Davis' favorite pastime: urination (he's an avid fan of beverages in general). Once again, you'll see the duality (or tri-ality) when you see this charismatic yet goofy singer meld the most basic of bodily functions with a higher sort of elemental understanding, such as why you can't pee through a window screen when it sounds like such a good idea, at least when you're half-asleep.

If all of this sounds carefully rehearsed, then you're missing the point. I've seen Davis perform at least a half-dozen times, and his humor is not only improvised but downright impulsive. One night Stuart was suffering from a cold, and while it didn't impact his singing voice, it did lead to epic displays of expectoration between songs. This merged into a variety of riffs on the nature of bodily fluids that had the audience in stitches. Well, maybe you had to be there.

The best performers connect with their audience. Davis involves his audience completely, as if they were guests in his living room. He takes requests by asking "Did I forget anything?" or "What do you guys want to hear?" If Skynyrd is suggested, such as it was on his 2002 live album, *The Late Stuart Davis*, Stuart will not only launch into a fairly faithful version of "Freebird," but an entire medley. *(continued)*



"Red Wine Audio's Signature 30.2 is one of my three favorite amps regardless of class or output devices... it sonically goes well beyond its own first incarnation to have turned into a bona fide ultrafi amp that'll upset equilibrium in the upper ranks of overpriced eye candy for those who pay attention and evaluate with their ears."

Srajan Ebaen, 6moons.com





www.redwineaudio.com

Eventually his encyclopedic knowledge of popular music will devolve into more goofiness and mania:

Dance with me, I want to be your partner

Can't you see, the music has just started

Night is falling, we're close to balling...

In other words, anything can happen at a Stuart Davis gig.

His Latest Creation

Stuart's new album, Something Simple, may or may not be the best place to delve into his world. It's a bit sweeter and mellower than the Davis of yore, but if you're looking for something more reflective and spiritual, it's an effective introduction. If you're attracted by Stuart's baser impulses and want to snicker surreptitiously and think at the same time, investigate songs such as the aforementioned "Wizard" and "Asshole World Renown" on the earlier albums.

In the Colorado Daily, Davis said that he wanted the new album to be less quirky and more mainstream in order to "resonate with the general public." This might sound like "sellout" for a lesser artist, but if you've followed Stuart Davis for years you'll have a greater sense of his ambitions. It is frustrating to see Stuart play to small venues even if the audience is wildly enthusiastic and devoted. It's frustrating for both performers and fans. After speaking with several of the faithful, it's clear that the vibe is much less about keeping this talented man to themselves and more about spreading the word. If Stuart wants to soften his sound a bit to achieve these goals, it's understandable. The message is still there.

TONEA61 NO.16 2008





Secret City Records started their business with the release of Patrick Watson's "Close to Paradise". Released in the fall of 2006, "Close to Paradise" won Canada's Polaris Music prize as well as receiving a Juno nomination.

I had a chance to sit down and chat with Andrew Rose, one of Secret City's two founders, while in Montreal for the Festival Son et Image in April. Secret City Records is a partnership between Andrew Rose and Justin West, son of founder Jim West of the Justin Time jazz label. The label started with the release of the Patrick Watson album, Close to Paradise in October of 2006.

Andrew stressed that he and Justin "have full faith in their artists and are committed to signing acts that will endure."

They work strategically with their artists to plan the release of the albums, sharing the artist's vision for their success. "Their records are their projects", he said. "There's a feedback loop around taking the album from beginning to finished product, but in creating the album, we let the artists do what they want to do."

When asked about the independent record business today and its economic viability, Andrew mentions "artists can make a real honest living, working every day, touring every year." Andrew continues, "It can take time for an artist to build a fan base and a label to do the same. Bands like Spoon, the National and Wilco have mainstream exposure now, but they have been working for a long time to get where they are today." *(continued)*

TONEA63 NO.16 2008

On tour, 50% of Secret City's sales are on vinyl, which is considerably better than the norm.

Andrew mentioned, "It's tough for a small label to invest in a vinyl run from the beginning, versus seeing how the album does first". According to him, Quebec is still buying 80% of their music as physical product as opposed to only about 50% in the US.

When it comes to new music, Andrew advises people "to listen to what they love as much as possible and follow the path of their favorite artists influences. Just listening to what's new today is a lost opportunity".

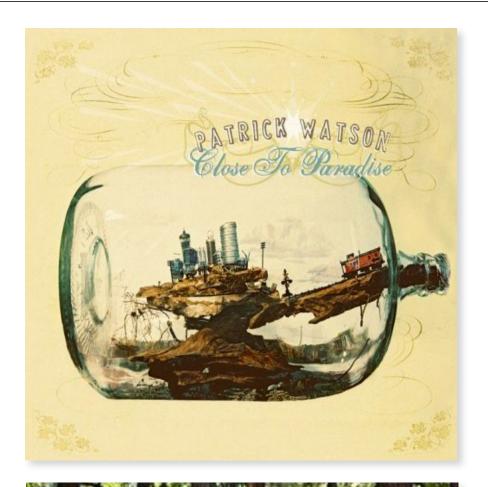
When asked about the local music scene, he replied, "Hopefully, people will stop talking about Montreal as a hot scene. It's just a place that fosters great music." He mentions the viral nature where "fans and musicians move to Montreal because of the scene and it steamrolls from there, sustaining itself for a long time... like New York City. Montreal is a great environment that feeds on itself."

When asked to describe his three artists, Andrew's eyes lit up. He labels Patrick Watson as a Cinematic Art Rock Quartet and sees Plants and Animals being the "most classic in terms of a new sound in line with lots of great American rock and roll traditions." He describes the new Miracle Roses album, *Five Roses* as a "deliberate studio experiment of artist Gram Van Pelt being into early Paul McCartney, Brian Wilson and Brian Eno."

In the end, he says, "Music does what words can't. The explanations pale in comparison to actually listening to the records... so just listen." I couldn't agree more. ●

Equiteria Vila Pad

When it comes to new music, Andrew advises people "to listen to what they love as much as possible and follow the path of their favorite artists influences. Just listening to what's new today is a lost opportunity."



A PARE NUE

Patrick Watson

Close to Paradise

If you are looking for that perfect, cool down moment, consider this one from Patrick Watson. While this record is not filled with memorable vocal hooks, it has a memorable overall feel.

With its richly layered arrangements, featuring some dramatic vocal deliveries, this record is a study in contrast. There is a strong dynamic scale that features some interesting instrumentation that you might not expect on a pop album. Twinkly pianos with bells and violins create a very dreamy atmosphere throughout, yet these quiet moments are balanced with dramatic guitar bursts. The best examples of this are on the opener, "Close to Paradise", "Luscious Life", and "The Great Escape".

So next time you are in the mood to mellow out, drop Close to Paradise on your turntable and disappear into the moment. If you're a fan of Jeff Buckley, Sufjan Stevens, Andrew Bird, Portishead and maybe even Pink Floyd, you'll find some sounds to identify with.

Plants and Animals

Parc Avenue

This album is as much about the street in the heart of Montréal's hip Mile End district with the same name as much as it is about the process of creating said album. Track five, "A L'Oree Des Bois" underlines this and could be considered the theme song of the album. You can feel the hot, upper-floor apartment in which they wrote and recorded most of the tracks to analog tape.

Parc Avenue has plenty of memorable lyrics and my favorite was on the second track "Good Friend", where they sing "It takes a good friend to say you've got your head up your ass". On track six, "New Kind of Love", they sing, "Like a child, we get hungry and restless and wicked and wild." That attitude is carried to track eight, "Mercy" with its bridge of pom-pom wielding cheerleaders screaming "M-E-R, C-Y" leading to a bombastic distortion driven wall-of-sound guitar romp.

Of these three Secret City releases, this one is the hardest for me to find direct comparisons and perhaps that's a good thing. If I were going to put together a care package for a fellow music lover on a quest for something new, it would be these three from Secret city.



Miracle Fortress

Five Roses

This record begins with the instrumental track "Whirrs", reminiscent of the great "shoegazer" bands of the early 90's; Lush, Ride, or My Bloody Valentine. The densely layered, synthetic sounds continue on the second track, "Have You Seen In Your Dreams" and through the rest of the album.

The songs on Five Roses feature some long, richly textured instrumental sections with layer-cake harmonies. As the synth-laden arrangements pull you deeper into the songs,

the slightly muffled, sky-high vibe feels like you are floating in clouds for 40 minutes. Track four, "Maybe Lately" combines a Beach Boys vocal tribute with a spacey romp featuring a lot of echo, while Track five, "Beach Baby" is another standout and could perhaps be mistaken for the soundtrack to a TV commercial.

Five Roses is an audio collage that feels like a mixture of happy Flaming Lips songs with some Beach Boys harmonies and some Yo La Tengo texture on the side. ●

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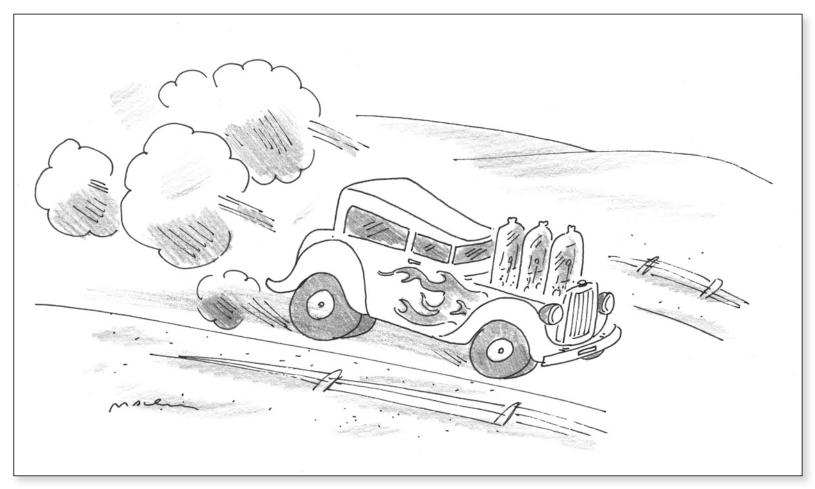
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What Makes Us Tick

 $Part\ Two: \ {\tiny \ \ \, Dragsters,\ Hot\ Rods,\ and\ Tube\ Amps-Technological\ Enthusiasm\ and\ the\ User}$



By Kieran Downs
Illustration By Michael Maslin

echnology is a bit like pornography . . . insofar as the former relates to the now-famous explanation of the latter by Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart in 1964: it's hard to describe precisely what it is, but "I know it when I see it."

At our first meeting this semester, I asked the students in my introductory science and technology studies seminar to define the word "technology". Some definitions were complementary, focusing on innovation and improvements in the standard of living. Others offered conflicting views, identifying certain technologies as disruptive or, as one person put it, "time-wasters". Their responses were an illuminating snapshot of the simultaneous variety and vagueness that the term implies. Looking up "technology" in the dictionary might give you references to things, ideas, processes or professions (like engineering) but these brief descriptions don't capture the complexity of how human beings relate to technology, or the forces at work behind it. This complexity led Melvin Krantzberg, one of the founders of the Society for the History of Technology, to suggest that "technology is neither good, nor bad, nor is it neutral." Examining and explaining this complexity is a big part of what historians and sociologists of technology do.

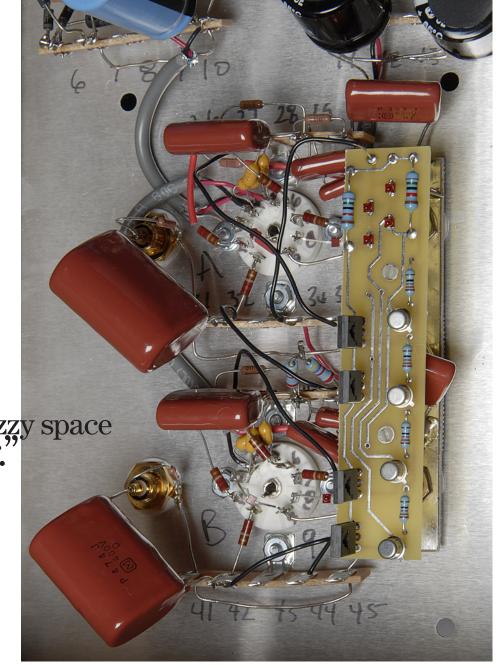
My research on the high-end audio community has shown me just how complex human relationships with technology can be.

Audiophiles sometimes occupy a fuzzy space between "user" and "engineer."

The stories audiophiles have shared with me pertaining to their high end audio experiences has demonstrated the incredible richness of these relationships, providing a conduit for powerful emotional and aesthetic experiences.

Part of my job as an academic is to develop analytical tools that can shed light on these relationships in the context of broader human history and experience, while showing how audiophiles iinteract with the technological world around them and the way the rest of us interact with technology in general. And you thought you were just sitting on the couch listening to records?

Audiophiles sometimes occupy a fuzzy space between "user" and "engineer". Many audiophiles I've interviewed began their quest for better sound and higher fidelity by building their own equipment. In the 50's and 60's these kits were readily available from Dynaco, Heath and others. Some even built their gear from scratch, working from schematics and information in technical manuals and magazine articles, while tinkering and communicating with other audiophiles. Though Dynaco is long gone, this is a



trend that continues today, with the DIY scene alive and well. As I observed in my previous article in issue 13, the drive to experiment and learn was fueled to a large degree by a love of music, but a serious curiosity about the technology of audio reproduction was never far behind.

Although many of these audiophiles did not have formal engineering training, they engaged in engineering projects out of the joy of the project itself, and the potential for higher fidelity sound. Some even followed this path to become engineers, both inside and outside of the audio industries. *(continued)*

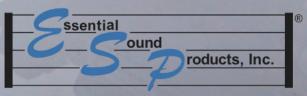


"The phase correct ESP's allow for a fluidity of movement, a continuity of change, if you will, that no longer wakes the mind from its trance of enjoyment."

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



A/C POWER CORDS & ACCESSORIES

One listen, and nothing else will do.

of better sound for their own listening pleasure, ended up creating components of such high quality that they were able to launch new businesses selling them. Some designs emerged from the vision of a single, passionate engineer, like the Audio Research Corporation's William Z. Johnson, or Dan D'Agastino of Krell. Others were team efforts. like Bill Conrad and Lew Johnson's eponymous company, or Steve Bednarski and Victor Khomenko's Balanced Audio Technology. These companies have become standard-setting entities in the high-end audio world despite their modest beginnings. Creating new businesses was frequently not the original intent behind audiophiles' experiments, but it does remain largely passion- and user-driven.

Many of the audio industries

began here, in basements and ga-

rages, where audiophiles, in search

Historians and sociologists of technology have described this behavior as "technological enthusiasm,"

describing the emotional, passionate, and aesthetic motivations of particular groups of people toward particular technologies.

In this context, the term "enthusiasm" isn't necessarily synonymous with "fetishism" or "gearheadedness", but is instead meant to capture the ways that aesthetic concerns influence the design and use of technologies, and how this complicates attitudes that tend to emphasize efficiency and economics above all else. (continued)

Theories of technological enthusiasm emerged from a broader set of ideas that viewed technology not as a force unto itself, but rather as the result of complex human relationships and interactions – a school of thought labeled "social construction" – popularized by scholars in the 1970s and 80s.

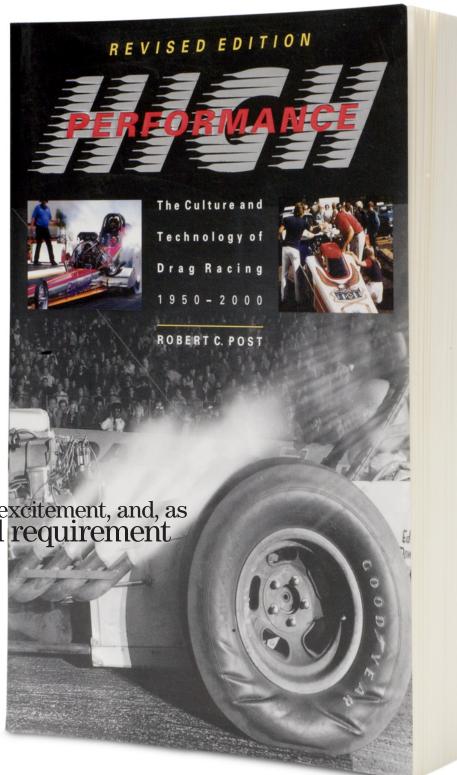
During this same period and up to the present, scholars began shifting their attention from large institutions and mass-producers of technologies to the users and consumers of those technologies, highlighting the ways that users repurpose or modify technologies to suit their own needs, desires, and motivations – ways that often subvert what the original designers and corporate manufacturers intended. Focusing on enthusiasm and users represented a radical shift away from more orthodox ideas among scholars in the earlier part of the 20th century that technology had its own momentum, and was at the center of all significant change in human life – a concept known as "technological determinism."

Some of the most interesting work in the history and sociology of technology combines studies of enthusiasm with studies of user communities, and two of my personal favorites happen to explore different aspects of automotive technology: drag racing and hot-rodding. In *High Performance*, historian Robert Post's tells the history of drag racing in America – a topic to which he was drawn as a young man because of a personal fascination with these heavily modified vehicles. Post suggests that one important characteristic of technological enthusiasm within the drag racing community is the way participants put economic considerations on the back burner in favor of the "thrills" associated with rates of acceleration that launch dragsters to speeds in excess of 300 miles an hour in less than a quarter of a mile.

they stay involved for the competitive spirit, the excitement, and, as one enthusiast put it to him, their "biochemical requirement for kicks."

Several of Post's interviewees explained that in spite of the substantial expense associated with drag racing, they stay involved for the competitive spirit, the excitement, and, as one enthusiast put it to him, their "biochemical requirement for kicks."

David Lucsko's forthcoming book about the history of hot rodding in the United States, *The Business of Speed*, addresses the never-ending quest among hot rodders for "better performance and appearance" in street-legal vehicles. *(continued)*



While other histories of the automobile in America have argued that by mid-century, automakers had turned cars into "black boxes" that users could no longer modify, Lucsko shows that the hot rodding community continued to innovate to achieve higher speeds and more power long after that point, using the automobile as a platform for technical and aesthetic experimentation. In fact, by 1960, hot rodders had created an after-market modification industry worth \$1 billion a year. But Luscko further shows that the influence of this community extended into unexpected places – all the way, in fact, to the level of the federal government. Hot rodders were instrumental in the development of environmental air quality regulations in

the 1960s and 1970s, subverting the argument by the "big three" automakers at the time

At the time, audiophiles used to hotrodding their turntables for better sound, saw the CD player as the ultimate "black box."

that new regulations were impossible to meet by showing how they could be achieved in a cost-effective, efficient, and relatively painless way. The enthusiasm of a small user community, had profound implications for both the regulatory and the natural environment of the

What can such stories tell us about high-end audio? The way hot rod enthusiasts' need for speed changes how they approach cars, the desire for high-fidelity music reproduction in the high-end audio community has meant that audiophiles have approached audio technology very differently than mainstream consumers. This has resulted in, among other things, the continuing prevalence of technologies such as vacuum tube electronics and vinyl records in the high-end community when they have disappeared elsewhere. While the popular press and some scholars pass this behavior off as nostalgic, it doesn't capture the nuance of the situation.

United States, as well as the automotive industry as a whole.

Interestingly enough, the fact that many audiophiles also have a strong affection for automobiles, motorcycles and even high performance bicycles is not a coincidence. These groups all share the same passion for increasing performance as well as visual appeal and, as Dave Lucsko tells me, hot rodders are often very concerned with sound. . . only in their case, it's the sound of a rumbling engine rather than massed violins! Also similar are the ways that enthusiastic users in the audio world challenge what may otherwise be considered "closed" technologies. An example I've been exploring recently in my own research is the CD player. When CD players were first introduced, they represented a major transition in audio technology. They were extremely complex and advanced technologically, but to the ears of many audiophiles, a big step down in terms of sound quality.

At the time, audiophiles used to hotrodding their turntables for better sound, saw the CD player as the ultimate "black box". Until Meridian's Bob Stuart came along, that is. He and his team at Meridian found the ways to open this closed technology and the MCD (enshrined by audiophiles as the worlds first high end CD player) was born, convincing the rest of us that the medium at least had potential.

Although Stuart found many aspects of contemporary CD play-back to be problematic and in need of engineering attention (such as internal vibration and, eventually, jitter), it was a desire for aesthetic satisfaction and enthusiasm for music that provided the foundation for his and others' efforts to improve this so-called "perfect" medium.

Considering technological enthusiasm as a motivational force doesn't mean that other forces, such as economics, aren't also important. But it gives us a broader, more nuanced view, and undermines the idea that technology itself, acting autonomously, or the world's large corporations and industries, are the prime movers behind technological and social change. When audiophiles assert their desire for the sound of vacuum tubes over transistors, or class-A amps over other circuit topologies, they are expressing technological enthusiasm. Although the community is small in comparison with mainstream consumers of audio products, audiophiles' differing aesthetic desires for the best possible sound, and the high-end audio user's energy for experimentation, have helped keep the industry going in spite of major economic, technological, and social changes.

As the high-end audio community finds itself on the cusp of another significant technological shift with the increasing prevalence of hard drive-based playback systems, we'll have the opportunity to participate in a whole new set of interesting transitions: how these new artifacts develop and become integrated with existing technologies in users' audio systems, how users manipulate them to suit their needs, and how aesthetic concerns come into play in their design. Ultimately, as with all other audio technologies, audiophiles will assess the quality of these new systems as Justice Potter did when faced with identifying offensive pornography: they'll know it when they hear it.

Recommended Reading:

Post, Robert C., *High Performance: The Culture and Technology of Drag Racing, 1950-2000.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001 [1994].

Lucsko, David, *The Business of Speed: The Hot Rod Industry in America,* 1915-1990. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, forthcoming [September 2008].



A Music Guy Through and Through

The Dave Wilson Interview

By Jeff Dorgay Photos by Sheryl Wilson and Daryl Wilson



ou get the first hint at Dave Wilson's personality when you pull into the neatly manicured lot at Wilson Audio. There's an unassuming silver Jaguar sedan sitting in the parking lot that upon closer inspection reveals that it's a "Type R". For those of you that are not automotive enthusiasts, the Type R Jags are limited production models with bigger brakes, beefier suspension and of course, more power. Much like a pair of Wilson loudspeakers, the Type R has a very understated look compared to the performance under the hood.

The license plate gives it away; it reads "Hifiguy".

Before my tour of Wilson Audio began, Dave stopped by the conference room to say hello and we chatted a bit until he turned me over to John Giolas, their head of marketing. After a brief discussion of Wilson Audio's core business and design goals, I got a complete tour of the factory, except for one room that was under construction.

With so many people entering the speaker game these days that don't do much more than source drivers, cabinets and assemble parts, it was very impressive to see the commitment to excellence in design, engineering and quality control at Wilson Audio.



After the tour, I spent some time in Dave's office, perusing a lot of interesting things. How can you not appreciate a man who has three snakes, a fleet of model airplanes and an SME 20 in his office? That SME 20 is connected to a Nagra PL-P linestage and a pair of Nagra VPA tube monoblocks along with a pair of Sophia 2 loudpseakers. Sitting on the couch, it's very much a traditional living room setup and the system sounds fantastic, with a very organic, musical presentation.

Coffin Trout





Interlude - Lady's Blue Sapphire ring accented with Diamonds, set in Platinum.

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What impressed me the most was Dave Wilson's love of music.

Immediately, he started pulling out some of his favorite records and I was immersed into the character of the Sophias. It seemed like no time at all when Dave looked at his watch and told me that we were due at lunch right now, but I would imagine he gets distracted a lot, with an office system like that!

A huge classical music fan, Dave spends as much time as he can listening to live music, whether it's at Vienna's famous Musikverein (where you see him listening to rehearsal on our cover) or on the opposite side of his listening room, recording on his Nagra. This is what gives him the ultimate reference by which he is able to decide how to proceed next with his speakers.

The next stop was Dave Wilson's other test lab, the 30 x 40 foot music room in his home. Over lunch, I had asked him what he listens to at home and his wife, Sheryl Lee said, "We have two pairs of X-2's at home". For those of you in the audience not familiar with their flagship, the X-2's cost about 150 thousand dollars a pair. What I wasn't prepared for was the sight of two identical pairs of X-2's, version one and the current version two, sitting side by side!

While Dave was cuing up some music, Sheryl took me behind the speakers and explained the changes to the newest version of the X-2. They have been working together at Wilson Audio for 35 years now, and while Dave has always been the creative visionary, Sheryl has been the operations side of the company, with both able to explain their products with tremendous depth and clarity. (continued)

Ready to start the demo, Dave started the second Mahler symphony. We did a few quick switches between V.1 of the X-2 and the current version, and then settled on the new speaker for the rest of the session.

If you've met Dave in person, you immediately experience the scientific half of his personality. Nothing is done on a whim or by chance, everything is calculated and documented. As our technical editor always likes to say, "good science can be duplicated by someone else". In the end, Dave Wilson's passion for music is what really makes the difference with their speakers; the tremendous amount of time he spends listening to acoustic music defines what he is listening for when trying to improve their products.

So, here is a bit more insight into the mind of Dave Wilson:

Many people do not understand the level of commitment and expertise required to build a set of Wilson speakers from design through execution to support. With new speaker manufacturers coming out of the woodwork, there are some challengers. How do you feel about the newcomers? After all, Wilson Audio started in your living room.

I wish them luck, I truly do. This is where a lot of creativity comes from, resulting in some brilliant ideas from that business model. It's a very high-risk situation, as some of these companies can't produce. There is a higher level of professionalism in the high end overall and the new guys are definitely benefiting from this. Even operating with the best of intentions, things can still go awry, and some startups just can't survive that kind of thing.

I see two business models in conflict; the specialty business model (which is how we tend to view it) and the commodity business model taught in business schools.

Is everyone in the company as much of a music lover as you are?

It varies. Some of our employees are musicians that play in some of the local venues, while others are not. It certainly isn't a requirement for employment at Wilson Audio.

You had mentioned in Seattle that you felt that some of the best gear in the high end is starting to converge because many of you have been at it for so long, you are all starting to figure it out.

In the world of amplifiers and speakers, there is a greater awareness of some of the fundamental differences in sounds. I think it began in the 70's with John Curl and a few others, when



they were exploring slew-induced distortion and the effects of negative feedback, etc. Peter Montcrieff started investigating the effects on capacitors and the quality of passive parts improved.

Rowland and Ayre (along with a few others) started investigating the effects of chassis vibration on the sound of amplifiers, Rockport did it with turntables and of course we did it with speakers.

What about cables?

Cable is different, that's the Wild West! There are a number of different schools of thought right now. Each has their own set of solutions and problems. It's like speakers where you have a number of different ways to approach the problem.

And those who think wire is just something you unwind off of a spool and make tons of money on?

Cable has the biggest credibility problem right now, but it's a lot more than just unwinding wire off of a spool, I'll say that! The AES (Audio Engineering Society), who are an extremely smart group of guys felt that they should have been able to understand every execution of a particular design based on what they knew at the time. I gave a presentation on the effects of cables back in 1982 and a large percentage of them admitted they heard differences between the cables, but felt they could just explain it with ohm's law. It's a lot different today. (continued)







Sometimes its tough to get a new wacky idea in front of the guys with discipline.

At first some of it seems so implausible, but the musical waveforms are so complex. For a period of time it was a distraction within this industry because it was so interesting!

There are so many arguments as to how valid measurements are. How much do you depend on measurements in your designs? Can you determine how a speaker will sound from a set of measurements?

Only in a VERY general sense, with limitations. It's like picking a basketball player. You might have a guy that has the same "specs" as Michael Jordan, yet you can't measure the quality inside Michael Jordan that made him a genius player. There are a number of things that are observable but not measurable.

So the best gear is still more than the sum of its parts (and measurements)

I think that's always the case. As a parallel, look at a Ferrari motorcar. Their test drivers push their vehicles to their limits and fine-tune what the computer simulations have started with. That fine-tuning is what makes that car much more than a competent automobile that delivers on its promise. The specs won't tell if a product fits the needs of the customer.

To say that you can design and execute a world class loud-speaker entirely with computer modeling is an overstatement. It eliminates the component of human emotion and how people respond to music that makes it more than just sound. (continued)

That's the difference between a competent design and one that is great, achieving that tremendously emotional experience.

And the best reference is still acoustic music?

Absolutely. I believe Harry Pearson got it right when he said the Absolute Sound is live unamplified acoustic music. There is something so vital to "orchestral balance", that when you can achieve that balance with a good loudspeaker, it will sound good with any kind of music.

Speaking of Harry Pearson, how did the two of you first meet?

Hmmm. Pearson in Person. I first read The Absolute Sound in 1973, but met him in 1978. I was asked to help with a loudspeaker evaluation and then to contribute to the magazine, which I enjoyed for several years. Harry is an old friend of ours; he's very clever, very funny and a profoundly perceptive listener.

What about hardware?

Great components are also necessary, but it's not just the audiophiles that are this way. I've been able to listen to some incredibly expensive instruments from Guarneri and Stradivarius; depending on the piece being played and the hall, a violinist will choose a different bow (and these are very expensive, by the

way) to get a certain sound that he or she is looking for. Isn't that hardware too? Hardware is always part of the equation.

Speaking of hardware, when did you first get the idea for your proprietary Wilson X and M materials?

I've been fascinated with the properties of materials for a long time now. When I first released the WAMM in 1982, we used Baltic Birch, marine-grade plywood with about 14 layers per inch with a laminated metal (noiseless steel) until 1985. There is another designer that we've seen using this today with some fanfare, but if you've been in this business for quite a while, you are rarely the first to use anything.

So in essence, it has a lot to do with application and refinement?

Yes. In 1985, I went to a polymer baffle and then used this polymer in the cabinet of the WATT about this time as well. The X material you are all familiar with was first used in 1993/94 with the X-1 Grand Slamm. The X-1 was made entirely with that material. Since then we have very aggressively investigated other materials. X material wasn't just an "a-ha" moment; it was part of a constant refinement. These composite materials also help us achieve a product that is very durable physically.

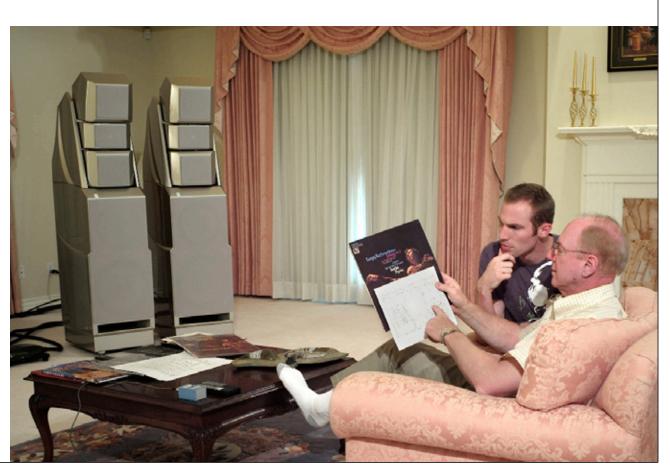
Is that what led to using automotive finishes, or was that just an aesthetic choice?

This was a definite move towards increased durability, but with a combination of durability and beauty. We have a number of customers that live in hot and humid climates; the automotive finishes help the durability in difficult environments.

Do you guys ever sneak a car in that paint booth on your off hours? (laughs) We can't drive one back here, but if we could, it

How many of the older designs do you still keep at the factory? Are they for sentimental or reference purposes?

We have an archive collection, so that we have at least one pair of each generation of each product we've produced. (continued)



would fit!



That's a pretty amazing body of work to look back on, how do you reflect on the journey?

It's humbling. It helps you realize that as much as you think you know at any given time, if you persevere and keep asking the right questions, you learn a lot more.

What do you listen for most, when auditioning a speaker?

First the dynamic contrast and the correct amount of dynamic shadings in a piece. I'm also looking for the correct tonal expression of the acoustic instruments. If there are inaccuracies or distortions, it can really rob the music of its color. Then, the presence or lack of artificial texture or granularity.

Next, I'm looking for an appropriate presentation of the soundstage, not an overblown one, but it depends on the recording. We are always at the mercy of the recording!

At the end of the day, can you take the designer hat off and just enjoy music?

Yes, I can, but I wish I could do it more often. On a good week, I can get about four hours a week to just listen for my own pleasure.

You mentioned a pretty interesting set of classical recordings at your disposal.

I had an agreement with EMI to get some of the world's most famous performances and great orchestral recordings transferred to tape for our reference use. I sent my Ultra Master deck to Abbey Road Studios to make the transfers. They even gave me the drawings with microphone placement and the engineer notes! When you see that tape zipping by at 30 i.p.s., that's serious,

there's a lot of resolution! It's like an 8 x 10 large format negative. Speaking of music, how big is your personal collection?

I've really whittled it down over the years, to somewhere around a thousand LP's and about the same amount of CD's. So are we going to see X-2's bumping the B&W 801's out of their spot at Abbey Road any time soon?

(laughs) No, I think the B&W's are permanent fixtures there. What are your other passions besides music and hifi?

Everyone in the Wilson family is interested in photography. I am a big Leica and Hasselblad enthusiast. As you know, Sheryl and I are big Ferrari enthusiasts. We actually got our first in 1969. As part of that we are avid Formula 1 fans, but it's not so much about the speed as it is the totality of the driving experience.

Sheryl and I also enjoy target shooting. We like the precision and the discipline.

Who's the better shot?

(laughs) I think she is. She is steadier and has a better eye than I do.

So, if someone tries to steal those X-2's from your living room, they better hope Sheryl is not on the other end of a .357 Magnum?

Exactly.

Later in the evening, Dave and Sheryl invited me to listen to their home theater system, which was an over the top experience as well, but that is another story. •

Classical Music Ato Z

By Dan Babineau

Music Conquers Politics and Finland Gets a National Hero







Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)

ately, we have all had to reevaluate almost every aspect of our freedom from air travel to internet accessibility. But imagine if our creativity was also under constant scrutiny. Try to envision how it would be to have to appeal to a dictator's whip when creating *any* form of art. This was the unfortunate scenario for Dmitri Shostakovich for most of his life as a composer. Once Shostakovich gained recognition as a serious composer, he was placed under a political microscope by Joseph Stalin. (who was in the process of reinventing Russia to become the Soviet Union) No part of Russian society was free of Stalin's vision and he took it upon himself personally to monitor the artists of the time. Shostakovich received more attention than most, but perhaps this is part of what made his music so special.

I feel that the interaction between Shostakovich and this complex society produced some of the most powerful and eloquent music to have ever been written. His compositions are exercises in contrast, with the most obvious being light and elegant versus dark and macabre. There is also plenty of contrast between classical and innovative styles, as well as explosive versus contemplative, you get the picture. Shostakovich transcribed and even refined the work of J.S. Bach to fit his own set of musical rules or codes. From symphony #1 to his bizarre 15th, we see the influences of a multitude of other composers from Beethoven to Rimsky-Korsakov.

These musical influences are stretched to their musical limits as Shostakovich innovates, extrapolates and dismantles their compositions to create something new, all during the rise of Stalin. The irony is that Shostakovich helped to bring a new Russia to the world, not Stalin. His music received the same positive response, stunning audiences around the world. The raw power of his compositions coupled with his sublime sense of melody filled the hearts of the most discerning audiences. Eventually, Shostakovich became a national hero, despite Stalin's constant intervention.

The genius of Shostakovich is his innate ability to absorb the many epochs of music from pre-Baroque to Jazz and then reconstruct this material into complete musical masterpieces. I disagree completely with Pierre Boulez on his comments that refer to Shostakovich as a second rate composer who somehow manages to lift his music from other great composers like Mahler and even Stravinsky. Think of

The genius of
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a patchwork quilt of music containing all different musical styles and techniques. Only Shostakovich pulls this information together to create a musical atmosphere that seduces us and draws us into a world filled with both inspiration and despair.

Combining his uniquely Russian influence with a wide range of musical styles is what set Shostakovich apart from his many contemporaries.

Shostakovich produced a tremendous amount of work in his lifetime; composing 15 symphonies, 16 string quartets and a large variety of chamber music. There were 5 ballets, 8 operas, 17 pieces dedicated to the piano, some choral music and an amazing amount of film music. In addition, he produced some other symphonic pieces as well as some vocal and incidental music. In every one of these categories,



it is easy to extract a tone or atmoshphere that is uniquely Shostakovich. Once again, the great contrasts make themselves known.

The first, fifth and tenth are his major symphonies, with the ones in between acting like building blocks, or studies along the way. His 1st symphony was written as a graduation piece and clearly shows influences from two other Russian composers – Prokofiev and Stravinsky. The second and third fall into this building block concept and the fourth symphony marked the beginning of Stalin's many denouncements of Shostakovich's work.

Due to it's experimental nature, the fourth was shelved for many years, deemed unacceptable by Stalin. Returning to a more neo-classical form with his 5th symphony that was more accepted by the politicians and the public, overwhelmed audiences and gave Shostakovich the popularity he needed to put the feud with Stalin to rest for a while. (continued)

In the 5th we clearly can identify Shostakovich's ability to manipulate our emotions. Just as the end draws near, with agony and gloom a bright light shines through his music and gives us hope, a way out of own desperation, perhaps.

The 6th symphony along with the 7th or "Leningrad" are largely thought to be Shostakovich's attempt to appease the Communist party, with a nationalistic theme that permeates these two. Perhaps Shostakovich put a bit of his genius on hold for his own well being?

The 8th symphony, illustrates the appetite for destruction that existed at the time, as Russia attempted to dismantle Germany. This is his "tragic symphony" as tanks roll over villages and bombs explode musically through out the work. There are some short reprieves in this piece, but the central theme of this rambunctious work is the ultimate chaos of a country and the human soul. Fortunately, in his 9th symphony, we get back some of the joy and inspiration found in his previous symphonic works. The 9th is light and airy, containing some of the most beautiful woodwind music ever written, especially for the bassoon.

Of his other works, the string quartets are brilliant. Their gripping intensity filled with hope, remorse and enlightenment will bring you to tears. Clearly neo-classic in structure, this piece mirrors the style of Haydn or Mozart. A delightful, farce-like, fifth movement – *allegretto*, completes this rather short symphony and should be able to put a smile on your face.

In his 10th symphony, Shostakovich assembles all of his amazing musical attributes and manages to compose one of the most profound pieces of classical music ever written, utilizing every element of Shostakovich's unique musical language. Tension is followed by resolve, syncopated rhythms come and go and the raw power of the orchestra is ferociously exposed, with the second movement rumored to be a musical portrait of Stalin.

The other remaining movements take on their own musical form and together create Shostakovich's finest symphony. It is interesting to note that Shostakovich saw fit to musically insert his own initials –

DSCH into the third movement of the 10th using a musical code or theme. This theme pops in and out of the work in a kind of cat and mouse fashion and I believe Shostakovich ends up the clear winner!

Of his other works, the string quartets are brilliant. Their gripping intensity filled with hope, remorse and enlightenment will bring you to tears. His two piano concertos are perfect examples of Shostakovich's musical mastery. The "1st Concerto for Piano" features a gorgeous trumpet solo and in the 2nd Piano Concerto, Shostakovich once again takes us on an emotional roller coaster ride that ends Allegro – happy!

All of the chamber music is wonderful, intertwining a variety of musical themes that blend together to form one solid masterpiece, with the piano music a bit more accesable and easier to follow Shostakovich's many thematic twists and turns. The ballets are playful, while the operas can be somewhat rigorous unless you are proficient in Russian. Finally, the film music really pushes the envelope as Shostakovich, like Copland and Ravel, actually embraces several jazz elements in this poignant, intense music.



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DG catalog #459670

String Quartet 8 - Emerson String Quartet

Chandos catalog #10064

String Quartets 1-13 - Borodin String Quartet

Decca catalog #433702

Tahiti Trot & Jazz Music – Chailly and the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra You have to get this one!



Jean Sibelius (1865-1957)

While some critics find his music simple, lacking the complexities found in Mahler or Shostakovich, I find them to have more of an organic feel. o other composer has helped establish an identity for their native country better than Sibelius. Long before Nokia put Finland on the map, Sibelius single-handedly presented the world with music from this country, with its folklore and mysticism. He started out a Wagner disciple but quickly turned to his native homeland for inspiration. The natural setting of Finland served as a musical postcard that Sibelius illustrated in almost all of his compositions.

Both of the times I've visited Finland, I've come away with a better understanding of the world in which Sibelius brilliantly painted in his music. While some critics find his music simple, lacking the complexities found in Mahler or Shostakovich, I find them to have more of an organic feel.

His musical themes change at a slower pace than the music of many other Romantic composers of this time. Warm and full of the sounds of nature, these musical atmoshpheres make a giant statement, allowing the listener to be transported to the Finnish countryside, perhaps even sitting right in the forest.

Making use of the folk music from many of the local villiages, Sibelius also incorporated a great deal of Finnish folklore as themes for many of his works. Goblins, swans and grotesque creatures came to life in his "the Four Legends of Kalevala" and "Skogsraet" the "Wood Nymph".

Sibelius is best known for his extraordinary seven symphonies. Symphony #2 got him off to a great start publicly and upon the completion of his severely nationalistic "Finlandia", Sibelius soon became *the* national hero of Finland – forever. (Sorry EP) (continued)

After he was diagnosed with throat cancer, many say that he just wanted to die and it was during this period he composed the hauntingly introspective fourth Symphony. Fortunately, the tumor was removed successfully and Sibelius was able to live a long and relatively prosperous life.

His only violin concerto, the" D Minor", is one of the most widely performed pieces for violin and orchestra and the "The Swan of Tuonela" is sure to melt the coldest of hearts. Incidental music like "Pelleas et Melisande" and the tone poem "Luonnatar" are other great examples of Sibelius creative genius. One of my personal favorites is "Stormen" (The Tempest), with its incredible vocals and sanguine solos. Something in his music always helps me to make sense of our existence. Enjoy! ●



DAN'S PICKS:

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Violin Concerto in D Minor

Bell, Salonen & the Los Angeles
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Chesky catalog #3

Symphony 2

 Barbirolli and the Royal Philharmonic

RCA catalog #38124

Symphonies 4 & 7

Ormandy and the
 Philadelphia Orchestra

Great Performances catalog # 66234

Symphony 5, Finlandia

Salonen and the Swedish
 Radio Symphony Orchestra,
 Philharmonia Orchestra and
 the LA Philharmonic

EMI catalog #85785

Tone Poems – Jones, Parsons, Wennberg, Dorati, Gibson Sargent and the London Symphony Orchestra, the Royal Scottish Orchestra and the Vienna Philharmonic

EMI catalog #54273

Symphony 1, Karelia Suite

Jansons and the Oslo
 Philharmonic Orchestra

An Alternative Distribution Model From B&W

By Jeff Dorgay Images Courtesy of B&W



Director of the music club, Danny Haikin told me, "We aren't making the mistake of becoming a music label. However we'd love to have a million subscribers by the end of the year." With over 400 new subscribers a day, I'd say they are well on track.



There are a few things that make this different from other high-resolution digital offerings. First, this is only available on a subscription basis. You can sign up for a year, which is about $\mathfrak{L}34.99$, or $\mathfrak{L}23.99$ for six months. At the current exchange rate, that's about $\mathfrak{L}70US$, but given our current economy, I'd sign up right now.

All kidding aside, membership gets you a new release every month. Some of these artists are under contract with Peter Gabriel's Real World Studios and others are new talents that have been recruited specifically for this project. The files are available as Apple Lossless files with no DRM that you can download very quickly. The folks at B&W are ready to rock, because the first two albums I've downloaded have only taken about three minutes in .zip format and they include suitable for printing album artwork sized to fit right in a jewel case. Impressive!

What makes the B&W music club different from a record label, is that they have recorded these bands on the premise that an exclusive is given to the music club for one month, and then they are free to take the master tape and shop their own record deal. Everyone wins, members get new music to listen to every month and musicians that might not have been able to afford a top shelf recording session get a great master tape. The only caveat is that the music is only up for a month, and then it's gone, there is no archive.

So far the first two releases, *Bought for a Dollar, Sold for a Dime*, by Little Axe (already out of print) and *You Think You Have it All*, by Mondo Cane (Grindhouse) have been well worth the money, especially considering you are getting 12 CD's for 70 bucks. The Little Axe disc is a blues record with some hard rock and reggae influences and the Mondo Cane selection has more of a gritty alternative feel. "We won't be producing any glockenspiel audiophile records here", Haikin said, laughing.

With Peter Gabriel having such a strong hand in this, I highly doubt we will be getting any clunkers. With a lot of audiophiles in a panic about not having physical media in the near future, this gives everyone their chance to have their cake and eat it too. I've taken both of my disks and burned them to 24kt CD's, printed the album art with my 12 color Canon printer on high quality paper and inserted the goods in a MoFi hinged jewel case, so I'm not feeling the least bit slighted. I can play the selections on my Naim 555 or on my iPod.

If this is the future of music, I say bring it on! ●



"We won't be producing any glockenspiel audiophile records here," Haikin said, laughing.

http://www.bowers-wilkins.com/display.aspx?infid=3550&terid=3551

SIMPLIFY,

The Simaudio Moon i-7 **Dual-Mono Integrated Amplifier**

By Randy Wells









i-7 INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER







horeau may have got it right over 100 years ago. One thing's for certain: there is something very satisfying about simplifying your stereo system. Less clutter, a simpler signal path, fewer cables, a smaller number of components to potentially wear out, and maybe even a less expensive way to go - all very good reasons to consider an all-in-one integrated stereo amplifier. The Simaudio Moon i-7 brought all of these virtues front and center.

Since introducing their Evolution series of amplifiers, preamplifiers and CD players, Simaudio has received critical praise for elegant design and sonic performance. Included in this series is the Moon i-7, their topof—the-line all-in-one preamp and amp. An integrated stereo amplifier, when done right, can certainly sound wonderful and can have several advantages over more expensive separates. For one, a single box takes the place of two or more separates saving on rack space and cabling. Add to this the fact that an integrated unit usually uses a little less electricity, and the idea of "simpler is better" starts to make even more sense. You might be thinking less weight too, but the i-7 tips the scale at 55 pounds, so that may not be a factor, however it does hint at the build quality inside.

The exterior is made of beautifully sculpted brushed and anodized aluminum, which is available in a variety of finishes, and the interior houses a true dual-mono fully balanced design using some very beefy transformers.

A Breeze to Set Up

Hooking up the Simaudio Moon i-7 could not be easier. Just connect your speakers and CD player and away you go. I read the instruction manual thoroughly of course, but this amp is so simple to use you may not need to read it more than once. It really is that intuitive to use. On the back of the unit are the main power switch and the speaker cable binding posts. There are enough inputs to satisfy the most demanding audiophile: 5 pairs of single-ended RCA inputs, a pair of balanced XLR inputs, plus a Tape out monitor jack. Also present are an RS-232 port, a pair of "SimLink" mini jacks, and a 12V trigger output, which allow for integration with other Moon components in a custom install environment.

You can also use the i-7 as a preamp only by using its pair of line level output jacks, which also come in handy if you use a subwoofer in your system. The front panel is equally well designed with a large display (which you can thankfully turn off), a standby power button (to save on power consumption when not in use), monitor and mute buttons, and a large volume knob with extremely smooth action. Below that are the input and set up selection buttons. If there is anything I would quibble about it would be that the remote, while a work of art and easy to use,

is a bit heavy, and the blue power light on the front panel is simply too bright for listening in a darkened room.

With a fully balanced, dual-mono, no overall feedback design and a power output of 150 Wpch into 8 ohms and 250 Wpch into 4 ohms, this amp should drive most speaker loads to a very high quality of music reproduction. Since my reference speakers are the notoriously hard to drive Magneplanar 3.6Rs, I was curious as to how this amp's power rating might handle such a difficult planar load. Just in case, I also had my trusty Rogers LS3/5a speakers on hand to try out if needed. In setting the i-7 up, I used three supplied Simaudio "pucks" under the amp and placed it on its own isolated platform. An aftermarket Black Sands power cable was used in addition to the stock cord provided. Fortunately, the I-7 arrived with plenty of time on the clock so I could start listening to CDs after just a few hours of warming it up in my system.

What struck me right away was how effortless and engaging this amp made music sound.

Passed all of the Tests

What struck me right away was how effortless and engaging this amp made music sound. In fact, CDs were never fatiguing to listen to during the two months I auditioned this amp. *(continued)*





One of the first albums I played was Emerson, Lake and Palmer Trilogy on MFSL UDCD. It turned out to be a fortuitous choice because prog-rock perfectly suits this integrated amp. You know those delicate highs that seem to go on forever? Well, this amp made those sound as extended as I've ever heard them. How about a more modern recording like The Very Best of Crowded House? Yup, all the pace and drive was there that I remembered from my reference system. OK, it was time to pull out the big guns. The Who Who's Next (super secret squirrel P33P 25009 Japanese pressing) will do nicely, thank you. Verdict? This amp can rock out with the best of them.

So much for the torture tests. What really matters to most of us is how a component survives under long term listening. Here's the scoop:

Whether listening to pop, rock, jazz or classical, there was virtually no grain to be heard and harmonics were both utterly liquid and easily discernable as layers of sound.

Transparency and resolution were both excellent, with instrumental details rendered very clearly without sounding too sweet. Backgrounds were ultraquiet. The soundstage produced by this amp was very wide and almost as deep. Frequency extremes were seamless, rendered in a very coherent way with a midrange that is this amp's forte. (continued)

The Moon i-7 is simply the best sounding integrated amplifier I've heard.

Clear, engaging, slightly warm, and silky smooth are the keywords here. Without mincing words, the i-7's midrange has a beguiling liquidity of tone that is simply breathtaking. The treble is served up in a musical and extended way as well without any harshness. You might mistake this

amp's sound for the best tube separates so intoxicating is it's overall presentation.
Listening to The Moody Blues To Our
Children's, Children's, Children was even
more of a guilty pleasure than it normally
is, so emotionally connected was I with
the music.

A Fantastic Choice

It was only in the bass department that I was ever left wishing for more. Don't get me wrong, the i-7 goes deep enough and it's lower octave tonality is superb, but it does lack the ultimate speed and dynamics of the best solid state units. To be fair, the amps that produce a deeper soundstage and more authoritative bass are both more expensive and of the stand-alone or monoblock type. It should be noted that bass did sound more taut and punchy when played through my Rogers speakers, which were easier to drive and also played to this amp's midrange strengths. The bottom line is that if anything the i-7 errs only ever so slightly on the side of omission (never addition) and is unquestionably a state of the art integrated amplifier that takes a back seat to no other. Most importantly, to me at least, is that its tonality throughout the frequency range is spot on. Music just seems real when played through this unit. In fact, its presentation is one of the most natural and engaging I've heard from any pre-amp or amp regardless of price.

So where does that leave us? The Moon i-7 is simply the best sounding integrated amplifier I've heard. It worked flawlessly during two months of almost constant use and offered nearly everything that the best separates have for less money. While not inexpensive at around \$7,500, this would be the amp I would buy if I were putting together my first high end system. Mated with an equally good source and speakers, the i-7 will satisfy until the itch to further complicate your life arises. Besides, just think of all the money you'll save on electricity, tubes, power cords, and interconnects! Keep things simple, I say, and enjoy the benefit.

Second Opinion

By Jeff Dorgay

Having spent a couple of months with the i-7 before shipping it up to Randy, I had the opportunity to try it with about a dozen different speakers and suspect that the issues Randy experienced would be fairly unique to the Magnepans. Using the i-7 with everything from the Harbeth compact 7-III, to my MartinLogan Summits and quite a few in between from KEF, Avalon, Penaudio and Verity, I never felt the amplifier lacking in any way. I even recommended this amplifier to a few friends, who happily purchased one after a quick audition.

I concur with Randy on every other aspect of the i-7's performance. If you ever wanted to be done with tubes, but are hesitant about the ability of solid state to sound truly musical, look no further than this amplifier. While I also enjoyed the Luxman 590 A that we reviewed last issue. even 30 watts of glorious Class-A power only goes so far and limits your speaker choices. The i-7 gives up just a slight touch of that magic but offers a huge dose of power in return and that's a trade I'd be happy to make any day of the week.

Granted you can't have it all for \$7500, but I haven't heard anything near this price range that is this enjoyable to listen to. Before you buy the next pallet of 6550 tubes, give this one a test drive; you might come back pleasantly surprised. I am very pleased to award the i-7 one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2008.

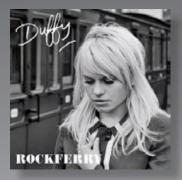
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Interconnects: Harmonic Technology Magic Link One, Audience Au24, Grover SC

Speaker Cables: Transparent Audio Musicwave Ultra MM

Power Cords: Running Springs Audio Mongoose, Black Sand Chromium, Violet and Reference

Power Conditioners: Running Springs Haley and Duke

Vibration Control: Fim rollerblocks, Mapleshade platforms and Isoblocks, DIY air suspension, Target wall stands



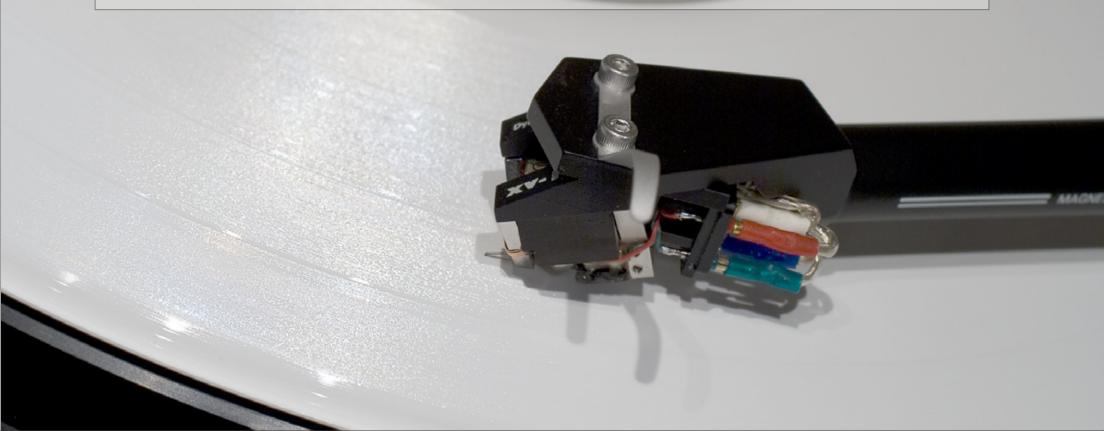
'Il take expensive phono cartridges for \$5000 and up, give me a vowel too! Considering that I know quite a few people that own a decent system that costs this much, one is getting into rarefied air when going down this path. As we all know the value of used phono cartridges, this road is not for the faint of heart or wallet. Many of my friends are big Koetsu fans and at this price point, everyone has their favorites, but I think I've found mine.

Over the years I've owned a number of Dynavector cartridges and currently have a 17D3 on one of my other tables. Their top of the line XV-1s is a big one, tipping the scale at 12.6 grams, so you might need a larger counterweight to achieve the correct tracking force on your arm.

Kicking off the listening with my Rega P9/RB1000 combination, even the accessory counterweight was not heavy enough to work with the XV-1s, so I used one from Groovetracer to achieve the necessary force. The Continuum Copperhead and the SME IV.Vi had no problem bringing the Dynavector into line. Because the stylus height on the XV-1s is 21mm, should you plan on using this cartridge with a P9, plan on picking up a pair of 3mm spacers to keep VTA in line.

Basic Setup Parameters

As you may have seen on our blog, I have started using an old Audio Technica MM cart to set initial VTA and tracking force with rubber bands holding the cartridge in place. While you might think I'm crazy for doing something like this, I do have a method to my madness. This whole combination weighs about 11 grams and is much easier to use when making these initial settings than a \$5000 cartridge with a nude cantilever assembly!



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POWER UP

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No matter how many times I do this, I still get a bit jumpy when working with a top cartridge, thinking what if I slip?

After the rough adjustments had been made, it was moment of truth time with the XV-1s firmly in place. Using the Acoustic Sounds test record and my trusty new Fluke digital multimeter, I was able to get the cartridge dialed in pretty quickly. Knowing my Nagra VPS is perfectly balanced between the L and R channels, I ran the 1000hz band to measure channel balance on the XV-1s. While Dynavector claims that the channel balance is within 1 db, I am happy to report that my test sample as close to perfect as I could imagine, with the output from the left channel measuring .430v and the right measuring .429v

Slight fine tuning and then, glorious music!

While the instruments really help, final setup still takes a bit of finessing with your ears. Dynavector suggests a range of 1.8 to 2.2 grams for VTF and on all three arms. I achieved nirvana at 2.05 grams. Once I had put a few hours on the XV-1s. I moved it to the Raven Two with the SME IV.Vi arm, where it has stayed. As I mentioned in TONEAudio #15 last month, Dynavector was kind enough to lend us a second XV-1s to use for the Continuum review so I did not have to upset my reference setup.

I settled on a loading of 100 ohms, which also turned out to be the sweet spot with the ASR Basis Exclusive phono preamplifier as well as the Rega IOS and the Nagra VPS. (We will have a review in TONEAudio #17). (continued)

I really enjoyed the XV-1s from the minute I gently placed it on a record, but after about 20 albums worth of play, it openened up even more, providing a huge soundscape for your records. You will need a phono stage with a bit of gain to accommodate the XV-1s somewhat low output of .3mv.

The first record played on the Raven/SME/Nagra combo was Anja Garbarek's *Smiling and Waving*. Her unearthly, distant, breathy vocals really let you hear into a cartridge pretty quickly. When the cartridge is dialed in perfectly, the speakers disappear and her voice just floats in space about four feet in front of you with a very organic, three-dimensional feel. In English, it's pretty darn convincing! Classical lovers, break out your favorite violin recordings and you will be mesmerized by this cartridge. Only a handful of cartridges truly capture the essense of this instrument and like the female voice, just emerges from the speakers rather than sounding electronic and screechy.

Another one of my favorite tests is to listen to the chorus on track two of Aimee Mann's Lost In Space (Mofi) album, "High on Sunday 51". When she sings "Let me be your heroin" on a decent cartridge it sounds like a doubled up vocal, but on the XV-1s you can clearly hear the male backing vocal behind her voice. This is what makes this cartridge so exciting, it adds a new dimension to your recordings.

The XV-1s is really a master of subtlety, revealing more nuance than I have had the pleasure of hearing in any recent memory.

No Limits

My biggest beef with mega audio components is when they have limitations or glitches. When you spend \$5000 on a phono cartridge, it should be a stellar performer in every way and this is how I feel about the XV-1s. If there are any limitations in the presentation of this cartridge, I could not find them.

Balance is this cartridges strongest suit. When listening to acoustic instruments, it was able to achieve that magic that precious few can. Spatial cues were spot on, yet there was a huge soundstage as well. Timbre and tonality was exquisite, with stringed instruments having a rightness about them that only occurs when coloration is kept to an absolute minimum and transient response is excellent.

Thanks to that transient response, this cartridge does a great job on music possessing large dynamic swings. From the blackest background to the loudest peaks, the XV-1s starts and stops on a dime, making this one absolutely unfatiguing, even after listening for very long sessions.

The XV-1s is also a superb tracker. No matter what I threw at this cartridge, it passed with flying colors. Even when the stylus was only a few grooves away from the end of the record, did not have a trace of sibilance on any of the three arms I used it with. The more records I listened to, no matter what kind of music I chose was completely free of fatigue.

My only advice is that with all of this potential on tap, you take the extra time to ace the setup, or find someone that can. Otherwise you may not be able to enjoy all that the XV-1s has to offer.

grooves record, pilance I used at I lis-kind pm-

The XV-1s Does it All

I realize that a cartridge of this magnitude is going to be a highly personal choice and dealers don't let anyone take \$5000 phono cartridges home for a test drive. But if you have a dealer in your area that happens to have one of these mounted to a table, you owe it to yourself to give it a listen with a couple of your favorite records. I suspect if you do, you just might walk out of the hifi shop \$5000 poorer than when you walked in.

With any hifi component or system, I'm always trying to get as much resolution as I can without things sounding overly etched or unnatural, while at the same time trying to achieve the most natural tonal balance possible without sacrificing that resolution to sound musical by rounding the corners off of the presentation. I know that's somewhat of a "have your cake and eat it too" mentality, this is precisely what the very best hi fi equipment offers, and I put the XV-1s strongly in that camp, a welcome addition to the lineup of the worlds best phono cartridges. \blacksquare

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MSRP: \$5000

MANUFACTURER

Dynavector Systems,

www.dynavector.com

PERIPHERALS

Preamplifier: Conrad-Johnson ACT2/Series 2

Phono Preamplifiers: Nagra VPS, ASR Basis Exclusive, Rega IOS, ModWright 9.0SWP SE, Audio Research PH7

Turntables: TK Acustic Raven Two w/SME IV.Vi arm and Rega RB1000 arm, Rega P9 w/RB1000 arm, SOTA Nova w/SME 309 arm, Continuum Criterion w/Copperhead

Power Amplifier: Conrad-Johnson Premier 350

Speakers: MartinLogan Summit with Descent i subwoofer

Interconnects: Cardas Golden Reference, Shunyata Antares, AudioQuest Sub 3 (to subwoofer)

Speaker Cables: Shunyata Orion

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

Power Conditioning: Running Springs Dimitri and Jaco

Vibration Control: Finite Elemente Cerapucs and Ceraballs, Pagode Signature Racks (3) and amplifier stand

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



By Jeff Dorgay

I must admit I walked into the Furutech room at CES this January with an attitude of complete skepticism wanting to make fun of their 2000 dollar record demagnetizer. The man doing the demo was none other than Michael Hobson, owner of Classic Records, so my interest was piqued.

After listening to Hobson bag on SME turntables for a few minutes, we got on with the demo. Tech editor Dan Babineau and I are both happy SME owners, so now we were really ready to hear this guy hang himself with the latest overpriced snake oil gadget, but you know what?

The damn thing works and the effect is not subtle.

While I understand that 2000 smackers isn't exactly chump change, if you are a pretty serious audiophile that has thousands of records, it's not out of reach, especially considering what power cords cost these days, or one of those silly coat rack things that is supposed to treat the acoustics in your room.

Furutech claims that the carbon particles that make a record black hold a minute magnetic charge that can cloud the sound, which makes sense considering the extremely low level that a moving coil cartridge operates. Interestingly enough, I could not hear any effect from the demagnetizer when I tried it on my gold copy of Grand Funk Railroad's We're an American Band, the clear copy of Synergy's Cords or the white copy of Live in the Air Age by BeBop Deluxe. I also noticed less of an effect with the Continuum Criterion than my other turntables, perhaps due to the magnetic suspension in the Continuum?

So I am on board with using the demagnetizer as part of my vinyl ritual.

I did my usual battery of tests with my favorite guinea pigs and even the non-audiophiles in the group came away feeling that the music sounded smoother and more open. That's the impression I always got when using it, but you know how we audiophiles can fool ourselves into thinking the latest expensive gadget has to sound better.

Diminished grain is exactly how I would describe the effect that the Furutech demag has on a recording. I would compare the effect to going up to the next notch in cartridges from any given manufacturer, or perhaps swapping our some Chinese 12AX7's for some great NOS ones, so if you have a pretty good system, I think you will be impressed.

Granted, the nerdtrons in the audience might be able to build one of these for less money, but it won't look as elegant as the Furutech and if you get the charging circuit wrong, you will probably make things sound worse.

The Furutech is definitely one of those cool hiff accessories for the man who has everything. The guys out on the various Internet boards squealed like pigs when I said I bought one of these, but I wouldn't be without it. If you've got the system, tons of records and would like a new gadget fix that actually works, I highly recommend the Furutech demagnetizer. *(continued)*



The "Saves the Day" Part of the Story

I'm sure you are wondering how a record demagnetizer saved my day. It didn't, it just made my day better. However, the Furutech DFV-1 LP flattener did. Again, this one is not for the faint of heart at \$1628. The best part of the DFV-1 is that this is an accessory that you can share with your buddies.



Considering what records cost these days and the inability of the vendors to just exchange the defective ones, it's getting easier and easier to get stuck with 35-100 dollar Frisbees.

Case in point, the recent Radiohead two record/two CD box set that was almost \$100. After it's long trip from England, I anxiously tore it out of the box to give it a spin. The

first record was perfectly flat, but the second one was warped like a pretzel bowl. Well, maybe not quite that bad, but warped enough that I wasn't going to let my Dynavector XV-1s bounce around on it.

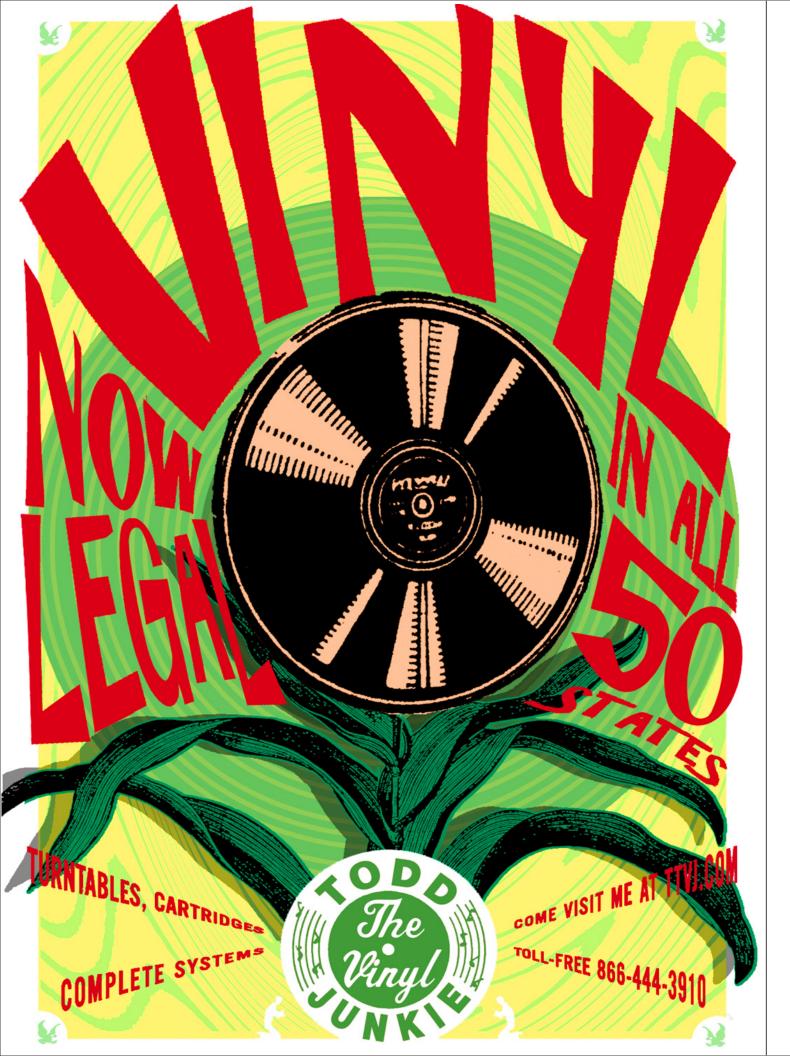
Of course this was a limited edition set and after waiting four months to receive it, I knew there was no way to get another copy, so it was the perfect chance to give the DFV-1 a try. I have a big stack of warped records sitting in my garage that needed a purpose, so I started there, before letting the DFV-1 have a go at my one and only rare Radiohead album.

Not to worry. The whole process takes about three hours; as it slowly warms up your record between two metal plates, almost like a dry mount press. This gently returns your LP to its original flat shape and then cools down equally slowly.

There are two lines of thought surrounding the effectiveness of this device; the naysayers and the true believers (I'm in the latter category to a point), but there is a limit to how much you can defy the laws of physics or at least bent plastic. Remember, anything that is bent beyond a certain point will still retain some of its bend even when you try to flatten it. Think of the 5mph bumper on your car, a modest impact and it will return to its original shape, but if you nudge something at about 10mph, you get somewhat of a warp. Hmmm.

I tried the DFV-1 on a number of different types of warped records to see just how effective it was and what the side effects might be. I had the

best success with moderately warped records (about ¼ inch or 5mm) that had the warps fairly evenly spread apart. These are usually the ones you experience in shipping with new records. You can be pretty certain that these will flatten out and the record in question will sound better than ever. (continued)



I did not have very good luck trying to flatten a couple of records that had multiple, sharp warps, somewhat akin to what happens when an LP sits in a warm FedEx truck for too long.

Should you have some very seriously warped records, the DFV-1 will make an unplayable record playable, but there will be some damage to the grooves and as a result, some distortion. If the choice is between some music and no music, it's still a lifesaver.

One last thing to keep in mind before using the DFV-1 is that record cleanliness is a must! I highly suggest a double cleaning and some liberal use of compressed air before you insert a record. Remember, you are heating up the record, which will soften it considerably. The last thing you want to do is imbed big dirt particles in the vinyl!

Again, this is not an audiophile accessory for the faint of wallet, but if used within its range of effectiveness is very handy. It's also the perfect gift for the audiophile on your list that has everything (but not one of these). Now that I have one in my arsenal, it's great to haggle with used record store owners, exclaiming how warped said record is. If the store is pretty full, the proprietor will usually knock the price in half on the warped records just to get rid of me right now! At this pace, I'm figuring the DFV-1 will have paid for itself by the end of the year.

Those of you with voracious appetites for vinyl will find this little gadget indispensable. ●

MSRP: DeMag \$1980 DFV-1 \$1628

MANUFACTURER

Furutech Co. Ltd.

Tokyo, Japan www.furutech.com

Conrad-Johnson Strikes Analog Gold

THE TEA-1 PHONOSTAGE By Dan Babineau

Sitting in my listening chair staring at a pair of turntables (an SME 20 and a Linn LP-12) I often wonder why we still succumb to this prehistoric technology, cultivating dinosaurs in a world of nano technology? I have the same thoughts perusing my extensive record collection, thinking about how much of my life has been invested in these museum pieces, finding,

storing and cleaning them. Let's not even talk about VTA and other aspects of turntable maintenance, sometimes it probably would be a lot easier to just drop an CD in and push play.

triode equalization amplifier

But the second that stylus hits the groove and the room fills with music I know why I can't give up on analog. Bill and Lew insisted that they were looking for a simple solution to phono playback, and they certainly got it right here. In this instance my excitement for analog is focused on the new TEA-1 phonostage from Conrad-Johnson. The TEA-1 has been in the works for a few years now, and I remember the conversation with Lew Johnson and Bill Conrad quite some time ago about their "proposed" update for their highly successful Premier 15. I've been seriously addicted to high-end analog for over 40 years but there have only been a handful of products that truly overwhelmed my senses like this new phonostage from C-J. It has the ability of taking the information from the cartridge and transforming it into a musical experience that equals and sometimes exceeds a live performance.

The design process was arduous to say the least, as Bill hand picked every transformer, resistor and capacitor. The TEA-1 employs no electrolytic capacitors anywhere in the audio circuit or their direct current power supplies.

A Quick Peek Under the Hood

Removing the top panel of the TEA-1 revealed banks of CJD Teflon capacitors and only three vacuum tubes: 2 6922's and a 12AX7, which surprised me, because judging by it's performance, I expected

a larger tube compliment. Bill and Lew insisted that they were looking for a simple solution to phono playback, and they certainly got it right here. The TEA-1 is dead quiet from both inputs with the low gain input providing 45db of gain (more than enough for my .5mv Lyra Skala and .6mv Air Tight PC-1 cartridges) and a high gain, transformer driven input that worked marvelously with my Koetsu RSP only having a .2mv output. The transformer increases the total gain to 60db.

The low-gain input allows for resistance loading from 100 ohms to 47k. The 1k setting was a perfect match for my Skala, which I've had better luck with loading down a bit, while the transformer coupled input worked very well with my Koetsu.

A quick run through the paces with my test equipment revealed that the RIAA curve was spot on, channel balance was within .1 db in all cases, hum and noise were quite a bit lower than C-J's spec. The low-gain setting mated beautifully with both of my medium gain carts to the point where I really was considering adding an additional turntable to solve the problem of remounting carts for this review. I loved the sound of both the Lyra and the Air Tight equally when run through the TEA-1. (continued)





Precise, well defined, glorious, severely transparent and full of natural energy were the first descriptions that I wrote down.

The Koetsu had so much get up and go that I rocked the Kasbah a little too hard one night, resulting in a conversation with one of Mission Viejo's finest due to a series of calls from my extremely unreasonable neighbors!

Four Versions for Your Listening Pleasure

There are four versions of the TEA-1, priced from \$5000 to \$10,000. My review is on the top of the line version, with all the goodies. All have two inputs, which I feel is very important to the serious analog enthusiast. The TEA-1B is the base model, which uses all 12AX7's and has a fixed gain of 54.5db is \$5000. One input is fixed at 47k and the other has switch adjustable resistive and capacitive loading. The TEA-1BC has the same tube compliment, gain and adjustments as the "B" version, but with a full compliment of CJ Teflon capacitors. The BC model costs \$8500.

The TEA-1 that I am reviewing here has the pair of 6922's and a 12AX7 along with the transformer coupled second input and full compliment of Teflon capacitors and it retails for \$10,000.

The TEA-1 BT has the tube and transformer compliment of the TEA-1 but without the Teflon capacitors and sells for \$6500. Confused? It's easier than it seems.

Remember, as with any modern day audio component that has a bunch of Teflon capacitors lurking inside, it will take about 250 hours to sound it's best and most open. The TEA-1 was no exception to this rule.

The Sound of the TEA-1

Precise, well defined, glorious, severely transparent and full of natural energy were the first descriptions that I wrote down. To say that I enjoyed reviewing the TEA-1 would be gross understatement. I literally was swallowed up by its ambience to the point that I had records strewn all over the floor of my music room.

I played them all: Barber's piano Concerto on Columbia with John Browning, Reiner and the CSO performing the Concerto for Orchestra, Copland performing Copeland, Debussy with Haitink on Philips, Martinon conducting the Paris Conservatoire, Elgar with Previn, Grieg, Holst - tons of Holst including "The Lure", all of the Bax symphonies on Lyrita, Prokofiev's piano concertos as well as an abundance of his symphonies, Shostakovich string quartets with the Borodin, Sibelius with Berglund, Stravinsky, Tippet Tchaikovsky, etc. etc. etc. All of these records ended up on both turntables over the course of about three days. The TEA-1 held me in its grip with its incredible inner detail. I clearly felt the bow dragged across catgut strings and timpani drums roared in the background and then faded to quiet bliss. I was hearing in between the notes and the musical atmosphere was beyond surreal.

The new Blue Notes from Acoustic Sounds made an excellent choice for testing the TEA-1 in an arena outside of the realm of classical music. Dexter's Calling came to life for first time in my music room as the TEA-1 capitalized on every note. I could hear subtle nuances in this intense music much clearer than a number of other phono stages I've evaluated over the years. *(continued)*

What does ne plus ultra mean?

ne plus ultra \nay-plus-UL-truh; noun:

- 1. The highest point, as of excellence or achievement; the acme; the pinnacle; the ultimate.
- 2. The most profound degree of a quality or condition.

As more and more audio retailers around the country embrace convenience, control, and gadgetry over audio and video performance, they effectively abandon the music and film lovers who desire a real experience from their systems at home.

At *ne plus ultra*, our passion is designing and installing systems that provide a compelling, engaging, and realistic experience of music and film in our clients' own homes. We invite you to our showrooms located in a Victorian mansion in downtown Austin, Texas. We have created an ideal environment in which you can relax and revel in just how amazing and exciting truly realistic music reproduction can be.

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Our Reference Listening Studio Three at *ne plus ultra* features the Wilson Audio Alexandria X-2 Loudspeaker.

Beyond tonally correct, the syrupy C-J sound of the past is now replaced with clear neutrality.

Next. I turned to Weather Report's Heavy Weather and the room lit up. On track two, "A Remark You Made", the combination of Joseph Zawinul's synthesizer riffs and Jaco Pastrious' elegant bass lines floated me into nirvana for the rest of the evening. The TEA-1 allowed me to hear into this recording to the point where I could hear the reed trembling in the mouthpiece of Wayne Shorter's tenor sax as he nicely defines the central theme of the piece. Alex Acuna's Zildgens sound like cymbals, not white noise, and I cold hear between the percussive gems doled out by Manolo Badena.

These subtle bits of inner detail and complexity are what really draw you into the music in a way that lesser components can not and is what puts the TEA-1 up on the top of the heap with the world's finest phono stages.

The first time that you experience this phenomenon you'll be hooked!

Another major attribute of the TEA1 is its almost unbelievable transparency, an utter lack of distortion or noise, so you do not hear the component that generates that music. Fanatical attention to detail and using the best parts available is what gives this preamplifier this transparency and extremely low noise floor. At first, it is a rather unnerving feeling to experience this type of microscopic detail. We literally see into the soundstage and everything becomes threedimensional. (continued)

From a logistical standpoint, it's wonderful to have two separate inputs at your disposal and both had their attributes.

input

Bruno Walter rustles a page of the score for Brahms third symphony and we can almost feel Joni Mitchell's breath when she sings "Song for Sharon" off of her *Hejira* LP. And once you hear all of the music it's impossible to go back to the norm.

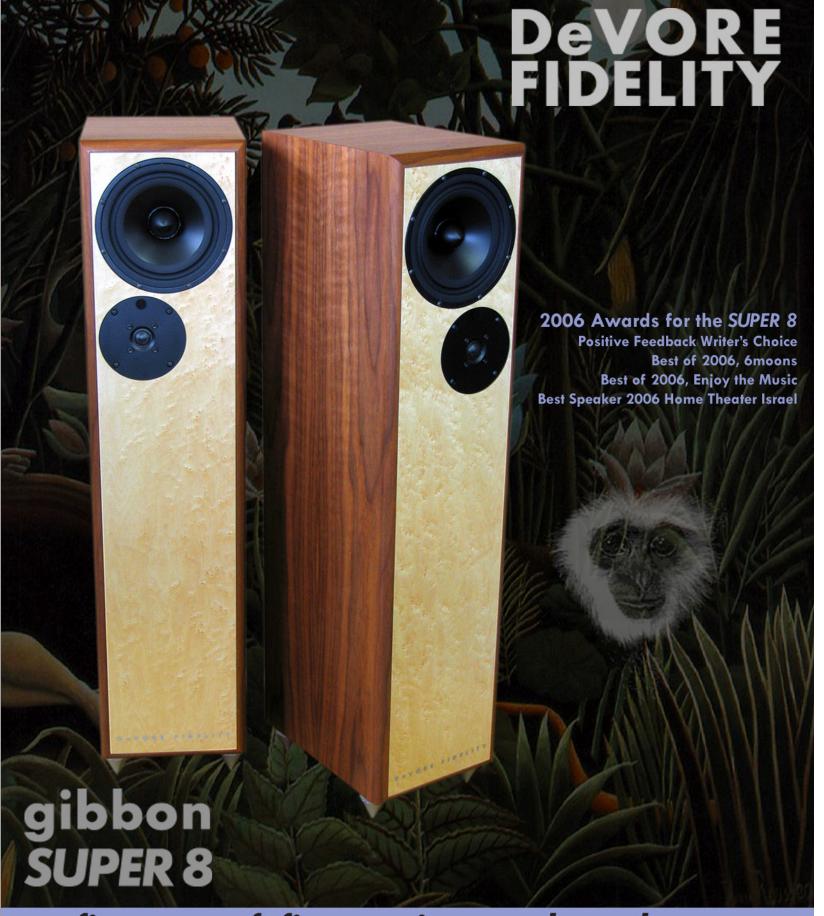
From a logistical standpoint, it's wonderful to have two separate inputs at your disposal and both had their attributes. The low-gain input seemed to be a bit more organic than the transformer based high-gain. I believe it threw a bit more air and seemed a little more natural especially with solo acoustic music like David Crosby's "If I Could Only Remember My Name". String tones up the wazoo and musical atmospheres that surround the room like smoke.

The high-gain input has a deeper soundstage, pushing the room boundaries out even further. The Koetsu though the high-gain input was breathtaking listening to Bon Scott rip a hole in the musical canvas on the title track of *Highway to Hell*. Nine Inch Nails never sounded better and even Nirvana took on a much more interesting timbre when played through the TEA-1. Again, let me reinforce this concept of two turntables. Play the nice classical music and small jazz ensembles through the low-gain and the Shostakovich and Metallica through the high-gain. And let me clarify, that both inputs are equally wonderful and will present any type of music in an almost frightfully realistic sense. It's just nice to be able to key in on their subtle attributes.

Can you tell, I love this thing?

To conclude, reviewing the TEA-1 has been a delightful experience, offering up everything I appreciate in a state of the art phono stage; weight, accurate tonality, resolution and low noise. Thanks to a minimal tube compliment, it offers no compromises in the sound along with a simplicity that will make it very easy to live with long term. Caring for three vacuum tubes is something that even a non-technical audiophile can easily live with. Those more technically inclined can experiment with NOS tubes for a different sound and be very happy as well.

The TEA-1 offers some of the most musically involving, yet precise analog playback I've had the pleasure to encounter at any price. Highly recommended. ●



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The C-J TEA-1 Phono Preamplifier

MSRP: \$10,000 as reviewed, other models see text.

MANUFACTURER

Conrad-Johnson Design 2733 Merilee Drive Fairfax, VA 22031 703-560-5360 www.conradjohnson.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source: SME 20/2 with SME IV.Vi arm, Linn LP-12 with Ittok arm (highly modified), Purist Audio phono cable

Cartridges: Koetsu Rosewood Signature Platinum, Air Tight PC-1, Lyra Skala

Preamplifier: Conrad-Johnson ART3, Aesthetix Callisto

Phono Stages: Aesthetix IO with dual power supplies, ASR Basis Exclusive

Power Amplifier: Conrad-Johnson Premier 350

Speakers: Avalon Indra

Vibration Control: Grand Prix Audio Monaco Racks

Cable: Cardas Golden Reference Interconnects and Speaker Cable

Power Conditioning: Running Springs Audio Duke and Dimitri

The Thorens TD-160 HD Turntable

By Marc Phillips



For many years, I had a bit of a bias against Thorens turntables. I was aware of the meticulous German craftsmanship and robust durability of these machines, but I always felt the sound quality stopped just short of simpler and more affordable designs coming out of the UK. A few months ago, however, I heard a vintage TD160 paired with an extremely modest Shure cartridge, and I found myself utterly surprised at the overall sound quality. I realized that after years of recommending old Duals and AR-XAs for my vinyl-loving but cash-challenged brethren, I should have been steering them toward Thorens instead.

The new Thorens TD160 HD, however, is a much more ambitious design than its legendary namesake. Thorens borrowed the TD160 moniker to reflect the fact that this new model has similar dimensions to the first model, which was first introduced in 1972. That model sold for a substantial amount of money even in those days, at least compared to those aforementioned ARs and Duals (remember that the LP-12 arrived a year later for a whopping \$360). This new model will set you back close to \$5000 with an SME-sourced arm attached to the plinth. A lower cost version with an OEM Rega RB 250 arm is priced at \$3500.

Great Sound. Great Price.





That same feeling of compactness permeates the new TD-160 HD, when you pick it up. At a shade over 17 lbs., this Thorens is surprisingly light and mobile. The majority of 'tables in this price range can be downright unwieldy, with separate motor housings, power supplies and lead or acrylic platters that weigh more than a bowling ball.

Thorens was able to make the HD so svelte by employing innovative new materials in its construction.

The base plate, tonearm platform and feet are all made from Resonance Damping Compound (RDC), a granular "non-homogeneous material of high mechanical stability" that reduces waves of resonance throughout the chassis. RDC also contributes to the light overall weight of the HD.

Technology at Work

According to the literature, the HD uses a progressively damped conical suspension and a flexible plastic subchassis to provide the same vibration control as high-mass designs. Thorens also keeps the outer dimensions of the TD-160 HD compact by placing the motor and electronic speed control inside the plinth... you know, like they used to do in the old days. Even the belt and pulley is completely hidden within the acrylic polymer platter. That's right, I said acrylic platter and Thorens in the same sentence. This new platter is relatively thin and light as well, and is designed to produce an optimum balance between mass and inertia. You also get two cork mats of differing thicknesses to help with those nagging VTA urges. (continued)

TONEA 111 NO.16 2008

I found this very handy when switching between standard 140g pressings and 180g audiophile pressings.

Since the belt and the pulley are obscured once the platter is in place, Thorens includes a small mounting jig that allows you to pull the belt into place. You slip the belt into the interior of the platter, fit the platter carefully onto the spindle, and then slip the jig under the platter and pull the belt out to the drive pulley. It's a fairly quick and painless procedure. When I first assembled the HD, I had actually misplaced the jig but was still able to get the belt and platter in place

on the first try. I'm not sure if I could do it again, though. I guess it all depends upon whether you feel lucky. Well, do you?

The M2 arm that was supplied with the HD is sourced from SME, and closely resembles the M1 arm that was fitted on that short-lived Musical Fidelity turntable a few years ago. I found the arm to be a bit fiddly for my tastes, and surprisingly less substantial than my reference SME V. That may not be an entirely fair comparison, considering that the V retails for nearly as much as the HD and the M2 combined. But the M2 will remind you more of old 3009s and 3012s

than the newer SME arms. If I could change one thing about the M2, however, it would be the arm clasp, which contains an additional, tiny release lever for your protection. It reminds me of those automobiles where you have to depress the extra button near the ignition to pull your key out. Some people may need this. I don't.

The key feature here is the removable headshell that is identical to the ones used with the current SME 309 arm. Should you have more than one cartridge, this will make it very easy to switch between them.

To Clamp or Not to Clamp, That is the Question

Lused the Thorens TD-160 HD over several months, and with a variety of analog equipment. My reference Koetsu Rosewood Standard cartridge shared duties with the stunningly well-balanced yet affordable Dynavector 17D3. And while I used the Thorens to evaluate three or four phono preamps in the \$1000 range (PS Audio, Dynavector, Lehmann, Sutherland), the HD also had a chance to strut its stuff with the much more expensive Audio Research PH-7. I have to admit that it took me a while to warm up to the Thorens' charms. Out of the box, I felt that the HD offered a truly big and detailed soundstage, but sacrificed a bit of heft at the low end. I suspected that the HD's low-mass construction may have contributed to this lightweight character, but decided to let everything play for a few weeks before making any hasty conclusions.

While staring at the spinning platter on the HD, I felt something else was missing. I finally realized that this was the first time in many years that I was using a high-quality analog rig without a record clamp. I tried using the clamp from my Michell Orbe SE on the HD, but it's intended for use with threaded spindles, so it just plopped loosely on top of the LP. Surprisingly, a bit more deep bass emerged. I then borrowed a SOTA clamp, which has a bit more mass than the Michell clamp and was able to grab onto the Thorens with more authority.

That confirmed some suspicions I had about the AC synchronous motor, which is definitely of the low-torque variety (dragging a dry cleaning brush across an LP actually brought the platter to a complete stop more than once). As it turned out, the use of a really heavy clamp such as the SOTA was too much of a strain on the drive system, affecting the speed. I was surprised that this would occur with the electronic speed control, but it did. Sorry, but I don't think there's an audiophile in the world who would sacrifice speed accuracy, especially when it's so obvious, for that last bit of deep bass.

With such a low mass design, it's no surprise that I found the overall character of the HD to be a little on the lean, exciting side. More than one industry professional has told me that some of the newer Thorens 'table designs

The Thorens prefers a slightly warm cartridge, unless you're a fan of ultra-detailed and forward sound.

are reminiscent of Linn, but the sound of the HD was much more P9 than LP-12. LP after LP, I found the Thorens to add the same bit of excitement and slightly forward presentation that the folks in Southend-on-Sea have been offering for decades. That's far from a bad thing, but once again you have to define your sonic priorities before you lay down this kind of money.

Master of Information Retrieval

With the astonishingly neutral Dynavector 17D3 mounted on the end of the M2, the presentation was a tad too forward on certain recordings, with the sides of the soundstage wrapping around laterally in a slight unrealistic manner. That's more a function of my room than anything else, but I found it curious that I'd never experienced this effect before while using other turntables. Another reservation with this combination was that it was so revealing that I felt that surface noise was accentuated to an uncomfortable degree. The sound of the needle on dead wax was much more audible than I'm used to. Switching back to my Koetsu seemed to remedy most of these annoyances and relegate the soundstage into a more relaxed and natural context. In other words, the Thorens prefers a slightly warm cartridge, unless you're a fan of ultra-detailed and forward sound. (continued)



One respect in which the Thorens absolutely shines is its ability to resolve that last bit of information from the groove and arrange it in an organized and meaningful fashion. If a productive listening session means that you've heard new details in familiar recordings, then the Thorens may be the right 'table for you. On my Sundazed pressing of Wilco's *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*, for example, I heard a few guitar riffs that I'd never noticed before, particularly on "I Am Trying to Break Your Heart." Lesser analog rigs tend to become confused and murky during complex passages. The Thorens, in comparison, is a master logician.

An Up to Date Classic

Now that it's time to pack up the TD-160 HD and send it back to Two Channel Distribution, I have to acknowledge a new and solemn respect for Thorens. I've been following Art Dudley's adventures in restoring and fine-tuning a vintage TD-124 mk. II, and I'm intrigued with his comments about the end result. I've toyed with the idea with restoring a Garrard 301 for many years, but my experience with the HD and my recent with that old TD160 has whetted my appetite for more things Thorens.

I'm sorry I've ignored this legendary company for so long. The Thorens TD-160 HD is a light, compact and easy-to-use premium turntable that doesn't ask too much of its owner. While not quite plug and play, it is startlingly close.

While I prefer the warmer, weightier balance that I get from my Michell Orbe SE, I still believe that the HD is a solid performer in its price class, and will make more than a few Thorens fans giddy with excitement.

Second opinion – Jeff Dorgay

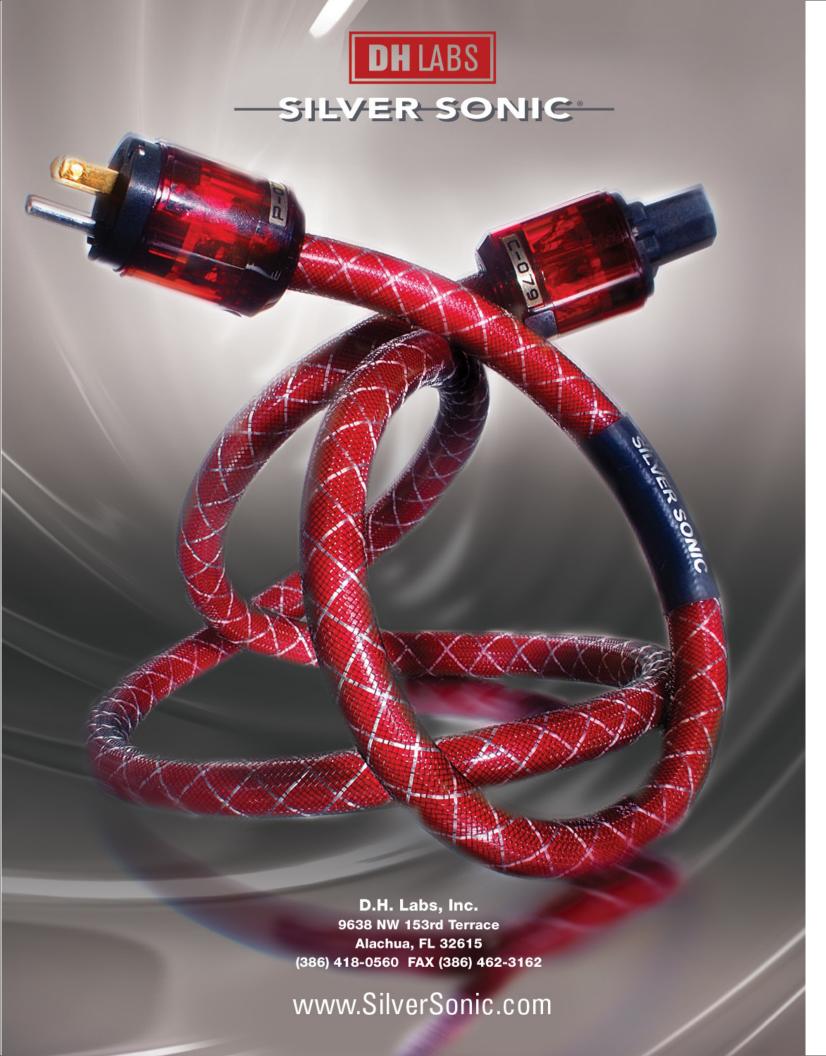
Perusing Marc's copy and looking back at what Michael Fremer had to say about the M2 arm, I was intrigued to try a bit warmer cartridge than the 17D3 and observe the results. I tried a pair of Grados, the \$500 Sonata and the \$2500 Statement. While the Statement was a little overkill for this table, the Sonata was a nice match and I suspect that moving up a notch or two in the Grado line, or perhaps going to the Clearaudio Maestro Wood would be the perfect match.

One really needs to look at their analog setup as a complete system that needs to work together to provide the sound that you are after. Due to its mechanical construction and choice of materials, a turntable and tonearm combination will have a given sound, but this can be fine tuned somewhat by choice of cartridge and phono preamplifier. Where Marc played it straight, staying on the neutral side, I wanted to see how much romance could be injected into this combination.

Quite a lot, actually, so if your system and/or tastes run toward the lush side of musical reproduction, consider a Grado or other cartridge with a known warm tonal balance for the TD160. It's like going from a BMW to a Lexus, still plenty of performance, just a bit comfier ride. The Grado Statement was a particularly good match with the Mod-Wright 9.0SWP providing plenty of dynamics but a little bit more air to the presentation.

If you are looking for a great turntable and would like an alternative to the Regas and VPIs that your buddies have, the TD 160HD is a real contender. If it were me, I'd restore a vintage one to sit next to the new one on my rack, but I'm obsessed! ●





The Thorens TD 160HD MSRP: \$4899 with SME M-2 tonearm \$2899 with RB250 tonearm

US Distribution

2 Channel Distribution 1500 South Ninth Street Salina, KS 67401 785-820-2931 www.2channeldistribution.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source: J.A. Michell Orbe SE w/SME V/Koetsu Rosewood

Cartridges: Dynavector 17D2,

Koetsu Rosewood

Digital Source: Naim CDX2

Preamplifier: Nagra PL-L, Modwright 9.0 SWL SE

Power Amplifier: McIntosh MC275, Nagra PSA

Speakers: DeVore Fidelity Gibbon Super 9s

Interconnects: Audience Conductor, DH Labs Relelation, Cardas Golden Reference

Speaker Cable: Zu Libtec, Wireworld Equinox III +

Power Cords: Shunyata Taipan Helix, Diamondback, Copperhead, Venom

Power Conditioning: Running Springs Jaco



Pocketful Of Miracles

THE DYNAVECTOR P-75 MK. II PHONO PREAMPLIFIER

By Marc Phillips

Many years ago, Microsoft founder Bill Gates said that modern technology would not only keep getting better, but it would keep getting *smaller* as well. We've certainly seen this in Bill's world over the years, with the tiniest of microprocessors now performing the mightiest of tasks. I've seen this phenomenon spread to the audio world as well, with the latest generation of diminutive DACs, loudspeakers and even amplifiers routinely exceeding expectations when it comes to delivering a big, expansive sound.



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It shouldn't be a surprise that a tiny phono preamplifier should follow in these footsteps. Up until a few years ago, phono sections were often perceived as little more than a notch on a selector switch, with the actual circuitry taking up very little space within the preamplifier chassis. With the advent of outboard phono preamplification, however, we've seen the technology move in the opposite direction, with some stages being installed into the same cases that usually house full-function line stages or even power amps. I'm not even going to mention some of the two and three box affairs that have appeared on the market lately.

While it's encouraging to see the highindustry take the idea of a phono stage to such extremes, it's not always necessary.

The Dynavector P-75 mk. II phono preamplifier is tiny. While it may not fit into the pocket of my jeans, it can easily be carried around in a jacket pocket. It weighs next to nothing. Sitting on my equipment rack with all of the other big black boxes, it might be mistaken for a mere power supply (albeit one in an very attractive case). It might seem unrealistic to expect a fully-adjustable phono stage suitable for a wide variety of cartridges in such a little package. not to mention one that sounds good enough to be used with a high-quality MC. The P-75, however, delivers. (continued)

Tiny and Flexible...It's the Mary Lou Retton of Phono Stages!

That flexibility is what differentiates this incarnation of the Dynavector from the original P-75. More gain and loading options have been included, so that the new phono stage could be used with most, if not all MMs, MIs and MCs. Dynavector has also improved their patented Phono Enhancer circuitry to aid with this compatibility. While making adjustments still requires the opening of the case, the jumpers are a little more easier to

I used the P-75 with three different analog rigs. Starting off with my reference J.A. Michell Orbe SE/SME V/Koetsu Rosewood setup, I also used the Dynavector with the Technics SL-1200/Ortofon 2M Blue combo in my second system. My last days with the P-75 were with the new Thorens TD-160 HD, paired with Dynavector's own 17D3 cartridge. The P-75 performed flawlessly in all of these applications.

manage than before.

My first impression of the P-75 was of a completely organic presentation. I've seen a lot of frustration on the part of novice audiophiles and objectivists when it comes to using this word, so I'll explain by noting that many inexpensive phono stages tend to gloss over the sound, making the music sound slightly sanitized and sterile (sort of like early digital). Sure, the detail is there, but it's unaccompanied by the human aspect of music-making, namely the breathing and the movement of the musicians. An *organic* sound is one that comes complete with the feel that you're not only listening to music, but that you're listening to other human beings create that music for your enjoyment.

For example, while listening to Anja Garbarek's absolutely stunning new LP, *Smiling and Waving*, it was easy to tell the difference between the artifice

(sampling, synthesizers) with the stark and natural elements (piano. horns and her delicate, sultry voice). The positioning of her body within that slightly alien context was more exact and distinct. A lesser phono stage would have blended those elements together. In my Three Blind Mice pressing of Tsuyoshi Yamamoto's Midnight Sugar, those glorious, utterly believable upper registers of the piano were preserved perfectly, with the right balance of movement and decay. The P-75 was by far the least expensive phono stage I've used that completely dispelled the haze and gloss and let the music come through unscathed.

The only real shortcoming in the Dynavector's presentation occurred in the area of deep bass. I've heard some engineers claim that the reason for a robust and substantial chassis is to produce that last measure of heft and weight, so that may be the case here (no pun intended). (continued)

My first impression of the P-75 was of a completely organic presentation.



I've been using the Devore Fidelity Gibbon Nine loudspeakers in my main system for the last couple of months, and I've been enjoying deep, expansive and tuneful bass with nearly every component I've placed into the chain. The Dyna did provide a lighter balance than I've been accustomed to, which could rob some music of some of its impact. On my Parlophone UK stereo pressing of *Sgt. Pepper*, for example, Paul's bass always stands out in clear contrast with the rest of the mix, making it easy to follow every note. With the P-75, his bass retreated further into the mix and was less intriguing.

Let's Get Small...

If you're using a pair of bookshelf speakers that don't venture below 45 or 50 Hz, however, you may not even notice these limitations. In fact, the P-75 may be a godsend for more modest systems where a \$700 phono stage may represent a significant investment. The P-75 may be that last piece of the sonic puzzle if you're looking to get the most out of your Rega P3-24 (especially if you're one of the many who are already using a Dynavector 10X5 cartridge with it). If you've hooked everything up to an outstanding pair of British monitors from the

likes of ProAc, Harbeth or Spendor, the P-75 may be all the phono preamp you'll ever want.

I can easily imagine a number of high-manufacturers taking the guts from the P-75 and placing it in a huge case and charging \$1500 or \$2000...and getting it. Kudos to Dynavector for keeping it real. Real small.

Second Opinion – Jeff Dorgay

I was also very impressed with the performance of this tiny phono stage, though my paws had a bit of trouble with those jumpers, but you can't have everything for \$750! One thing worth noting though, is that the P-75 mk. Il is NOT supplied with a 12VDC power supply. I gave Marc a beefier than average wall wart to go along with this preamp, but I tried it with a custom 12 volt supply that I happened to have on the bench and it did offer up more in the lower registers.

So, for those of you that are a bit more inclined to the DIY side of the fence, I'll just bet that you might be able to build a very good outboard supply for the P-75 and have a pretty amazing phono stage for well under a thousand dollars.

Kudos to Dynavector for keeping it real. Real small. "Clearly one of the top phono preamplifiers..." Helmut Rohrwild HiFi & Records

"Spot-on tonality..." Jeff Dorgay **TONE**Audio

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MANUFACTURER

Dynavector Systems, Ltd.

www.dvnavector.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source: J.A. Michell Orbe SE w/SME V/ Koetsu Rosewood, Technics SL-1200 w/Ortofon Blue Thorens TD-160 w/SME M-2 tonearm

Digital Source: Naim CDX2 Preamplifier: Nagra PL-L **Power Amplifier:** McIntosh MC275, Nagra PSA, Conrad Johnson FT250

Speakers: DeVore Fidelity Gibbon Super 8s, Zu Druids

Interconnects: Audience Conductor, DH Labs Relelation. Cardas Golden Reference

Speaker Cable: Zu Libtec, Wireworld Equinox III +

Power Cords: Shunyata Taipan Helix, Diamondback, Copperhead, Venom

Power Conditioning: Running Springs Jaco





The Nova is a belt driven table that has a four-point suspension and a 14 pound balanced platter.

The Nova weighs in at 44 pounds and has a retail price of \$3800 without tonearm. My test sample came with armboards for SME and Rega tonearms and I spent a fair amount of time with both. The Nova utilizes SOTA's vacuum platter mechanism and requires an external power supply and vacuum pump, which is supplied with the table. So this is a hefty package to say the least. The Nova is a belt driven table that has a four-point suspension and a 14 pound balanced platter.

Somewhat Cryptic Setup

Though SOTA tables are no worse to setup than any of the other high end tables, the instruction manual is a bit tough to understand if you have never used one before and there are *no* pictures. I tend to go on like a broken record about this, but I wish turntable manufacturers would offer a manual with decent pictures for the assembly as a PDF, so I could at least download it and see what the heck I'm doing rather than damage something.

Once you unpack the table and mount a tonearm to the arm board, you add the supplied

lead shot to balance the chassis. This too is a bit cumbersome, but works surprisingly well once complete. The last step is to screw the armboard down with three hex keys and attach the clear vacuum line to the pump. Now is also a good time to touch up final balance with the threaded feet underneath the base. Finish up the final adjustments with your tonearm/cartridge and let's play some records!

Worth the Wait

I had a SOTA many years ago and my only complaint was that the vacuum pump was a bit noisy. SOTA thoughtfully supplies you with a long enough power cord and vacuum line that you could put the pump elsewhere if it was convenient. The good news is that this new pump is extremely quiet. I never felt that I had to move it out of the room.

Once you clamp your record down with the SOTA clamp and turn the table on, it takes a couple of seconds for the vacuum to reach its level of 3 Hg. If you look closely at the record, you can see it flatten out as the platter sucks it down. *(continued)*



Though the Continuum Criterion uses a bit more sophisticated system, the SOTA's worked equally well. One of the big differences between the SOTA and the Continuum is the mat surface. On the Continuum, it was very hard, and the SOTA has a softer, fabric covered platter.

I still highly suggest having your records as clean as possible before putting them down on a vacuum platter, but I do not think this mat has the potential danger that the Continuum presents to unclean records.

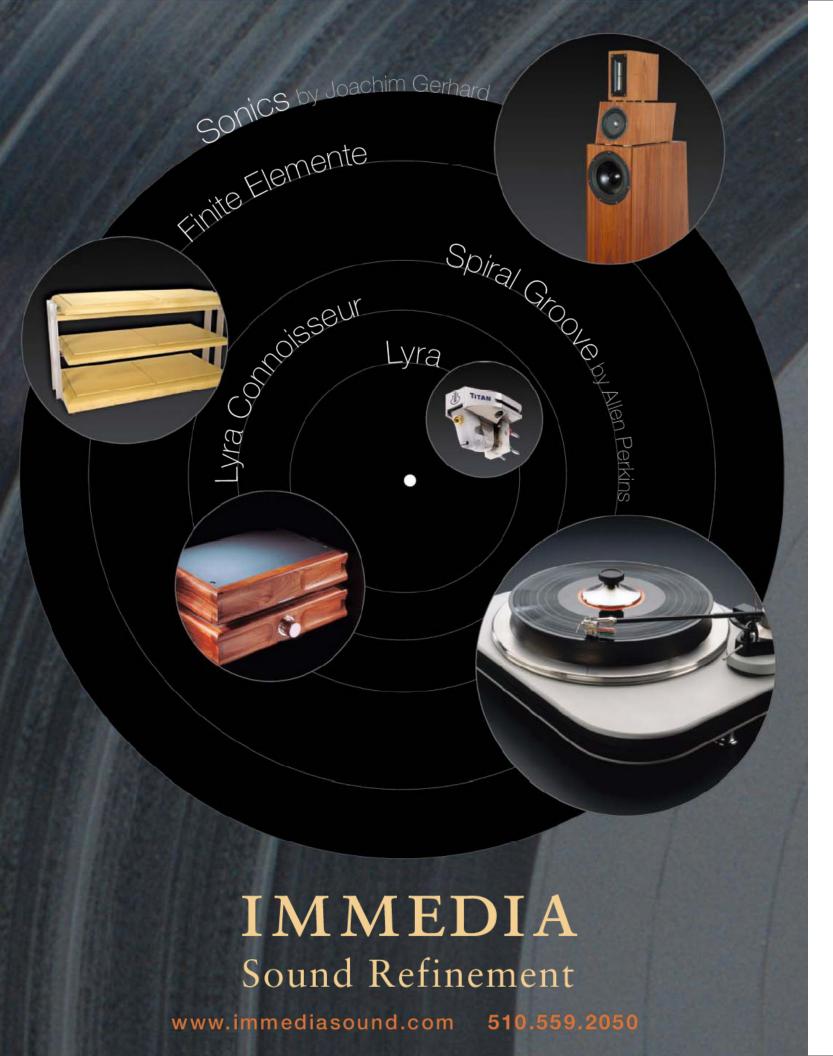
Having had the chance to compare suspended vacuum tables to suspended non-vacuum, there is a definite difference.

The vacuum really couples the record to the platter and is quite good at minimizing the effects of a gently warped record, so you do not get the tiny speed variations that occur as the record travels up and down the warp.

On the top panel, you can see the speed controls for 33 and 45 rpm. I had initially used the large strobe disc that came with my SME turntable, but double checked speed accuracy with my mulitimeter and the Acoustic Sounds Test Record. Where I had nailed the speed on the Raven Two, I was a bit off on the SOTA, so a quick adjustment and I was back in business. If everyone is playing vinyl at exactly 33 and a 1/3, we can compare apples to apples. (At least in that department anyway!)

Though the photos you see here depict the table with the Rega RB1000 arm and the Zu Denon 103 MC cartridge, most of my testing was done with the SME 309 arm and the Dynavector 17D3 cartridge. My reasons for this combination were twofold: I felt this arm and cartridge would make good sense financially for someone considering this table and it made things very easy to switch the 17D3 between the 309 arm on my Oracle Delphi V and SME10 so that I could really get a feel for just the turntable, thanks to the removable headshell. Again, the Acoustic Sounds test record and protractor were invaluable, because I was able to adjust for the same settings and minimize cartridge setup variations between all three tables. While I tried a few other things along the way, the majority of this test session was with the ModWright 9.0 SWP SE phono preamplifier. (continued)

continuea)



It Don't Mean A Thing If It Ain't Got Those Springs

All three tables were placed on Finite Elemente Pagode Signature racks; so a little bit of vibration control was on tap to begin with. There is a definite textural difference between the suspended tables (SOTA, LP-12, AVID, Oracle, Continuum, etc.) and non-suspended tables like the REGA or the Raven.

As you might guess, the suspended tables overall have a bit bigger sound with a little more heft in the bass, with the non suspended tables having a bit quicker sound to them. Thanks to modern materials and good engineering, both camps do a very good job, but it does come down to what flavor you prefer.

Interestingly enough, where you can really tell the difference immediately is listening to some clicks and pops on a less than pristine record.

The SOTA softens the leading edge just the slightest bit, but in the case of about 90% of the records I've heard, this is not detrimental to the resulting playback. This is also where you can fine-tune the rest of your analog playback chain to get the exact sound you want. The Dynavector 17D3, with its relatively neutral tonal balance and quick transient attack was a perfect match for the SOTA/SME combination. My Grado Statement was a bit too warm overall for my taste, but the combination was super lush and liquid, kind of like a super Dynaco Stereo 70! The Grado and my Zu Denon 103 (also a bit on the warm side) were much better suited to the Rega RB1000 arm. (continued)



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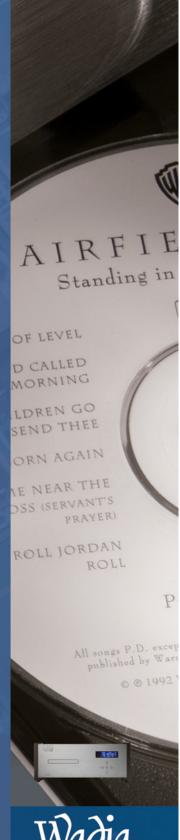
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To confirm the effect of the vacuum pump, I disconnected it a few times to see its effect on the music. With no vacuum, the soundstage always got a bit more diffuse and some of the ultimate weight of the presentation went away.

The vacuum is definitely a worthwhile upgrade from the lower models that do not have it.

Next up, a little Bowie. Pinups and Aladdin Sane just to hear some Mick Ronson guitar. *Pinups* is a pretty lousy pressing on RCA, but it again shows off the SOTA's ability to minimize listener fatigue, while still producing a very BIG sound. It was very easy to pick out all of Bowie's vocal overdubs on "Everything's Alright", so it was time to move on to a bit of jazz and classical music to reference some acoustic instruments. Check and check.

I like to listen to the title track of Michael Hedges' Aerial Boundaries for the explosive acoustic guitar playing. His steel stringed guitar is extremely well recorded on Windham Hill and it is a great way to see just how dynamic your system can be. This guitar track has a lot of attack, but also a lot of sustain and decay between the notes. Again, I would like to stress the naturalness of the SOTA here. The tonality was excellent and I must say that the table does embellish just a bit, but in a very musical, three-dimensional kind of way. (continued)

In The End, A Very Musical Table

No matter what I played with the SOTA, I found it very enjoyable. Yes, I could switch back to the Raven or the Continuum and hear further into the record, but what the SOTA has in spades is balance. It doesn't do any one thing phenomenally well, but it does everything equally well.

The toughest thing to quantify about any turntable is it's innate tonality. Remember 25 years ago everyone was claiming they all sounded the same! The SOTA is biased just a bit towards the lush side of the equation, but if you match it up with the right arm and cartridge, you can come very close to having your cake and eating it too.

Twenty years ago, the SOTA tables were at the top of the price heap. They haven't raised their prices much over the years, yet have continue to make subtle improvements as the years go by. Today, \$3800 is not that much money to spend for a turntable, making the SOTA an exceptional value. It combines a classic look with fantastic performance and that never goes out of style. ●



The SOTA Nova turntable MSRP: \$3800

MANUFACTURER

Sota Sales & Service

10830 S. Nagle Avenue P.O. Box 247 Worth, Illinois 60482 608-538-3500 www.sotaturntables.com

PERIPHERALS

Preamplifier: Conrad -Johnson ACT2/ Series 2

Phono Preamplifiers: Nagra VPS, ASR Basis Exclusive, Rega IOS, ModWright 9.0SWP SE, Audio Research PH7

Turntables: TK Acustic Raven Two w/ SME IV.Vi arm and Rega RB1000 arm, Rega P9 w/RB1000 arm, SOTA Nova w/ SME 309 arm, Continuum Criterion w/ Copperhead arm

Additional Cartridges: Grado Statement, Lyra Skala, Zu Denon 103, Sumiko Blackbird, Dynavector 17D3

Power Amplifier: Conrad-Johnson Premier 350

Speakers: MartinLogan Summit with Descent i subwoofer

Interconnects: Cardas Golden Reference, Shunyata Antares, AudioQuest Sub 3 (to subwoofer)

Speaker Cables: Shunyata Orion

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

Power Conditioning: Running Springs Dimitri and Jaco

Vibration Control: Finite Elemente Cerapucs and Ceraballs, Pagode Signature Racks (3) and amplifier stand

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



AWOrthy Successor

THE SHELTER 9000 By Jeff Dorgay

Shelter is no stranger to the audiophile world, with their 501 and 90x cartridges winning their fair share of awards along the way. I've owned both and the 501 is one of my favorites to suggest to friends on a budget that still want a big taste of analog with perhaps a touch of romance thrown in.



Moving up the Shelter line, the 901 has always been the red headed stepchild, having more detail albeit at the cost of that wonderful midrange magic that the 501 has. The 90x was the winner if you had a larger budget, possessing a glorious midrange with plenty of detail and extension without sacrificing any musicality.

So I was very curious to sample the 9000 to see what Shelter's next move would be.

Here's the short version of the review, if you liked the 90x I suspect you will love the 9000, I know I do.

With not much of a price increase from the 90x, the 9000 will set you back an even \$3000, where the 90x was about \$2800. While we are on the subject, should you have a 90x that is in need of replacement, Shelter is offering a replacement program for 90x owners. If you trade in your 90x on a new 9000, the cost is only \$2100, saving you 30% on a new cartridge.

Setup

Though the 9000 spent a little bit of time on my budget Rega P3-24 just to get some hours on the clock, it was definitely overkill for this table. It made a nice match with the Continuum, but finally made it's way back to my Raven Two, this time with the Rega RB1000 arm.

The 9000 weighs about 11 grams, so it should work well with most counterweights. I was able to use the stock Rega weight, but it had to be moved all the way back to the end of the arm stub. (continued)

Once the necessary parameters were dialed in, and final adjustments made by instrument and ears, I got down to work. This one is fairly easy to work with, having an output of .6mv and a suggested loading of 100 ohms, which turned out to be the most neutral sound in my system. Tracking force is listed as a range of 1.4 to 2.0 grams and I found the most musical results at 1.9 grams in the Rega arm.

When testing the channel balance, it was again well within the specified .8db per channel claim, with the left channel measuring .428mv and the right .431mv out of the Nagra VPS with a 1khz test tone.

The Sound

While I had good luck with the SME 309 arm as well, the 9000 just seemed to be a bit more alive in the midrange area and posess a touch more air in the upper registers with

the Rega arm, both on the Raven and also on the Rega P9. With the body top to tip only measuring 16mm, I was able to get by with a 2mm spacer when I used it on the P9 Table.

A touch grainier and more closed in than my reference Dynavector XV-1s, the 9000 is still an excellent performer at its price point. One thing that really impressed me with this cartridge was it's extremely quiet background, a trait that the 90x also possessed.

I was especially curious to see if the 9000 would gain resolution but lose some of that analog magic I came to love with the 90x? The answer is a resounding no! This cartridge is an improvement in every way over the 90x that it replaces with no drawbacks. It's even finished in a much cooler color, a nice shade of platinum silver.

But seriously, as much as I loved my 90x, it still had a touch of that bass bloat that made the 501 so romantic. The 9000 exhibits none of this behavior and is all the better for it. While some of you might prefer that little bump, mistaking it for actual bass response, if you play your favorite records that showcase the lower registers, you will notice as much extension as before, but with a lot more control and texture. The lower frequencies possess more attack as well as the ability to stop without overshoot and the accompanying blurriness.

The tonal balance was very good and the overall

presentation was just a slight bit on the forward side. To me, the Koetsu RSP is about row 15, the Dynavector XV-1s is about row 10 and the Shelter, row 4 or 5, though not at the expense of being harsh. This is a very live sounding cartridge and I mean that in a good way. In my system, the perfect balance came with my spare RB1000 arm on the Oracle Delphi V. The suspended table matched with the slightly lively 9000 was very enjoyable.

I experienced the same refinement with the upper registers. Where the 90x was nowhere near as etched as the 901, there was still a bit of harshness when compared to the big boys. As I mentioned earlier, the 9000 still lacks that last bit of refinement that you do get with the XV-1s, a Koetsu RSP or the new AirTight cartridge, but if your budget stops at \$3000, you could live happily ever after here.

While we are on the topic of budget, the 9000 makes a great choice for those of you with tables in the \$3-5000 range. Add your favorite \$2-3000 phono stage, wave ten grand in cash under your favorite retailers nose and you might be able to walk out the door with a complete package that gives you a very big helping of what the megabuck turntable guys enjoy at a much more reasonable price indeed.

A Worthy Successor

One thing that

really impressed me

with this cartridge

was it's extremely

quiet background, a

trait that the 90x also

possessed.

The Shelter 9000 passes muster quite well indeed. Tonally, it is very neutral and has a big helping of what the cost no object phono cartridges offer for a not too crazy price. (though many may argue that \$3000 for a phono cartridge is still insanity)

If you've been a Shelter fan for years and want to trade up, the 9000 will make you feel right at home in a way that trading up to a slightly newer model of Porsche or BMW would. Everything is similar to the old model, but the refinements make themselves noticed after a very short test drive. If you are new to the Shelter way of doing things, I would suggest this cartridge to anyone with a system that is anywhere from laid back to slightly past neutral, but not for a somewhat forward sounding system. In this case the 9000 might be a bit too much. But if you feel that your system fits this bill, the Shelter 9000 might be your new best friend. Highly recommended. \bullet

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MANUFACTURER

Distributed by Axiss Audio 17800 South Main Street, Suite 109 Gardena, CA 90248 310-329-0187

www.axissaudio.com

PERIPHERALS

Preamplifier: Conrad-Johnson ACT2/Series 2

Phono Preamplifiers: Nagra VPS, ASR Basis Exclusive, Rega IOS, ModWright 9.0SWP SE, Audio Research PH7

Turntables: TK Acustic Raven Two w/SME IV.Vi arm and Rega RB1000 arm, Rega P9 w/RB1000 arm, Oracle Delphi V w/RB1000 arm, Continuum Criterion w/ Copperhead arm

Power Amplifier: Conrad-Johnson Premier 350

Speakers: MartinLogan Summit with Descent i subwoofer

Interconnects: Cardas Golden Reference, Shunyata Antares, AudioQuest Sub 3 (to subwoofer)

Speaker Cables: Shunyata Orion

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

Power Conditioning: Running Springs Dimitri and Jaco

Vibration Control: Finite Elemente Cerapucs and Ceraballs, Pagode Signature Racks (3) and amplifier stand

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

A Whack on the Side of the Head



The Harbeth Compact 7ES-3

By Jeff Dorgay

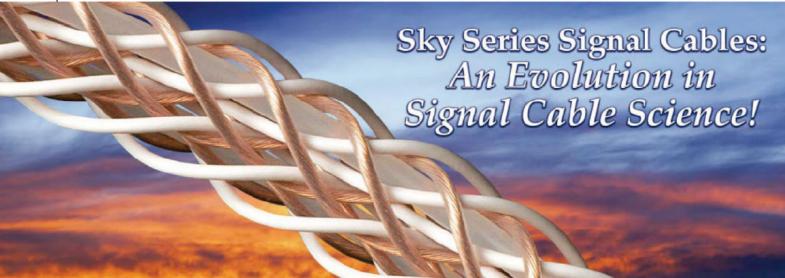
Sometime back in the early 80's I read a book by Roger Van Oech titled "A Whack on the Side of the Head". It dealt with creative solutions to problems that one might not have considered without being taken outside of their comfort zone. The new Harbeth Compact 7ES-3 is the perfect example of this. This was not the speaker I expected to redefine what I thought a modestly priced speaker would be capable of, but after a few months of listening I continue to be amazed with them.

The first whack on the side of the head came when visiting Acoustic Sounds last October covering the Blues Masters concerts. Listening to the Avalon Sentinels in their main sound room was my top priority, but what I heard in the second room was just as amazing considering the price. No, you can't have the sound of a pair of Avalon Sentinels for 3,500 bucks, but what you can get a very substantial helping of musical enjoyment in these small boxes at a price that should be accessible to most music lovers.



NEW PRODUCT





A PATENTED BREAKTHROUGH IN SIGNAL GEOMETRY!

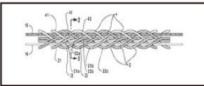
The new *Sky Series Signal Cables* utilize *Shunyata Research's* extremely complex, hand wound *Helix Geometry* braid; granted a patent for its ability to minimize the effects of electromagnetic interference, reactance and self-induced distortion. The dual helix, longitudinally offset, counter-rotating geometry eliminates the self-induced distortions that plague other cable designs.

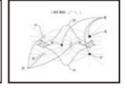
All signal cables have a characteristic resistance and reactance (capacitive and inductive), which is essentially a simple type of filter. Resistance is a linear function and simply reduces signal level while reactance is much more destructive to signal integrity in that it is frequency dependent. It skews amplitude and phase as frequency increases.

Conventional cable geometries dictate that a cable must be either capacitive or inductive, if one is reduced the other increases and vice-versa. By all accounts, the ideal cable would have virtually zero resistance, zero inductance and zero capacitance — which of course is impossible to achieve, but it should be the design goal. No cable should be designed to be either capacitive or inductive.

Shunyata Research's patented Helix Geometry solves the cable reactance problem. Wide conductor spacing and 90-degree crossing angles, minimize capacitance. Counter-rotating helices that are longitudinally offset create disparate EFF (electromagnetic flux fields) that minimize inductive reactance! Only the Helix Geometry achieves both low capacitive reactance AND low inductive reactance.

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All New From Top To Bottom

First, forget any kind of built in predudice you might have about "The British Sound" just producing good midrange and forgetting the extremes. None of that applies to the new Compact Seven. That's not to say they aren't musical, but they are open and dynamic in a way that haven't quite heard from the likes of Spendor, ProAc or any of my other favorite British speakers, even the Compact seven version II for that matter. The great news is that Harbeth has not sacrificed any midrange magic or tonality, they just added a huge helping of resolution!

Though version three looks the same as version two, it is a completely new speaker from the drivers to the crossover components.

The woofer features Harbeth's new Radial 2 technology, used on the more expensive Monitor 30 and 40 along with a new tweeter. We could write pages about all the techie stuff, but suffice to say it works tremendously well. A quick trip to the Harbeth site (www.harbeth.com) will answer all of your in-depth technical questions.

Incredibly Un-fussy

I was advised by Alan Shaw himself, the designer of the Compact 7 to forget about my 24" Sound Anchor stands and get some 19" ones to replace them. "They couple to the floor and provide much better bass" he told me. My stubbornness got the best of me and I tried the 24's anyway – sure enough, the magic disappeared. Most of the sound was going over my head and they sounded dry and lifeless. (continued)

So, should you choose to ignore Mr. Shaw and me, you were warned; 19 inch stands are the way to go.

The Compact 7's here for review came finished in eucalyptus and retail for \$3900 a pair. You can get a pair in cherry for \$3750 if you are more budget minded. The Sound Anchor four post stands will set you back about another \$624 but they are essential to getting the most the Compact 7's have to offer. Don't wuss out with three post stands, get the four post model.

After a few hours of checking alternate locations, the Compact 7's ended up sounding the best in my 16 x 24 foot listening room on the long wall, about two inches from where I have my reference MartinLogan Summits. They are exactly eight feet apart with the tweeters 3'10" from the rear wall with about 10 degrees of toe-in. Both speakers are about 8 feet from the rear wall and the listening position is 8'08" from the tweeters. Aren't digital measuring tools awesome?

For the novice audiophiles in the audience, these are incredibly easy speakers to set up. While a little bit of futzing will help the ultimate imaging performance of the Compact 7's, if you just get a massive set of 19" stands, you are 80% of the way there. A bit of time with the tape measure and a little bit of room treatment will give you the last bit of performance they are capable of, but in short, these are not fussy speakers in the least.

I used a pair of Shunyata Orion speaker cables in my reference system, (which actually are worth more than the speakers!) but also had excellent luck with my favorite reasonably priced speaker cable the ED 415. These are about \$450 a pair and are also a fantastic match for the Compact 7. I tried a few things from Cardas, DH Labs and Tara with good luck, again revealing the un-fussy character of my test subjects.

If you are a new reader, you need to be brought up to speed a bit. My reference speakers are MartinLogan Summits, so I'm a panel guy through and through. I like that "walk through" sound that can often be a bit larger than life, so you know my bias going in. Most box speakers drag me in the door with dynamics, but leave me pretty cold in the tonality department and rarely play big enough to hold my interest. (continued)

For the novice audiophiles in the audience, these are incredibly easy speakers to set up.





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Tonemasters To Be Sure

Let's get down to business, shall we? The Harbeth Compact 7ES-3 is one of the most enjoyable speakers I've heard in the last few years, regardless of price. I know these are pretty big words, but I've taken forever to write this review, because I just have so much fun listening to them, that I always put my laptop down and got ten more records out!

What the Compact 7ES-3 offers that I value above all else is balance.

They only have strong bass down to about 45hz, (according to Harbeth, they have a measured frequency response of 45-20khz with the grilles on) but what's there is solid, accurate and full of detail. The midrange is also very correct; when you listen to a piano, it sounds like a piano. I can listen to someone play a Steinway on the Harbeths, go in the house and plunk around on my wife's Steinway and hear a very accurate resemblance. Interestingly enough, I didn't notice a huge difference with the grilles off, so once the pictures were taken, I put them back on.

In a small to medium sized room they will move a sufficient amount of air that you are getting a good feel of dynamics. This is a very important aspect of musical reproduction that is often overlooked. Push them too hard and they flatten out instantly. The threshold from playing fairly loud to compressing is very immediate; you will know when you've hit the wall. Fortunately, that wall is at a high enough sound pressure level that all but the most crazed rock and rollers will be more than happy. (continued)

TONEA 136 NO.16 2008

The Compact 7's also do a fantastic job at having an airy presentation with just the right amount of decay that again, gives that feeling of acoustic instruments sounding correct. Drop your favorite acoustic guitar record on the turntable and you will see what I mean. The image presented by the Harbeths doesn't extend all the way to the side walls eight feet away like my panels, but with good recordings it does extend well beyond the speaker boundaries.

Nothing Sounds Overdone

That's the secret of the Compact 7. No, they won't offer up the dynamic contrast of a Wilson floorstander and they aren't as *big* sounding as my MartinLogans, but they are so enjoyable and musically correct, I dare you to find a speaker in this price range that is more musically accurate and balanced. You might find a speaker that has more bass, or plays a bit louder, but you will be hard pressed to find one that has a decent helping of these characteristics mixed in with the phenomenal tonality that the Harbeths do.

After spending a fair amount of time in my reference system, I tried a number of different amplifiers to see if there were other synergies that made good sense. Should you want a bit of that older British sound, look no further than your favorite valve amplifier. Substituting the McIntosh MC275 for my solid state Premier 350 rounded the corners off of the transients a bit, but was very lush and romantic. The Naim Supernait was another fantastic match, with plenty of power on tap, but a little more of a neutral sound.

My personal nirvana with the Compact 7's ended up being the Luxman L590A-II that was reviewed last issue. Though only 30 watts per channel (Class-A), the Luxman had the perfect balance of tone and control, with just a few drops of warmth thrown in. Bottom line; these are very easy speakers to drive as well as set up. Unless you have incredibly dry sounding gear, I can't imagine the Harbeths not working in your system. They were also a fantastic match for my ACT2 and Premier 350, but I doubt that the average owner is going to mate almost 30 thousand dollars worth of amplifier and preamplifier up with \$3900 speakers. They would probably go for the Harbeth Monitor 40's. (continued)



I dare you to find a speaker in this price range that is more musically accurate and balanced.

The Compact 7ES-3 does a phenomenal job at just disappearing in the room and letting you concentrate on the music.

It is worth noting though, that the speakers were up to the task and revealed significantly more detail than they did with lesser electronics, always the sign of good design.

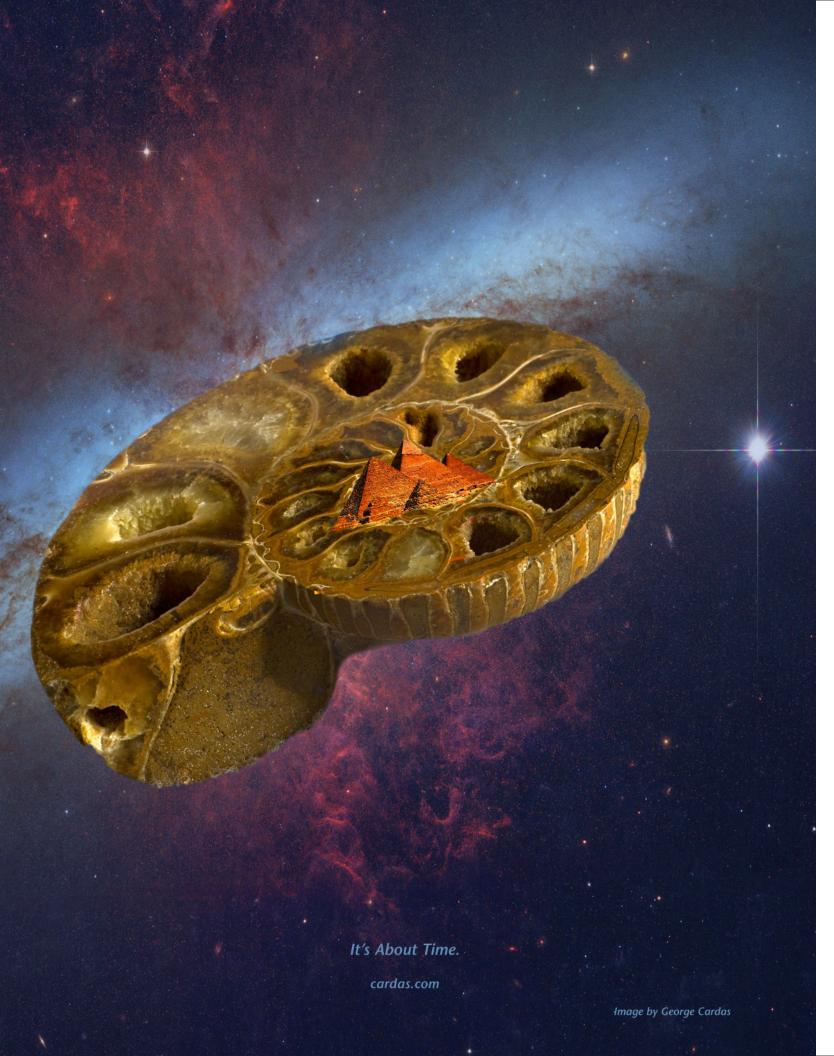
The Compact 7ES-3 is rated to have a 6 ohm impedance and has a very well designed crossover in the sense that it is equally at home with tube or solid state electronics. It is not an easy feat to get a good speaker to work well with both sides of the fence, but again these are brilliant.

Using the Luxman's built in phono stage with the Rega P9 and the new Lyra Skala cartridge was an analog lover's dream. Listening to the MoFi pressing of Santana Abraxas, the wind chimes on the opening track just float above and around the speakers in a way that makes you suspect there are a pair of surround speakers hidden somewhere.

Vocals are great too, no matter what your fancy, with voices emerging up and out of the soundfield created. The Compact 7ES-3 does a phenomenal job at just disappearing in the room and letting you concentrate on the music. I really had to push myself to actually analyze these speakers, they offered up such a great musical experience, I just wanted to relax and take it in.

You Can Hear For Miles

The Harbeth Compact 7ES-3 is a speaker without fault. It does everything that I would ever want a speaker in this price range to do; play music extremely faithfully without coloration or fatigue. Granted, you will have to spend a lot more money to get that last bit of bass extension or concert hall dynamics, but these speakers are faithful to the music in a way that is very rare these days. They have certainly changed my thinking! ●



The Harbeth Compact 7ES-3

MSRP: \$3900 in eucalyptus, \$3750 in cherry

MANUFACTURER

Harbeth Audio LTD.

West Sussex, England www.harbeth.co.uk

US Distributor

Fidelis AV

14 East Broadway Derry, NH 03038 603-437-4769 www.fidelisav.com

PERIPHERALS

Preamplifier: Conrad-Johnson ACT2/Series 2

Phono Preamplifiers: Nagra VPS, ASR Basis Exclusive, Rega IOS, ModWright 9.0SWP SE, Audio Research PH7

Analog Sources: Continuum Criterion w/Copperhead arm and Dynavector XV-1s, Rega P9 w/ RB1000 arm and Dynavector XV-1s

Digital Sources: Naim CD555, Meridian 808

Power Amplifier: Conrad-Johnson Premier 350, Classe CA-2100, McIntosh MC275, RedWine Audio 30.2 signature

Interconnects: Cardas Golden Reference, Shunyata Antares, AudioQuest Sub 3 (to subwoofer)

Speaker Cables: Shunyata Orion

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

Power Conditioning: Running Springs Dimitri and Jaco

Vibration Control: Finite Elemente Cerapucs and Ceraballs, Pagode Signature Racks (3) and amplifier stand

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

A Serious Threat To Your Favorite Moving Coil

THE GRADO STATEMENT

By Jeff Dorgay

Building cartridges, especially at the upper ends of the range, is a work of art. Usually, taking a turn past the \$1000 price point means that you are looking at a moving coil cartridge with few exceptions.

The Grado Statement is a great exception to that philosophy. Neither moving coil nor moving magnet, the Statement is a moving iron cartridge, which differs slightly from the moving magnet designs. The Statement is the top of the line Grado cartridge and has an MSRP of \$2500. Judging from its appearance, it has the same wood body look, but inside it's a different story. If you peruse the Grado website, you can see from their technical information that the moving iron design is somewhat of a hybrid design, somewhere between the way a moving coil and a moving magnet cartridge work. (continued)

May The Force Be With You

The good news is that you only need a 47k phono input, however because the output of the Statement is only .75mv, you still need a phono preamplifier with a fair amount of gain. I did not have any problems with the phono section in my Luxman 509A II or the Nagra VPS phono stage in my reference system. The suggested tracking force is 1.5 grams and I ended up at 1.65g to get the biggest soundstage. As with any cartridge, I always suggest starting in the middle of the range and making some subtle adjustments up and down the tracking force scale to find that optimum balance point.

While I had a lot of fun with the Statement on a number of tables from my Technics SL-1200 all the way up to the Continuum Caliburn, it has come to rest on the second arm of my Raven TK-2; a Rega RB1000. This has proven to be a very good match in terms of tracking and ease of use. Interestingly enough, when setting up the cartridge I had initially followed the instructions and aligned the stylus for a 220mm distance from pivot to stylus tip, however, this resulted in a touch of mistracking in the innermost grooves of some records. Futzing with this distance in both directions yielded better results and 218.5mm ended up being the shizzle, eliminating the inner groove mistracking with no audible effect on the outer tracks.

Grado cartridges have sometimes had somewhat of a bad rap in this department and I suspect that part of this might just be not paying close attention to alignment. The more time I spend with top shelf analog, it keeps coming back to two things: attention to detail with cartridge setup and system synergy. I tried the Grado with a number of different phono stages and had good results with quite a few, but the magic combination with this cartridge was truly the new Audio Research PH-7. (continued)





My initial take on the PH-7 is that it is very accurate tonally, and while it has tubes under the hood, does not seem to embellish one way or the other. The match of this and the slightly warm Grado was a combination that I enjoyed tremendously, so those of you PH7 owners in the audience take note: put the Statement on your short list of cartridges to audition.

No Mistaking This Baby For Digital

The Statement is definitely on the warm side of the fence, but is not as lush as some of the lower priced Grados, that can definitely round some of the edges off the music. Not that this is a bad thing with a lot of records from our day and especially the 70s.

The Statement does such a nice job with low level detail that you might even forgo the moving coil experience altogether, depending on what your hifi preferences are.

Where it loses its way a bit is on large-scale orchestral music, that is flawlessly recorded. When I listened to the Shostakovich box set of film music on Classic Records the ultimate dynamics were a bit muffled compared to my reference Dyavector XV-1s. However when listening to some old DG classical records that have a tonal balance tipped a bit to the harsh side in the upper registers, trading a bit of dynamics for smoothness was a trade I was happy to make. (continued)



Same thing with so many overly compressed or somewhat harsh rock records from the 70s; (i.e. just about anything on Columbia or RCA) the Statement brought out the best of a lot of records that I had kept on the back burner, because some of my favorite moving coil cartridges were a bit too revealing.

But Is It For You?

Much like speakers, I always see phono cartridges as an expression of their designer's interpretation of how music should sound to them. Do you want John Grado's interpretation, or someone else's, that is the question? In a perfect world, one might have more than one turntable and tonearm to get the best out of different recordings and I highly suggest this philosophy. Should you have a spare tonearm with a space to fill, I'd put the Statement at the top of your list.

If the Statement is going to be your only cartridge, it will depend on your musical taste. If you like your vinyl served up with a touch of romance I think you will really love the Statement. ●

The Grado Statement MSRP: \$2500

MANUFACTURER

Grado Labs4614 Seventh Avenue
Brooklyn, NY 11220
718-435-5340
www.gradolabs.com

PERIPHERALS

Preamplifier:

Contrad-Johnson ACT2/Series 2

Phono Preamplifiers:

Nagra VPS, ARC PH7, ModWright 9.0SWP, JLTi phono, Conrad-Johnson TEA-1

Power Amplifier:

Conrad-Johnson Premier 350

Digital Source: Naim CD555

Speakers: MartinLogan Summit with Descent i Subwoofer

Interconnects: Shunyata Anteres, Cardas Golden Reference. Audioquest Sub 3 (to subwoofer)

Speaker Cable: Shunyata Orion

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Vibration Control: Finite Elemente Pagode Signature racks and amp stand, Finite Cerapucks and Ceraballs

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

The TW-Acustic Raven Two

A Must for the Analog Aficionado!

By Jeff Dorgay

nless you are one of those fringe audiophiles with a very small collection of brand new records, you soon realize that not all records are created equal. As much as you would like that perfect table/arm/cartridge combination, it just doesn't exist. What we all end up doing is shooting for a reasonable average spot that will work well for most of our collection and deal with the rest. Or perhaps you are one of those maniacal audiophiles that are constantly fussing and fiddling with multiple VTA settings, etc. Having a large collection of Mono records can also present a challenge, because they truly sound their best when used with a mono cartridge.

The wider in scope your collection becomes the need for more than one turntable becomes clear, but not everyone has the space. Wouldn't it be handy to have a turntable with two tonearms? The answer to that question is "yes, without question".

From a reviewer's standpoint, it is awesome to have an identical pair of everything; tonearms, cartridges and cables. This makes it much easier to evaluate the missing item in the group. With everything else equal (and a two input phono preamplifier) it becomes a very simple process to identify what is different in the analog chain. The Raven Two is indispensable as a tool for comparing analog gear.

But you probably don't care about that, so let's have fun!

The Raven Two is an unsuspended turntable with two arm pods that can easily work with any of the major tonearms. It costs \$7500 with two armboards, and the motor assembly is out to the left side on the front of the turntable. A small outboard power supply tethers to the motor and has two speeds, 33 and 45 r.p.m, with adjustments for each on the back panel. If you have no use for a second armboard, you can order this table as a Raven One, with the motor fitting where the second armboard would go, for \$5500 with the standard composite armboards you see here (an upgraded bronze armboard and OEM Stillpoint feat raise the price to \$6300). Trust me, if you start there, the lure of a second arm will eat away at you until you get one!

I have tried four different tonearms on the Raven, all with excellent luck. The main arm used for most testing has been the SME IV.Vi, with the second position being occupied at times by an additional IV.Vi, an SME 309, the Rega RB1000 and the current Tri-Planar arm. All have been very easy to setup and have proved very compatible with the Raven. I have seen the Raven tables used with a number of the Schroeder arms with excellent luck as well.



The arm pods screw down with a 5mm hex bolt and can swivel, making it very easy to adjust the pivot to spindle distance of your tonearm. I used the Acoustic Sounds protractor for every arm I worked with and this made removing one arm and resetting another a snap. If you do not have a system that you enjoy, I highly suggest the Acoustic Sounds protractor.

Because the Raven is machined from a solid billet of aluminum, the plinth is massive. The platter is made of a very dense acrylic and weighs about 20 pounds. Assembly couldn't be easier; unpack the parts, slide the platter on the bearing and install the arm board. If you are familiar with your tonearm, you should be able to be spinning records in under an hour. (continued)

BLUE NOTE REISSUES

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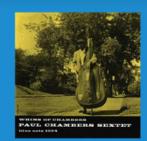






















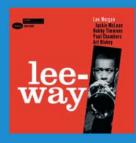




















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I set the speeds optically with the Cardas test record just so I could start listening. Coming back to fine adjustment later, I managed to nail the 33 r.p.m. speed right at 1000hz when playing the Acoustic Sounds test record, but the 45 r.p.m. setting was a bit fast and needed a bit of touching up.

My test sample came with a carbon fiber mat, but importer Jeffrey Catalano suggested that I try the table with and without. After extensive use, I ended up liking the mat, so it stayed for the duration of my listening sessions.

So many choices

If you aren't careful, analysis paralysis can set in once you have two choices for your tonearm and cartridge. After a number of options, which you have probably read about a bit in the last issue, I finally settled on SME, because I am the most familiar with these arms and they are the easiest to adjust. If I were strictly doing this for fun and settling on two arms, I would choose the excellent Rega RB1000 in the arm two position.

With the SME IV.Vi in position one, with my trusty Dynavector XV-1s, I was ready to take on the world and this is now the standard by which I am evaluating everything else. Tonearm two is the SME 309 with the IV series damping trough attached. Both arms use the new Furutech AG-12 tonearm cable (review in process) which has become my favorite. (continued)

Can We Play Records Now Please?

Whenever I have heard the Raven turntables at shows, I have always been impressed with the presentation. Mr. Catalano likes the XV-1s, so I had a great degree of confidence that I would also like the sound, but you know how the show thing can be.

I was even more impressed when I got to hear the Raven in my system. After spending a few weeks listening to the Continuum Criterion, (with an identical XV-1s) I was not ready for the stunning capabilities of the Raven. Yes, the 56 thousand dollar Continuum had a slight edge in bass detail and ultimate weight, but a minute into "Strawberry Fields Forever" and I wasn't thinking about the Continuum any more.

Folks, this is a pretty amazing turntable and yes, all of your favorite overused audiophile clichés apply. However, the Raven Two was not jaw dropping, it was smile inducing. This is what music is supposed to sound like.

The true test of fire for a great audio component is when it just gets out of the way and you completely forget about it, not worrying about VTA, cables, etc. The closest thing I can compare the Raven to is the SME 10. The two tables are very similar tonally, but the Raven has more weight and a larger, more dynamic sound. A casual listener might even mistake them if you were just playing vocal music or perhaps a string quartet. But when playing heavy rock music or a full-scale orchestra, the sound is much more expansive and it feels like someone turned the subwoofer up a click. (The SME is already excellent in this department).

Simple Yet Complex

Even when everything else is the same, it is often hard to describe the "sound" of a turntable. In a perfect world, a turntable would spin at *exactly* 33.33 r.p.m. and extract *only* the information on the groove without being influenced by the tonearm, cartridge or room. This perfect turntable would also completely isolate the drive system from the platter, which would perfectly couple to the record and cartridge. *(continued)*

As you inch up the ladder improving your vinyl playback system, you should keep getting more of everything; detail, tonality and weight. Things should sound more real and at the same time more natural. This is what the Raven Two does on par with the best of them and considering it's price has to be one of the best values in high-end audio today.

All this idealism goes out the window when you go to play a bargain copy of Boston's Don't Look Back. It was all good with your Pink Island pressing of John Barleycorn Must Die, or that mint, first run Blue Note of Saxaphone Colossus. This is about the time your smart ass friend comes over wanting to hear one of his crappy records on your high zoot analog rig and says something really stupid like: "this doesn't sound that much better than my SL1200!"

Voila, It's Second Tonearm Time!

This is when you put him in the weeds; after all, your honor as an audiophile is at stake. Now is when you leave the killer arm on its perch and go to arm two with a 500-dollar wood body Grado and Kapow! Boston never sounded so good and you shut him up forever!

Ok, so even if you don't need to be an Audiophilus Jerkasaurus, this is mighty handy when you acquire records that contain music you love, but with less than average recording quality. As a lover of popular music, I've had more than my share of mediocre pressings. Having that second arm and cartridge on the Raven has made at least a third of my records that I used to only play on my second (i.e. much lower resolution) system, much more enjoyable. In my book, anything that makes the musical experience better is a winner.

The combinations are endless, as I mentioned earlier you could have one arm with a mono cartridge, perhaps two identical arms, one set for 140g pressings and one for 180, eliminating the need to futz with VTA forever. (Except for those 200g pressings!) If you really want to go nuts, step up to the Raven AC, it will let you use four tonearms! (continued)



Better or Different?

That is always the most difficult part of trying to describe the sound of a turntable to someone. It's like trying to teach a friend how to drive a car with a clutch and stick shift for the first time. You know just what to do; the problem is you know it so well, you can't really tell them how to do it!

But I can tell you this about the Raven One/Raven Two; I have the privilege of listening to a lot of great analog and this is one of the most musically rewarding tables I have heard at *any* price. I have my favorites at certain price points, and while these usually present compromises, the Raven truly does not. Are there better (i.e. more musically revealing) tables out there? Yes there are, but the gap is not that big and you are going to have to pay quite a bit more money.

If there ever was a product that epitomized the point of diminishing returns (and I hate that term) it's the Raven Two. It raises the bar for what a \$7500 turntable is capable of so high, it's on par with some of the best tables out there; especially if you can afford a world class cartridge and arm. The added flexibility of the second arm makes it even more so.



The TW Acustic Raven Two MSRP: \$7500 (with standard composite armboards)

IMPORTER

High Water Sound

274 Water St. New York, NY 10038 212-608-8841 www.highwatersound.com

PERIPHERALS

Preamplifier: Conrad-Johnson ACT2/Series 2

Power Amplifier: Conrad-Johnson Premier 350

Phono Preamplifiers: Conrad-Johnson TEA-1, Nagra VPS, ASR Basis Exclusive, Modwright 9.0 SWP. Audio Research PH7

Phono Cartridges: Dynavector XV-1s, Lyra Skala, MoFi 3.5C, Rega Apheta, Grado Statement

Tonearms: SME IV.Vi, SME 309, Rega RB1000, Tri-Planar Mk.7

Speakers: MartinLogan Summit 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, Shunyata Helix Alpha VX

Power Conditioning: Running Springs Jaco and Dimitri

Vibration Control: Finite Elemente Pagode Signature, Cereballs, Cerepucs

Room Treatments: Sonex Classic, GIK 242 panels, GIK tri traps

Accessories: Furutech De-Mag, Clearaudio Simple Matrix record cleaner

.....

The Regalos

By Jeff Dorgay

When I last reviewed the Rega P9, which now retails for \$5000, and their Apheta moving coil cartridge, I wondered when Rega would release a phono stage that was at the same performance level of these two excellent products. The los completes the phono trilogy of top-shelf components and is actually the first in a series of a new, premier line of components in the works from Rega designated Signature 3.



You can tell that this preamplifier was designed by a group of people that are obsessed with analog. Priced at \$3195, the los is priced for the serious analog enthusiast, but it won't break the bank, like some of those five figure phono stages lurking out there. Sharing the same casework as the power supply from the P9, it looks rather smart sitting on the rack with a P9 and a Rega Saturn, should you happen to have one of those too.

A quick peek at the rear panel reveals a pretty spartan aesthetic; input, output, ground and IEC. The fun is around the front. You can tell that this preamplifier was designed by a group of people that are obsessed with analog.

There are two gain settings at 64 and 70 db respectively and a couple of other easily accessible adjustments that will help you tailor the los to just about any MC cartridge you might have. None of my cartridges have a lower output than .3mv, so I never had to switch to the higher gain setting to achieve enough gain through my preamplifier. When I did try the higher gain setting, no increase in background noise was apparent, so it should be a breeze for those of you in the audience with extremely low output moving coil cartridges.

Though most of the other designs we've auditioned lately switch in a pair of step up transformers for the higher gain settings only, the los uses them for both. When I was discussing the circuit design with Roy Gandy, he told me that they feel like a transformer is the ideal way to load a very low level transducer like a moving coil cartridge (or a microphone). "The transformer in the los only provides a minimal amount of gain, it's there more

for the consistent load it presents to the cartridge. It may seem a bit low-tech to use a transformer, but we've had the best results using a transformer."

Friendly!

While many MC preamplifiers offer a fair amount of adjustability, most (like my previous reference, the ASR Basis) require that you remove the top of the enclosure or poke around with tiny DIP switches on the rear panel. Rega thoughtfully puts all of the adjustments right out on the front where you can easily fiddle with them.

There is an adjustment for loading, DC resistance and a notch filter that has a bit of cut at 6.5khz that is supposed to help with MC cartridges that have a bit of harshness in this range. Unfortunately, I didn't have a cartridge in my collection that needed any help here, so this is the only feature of the los that I can't comment on yet.

The DC resistance switch helps to optimally load the moving coil to the input transformers. To really wrap your brain around this, think of it as you might when using a tube power amplifier, with multiple output taps. Most speakers seem to couple to one set of windings on the transformer better, providing that last bit of synergy to the playback. It's the same thing with the DC resistance switch. Most of the time going with the manufacturers suggestions worked just fine, but a little experimentation here (Rega encourages this in the manual as well) might lead you to a touch better marriage between your moving coil cartridge and the rest of your system, delivering smoother sound through the frequency spectrum. (continued)



"We didn't built it to a price point, we made the best phono preamplifier we were capable of." Loading can be set at 50, 100, 200 and 400 ohms. While not quite as wide of a range as others that go up to 1000 or 2500 ohms, I was more interested in having the 50 ohm setting, because the Rega Apeheta cartridge is smooth as silk at a 50 ohm setting. Most MC's require loading somewhere between 100 and 1000 ohms, so you will probably be just fine throughout the range the los offers. I tried the los with quite a few cartridges and got the best results between 100 and 200 ohms, only occasionally needing the 400 ohm setting. Having the settings right out on the front panel encourages some experimentation.

Quiet, Yet Powerful

For the last year, I've been listening to the king of quiet phono stages, the ASR Basis Exclusive. With battery power, it doesn't get any better than this in terms of a "black background" that hifi reviewers like to rave about. With such low level signals, every bit of noise that can be eliminated will benefit a phono stage.

Removing the los from the box, it is apparent that there is a substantial power supply inside. As you can see from the picture, this is a very complex phono stage indeed! The circuitry is discrete throughout, with only a couple of op amps used in various stages of power supply regulation.

Having a fully differential circuit also helps dramatically lower the noise floor, though again, making the los more complex. Gandy said, "Usually, we tend to take a simpler is better approach, but the los is perhaps the most complex circuit we've built. We didn't built it to a price point, we made the best phono preamplifier we were capable of."

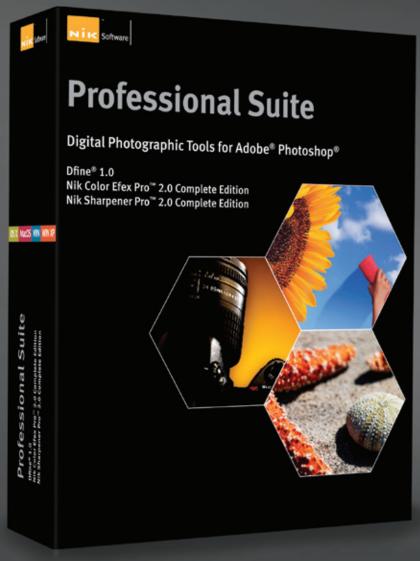
He's not kidding, the los delivers the goods even before you place the stylus on the record. The ASR Basis is the only other phono preamplifier I have used that has absolutely no noise when you put your ear up to the tweeter (or in my case, panel) and listen. *(continued)*

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Even with the stock power cord, going straight into the wall, the los is one of quietest phono stages I've had the pleasure of listening to. Swapping the stock power cord for a new Shunyata Helix and plugging in to my Running Springs Dimitri power conditioner peeled off one more layer of background and put the los right in battery powered territory. The engineers at Rega have definitely done their homework.

Making it a point to listen to some recent Blue Note remasters, quite a bit of classical and even some of my favorite rock warhorses that have a lot of quiet passages, you can really see where the los excels: the sound iust decays all the way down to nothing during the quiet bits.

Top Shelf, Indeed

The los' ability to do it all is what makes it a worthy contender for being on the list of top phono stages ever. The more you listen to acoustic music and pay attention to the way the los captures the texture of even the most delicate intstruments, you realize that this is some of the best analog has to offer, with outstanding tonality.

In order for any component to go from the "quite good" column to the "top of the heap" column, is its ability to do everything at an equally high level and in the case of a phono preamplifier, that means quiet, tonally correct and dynamic. Again, the los is a contender. When using the Raven table, with a Dynavector XV-1s mounted on each arm, it's very easy to bounce back between one preamp and the other, keeping everything else equal. (continued)



Comparing the los to the \$10k Conrad-Johnson TEA-1, and the \$6000 Nagra VPS, it definitely held its own. The CJ had more ultimate weight and a slightly wider soundstage, with the Nagra right on its heels, but these were both tubed preamplifiers. Where the ASR Basis exclusive was somewhat dry and sterile, (or completely neutral, depending on how you want to call it) The los had that something extra, a touch of warmth or weight that I wasn't expecting that was very exciting at this price point and certainly not from a solid state phono preamplifier.

There were no shortcomings with the los for me. The tube thing has always been a love/hate relationship (I love my Nagara VPS, but it only has two tubes under the hood). Sure, I'd love to see a second input, perhaps the ability to accept a 47k input on that second input and a mono switch, but then the los would be five grand. Mr. Gandy felt that adding the ability to accommodate a MM cart too would have made compromises to the MC inputs, so who am I to argue?

Quite the Journey

Why then did it take Rega so long to make the los? Considering that their website says that they are "the last high major hi-end manufacturer to make a CD player" I guess this seems pretty much on track. Gandy adds: "The los is something that developed over a very long period of time. We used a similar circuit when we first started making integrated amplifiers quite a while ago. When we were working on this preamplifier we had a single ended circuit that improved dramatically when we added transformers; then the lightbulb went off – what about the los? We then went back to the symmetrical design and had what we were looking for".

Bottom Line

I had a fantastic time listening to the Rega los and had the opportunity to pair it up with some first rate record players. One of the things I have always enjoyed about the Rega P9 turntable is that it gets you close enough to what the cost no object tables offer with a minimum of fuss and ease of setup at an accessible price. Whenever I get bogged down trying to wring the last bit of performance out of a turntable, I always take a break, go back to my P9 and think, "why bother?"

The los offers the same thing in a phono preamplifier. Yes, some of the mega preamps (with their mega pricetags attached) will extract more information from your grooves. But I guarantee none of them will be this easy to use and live with every day. Think of the los as the Acura NSX that you drive every day because you don't want to rack up the miles on your much more expensive to maintain Ferrari. Or perhaps you are that more logical person that doesn't need the Ferrari at all.

Roy ended our conversation by saying that "he's never completely happy unless they've accomplished something just a little bit special." British understatement at its finest. Go buy this one.



Second Opinion

By Marc Phillips

"Whatever you do, don't scratch it," Jeff told me as we loaded the Rega Ios into the trunk of my car. "I bought it... it's mine!"

I grumbled as I drove away, thinking, "Of course I'm not going to scratch it...who does he think I am?" After a short time in my system (too short, in my opinion), I discovered why he was so protective about this particular piece of gear. It really is something special.

First of all, the los is the quietest phono pre I've ever used. I'm sure you've read reviews where the item in question (usually an amp or preamp) was so quiet; the reviewer didn't think it was turned on. I've had that experience before, but never with a phono preamp. There's always something, a little tube rush, a tiny bit of hum, that almost but not quite imperceptible sound of air particles colliding with the tip of the stylus. I literally jumped, however, when the stylus hit the groove and I realized, much to my surprise that the los was hooked up correctly.

Once it settled in, I was even more enthralled with los' ability to deliver an extra bit of detail to familiar recordings. I know, it's another reviewer cliché, but I was always able to hear something new in several of my favorite LPs. For instance, on "Duke's Place" from the Classic Records version of *Louis Armstrong & Duke Ellington*, I could hear Pops extend each note he sung, straining ever so slightly for a second or two longer than normal, his distinctive vibrato wavering into oblivion. Yes, with the los, each note hung in the air just a bit longer. Of course, that level of detail is directly related to those jet-black silences.

Over the last few months, I've listened to perhaps a half dozen \$1000 phono preamps, each one a winner in its own way. Just prior to that, however, I used a couple of phono stages in the \$5000 to \$7000 range. The Rega los easily belongs in the latter group. The build quality is astonishing (it's certainly the heaviest phono preamp I've used), the flexibility world-class. The sound quality was perhaps the most addictive I've experienced in my system, and now I want that los as well.

Upon return, I did notice a tiny scratch on the top of the case. Was it a self-fulfilling prophecy or passive-aggressive behavior? Arrgh! ●

The Rega los Phono Preamplifier

MSRP: \$3195

MANUFACTURER

Rega Research Ltd.

Essex, England www.rega.co.uk

US Distributor:
The Sound Organisation

159 Leslie Street Dallas, TX 75207 972-234-0182 www.soundorg.com

PERIPHERALS

Preamplifiers: Conrad-Johnson ACT2/

Series 2

Phono Stages: Nagra VPS, Conrad-Johnson TEA-1, ModWright 9.0SWLP, ASR Basis Exclusive

Analog Sources: TW Acustic Raven Two w/SME IV.Vi arms, SME 309 arm and Rega RB1000 arm mated with Dynavector XV-1s, MoFi 3.5C, Lyra Skala and Zu Denon 103 cartridges. Rega P9 w/RB1000 arm and Apheta MC

Power Amplifiers: Conrad-Johnson

Premier 350

Speakers: MartinLogan Summit 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, Shunyata Helix Alpha VX

Power Conditioning: Running Springs

Jaco and Dimitri

Vibration Control: Finite Elemente Pagode Signature, Cereballs, Cerepucs

Room Treatments: Sonex Classic, GIK

242 panels, GIK tri traps

Accessories: Furutech De-Mag,

Clearaudio Simple Matrix record cleaner

The HiFi Chick Reports:

Audiokarma Fest 2008



n May 3rd and 4th, audio enthusiasts from the Detroit area, and a few from beyond, descended on the Embassy Suites Hotel in Livonia, MI, for the 5th Annual Audiokarma Fest. For those not familiar with the fest it is a casual yet diminutive gathering of audiophiles, hobbyists, retailers and manufacturers. What makes this event unique is the 'festival' climate as opposed to a regulated trade show. There is a relaxed, fun undertone at the event; even the festival badges were handwritten by the AK staff, largely consisting of the organizer's family and friends.



"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











No unions, extensive paperwork, outrageous exhibit booths or miles to walk. Exhibitors drove their gear to the Embassy Suites and schlepped it all in and out on bell carts, hand trucks or the old fashioned way, by hand.

Dave Goldstein, aka 'Grumpy', the AK organizer, is a pretty laid back guy himself and the festival certainly reflected his character.

To fully grasp the concept of Audiokarma and the Fest, a short history lesson is in order. The Audiokarma Fest began in 2004 as a means for members of the www. audiokarma.org website forum to get together and do what they love to do; talk, listen and drink in all the audio they possibly can. The first Fest started as a simple, open invite from site owner, David Goldstein, to members of the Audiokarma forum to come to his home. The response was overwhelming with nearly 80 people responding! However, Dave's modest home would not hold that many "Karmites", so he moved the event to a hotel where he booked 8 rooms and allowed members to exhibit their systems. A few local Michigan-based companies joined in, as exhibitors and the Audiokarma Fest was born.

In 2008, the Audiokarma Fest moved to a new venue at the Embassy Suites, a nice hotel with interior atrium and balconies connecting the rooms. Wandering room to room was refreshing, feeling like being in an outdoor mall, instead of being trapped inside traditional stuffy show rooms.

The atrium housed a restaurant, bar and large gathering areas, all held together by a waterfall and a stream bubbling through. (continued) Now this HIFI Chick did not attend previous Fests, but from what I'm told, the previous hotel left much to be desired and that my friends would have escorted me out if I did attempt to enter. Glad to see that AK is moving up and cleaning up, which inevitably will attract more exhibitors and attendees. You can visit the Fest website at www.akfest.com.

This year's festival grew exponentially from the first show, and continues to do so each year. 2008 had a record 41 suites booked, consisting of 30 manufacturers, 9 AK member display suites and 2 used gear/LP swap suites.

A total of 657 attendees browsed the 2 floors of the Fest, enjoying some remarkable demos, with many attendees bringing their own CD's and vinyl to demo on the array of systems. Of the total attendees, 27% of attendees were AK members and their badges not only listed their real name but also their AK member name, by which members know each other. Interestingly enough, 10% were international attendees. Nearly 200 door prizes were given away totaling over \$22k, many of which were donated by the manufacturers and exhibitors directly.

Anchor manufacturers included Marantz/Snell, McIntosh, Manley Labs, Esoteric and Usher Audio. Many suites were an eclectic mix of brands or home made gear. Several companies used AK as their springboard, to launch new products:

- Classic Audio Reproduction debuted the new Point 3 version of their T1 speakers, loaded with field coil drivers and using T.A.D. TL-1601b Woofers and a newly designed low-pass filter board.
- Usher Audio introduced their Dancer II Beryllium loudspeaker.
- Hawthorne Audio and Whiplash Audio each debuted a new line of loudspeakers.
- McIntosh officially introduced the MC2301, 300 watt monoblock tube amplifier and the MA7000 integrated amplifier. Both played for the very first time, to the public, at the fest.

Wandering the suites proved not just musically varied but cosmetically uninhibited. The room hosted by "Pak Protector" featured all home-made equipment. A massive aluminum turntable, amps, radio station tubes and wood cases, and big transmission line kit speakers. It resembled Frankenstein's lab yet still sounded very cool.

One of AK's member rooms, run by David Williams, featured the world's coolest iPod dock from Wadia, the 170i Transport which claims to be the first and only iPod component to offer native digital audio output, high-resolution component and S-Video output, and analogue outputs. Infrared remote control, coaxial digital cable, and docking inserts are included. The 170i was running through a McIntosh MA7000 Integrated to Infinity Prelude Speakers. A simple set up that sounded amazing.





Sound Advantage, a retailer in Rochester, MI, teamed up with Ken Haig of IDS by Roger Russell. Ken builds and represents IDS speakers, which are designed by Roger Russell, the retired acoustic engineer who developed the McIntosh loudspeaker program. The speakers use a patented column design incorporating 25 drivers providing a total cone area equal to that of a 16" woofer. All frequencies, including bass, are evenly distributed over the entire column. The pair that Ken brought were finished in a piano white hardwood veneer. A bit too white for my taste, I think I would prefer the Bubinga finish if you want to get them in my living room. Leo Montoleone of Sound Advantage provided McIntosh electronics driving the IDS-25's.

The last thing that caught my attention was a tube CD player from Shandling. *(continued)*



to detail, including a \$21,000 FFT Siemens, Svetlana... you name it. amp as a tube tester.

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www.upscaleaudio.com

Saturday night entertainment was a surprisingly melodic and magnetic trio headed by Laith Al-Saadi, a phenomenal guitarist. This Detroit-based artist contemporizes the blues, often with jazz undertones. Al-Saadi's whiskey voice and guitar prowess transcends his 27 years. Along with smooth originals, Al-Saadi mesmerized the 100+ crowd with a wide variety of favorites such as "Still Got the Blues for You" by Gary Moore, "Bright Size Life" by Pat Metheny, "Folsom Prison Blues" by Johnny Cash and "Hal-Ieluiah I Love Her So" by Ray Charles.

I thoroughly enjoyed myself at the Fest and experienced much more audio and down to earth conversations than at a traditional trade show.

It's a refreshing atmosphere, with families in attendance, as well as the usual cast of audiophile characters. My hope is that the fest continues its growth pattern but stays true to itself and doesn't creep into an overextended, commercial circus. Next year's Fest is scheduled for May 2nd and 3rd, 2009, Embassy Suites, Livonia MI.

If you are not familiar with Audiokarma, visit the web site. Their members have topped 37,000 in number, with well over 2 million hits per day and 150,000 hits per hour during peak usage. Members post close to 2,000 new posts each day. There is a thread, topic, manufacturer forum for everyone on this site.

Slummin'

By Jeff Dorgay

This issue we have a couple of fun things from analog's past, a portable Sony cassette recorder and a famous movie soundtrack. I even found a killer deal on a SOTA Sapphire, but the staff agreed that it was too good of a piece for this column, even though I picked it up for almost nothing!

Sony TC-D5M Portable Cassette Deck — \$100

If you are a portable recording enthusiast, you know how cool these are. Used by many a concert-goer to make righteous bootlegs, the TC-D5M offered up audiophile specs in a very compact (for the day) package. Claimed frequency response with Metal tape was 30-17,000 hz, +/- 3db. Pretty sweet.

The model here was a steal at 100 bucks, but lacks record capability, with one channel pretty week, however playback was great. When playing back from a pair of D batteries, it still had great sound. Now the debate is whether or not to completely refurb it! Mint examples of the TC-D5M are still fetching as high as \$600 on Ebay, so this is a collectors item.





Darth Vader Picture Disc — Free

This issue I managed to pick up a huge cache of records from one of our writers with many treasures lurking inside, but there's one I just had to share; a Star Wars picture disk! Even though I'm not a Star Wars geek, this is still cool. ●

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Immedia Sound: www.immediasound.com

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Zu Audio: www.zuaudio.com