



Ladies and gentlemen, the Beatles.

Bob Gendron Reviews the Beatles Remasters

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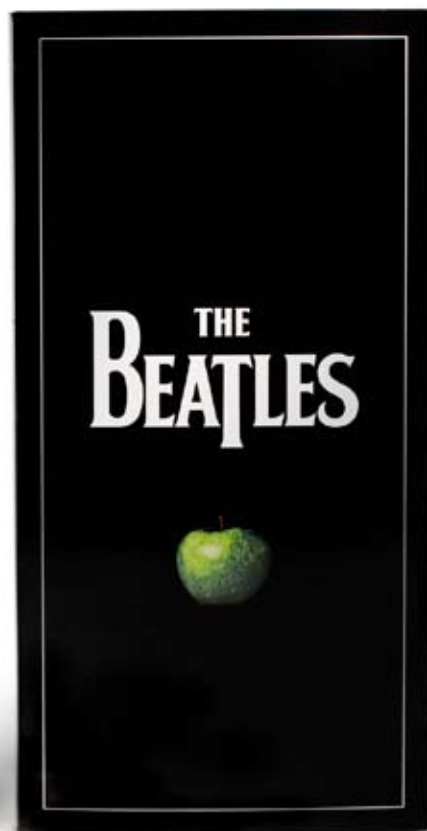
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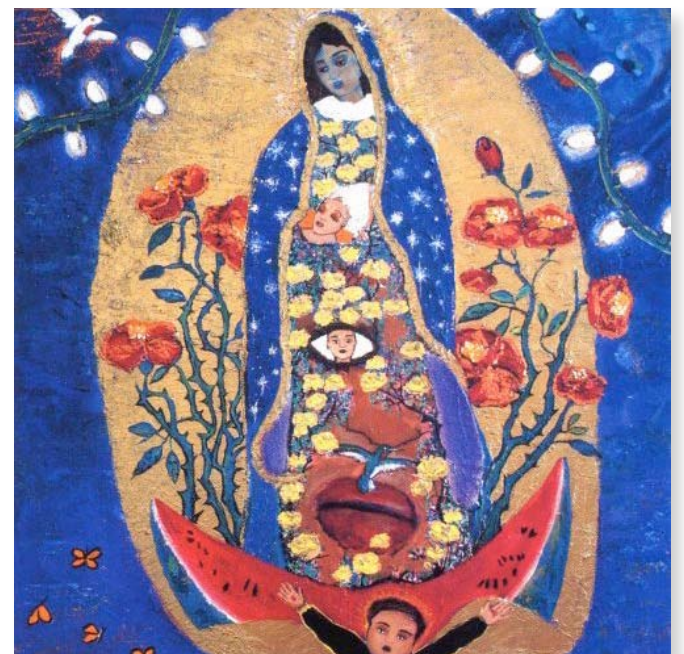


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new in tone this issue

LAWRENCE DEVOE

Lawrence Devoe is a native of Chicago, Illinois. He was an undergraduate at Harvard University during the Timothy Leary era and received his medical degree from the University of Chicago. Lawrence is a professional medical journal editor and has published more than 250 articles.

His musical roots stem from his mother, a former concert pianist, who introduced him to the wonderment of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra at age seven. In college, he was a classical music announcer for a campus radio station and was a music reviewer for *Ultimate Audio* in the 1990's.

When not listening to music, he may be seen doing long-distance running on the Augusta canal towpath.

PUBLISHER'S LETTER



As I'm en route to Switzerland, I'd like to dedicate this issue to a friend who is no longer with us: David Trout of Phoenix, Arizona. You may have seen the ads from his jewelry shop in our magazine since the first issue, and if you purchased something from Dave over the years, you know what a great guy he was.

Dave and I met at Einstein Bagels in the Ahwatukee Foothills, an outlying suburb of Phoenix. Actually, it was our love of yellow sports cars that brought us together, when one day he parked his yellow Acura NSX next to my yellow Porsche 914. As we were walking out to our cars and noticed each other, we both said "nice car" at almost exactly the same moment, and a friendship had begun. Dave always went to work in a suit and I was usually wearing a concert T-shirt, so our next conversation regarded what we did for a living. Turned out Dave had sold Jean and me our wedding rings about eight years earlier. His shop, Coffin and Trout, had grown substantially since then, and he had moved to our side of town.

Somewhere in the middle of our relationship, I found out Dave was an excellent photographer and shot all of the outstanding photos for his shop's advertisements. Jewelry is probably one of the toughest things to get right while in a photo-studio situation, and Dave was always very humble about his abilities, as he was about his jewelry making. I always did my best to lend whatever technical support he needed, once he moved to the digital world of Photoshop.

We always kept in touch, even after my family moved to the Pacific Northwest. When I told Dave about TONE, he became one of our first advertisers, anxious to find the crossover between buyers of high-end audio gear, fine watches and jewelry. The last time we spent time together in person, about a year ago, we talked late into the evening about Dave getting his hands on a great audio system. "I've always admired McIntosh" he said, "Big and beefy. Those blue meters really have a timeless style, just like a Rolex." I was going to fly out and help him put a system together, but we both got pretty busy at the beginning of this year. It was a tremendous shock when I was about to ring Dave to ask him for some sightseeing tips while in Switzerland, and saw on his Facebook page that he had passed away recently while hiking not far from his home.

Dave was 51 years old and in excellent shape, so there's no real rhyme or reason for any of this. But the lesson I've learned is that life is way too short and way too random. Count your blessings and enjoy the fruits of your labors. And if your HiFi is sounding pretty good these days, raise a glass to your efforts and enjoy it. Maybe nothing needs to change at all.

Thanks for listening and as always,
thanks for reading.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "Dave Trout". The signature is stylized with loops and a long horizontal stroke at the end.



"Now that George has his upgrades, I'll be scheduling mine."



Love Those LED's

The SAE 2200

By Jerold O'Brien

When I worked across the aisle in the local mall during my college years, I dreamed of owning a whole stack of SAE audio gear. Much like Wayne in *Wayne's World*, I used to pester the hell out of the "audio consultants" at TEAM Electronics to let me hear the full blown SAE system, chock full of giant VU meters, rows of LED indicators and nixie tube displays.

However when my cha-ching moment finally came and I was ready to plunk down some cold cash on a system of my own, complete with a pair of Altec Lansing Model 19's, (the same speakers that I made them play *Dark Side of the Moon* on every Friday), SAE had gone out of business, never to return. So I settled on a Harmon/Kardon Citation amplifier, because it also had a cool LED power display and by then, a good friend was working for TEAM's competitor, so I was able to score an employee discount. But I always dreamed of that line of red LED's bouncing back and forth while my favorite 70's hits were playing.

Sometimes You can Revisit the Past Successfully

A very clean example turned up on eBay a while back, so it was a great opportunity to relive the past, but the burning question would be just how good was this amplifier I lusted over for so many years? As many HiFi collectors know, digging up vintage gear is a lot like shaking a magic 8-ball; signs often point to no. *(continued)*

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FEATURE

Not this time. The near mint 2200 that our publisher purchased for the Slumming' column last issue arrived in excellent shape, was well packed and all of the LED's in the power level display worked. Having no idea how long this 2200 had been powered down; I let it play for a few days at low level before breaking out the Pink Floyd records. Initially mated up to my JBL-L166 speakers, I was floored at how good this old workhorse sounded, enough to add some more modern gear to the mix and investigate further.

The 2200 still has a very good helping of modern audiophile cachet. Hooked up to our publishers Harbeth Monitor 40.1's we were both surprised at the solid bass response and relatively grain free presentation, as part of a system with the new Audio Research SP-17 preamplifier.

Buying Advice

Should you be interested in a 2200 of your own, they are rated at 100 watts per channel into 8 ohms and you should be able to purchase a very clean example in the \$200 - \$300 range. There are still quite a few out there and I will be sending this one to 2200 specialist, Ken Ealey Audio in Illinois for a full rebuild. He charges \$300 to give the amplifier a substantial rebuild, upgrading the semiconductors and capacitors to current spec units, but charges an extra \$50-\$100 if the LED displays don't work properly.

You can find Ken at www.kenealeyaudio.com We'll have a full report when we get our test sample back, but I'm thinking this one's going to be a permanent addition to my collection. ●

**The Montreux Jazz Festival**

Montreux, Switzerland

July 3 - July 18, 2009

By Jeff Dorgay

Montreux Jazz Festival founder Claude Nobs knows how to throw a great party. With over 150 acts on the program and over 10 venues to choose from, the only disappointment at Montreux is that even if you had tickets, you couldn't attend every show. And the faire is not limited to jazz; there is plenty of jazz to be sure, but this year's roster opened with Chickenfoot and The Dave Matthews Band, closing with Prince, so there was something for everyone.

Chickenfoot

Saturday, July 4

Sammy Hagar is clearly enjoying his new job. If you left the Stravinski Auditorium after the Dave Matthews performance, you truly missed out. Taking the stage, bathed in a red glow, Hagar and company (with matching Chickenfoot logos on their guitars) blew the audience out of the room. It was great to see that Hagar hasn't retired his red guitar either; he and lead guitarist Joe Satriani closed the set with an outstanding two guitar version of "Bad Motor Scooter", ending with Satriani playing with his teeth, Hendrix – style.



Jeff Beck

Friday, July 17

At 65 years old, Jeff Beck still reigns supreme over all other guitarists. Playing a set that borrowed heavily from his *Wired* and *Blow By Blow* albums, Beck proved his genius by taking the songs that we all know quite well and mixing them up just enough to stay fresh but not going too far off on an improvisational tangent to lose the familiarity.

Featuring Australia's hottest new talent, Tal Wilkenfeld on bass guitar, Jason Rebello on keyboards and Vinnie Colaluta on drums, Beck's quartet ripped through their two hour set in no time and at the request of festival host, Claude Nobs, came back out for a two song encore. At the end of the show, the audience, led by Beck, sang "happy birthday" to Ms. Wilkenfeld, joined by Claude Nobs.

Beck gave the group plenty of room to stretch out and solo in their own spaces, but he was the undisputed star of the show. These days, when most guitarists take the stage with ten or twenty guitars, sometimes changing instruments for every song, Beck blazed through the set with a single, white Fender Stratocaster and barely broke a sweat. That's a true master in action.



Allen Toussaint

Thursday, July 16

Previously touring to support his latest album, *The Bright Mississippi*, Toussaint's performance at Montreux was part gospel, part retrospective. The height of cool, he was impeccably dressed as he sat down at the piano to share some music and tidbits of his life with the crowd. When talking about the current Axe Shower Gel ad on television, he said, "I'm not quite sure what that chocolate dude was selling, but that's my music in the background."

Recently losing all of his archival footage to Hurricane Katrina, Montreux host, Claude Nobs assured Toussaint and the audience that this performance would be turned into a DVD very soon, so stay tuned.



John Fogerty

Thursday, July 16

Much like Dick Clark, John Fogerty never seems to show signs of age in his playing or his appearance. Appeasing the crowd with a good number of CCR tunes on the setlist, Fogerty showed his wry sense of humor during “Bad Moon Rising” when he sang, “there’s a bathroom on the right” during the chorus.



The Earth, Wind, and Fire Experience

Wednesday, July 15

For those confused about the difference between Earth, Wind, and Fire and the Earth, Wind, and Fire Experience, lead guitarist Al McKay (who played with EWF's classic lineup in the 70's) set the record straight; "We *play!*"

The 14 piece EWF Experience had the packed crowd at Stravinski Hall up on their feet and dancing throughout the show, with the audience as sweat-soaked as the band.





SUNN O)))

Empty Bottle
Chicago, Illinois

July 2, 2009

By Bob Gendron

Entering a stage almost entirely obscured by dry-ice fog, SUNN O))) made good on the unspoken promise to match its profusely dense music with an equally forbidding visual aesthetic that evoked an erupting undersea volcano. At Chicago's Empty Bottle, this 80-minute experience involved summoning the darkness by way of claustrophobic volumes, ominously slow tempos, low tunings, bowel-triggering low-end frequencies, and the group's trademark hooded robes.

Even without the high-tech assistance afforded to mainstream arena bands, few artists consistently create such an apt—and supremely cool—spectacle as the bi-coastal experimentalists, which brought the noise courtesy of stacks upon stacks of tube-powered amps and speaker cabinets. Not for nothing has the duo of Stephen O'Malley and Greg Anderson—accompanied on this tour by vocalist Attila Csihar and keyboardist Steve Moore—become one of the most celebrated underground bands, a collective that in recent years evolved from a doom-metal act into a creative juggernaut that's just as liable on record to explore minimalist beauty as it is to cause sonic tremors.

Granted, there's some humor involved in watching these druid figures—their outlines illuminated only by dim red light bouncing off of floating vapor particles—conduct business with a staunch seriousness befitting a major surgical procedure. Live, SUNN O))) doesn't play concerts as much as conduct performance art. Hence, while several fans in the sold-out crowd raised their arms as soon as they noticed the band doing the same—gestures that not only served as great theater, but which were a necessary communication tool since the high decibel levels and limited visibility made verbal interaction between the four members impossible—most of the audience remained content to bask in the bizarre ambience. *(continued)*

And there was plenty of weirdness to go around, be it the haunting spoken-word incantations from Csihar's cloaked Grim Reaper figure or the overly saturated din of textures, waves, and chords unleashed by the battery of guitars and bass. For concertgoers, there's no substitute for literally being moved, shaken, and vibrated by oscillating pitches and drones. As master practitioners of amplifier worship, SUNN O))) was more about being physically felt and heard than being precise or seen. In this regard, the quartet did not disappoint.

SUNN O))) continually messed with aural perception. Coming across like a sinister séance, Csihar's cryptic recitations emerged in tandem with fractured notes that, due to the suffocating volumes and measured tempos involved, took on unusually heavy weight. The frontman's phonetic deliveries alternated between mouth breathing, creaky screeches, Gregorian chants, and disturbing howls. With his head shrouded by his robe, he looked and sounded like a wizard casting spells. A willing accomplice, Moore hovered over a Moog synthesizer. He twisted knobs and punched buttons to manipulate timbres, add psychedelic color, and craft horror-film atmospheres. At times, everything slowed to a crawl until the music seemed suspended in mid-air. The resultant buzz fed a tonal loop that dizzied the senses and gave the illusion of an approaching calm. But any relaxing sensations were short lived.

During the closing passage, SUNN O))) channeled a terrifying frenzy that knew no limits. With slivers of shrill feedback piercing through the sludgy drone, Csihar let out a series of shrieks that drove his fellow mates to pick up the pace. Aiming their guitars at the ceiling, SUNN O))) completed its mysterious ceremony as high priests would a black mass. Sonic asphyxiation seldom felt so cathartic—or mighty.

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Coldplay

Clark County Amphitheater

Vancouver, Washington

July 10, 2009

Photo and Text by Jeff Dorgay

After a pair of forgettable opening acts, Coldplay took the Clark County Amphitheater stage to a frenzied, sold-out crowd of just over 18,000 people. By this time everyone had been sufficiently fed and watered as well as thoroughly brainwashed by the bands merchandising people and their politicians. A perky young girl asked me to sign a petition for one of Martins' favorite charities and to wear my button, because "that would make Chris happy." I'm sure Chris Martins was much happier that I (and most of the other parents there) bought my daughter a \$60 Coldplay tour sweatshirt.

The show began with "Life In Technicolor", from their current *Viva la Vida* record with the group wearing the Sgt. Pepper meets the Confederate Army costumes that they wore on the cover of *SPIN* magazine a few months back and have worn in a number of videos recently.

Though the audience went bonkers when their trademark hit, "Yellow" entered the playlist, Martins' voice was still terribly weak and he did not hit his stride until halfway through the set. Martins romped around the stage while lead guitarist Jonny Buckland stayed mostly on the left side of the stage playing Edge-lite riffs that never got too far out of the box. Near the end of the show, they performed a pathetic version of "Billie Jean", which was more creepy than intriguing.

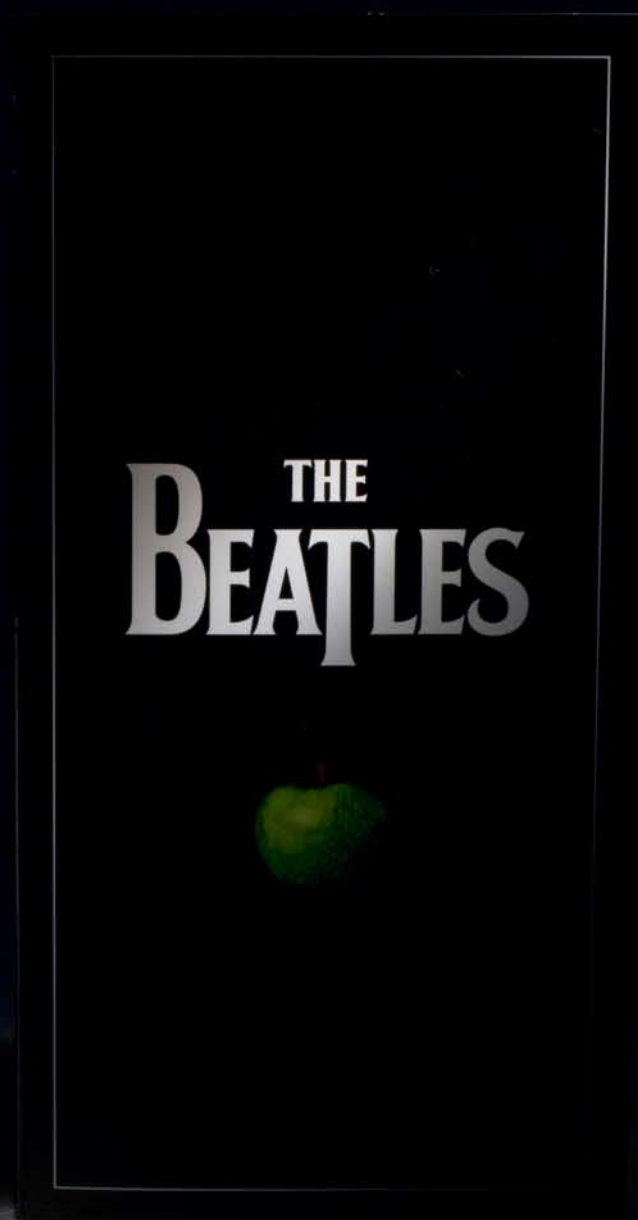
After two encores, they left the stage to a standing ovation, but this show was not much more than a slightly older Jonas Brothers show with different costumes. The music was adequately performed, but no more. Though brilliantly packaged and choreographed, Coldplay offers little more live than what you've already heard on the record.



Please Please Me

The Beatles Remasters
in Mono and Stereo

By Bob Gendron





© Capitol EMI

The cost of owning a good-sounding Beatles record just got significantly cheaper. Arriving 22 years after the band's catalog was originally issued on compact disc, Capitol's long-awaited remasters of the Fab Four's 12 studio albums, *Magical Mystery Tour*, and the *Past Masters* collections—as well as the label's limited-edition *Beatles in Mono* box set, comprising the *Past Masters* set and ten studio records in their original mono mixes—sound, as a whole, fantastic. It's clear that the team of engineers responsible for the four-year project ensured that the world's most important and famous pop catalog finally received the care it's always deserved.

While hardcore fans will want both the mono and stereo editions, the general populace is almost guaranteed to be content with the widely available stereo versions. Not that everyone will be happy. All accomplishments aside, it's a foregone conclusion that no matter what the results indicate, certain parties will complain, criticize, and nitpick. Those curmudgeonly detractors and obsessive freaks are better off waiting for the second coming of Christ; rumor is that the payoff will be a lot better.

For the majority of listeners, however, any temptation to spend hundreds of dollars on rare vinyl pressings should erode as they become acclimated to what often resembles hearing familiar records for the very first time. Such are the near-miraculous improvements in the key areas of information retrieval, hidden details, palpable physicality, expanded midrange, transient presence, and frequency response. As expected, the mono and stereo editions have their share of positives and negatives.



What does matter, of course, is the sound. And it's largely excellent, improving in accordance with time, parallel to advances in recording technology and the band's groundbreaking studio techniques.

Yet the benefits of the mono mixes reign supreme through *Revolver*, which is no surprise, given that producer George Martin intended for the Beatles' records to be enjoyed in mono. With *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, the tide begins to turn; yet efforts like *The Beatles* (a.k.a. *The White Album*) remain toss-ups for myriad reasons.

There will be little debate surrounding what box set received the best packaging. Collecting a total of 13 discs in a plain and compact white box, *The Beatles in Mono* presents each album in replica mini-LP jackets that feature faithful reproductions of the original artwork, labels, and inserts. Protective plastic sleeves shroud the discs, and a re-sealable plastic cover slips over the glossy mini-vinyl CD holders. A booklet containing rare photos and copious notes by Kevin Howlett rounds out the rather economical and practical bundle. By contrast, *The Beatles In Stereo* set is housed in a shoebox-sized box that opens up to reveal two stacks of digipak CDs.

(Unlike their mono counterparts, the stereo discs are available individually.) Enthusiasts should note that the discs slide in and out of the digipaks without any extra padding or protection. Still, the classy packages conform to the original vinyl artwork and contain archival photos, recording notes, and historical notes—but lack inserts and faithful gatefold replication. Each disc also comes embedded with a QuickTime mini-documentary about the respective album. Curiously, the set lacks an accompanying booklet. Not that it matters much.

What does matter, of course, is the sound. And it's largely excellent, improving in accordance with time, parallel to advances in recording technology and the band's groundbreaking studio techniques. As previously mentioned, every Beatles album through *The White Album* was mixed to be heard in mono. Capitol's remasters mark the initial occasion of *Please Please Me*, *With the Beatles*, *A Hard Day's Night*, and *Beatles for Sale* being available on disc in a stereo mix; the converse is true for *Help!*, (continued)



Each disc also comes embedded with a QuickTime mini-documentary about the respective album.

Rubber Soul, Revolver, Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band, Magical Mystery Tour, and The Beatles. Finally, the mono editions of Help! and Rubber Soul also include the original stereo mix, which makes comparison listening that much easier.

Without diminishing the value and impact of the stereo editions, which blow away their 1987 digital predecessors in every imaginable facet, the mono discs are where it's at for experiencing the Beatles in the most "authentic" manner. (Officially, no compression or de-noising was used on the mono mixes; fewer than five minutes of de-noising graces the stereo editions.) Specifically, the group's early records tend to sound unnatural in stereo, as the hard panning seems forced and artificial—which, in actuality, it is. In mono, the Beatles' music thrives from ultra-dynamic front-to-back layering that, intentionally or not, often gives the impression of a stereo mix. The changes wrought by the remasters are dramatic.

Please Please Me is distinguished by a previously vacant fullness, richness, and enormity. There's discernible air and echo around the swooping vocals on "Miserery," and resolute imaging on "I Saw Her Standing There"—quite a thrill. And the bottom end—quite possibly the single-biggest enhancement on all of the remasters—registers with a forceful thump rather than a dull, empty thud. No longer an undefined aural morass, "Twist and Shout" explodes with a clean yet musical clarity, the singing more distinctive and immediate, the instruments possessing true timbres and resonant clatter. And who ever notices the expressive "Yeah!" at the end of the take?

(continued)

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Similarly, the mono *With the Beatles* unfolds with ear-bending vibrancy and liveliness. The rolling vocal harmonizing on "All My Loving" astounds. Across-the-board upgrades in airiness, dimensionality, depth, size, and Paul McCartney's vastly underrated bass lines are detectable on every song. And whether it's the now-noticeable presence of the piano or the wonderfully rattling chords on "Money," or discernible rhythmic rumble on "Hold Me Tight," the record has received a startling facelift that even Hollywood's most expensive plastic surgeon wouldn't be able to configure. With the band long faulted for being too sweet, the mono remasters open up space for the argument that the Beatles possessed an edge—if not a slight mean streak (witness the 3-D imaging of "No Reply" off *Beatles for Sale*).

Vocal precision, smoothness, and extension become even more pronounced on *Help!* and *Rubber Soul*.

Ditto for the realistic bottom end, long absent on most Beatles recordings. McCartney's bass and Ringo Starr's percussion ride side-by-side, and smart albeit illuminating shades and accents—the tambourine on "You've Got to Hide Your Love Away," the twangy pitch of the guitar strings on "Ticket to Ride," the breathlessness of Lennon's singing on "Dizzy Miss Lizzy," the natural fade-out on "I've Just Seen a Face," Lennon's sucking of air through his teeth on "Girl," the barbershop-quartet swoons during "Michelle"—emerge with breathtaking clarity. Enmeshed with the song as a whole, Starr's Hammond organ playing on "I'm Looking Through You" now comes across as an integral part of the arrangement. *(continued)*

Revolver marks the point at which the mono-versus-stereo debates begin to get interesting. Admittedly, the backward tape loops on “Tomorrow Never Knows” sound cooler in stereo. In addition, stereo is how most listeners are accustomed to hearing music; for some, mono seems bare. Yet all that’s sacrificed with the latter versus stereo is a larger soundstage, a perceived sense of “hugeness,” and the security of familiarity; mono mixes exhibit an organic presence, naturalness, purity, and outright musicality that render moot any tradeoff. The horns on “Got to Get You Into My Life” have never emitted such boldness or pizzazz; the transparency of the chords during “Here, There and Everywhere” and the movement of the bounding piano in “Good Day Sunshine” are utterly staggering. Pure genius.

For kicks, comparing the 1987 digital issue of *Sgt. Pepper’s* to the new remasters lends perspective to just how awful the former are, and how amazing Capitol’s 2009 entries sound. Whereas the previous edition of the landmark record comes across as tinny, lifeless, shrill, flat, and canned—to the extent that listeners are forced to mentally fill in parts they think (and know) should be present—both versions of the revised *Sgt. Pepper’s* present the album as an entirely new adventure filled with immense detail, holographic soundstages, authentic studio dimensions, and shocking instrumental and textural surfaces that heretofore have been missing in action. Tracks such as “For the Benefit of Mr. Kite” seemingly float on an ethereal bed of studio effects, with tremendous top-to-bottom frequency extension revealing trippy surprises such as bells, wood blocks, congas, and various other percussive trinkets that possess a reach-out-and-touch presence.

Sgt. Pepper’s signifies the first instance in which stereo gains an upper hand. Compared to the stereo pressing, the mono edition features less impact, punch, and dynamics. In some ways, it’s almost underwhelming when heard against its technologically advanced mate. Ironically, the results seem to argue on behalf of the use of judicious compression—meaning that the strategy can indeed be positive when used for intended dynamic purposes and not taken to loudness extremes as it so often is in modern recordings. And that’s exactly what *Sgt. Peppers*—and the Beatles records that follow—now resemble; the remasters make them sound like contemporary state-of-the-art albums that are recorded properly and brim with mind-blowing features that never grow tiresome.

And yet, the mono version of *Sgt. Pepper’s* trumps the stereo in several regards. In stereo, “She’s Leaving” runs slower and lower in pitch; the laughter in “Within You Without You” is quieter at the end; McCartney’s scatting is hardly audible on “Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band (Reprise);” the psychedelic phrasing on “Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds” isn’t as clear. Such discrepancies owe to the time lapses that occurred between the mono and stereo mixes as well as the full (or partial) participation of the band and George Martin (both parties favored mono). Such discrepancies are why owning both the mono and stereo mixes of *Revolver*, *Pepper’s*, *Magical Mystery Tour*, and *The Beatles* borders on mandatory. (continued)

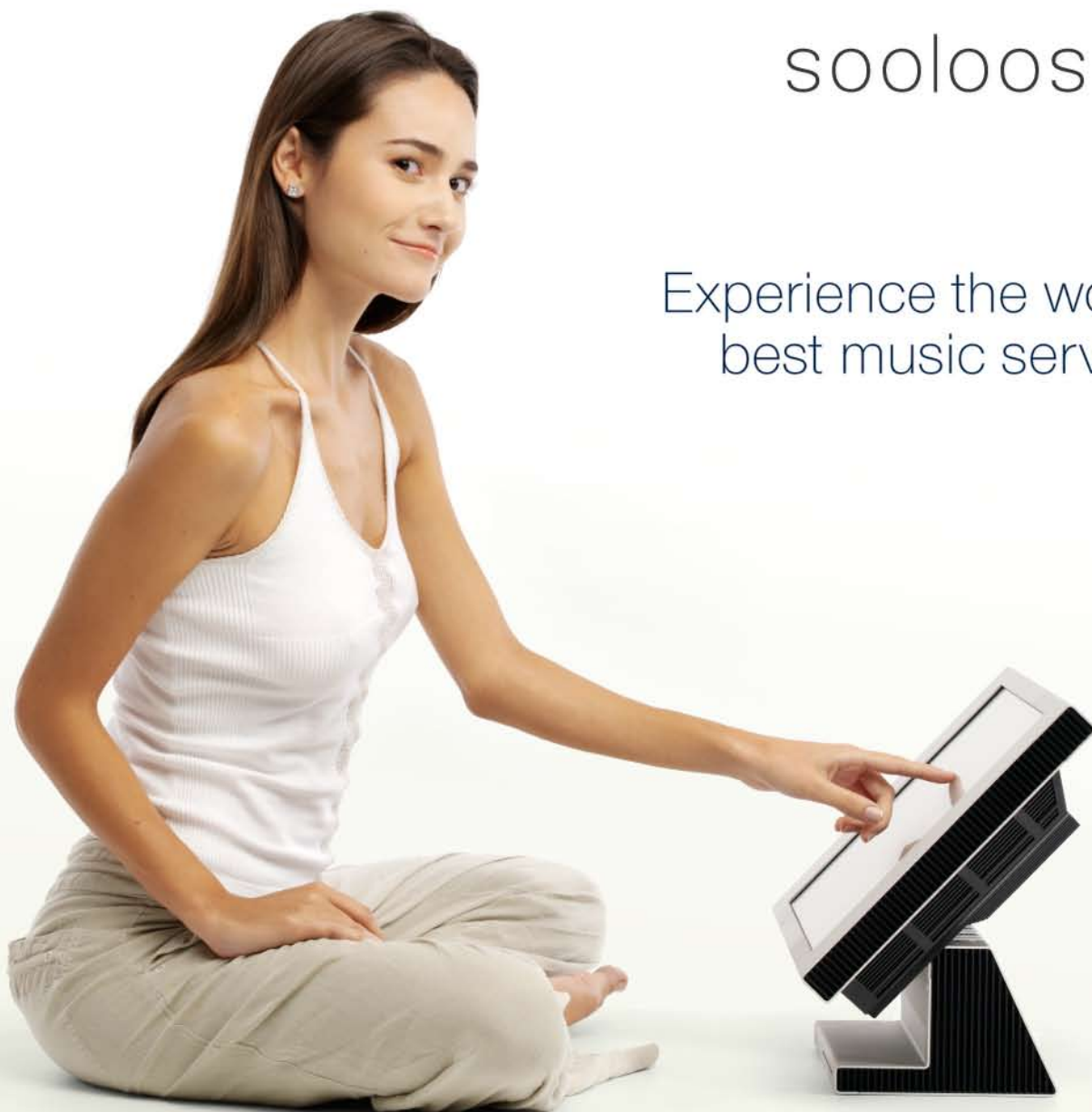




Accordingly, the stereo version of *The White Album* boasts life-size images and discerningly more pronounced frequency extension than its mono counterpart. The immersive experience gives birth to underexposed intricacies (the single snare drum strike that parallels the “shot” in “Rocky Raccoon”), defined footprints (McCartney’s bass purrs and growls), and completely new sounds (“Revolution 1” has what seems to be a horn—who knew?). Differences still abound. The mono version of “Helter Skelter” is shorter, sped up, and without Starr’s renowned “blisters on my fingers” comment. The aircraft effects during “Back in the U.S.S.R.” vary, and there are fewer grunts in “Piggies.” Due to such distinctions—and no clear-cut winner between the two versions, although stereo does seem to have the edge—both versions are considered “authentic.” Again, listeners get to be the bench judge, and most likely, won’t be able to come down on one side or another, which is another benefit of the series.

No painstaking decisions involve *Abbey Road* or *Let It Be*, as only stereo versions exist. Each album unfolds like never before—particularly *Abbey Road*. Thicker tracks such as “She’s So Heavy” come on as indestructible walls of sound replete with phenomenal low-end weight, superb definition, vivid dynamics, and unlimited ceilings and floors. Starr’s drumming on “The End” is absorbing and titanic; it sounds so good, it’s almost difficult to believe this is the Beatles, which, unless one had unlimited funds for collectable LPs, have never sounded great. Depending on one’s perspective, such a conclusion is the ultimate sign that the folks at Capitol and Abbey Road Studios not only succeeded but surpassed most expectations. For if the Beatles remasters signify the last great hurrah of the compact disc, at least the format is going out in style.

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The Fussy Audiophile Perspective

By Jeff Dorgay

Let's cut to the chase. If you are one of the lucky collectors that has the ultra rare, early stamper LP pressings (we can debate the superiority of the U.K. or German pressings, etc. later) of these records in *perfect condition*, the latest remasters of the Beatles' catalog are still going to come up short for you. But they are damn good, and if you are a completist collector, you'll probably buy two mono and two stereo box sets anyway.

To determine just how good these CD's were, the big guns were rolled out. German and British pressings of various albums were borrowed from a few hard core friends. Serious listening began in earnest, using analog and digital front ends (worth more than a gently pre-owned 5 series BMW) as part of a six-figure system to find the differences between old and new.

In the end, I agree with Mr. Gendron: these discs are fantastic, and I also prefer the mono mixes of most of the titles. With compression and harsh digital sound the order of the day, the engineers on this product should be praised for being such faithful archivists. Whether stereo or mono, these are pristine transfers. Both sets sound as if a huge layer of crud has been removed when comparing them to average quality LP's or the 1987 CD's.

While the early LP's have the edge, possessing slightly more body and warmth, you're going to have to find LP's that will cost more *each* than these box sets will cost to get better sound than the CD's provide. And that's assuming those records been handled with extreme care.

For the collector, look at the new box sets as the Lexus you drive every day, saving your vintage Aston Martin for the perfect day when there isn't a cloud in the sky. For the rest of you, these are some of the best sounding CD's ever produced. ●

Current Releases

By the TONE Staff



Cheap Trick

The Latest

Cheap Trick Records, LP, CD and 8-Track

The only thing more fun than listening to the first Cheap Trick album on 8-Track tape in a '69 Camaro is listening to their new album, just released on 8-track tape in the comfort of your listening room – that is, if you still have an 8-track deck. Don't fret if you somehow lost your 8-track player. The LP and CD versions are very good. But the hopelessly nostalgic types can still get the tape version at www.cheaptrick.com for \$30.

Cheap Trick still has a strong pop influence, but it's more Beatlesque than ever before on *The Latest*. (Incidentally, Cheap Trick will be performing *Magical Mystery Tour* in Las Vegas in the middle of September.) Lead singer Robin Zander's voice is as strong as ever and the rest of the band is well sorted out, offering up 13 songs with a wider scope than any Cheap Trick album in recent memory.

Though the band has expanded their scope, they haven't let go of their power pop roots. The second track, "When the Lights Are Out," has a drum intro almost identical to the one in "Elo Kiddies," with blazing guitar riffs that sound as good today as they did in 1974. "Sick Man of Europe" and "California Girl" also pay homage to the *Live at Budokhan* sound, with the rest of the record slower, having a more layered sound, like the Cheap Trick albums in the '90s.

No matter what part of Cheap Trick's 35-year career is your favorite, there's something for everyone on *The Latest*. – Jeff Dorgay

**Slayer***World Painted Blood*

American/Columbia CD, LP

For the past 25 years, it's seemed as if the rest of the world has been catching up to

Slayer.

Unprepared for the ferocious malevolence the band wreaked in the early '80s, and stunned by the pioneering speed metal that the quartet developed beginning with 1986's *Reign In Blood* before re-inventing its approach on 1990's *Seasons in the Abyss*, society and the popular music community at large have looked upon the ensemble with a jaundiced eye--if it all. In Western culture, what's feared and dangerous is at best ignored--or, if any attention must be paid, dismissed as freakish. Not that the quartet's narratives haven't reflected the surrounding turmoil of our environments. As much if not more than any other artist, Slayer's sobering songs reflect the ongoing social, political, and economic disorder in an unflinching manner that most news outlets and media pundits electively gloss over. *(continued)*

No wonder, then, that the title track to the band's disarmingly brutal *World Painted Blood* ponders what 2012 might represent for the human race even though the potent lyrics resound as if they address the modern day. A gargantuan mass of sonic carnage that comes on like the apocalyptic approach of the Four Horsemen, the ripping opener contains everything from an eerie tritone sequence to a wrecking-ball sway that defiantly swings in spite of the manic tempo. It sets the tone for a merciless record that continues the group's late-career winning streak that began with 2001's *God Hates Us All*. Given the members' ages, Slayer has no right to sound so cohesive, precise, angry, or outright essential. Yet they still bring it, refusing to let up or compromise.

To be clear, there's nothing groundbreaking here, nor really should there be. Akin to Motorhead and AC/DC, Slayer long ago graduated to a heightened expectation of consistency and dependability that make the band's role simple on the surface: Dare to bowl audiences over with more of the same, and do it in a way that lives up to their greatest work. A discernible difference on *World Painted Blood* is that the band entered the studio without having already written and rehearsed ideas. The fresher, on-the-fly approach fostered an expanded freedom and creative collaboration that members hadn't experienced in years. Omnipresent and palpable, a punk-fueled vigor echoes the looseness. Save for a handful of exceptions, these songs rank among the fastest and sharpest of Slayer's career. The group's trademark themes—murderers, tormentors, heresy, greed, pain, war, corruption—remain in place. Yet seldom has vocalist/bassist Tom Araya delivered the lyrical bile with such violent possession and lung-bursting rage.

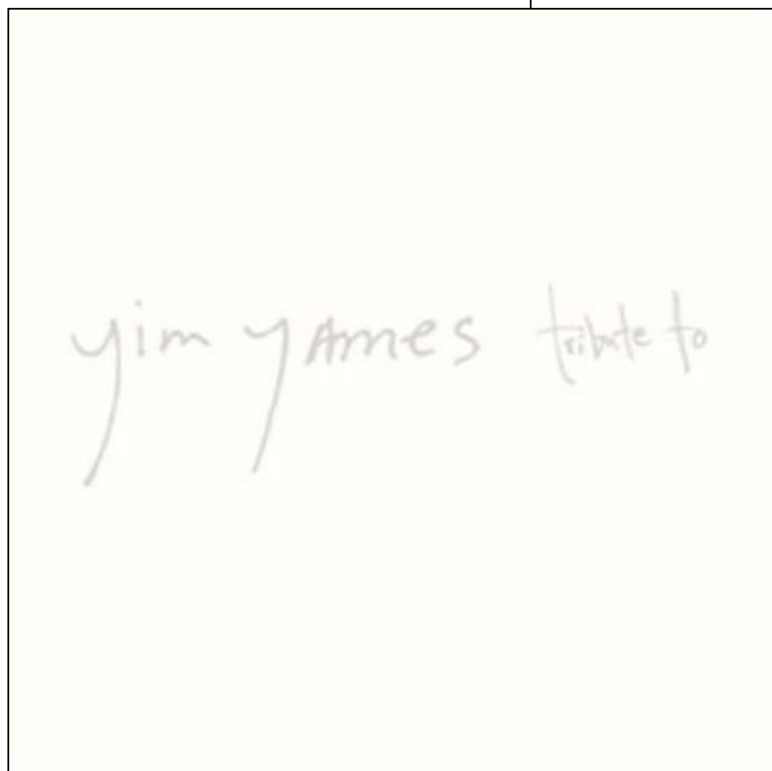
Whether on "Unit 731"—a head-down blast inspired by a Japanese military medical unit that performed harsh experiments on patients to determine judgments—or the corrugated punch of "Public Display of Dismemberment," Araya's yowled words fall into rhythmic gallows that await below. Drummer Dave Lombardo functions as a hydra, his double-bass rolls and combination snare-and-cymbal hits responding in kind to the grind and groove. Anchored by the superhuman timekeeping, a number of surprising transitions and sudden bridges help break up the pace and distinguish the arrangements.

While guitarist Kerry King's contributions prize breakneck speed, antireligious fervor, and whiplash aggression, his "Not of This God" leads to a brief detour that evokes the chomping sound of an industrial trash compactor. Araya stays on top of it all, barking as if he's a demented soap-box preacher armed with a bullhorn. "Beauty Through Order" begins as if Slayer is going to take its collective foot off the listener's throat. But the song spirals into a knot of nightmarish riffs that preclude Araya going off the rails; he plays the role of a twisted protagonist obsessed with killing, sacrificing, and control with a level of measured chaos on par with Anthony Hopkins in "Silence of the Lambs." "Human Strain" stomps and thunders, its circular funnel-cloud motion collecting harmonic debris and melodic tension until it blows through. King and Jeff Hanneman turn their guitars into an agitated swarm of hornets on "Psychopathy Red," written about Russian serial killer Andrei Chikatilo, and come remarkably close to conjuring the feeling (and noise) of ripping skin. Slayer's vibe, energy, impulse, and attack throughout *World Painted Blood* simply astound.



"You'll wish you were in hell!" yells Araya at several intervals during "Playing With Dolls."

The warning serves as an apt metaphor for Slayer's unrelenting third-degree intensity that, when compared to the eternal resting place of the damned, makes even the devil's playground seem weak. — **Bob Gendron**



Yim Yames

Tribute To
ATO, CD

This six-song EP was recorded by Jim James as a tribute to George Harrison. He substitutes his own banjo playing for Harrison's sitar, but it all works together quite well. The choice of songs is excellent, including "Love You To" and "My Sweet Lord," ending with "All Things Must Pass."

Tribute To is sparsely produced, with a lot of echo in the mix. All of the tracks feature James as the solo vocalist, except for "My Sweet Lord," with multiple overdubs of his voice. It sounds as if he is playing alone on a giant sound stage or movie set, with his pain over the loss of Harrison coming through loud and clear.

Though *Tribute To* is obviously a tribute to Harrison, it feels as much a tribute to the Fleet Foxes. James vocal delivery and texture is so convincingly similar to the the Fleet Foxes lead singer Robin Pecknold, that a few staff members were fooled into thinking they were hearing a bootleg of the new, yet unreleased Fleet Foxes album. – **Jeff Dorgay**



Califone

All My Friends Are Funeral Singers
Dead Oceans CD, LP

Ever since forming from the embers of the occasionally still-burning Red Red Meat, Califone has split time between making off-kilter roots records and even more explorative, improvised film music. So it comes as no surprise that the veteran Chicago-based quartet's latest album, the densely textured and somewhat surprisingly melodic *All My Friends Are Funeral Singers*, features many of the characters and images in leader Tim Rutili's forthcoming feature-length movie of the same name.

Yet unlike Califone's staggering *Heron King Blues*, the focus here isn't on narrative as much as on the band's otherworldly atmospherics, junkyard percussion, eclectic noises (the optigan, stylophone, baritone ukulele, horns, and thumb piano are among the armada of instruments utilized), and slackly tuned guitars. Rutili's gauzy hangover vocal wheezes remain ideal for the band's array of decaying Appalachian folk, damaged country, rustic electro funk, and swampy blues. Califone sounds as if it comes from an entirely different century, except that its music isn't traditionally retro, which places *All My Friends Are Funeral Singers* in a time warp that's not old, modern or futuristic. This in-between flux mirrors the odd dalliances of patched-together electronics, archaic strings, and lung-punctured harmonies that frame the songs. Surreal contrasts and abrupt detours abound. (*continued*)

On "Polish Girls," Califone surprises by opting for grand crescendos normally absent from its vocabulary. The record's title track is similarly entrancing, Rutili and company slowly building the tempo and momentum until they're forced to confront and deliver an oversized hook. Yet in other spots, Califone's trademark experimentation carries the day. However cohesive and accessible, a carnivalesque organ and staggered counter-melody underscore—and nearly inten-

tionally undercut—the rhythmic pulse of "Ape-like." "Better Angels" unfolds as a distorted calypso, while piano fragments and subtle fizzing that evokes a leaky steam pipe contribute to the burbling "Giving Away the Bride."

No matter the sonic path taken, Califone clings to an economy of scale. Only the fiddle-driven scrape of "Bunuel" leads into an extended jam, but even this Old West shootout doesn't last too long. It's as if the group discovered that

collage-based experimentation and pop trappings can coexist—and still be as ugly as the "back-teeth grind" described on the swampy, mucky, wonderfully backward blues that is "Salt." Visuals from Rutili's film may be needed to fill in the blanks, but we're the better for being subject to such daring ambition and fractured beauty. Besides, it's healthier than chugging a bottle of cough syrup.

— **Bob Gendron**

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What's a good, working definition of world music? How about a Norwegian jazz pianist who leads a Baroque orchestra playing Arabic music behind a Moroccan vocalist singing the works of ancient Andalusian poets? Oh, and she sings in Spanish and Aljamiado, a Latin-Arabic hybrid spoken in medieval Andalusia.

Jon Balke, the Norwegian in question, is a wildly creative composer with a rich and varied musical palette. His colleagues are equally well schooled in what American trumpeter Jon Hassell calls the "fourth world — a music without borders." Algerian violinist Kheir Eddine M'Kachiche playing microtonal magams (similar to Indian classical ragas) on a European instrument is just one example of the culture clash on this amazing release. The harpsichord accompaniment in the recitative style of early Baroque composition is another.

Singer Amina Alaoui researched the poets, setting their work to music. Southern Spain in the Middle Ages was a unique amalgam of Moorish and European culture, a peaceful meeting point of Christian, Arabic and Jewish scholars. While the rest of Europe was burning books and heretics, this tiny oasis' scientific and artistic achievement and religious tolerance seem like a fairy tale compared to our current situation. The capsule bios she writes in the liner notes for each poet give a fascinating glimpse into this lost world. Lovelorn, imprisoned or overtaken with religious ecstasy, their words may be lost in translation but the joy and pain she communicates with her extraordinary voice transcends language. — **Anne Farnsworth**



BLK JKS

After Robots
 Secretly Canadian CD, LP

Making good on the promise of its initial EP (the critically acclaimed *Mystery*) as well as attention-getting performances at South By Southwest, BLK JKS have delivered one of the year's finest debut LPs with the tracks-stopping *After Robots*. While it would be easy to pin the ubiquitous and increasingly meaningless "world music" tag on the South African quartet's hybrid mixture of sub-Saharan blues, psychedelic rock, hypnotic dub, and abstruse jazz, doing so would miss the point and diminish the group's achievements. Energetic, insistent, and intelligent, BLK JKS' compositions are as much about fusing cross-continental influences as they are about creating a new, shared language for Afro-pop, reggae, and prog rock—seemingly disparate styles that coexist here as if they've been carved from the same stone.

Much like Mali's Tinariwen continues to redefine modern blues and rebel music, BLK JKS force the listener to reconsider dance and rhythm through the context of a vibration-rich vernacular that blends traditional, present, and future sonic dialects. Joined on several tracks by the Hypnotic Brass Ensemble, whose urgent horn accompaniments further propel the forward drive on songs ("Molalatladi," "Banna Ba Modimo") that double as grand marches, the band revels in a joyous noise that combines harmonic vocals, chanted refrains, clipped tempos, and three-dimensional textures. (*continued*)

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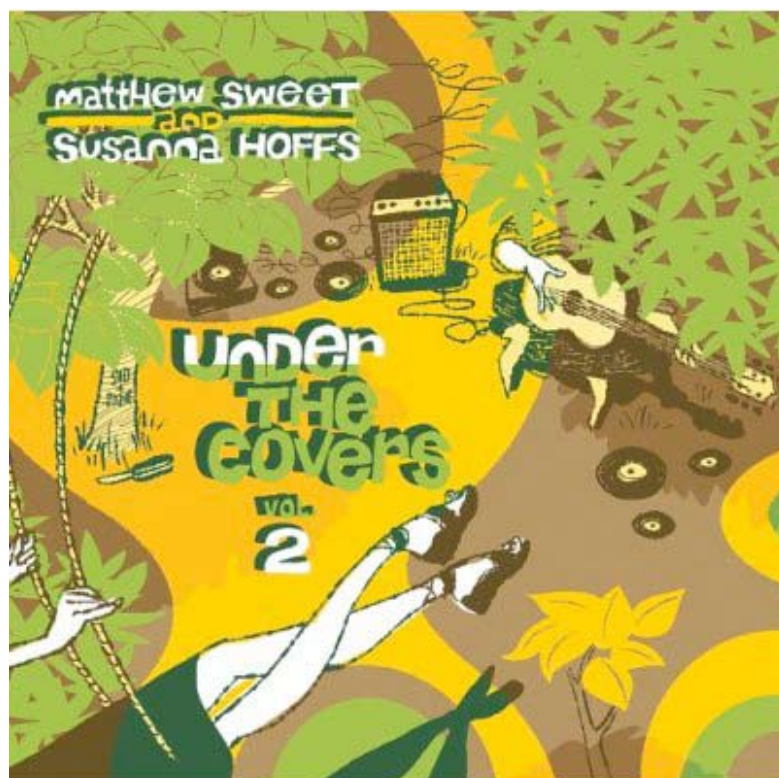
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Instrumental passages appear as if they're lined up against a wall, where explosive interplay and gypsy swagger are the only way to escape their confinement.

Nothing ever seems out of place or overdone; hence, despite the occasional cacophony, tunes such as the desert-wandering "Kwa Nqingetje" benefit from a generous sense of space and atmosphere.

Lindani Buthelezi sings in a combination of English and native Zulu, peppering majestic ballads ("Standby") with a tender falsetto that's as persuasive and entrancing as his surging vocals on dynamic, frenetic material. And thanks to virtuosic drummer Tshepang Ramoba, there's never a shortage of electricity.

Anchored by Ramoba's shifting percussion, elliptical crescendos, and tribal-inflected beats, BLK JKS aren't afraid to hold back, whether the situation calls for extended jamming or swinging, as if in competition with a hardened jazz ensemble. Truly jacks of all trades, the quartet manages to be manic speed freaks, cool jazzbos, exotic African pop maestros, and philosophical poets at once, along the way dropping a staggering array of colors, feelings, and polyrhythms that can both ignite a party and stimulate the mind. — **Bob Gendron**



Sid n Susie [sic]

Under the Covers Vol. 2
Shout! Factory CD

The '80s-era Paisley Underground was a loose confederation of Los Angeles-based bands that shared both a fondness for '60s psychedelic music and distaste for the increasingly violent vibe seeping into the hardcore punk scene. The Bangles were the most commercially successful of the groups, and a certain royal personage was so enamored of the movement that he wrote "Manic Monday" for the group and named his Minnesota recording complex Paisley Park.

In '84, musicians from several of the leading Paisley bands, including Susanna Hoffs of the Bangles, collaborated on *Rainy Day*, a tribute album of covers from their favorite '60s artists. Two decades later, Hoffs teamed up with alterna/power-pop maven Matthew Sweet as "Sid n Susie" to record their own '60s tribute album, *Under the Covers*.

Now the duo has released *Under the Covers, Vol. 2*, with the focus on the '70s. The generous 16 tracks on the CD form an eclectic and highly personal set. Mega-hits like Carly Simon's "You're So Vain" share space with oddball Todd Rundgren tunes; Tom Petty jostles up against Bread's "Everything I Own." Rod Stewart's "Maggie Mae" sung by Ms. Hoffs is destined to become a Sapphic anthem.

Lindsey Buckingham plays on his own "Second Hand News" and Dhani Harrison adds guitar to his father's "Beware Of Darkness." Steve Howe of Yes lays down the familiar 12-string acoustic guitar track on the "I've Seen All Good People" medley that was one of the prog-rock group's biggest hits. Whether that's stunt casting or a respectful nod to their forebears, the results are a satisfying amble down memory lane.

— Anne Farnsworth

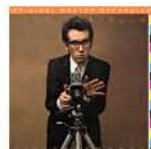
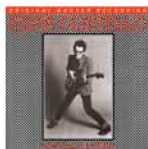
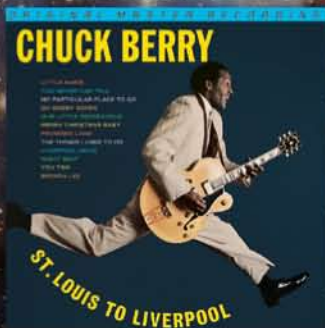


Drivin' N' Cryin'

Great American Bubble Factory
Vintage Earth CD

Absent from the scene for nearly twelve years, Drivin' N' Cryin' pursue similar themes on *Great American Bubble Factory*, a crackling record that harkens back to the Atlanta quartet's roots: hard, crunchy, simple, heart-on-the-sleeve Southern rock blared through Marshall amplifier stacks at loud volumes. While occasionally guilty of hokey tendencies (the cringe-worthy "I Stand Tall"), rare is the group that announces its intentions with more conviction or immediacy. Lyrically, the resurrected unit's latest songs reflect an atmosphere where disillusion, bewilderment, and frustration fester. Still, pride and faith overcome—or at the least, fuel the belief that better days can shine through.

Leader Kevn Kinney's voice is an ideal conduit for airing grievances about middle-class crises, credit problems, and surmounting pressures. Pockmarked from nicotine, battered from being pushed too hard, and unconcerned with staying in tune, Kinney's reedy nasal is the sound of the situations, doubts, and people he sings about. It's not always pretty, but when it is, as on the soulful "I See Georgia" and rootsy "Don't You Know That I Know," it's enough to melt fears. But Kinney is even better when howling and shouting like a rabble rouser on the courthouse steps. *(continued)*



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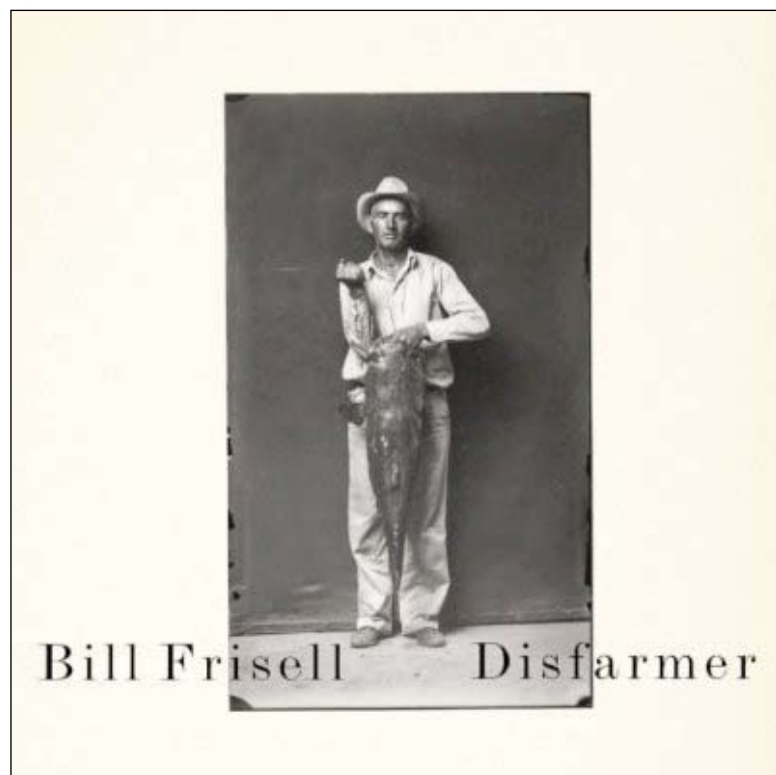
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An insightful songwriter with a sympathetic conscience, Kinney has the fading American Dream on his mind, whether using cars and proto-punk legends as metaphors to illustrate a desirable target (the stomping “Detroit City”) or railing against outsourcing (the rallying title track, which utilizes a peppy horn arrangement to staggering effect). Kinney might be too red, white, and blue for his own good, but it’s hard faulting his logic or wit. On the garage-rock sway of “Preapproved, Predenied,” his tale of living to work resonates with a pained truthfulness that’s become all too commonplace; there is no easy way out. “Midwestern Blues” contemplates seizing second chances via reluctantly moving on and chasing dreams that may no longer exist. The acoustic “This Town” distills a dying mid-America: disappearing employment, dead-end opportunities, status-quo boredom, and social disinvestment. But the narrator ends up staying. His love is too strong for the time-tested principles—what the locale represents, even if it’s now just a figment of the imagination—to turn his back on it now.

Of course, *Great American Bubble Factory* isn’t just Kinney’s creation. His mates deliver in spades, circling the narratives with shotgun riffs, timely fills, steady percussion, punchy aggression, and bluesy distortion. As rich as Kinney’s solo albums have been, they are a world away from the exuberance of *Drivin’ N’ Cryin’*. “Whatever happened to the great American world?” Kinney challenges on the title track. That issue might be best left to economists and think tanks, but what’s left unsaid is that *Drivin’ N’ Cryin’* has resolutely responded that another great American tradition—rock n’ roll—is alive and well. — **Bob Gendron**



Bill Frisell

Disfarmer

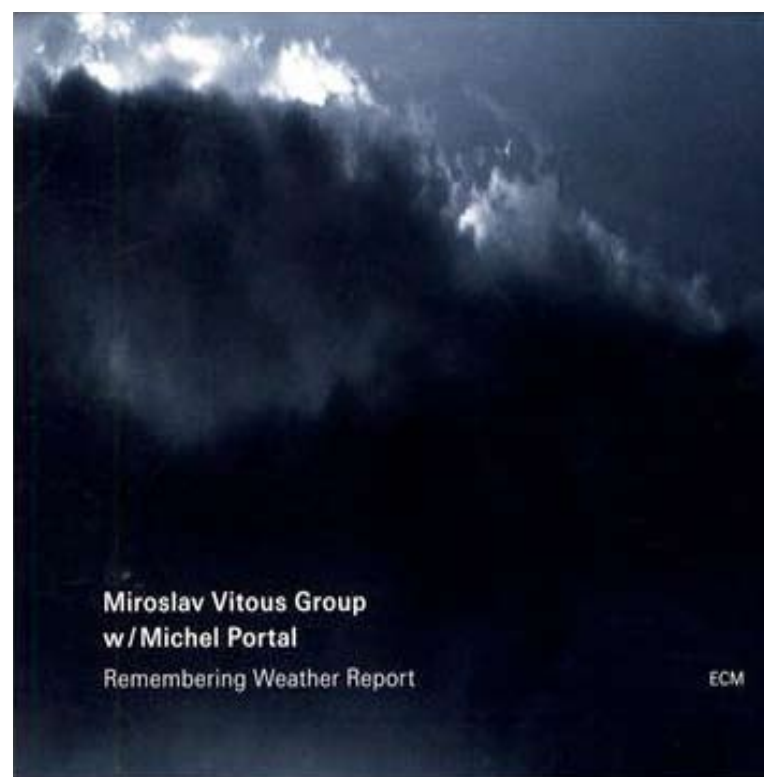
Nonesuch CD

Jazz critics don't know how to slot guitarist Bill Frisell. Someone who has reached his level of technical expertise and success in the jazz arena is easily defined. But to shift from that exalted position into different musical territory, well that's just crazy. So he gets a label, 'post-jazz', because after jazz, what else is there?

When you're one of the most original artists working today, there's a lot. *Disfarmer* is a deep and thoughtful evocation of the American experience. Roots music, country and western, a little Charles Ives, with a subtext based on a 20th century photographer's vision of the heartland, are the elements of this unique effort.

Disfarmer's photography has been compared to the work of Irving Penn and Diane Arbus. He was born Mike Meyers, an Arkansas farm boy who changed his name in repudiation of his agrarian roots. He remained in Arkansas, operating out of a small studio where he took starkly beautiful black and white photos of local farm folk. After being introduced to the photographer's work, Frisell scored a multimedia touring exhibition. That score forms the basis of this recording. A documentary is also in production, with Frisell providing the soundtrack.

The music does have a filmic quality, combining traditional instrumentation of mandolin, fiddle and pedal-steel guitar with jazz harmonies, distortion and looping. As in Ives' compositions, at times familiar hymns and folk songs sound simultaneously, forming an atonal dreamscape. Included in the 26 cuts are covers of "That's All Right, Mama" and "I Can't Help It If I'm Still In Love With You", classics that flow seamlessly with the originals that form the body of this amazing collection. – **Anne Farnsworth**



Miroslav Vitous

Remembering Weather Report

ECM CD

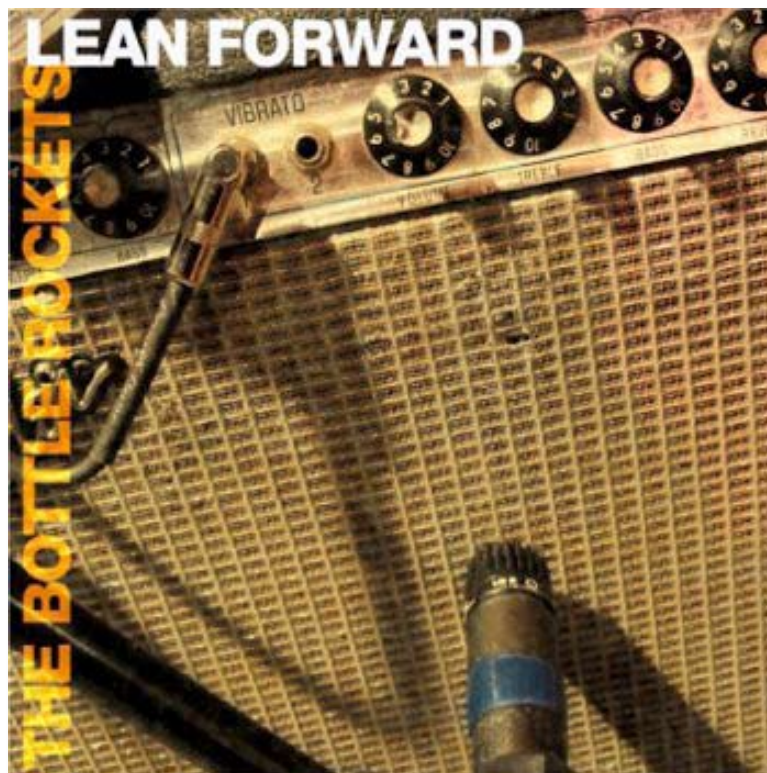
Before delving into the merits of this record, potential buyers need to know that the only thing that connects the music to Weather Report is Miroslav Vitous, a founding member of the jazz/rock fusion supergroup. The music on this release falls under the free jazz label, a style that sits on the opposite end of the jazz spectrum from fusion. Think Ornette Coleman, not Joe Zawinul.

Misleading titles aside, the music is good; great in places. Vitous is a virtuoso bassist with an uncompromising musical sensibility. He not only composed the material, but produced and engineered the session as well. (*continued*)

Supported by the fabled Manfred Eichner as executive producer on the classic ECM label, this is a high quality project.

Vitous left Weather Report after two short years, as the group moved away from its original acoustic instrumentation. **That begs the question — what exactly is Vitous remembering? The band's original format or his vision of what he thought the group should be?**

One thing he's remembering is saxophonist and composer Wayne Shorter. The former bandmate is probably closest to Vitous in his expansive and visionary approach. The opening track, "Variations On Wayne Shorter," references Shorter's classic "Nefertiti," with Vitous setting up the theme by alternating finger with blistering bowing technique. "Variations On Lonely Woman" gives Coleman's best-known Free Jazz standard similar treatment. One of the most interesting cuts is "When Dvorak Meets Miles," the title alone enough to pique the interest of any fan of jazz or the classics. "Blues Report" is basically a rearrangement of Davis' "Freddie The Freeloader." Vitous is not only treading deep musical waters, he's skirting the swirling eddies of copyright infringement as well. — **Anne Farnsworth**



Bottle Rockets

Lean Forward
Bloodshot CD, LP

Groups forced to struggle for their existence know something or two about the current economic downturn. Even in times of prosperity, such hardscrabble artists realize few luxuries, and instead sacrifice peace of mind and security for the stubborn beast that is rock and roll. While geography doesn't necessarily always loom large in the equation, the Midwest and South claim a working-class aesthetic that translates well to bar bands that seemingly know the state of the country better than any politician. This awareness is reinforced by the small, down-to-earth places they play and the audiences that come to watch. There's nothing sexy about it; just gritty, honest music that's often reflective of the times that inform it.

The Bottle Rockets have been kicking around in smoke-filled dives for the better part of two decades. They predate their friends in Wilco by several years, and guitarist Brian Henneman even contributed a few licks to the Chicago-based group's 1994 debut. Despite rumors that insisted otherwise, fame evaded the Missouri-based quartet, which recently recovered from a years-long creative tailspin with 2006's *Zoysia*.

As it happens, that was just a warm up. On *Lean Forward*, its ninth studio effort, the band reclaims the barnstorming glory it displayed during its formative years. Just as importantly, the Bottle Rockets present a smart, apolitical slice of contemporary America largely absent from popular entertainment. And they do it with considerable gusto.

A whiskey-soaked ruckus immediately ensues. The leadoff "The Long Way" straps the listener in the passenger seat of a speeding car, the group's ringing treble tones and twangy accents setting the stage for what's a scampering romp through fractured small towns, frayed relationships, and tough hopes. *Lean Forward* doesn't shirk from hardship or trouble, but the record's joy is in its refusal to give in or give up. There are no pleas for pity or martyrdom—only cries for acknowledgement and defiant statements of guarded optimism. For the Bottle Rockets, salvation is in surviving, no matter how one accomplishes such a feat.

Hence, the down-and-out protagonist with toothpicks holding up his eyelids on the strolling "Done It All Before" continues to fight despite unfavorable circumstances; the country-laced "Shame On Me" finds a partner discovering truth in denial; the shit-kicking chug of "The Way It Used to Be" attempts to stave off life's surprise attacks and nostalgic emptiness via driving rhythms and assured purpose. Carefree vibes always prevail over worries. The jaunty "Get on the Bus" two-steps to a bluegrass dance. Sitar-like ripples pepper the escape from reality that is the cozy "Slip Away." Nothing, it seems, is enough to crush the band's spirit.

"Hard times/Will not do me in," declares Henneman in a thick, tobacco-chewy timbre on the clanging "Hard Times," singing with the determination of someone who's been through it all before and, most likely, will be through it again before it's all said and done. Uplifting and confident, the Bottle Rockets deliver more reassurance than any bailout plan ever could. — **Bob Gendron**



Embracing Past and Future Technologies:

**An Interview with Simon Drake
from the Naim Label**

The Naim record label is filled with interesting contradictions: a company that does not produce a turntable (but they do make a cracking phono preamp and tonearm) presses a substantial amount of their audiophile recordings on vinyl. In fact, many of them were recorded to analog tape with Nagra equipment. Though they are well-known for making some of the world's most-musical CD players, they are also releasing their titles as high resolution 24 bit/96khz downloads. The bottom line is the commitment to music and recorded quality.

Simon Drake is the man in charge of all this, and he's a very young guy. That means there will be a visionary at the helm well into the future, which should benefit music lovers and audiophiles quite well. Drake is determined to make the Naim Label much more than just an audiophile label as they continue to grow.

After twice crossing paths with Simon in the UK, he ended up on my doorstep a few weeks ago, here in Portland, Oregon. While I was attending the Montreux Jazz Festival in Switzerland, his email said, "I'll be in your neighborhood next week, rather unexpectedly, let's get together."

We chatted about cars, all things Naim and of course music.

How did you get the job?

An interesting story ... Three years ago, I had just finished university and I was looking for a job in the record industry. I answered an ad in *Music Week* (a UK industry magazine) and Paul Stephenson was looking for someone, and they had a huge amount of applications. I had just finished my degree in contemporary music along with business and I was in a band as well.

In the meantime, the band I was in had recorded an album at Peter Gabriel's studio, but it got tied up in red tape and that's another long story ...

Paul had sent me statistics on the label and asked me how I could improve it, to which I had a rather lengthy response. The others that had applied were more experienced than I was, but Paul, Doug and I hit it off and I felt totally at home at Naim from the moment I set foot in the door. I had lots of other interviews lined up for similar jobs in the industry, so I had nothing to lose!

How did the interview go?

I was brutally honest. I told them what I didn't like about their business model. I told them what I felt needed fixing and that I was willing to be their man. I think they appreciated that. They gave me the job!

What was your next move?

It was slow to start because we were only putting out two or three records a year. Now we are putting out 12 records a year.

How has that helped the bottom line?

Now we are an independent arm of the company and a profit-making one at that. It's great to introduce the Naim brand via artistic means to people who otherwise wouldn't know what we are about, but would love to be a part of it.

What has changed in your distribution model? Naim records used to be only available at your local HiFi store.

We're still dealer-centric, but a lot has changed. However, we still want our dealers to have access to our music, whether to sell or even just to demo our gear; it's very important to us. It's important for us to get us in traditional music retailers as well. That's some of the best exposure you can get. And our recordings are getting noticed in some of the bigger magazines: *Downbeat*, *Billboard*, etc.

Yes, James at Tom Tom Audio sent me home with a few of your newest discs ...

Yeah, he's a big supporter of the label and what we're doing. We really appreciate it. (*continued*)



Let's talk about content, you are definitely moving away from the standard "audiophile faire?"

Yeah, we just signed this new avant garde jazz band, Empirical. They're all over the jazz mags in Europe. We're getting out to a lot more people. Gwyneth Herbert, too. Now she's signed with us. She released an exclusive album for B & W and this, her third album, is really her elaborating on those compositions and recordings with a little more attention to detail in the Naim release.

Even with the care that you take with your recordings, the live experience is still more engaging. Do you think technology will ever catch up?

That's how it *should* be! Good HiFi will never replace live music, but it should compliment it.

So how is the online store doing?

Excellent; sales are above our projections.

none but the lonely heart



charlie haden • chris anderson

How well are your customers responding to the high res downloads?

Very well indeed. Hi Def downloads are particularly large files. People with slow connections have a bit of trouble with fully uncompressed 24bit WAVs. In a way, the future of digital music is entirely dictated to by the ever increasing speed of the internet – that and the development of inexpensive storage space.

I like to think we have the formats required to cater for all digital users' needs. Because of the diversity of people's digital music playback habits things are ever changing. We've just gotta try and keep up!

If you will divulge, what percentage is CD vs. LP vs. download?

Downloads represent just over 50% of the sales on our site. This remains the only place you can get our Hi Def offerings – whilst obviously our CDs and LPs are stocked in record stores across the world. LPs sales are healthy too. Although there has been a resurgence in vinyl of late; Europe and the Far East are most excited about our audiophile vinyl where as the Hi Def downloads appear to be much stronger in the US and UK.

Are you spending any time on Twitter and Facebook?

That's next. We started with MySpace and are building from there. MySpace is still very music centric though, you don't get that with Facebook or Twitter. Facebook is perfectly interactive, but is yet to be as supportive to the music industry as MySpace.

Sounds like you don't get much time off.

(laughs) I'm a young man. It's OK!

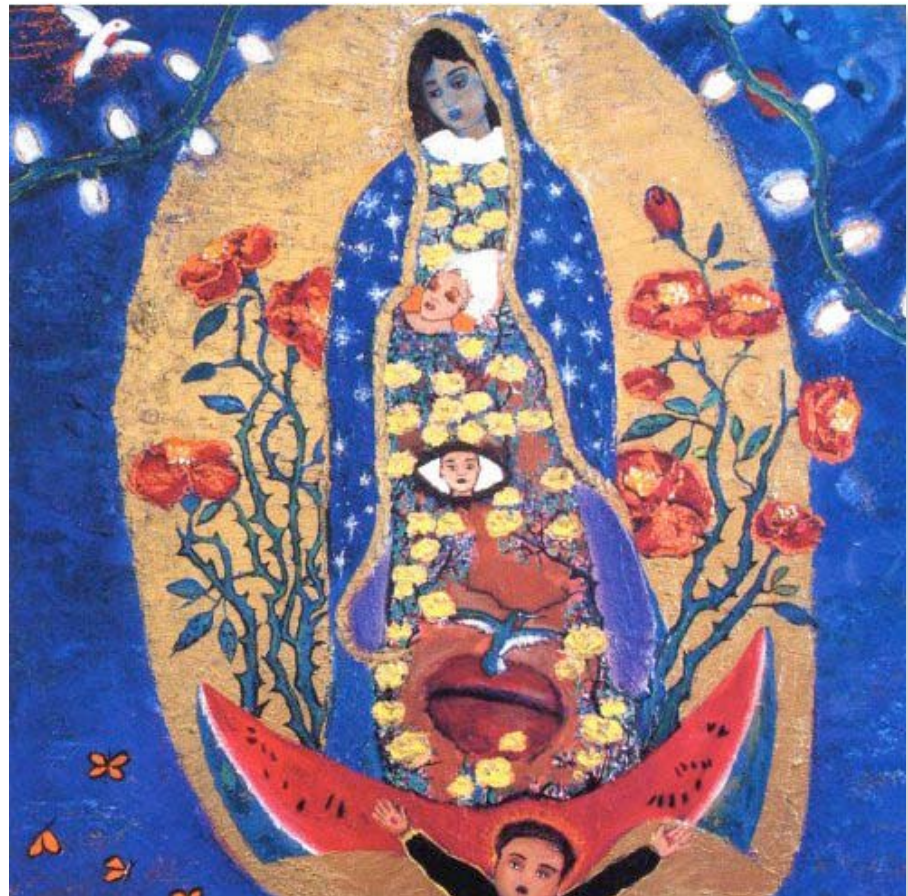


The TONE Audio Obscurities

By the TONE Staff and Audio Industry Friends

Sooner or later, every music magazine produces an article about “The Top 100 Records” or something to that effect. However, in the 21st century, what more can we say about *Sgt. Pepper* or *Who’s Next*? If you love music, you should have those records in your collection anyway and arguing about which one of them is the best is pointless.

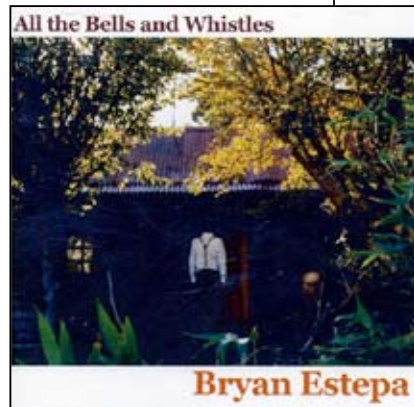
One of our goals is to help you to expand your music collection, so we’ve put together a list of new and old albums that are off the beaten path — some *way* off the beaten path. Along with picks from our staff writers and editors, several friends from the audio industry have selected some tracks. We hope our oddities list leads you to a few new albums you haven’t considered before. As Doug Graham from Naim Audio likes to say, “This is not music for HiFi, this is music for music’s sake.”



The Krayolas

La Conquistadora
Box Records

This is the revival of a Chicano garage band out of San Antonio who showed their love for the Beatles and other British bands (The “K” is in honor of the Kinks). They had a nice, ten-year run, beginning in the mid-’70s, and, thanks to a South by Southwest showcase, are back. Catchy tunes; great harmonies—plus Sir Doug’s legendary organist, Augie Meyer, who contributed a vintage tune of his, “Little Fox.” The Krayolas, led by Hector Saldana, also echo Warren Zevon, Bob Dylan and, for sure, the Beatles. Fab! And to hear them at their earlier prime, go for their compilation, *Best Riffs Only*. — Ben Fong-Torres

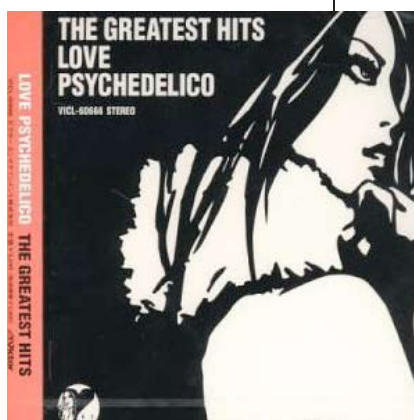


Bryan Estepa

All the Bells and Whistles
Popboomerang

I heard about Estepa from my best buddy, Tom Gericke, a music and television producer who's been in Sydney since that quiet little burg hosted the 2000 Summer Olympics. Tom turned me on to Prefab Sprout, Blue Nile and some cool Aussie flicks, so if he suggests checking out Estepa, I'm on it. Plus: this singer, songwriter and multi-instrumentalist, a young Filipino-Australian, is huge on Gram Parsons and country rock, and he's true to the genre, although his penchant for sweet harmonies takes him into Poco and Beach Boys turf. And, it's not only any of his own CDs, but he's done excellent covers of Dylan tunes, including "I Threw It All Away." Worth searching for.

– Ben Fong-Torres



Love Psychedelico

The Greatest Hits
Victor Entertainment

I don't know that much about this band – in fact, just learned online that they've come to call themselves "The Delico Band." But I've loved them since hearing them in the late '90s, on their debut album, the audaciously titled "The Greatest Hits." Fronted by two Japanese women, Delico mixes Japanese and English (much of the latter being charming mumble-jumble) and deliver marvelous songs that actually do sound like classic rock numbers, shades of the Beatles, the Mamas and the Papas and a rockin' jukebox of others. The music is totally foreign, and yet fuzzily familiar. Psychedelic—and delicious.

– Ben Fong-Torres

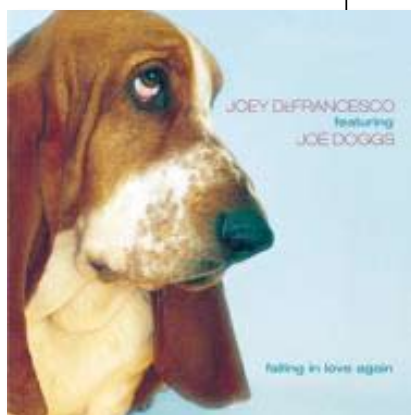


Larkin Gayl

Two Hands
About Records

A fresh new talent from the San Francisco Bay Area. Yes, she sounds like Norah Jones (not at all a bad thing), but, on various tracks, she may conjure a Madeleine Peyroux or a Corinne Bailey Rae. She's capable of swinging, in a languorous jazz tempo, as well as swooning through ballads of love and hope. And she composes songs with intriguing twists. "I Do" is a tender ode to one's wedding day. A same-sex wedding day. Produced by veteran knob-twister George Daly and backed by everything from accordion to saw, Gayl is a triumph her first time out.

– Ben Fong-Torres



Joey DeFrancesco featuring Joe Doggs

Falling in Love Again
Concord Records

Quincy Jones turned me onto this guy, Joe Doggs (DeFrancesco is the organist), and, in turn, I played a snippet at our onstage interview in San Francisco in December, and asked if anyone in the Herbst Theatre audience could identify the high and smoky soprano voice, belting out "But Not For Me." "Jimmy Scott!" yelled one person. "Nina Simone?" said another. Good guesses. But Doggs, who Quincy calls "the real deal" in the liner notes, is actually Joe Pesci. Before he began whacking people in the movies, he was a club singer—and a fine one. With a tasty jazz combo behind him, he is money on "Falling in Love Again," "Secret Love" and more. Any criticisms? *Feggetaboutit!*

– Ben Fong-Torres



Bonnie Raitt

Takin' My Time
Warner Bros

Nearly two decades before Bonnie Raitt's first hit, "Nick Of Time," swept the 1990 Grammys, she was already a seasoned pro, an accomplished bottleneck blues guitarist as well as a singer. A young white female who had been welcomed into the fold of the older, mostly black blues fraternity, she enjoyed a critical acclaim that hadn't yet translated into commercial success.

Takin' My Time was Raitt's third release and a stellar example of southern roots music as reinterpreted by the Los Angeles music scene in the '70's. Drawing on the organic similarities between the Delta bluesman and laid back Southern Californian musicians, Raitt and her colleagues Jackson Browne, Taj Mahal and Lowell George, as well as producers Steve Cropper and Don Was, reinvented the genre, laying a chill rock groove under the traditional tales of lost love, penury, booze and cocaine. No trains or hellhounds on this trail though; they're pretty scarce in Malibu. — Anne Farnsworth



Al Jarreau

Look to the Rainbow
Warner Bros.

Germany's fascination with David Hasselhoff may be puzzling, but they got it right when they awarded Al Jarreau a third German Grammy for this live double album from 1977, years before "Breaking Away" and the theme from TV's *Moonlighting* brought him an American audience.

Jarreau is one of the best male jazz singers ever; no one can touch the creative versatility of his scat. His vocal artistry spans tongue-twisting hard bop lines, stunning mimicry of drums and bass and a character actor's repertoire of voices, from young girl to old geezer. Add a unique and humorous use of language in his improv and compositions and you have a musician who, like Louis Armstrong, never lets virtuosity get in the way of an audience's good time.

Whether it's his original lyric to Brubeck's "Take Five" or Broadway staples like the title song, Jarreau's genius shines throughout the nearly 80-minute concert. Speaking of "Take Five," here's a warning to anyone picking up the remastered CD version. In trying to fit the recording onto one CD, the engineers played slice and dice with some of the tracks. For instance, the brilliant 45-second a capella percussive intro in 5/4 that Jarreau uses to set up the band is gone, the most egregious of several ill-advised cuts. — Anne Farnsworth



Bette Midler

Bette Midler
Atlantic

By the early '70s, Bette Midler was a Broadway veteran, but her career gained traction with a bawdy cabaret act in the unlikely milieu of New York's gay bathhouse scene. Part Sophie Tucker, part Andrews Sisters, and politicized by the feminist sensibilities of Laura Nyro and Nina Simone, Midler, with her bombastic angst and risqué humor, made the emotionalism of her 1980 breakout hit, "The Rose", a snooze fest to longtime fans.

Nicknamed "Bathhouse Betty," Midler and her pianist-arranger, a young Barry Manilow, rearranged a repertoire that encompassed theatrical ballads by Brecht and Hoagy Carmichael, '60's pop, and R&B, and fused a breathless "Lullaby On Broadway" with "Optimistic Voices" from *The Wizard Of Oz*. Annie Ross' vocalese, "Twisted," is set in a bar with Midler and the girls dishing her therapist over banana daiquiris.

It all blends seamlessly into a high-voltage alternative stage show: Vegas Strip meets the Lower East Side. Like Madonna, another cultural icon who developed her style cruising Manhattan's downtown haunts, Midler, with her frizzy hair, platform shoes and vintage dresses, became as popular with young women of the day as her wildly exuberant sound.

— Anne Farnsworth



The Pointer Sisters

Live At the Opera House
Blue Thumb

Before their breakout hits, “Fire” and “Slow Hand,” Oakland’s Pointer Sisters were an unusual amalgam of jazz, blues, Broadway and C&W. Dressed in ‘40s-era thrift store attire that was soon emulated by fans at their live shows, they harmonized flawlessly and scatted at blistering tempos on bop standards like “Salt Peanuts” and “Cloudburst.”

This Bill Graham-produced double album captures the first pop music performance ever staged at the San Francisco Opera House. It opens with an extended overture of themes from their set, even more enjoyable in retrospect as the full orchestra trades off with the funky wa-wa of electric guitar so emblematic of the ‘70s. Sister Bonnie tears up “Black Coffee,” one of the quieter moments in this high-energy show that roams from Broadway hits like “Steam Heat” to the Andrews Sisters’ “Bei Mir Bist Du Schoen” and Allen Toussaint’s R&B classic, “Yes We Can Can.” “Fairy Tale,” an original written by Anita and Bonnie Pointer, won a Grammy for Best Country Performance, was recorded by Elvis, and got them an invite to the Grand Ole Opry. It was a testament to their authenticity despite the protean nature of their style.

– Anne Farnsworth



Joe Williams

Joe Williams Live
Fantasy 1973

Joe Williams shared singing duties with Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald in Count Basie’s “Second Testament,” the post-war reformation of his Blues-centric big band. Never a blues shouter like Jimmy Rushing or Big Joe Turner, the Chicago native’s style was more sophisticated and his supple baritone more versatile, allowing him to interpret jazz standards as easily as he testified. That versatility shines on this CD, where a swinging “A Beautiful Friendship” follows an extended talk/sung ad lib on the Basie/Rushing classic “Going To Chicago Blues.” His encyclopedic knowledge of American roots music is showcased in a medley that links the Miles Davis’ classic, “All Blues,” with five other chestnuts, including Williams’ signature “Every Day I Have The Blues.”

Produced by Orrin Keepnews and recorded before a live audience at Berkeley-based Fantasy Records’ Studio A, the all-star band includes Cannonball and Nat Adderley (a co-producer), pianist George Duke, drummer Roy McCurdy and bassists Walter Booker and Carol Kaye. Sexy, groovy and very cool, like the man himself, this little gem is a standout.

– Anne Farnsworth

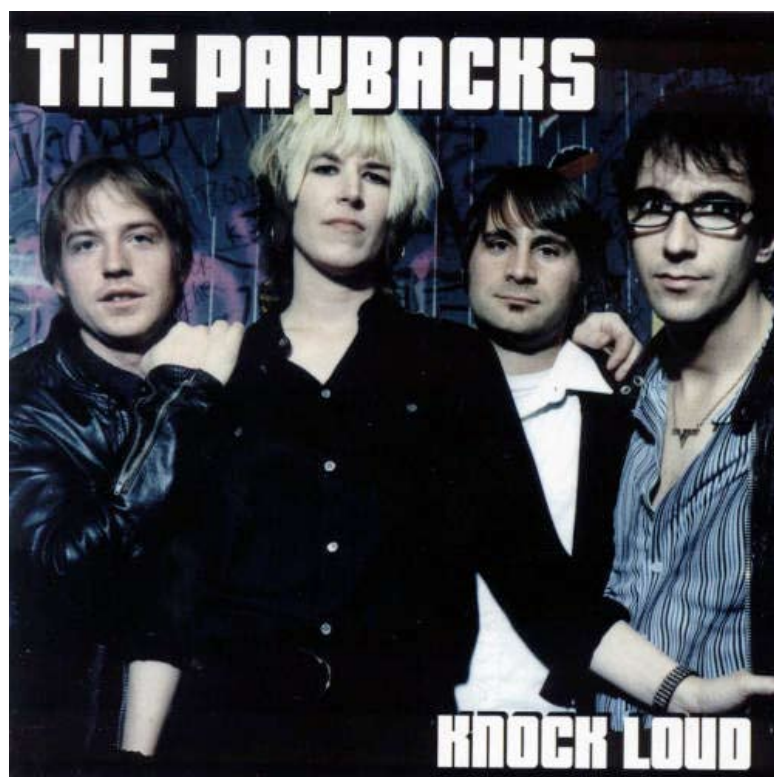


Lorez Alexandria

Alexandria the Great
Verve

Los Angeles-based Lorez Alexandria never broke wide, perhaps because her relaxed, dark-honey tone was so similar to Sarah Vaughan’s. But she was one of the coolest American Songbook interpreters around. Cool enough, for one thing, to attract the cream of west coast jazz musicians to back her up. These aces included Bud Shank, Wynton Kelly, drummer Jimmy Cobb and bassists Paul Chambers and Al McKibbin.

Several of the cuts on this release are from *My Fair Lady*, and Alexandria and arranger Billy Marx give them a slant that’s worlds away from the Broadway stage. Her play with the lyrics of “Satin Doll,” always problematic for hetero female singers, are a brilliant solution that doesn’t compromise the original. In her version, some dude who’s “out cATTin’ with *his* Satin Doll” is making eyes “over his shoulder” at Lorez and she warns him to “watch it, amigo, ‘cause she’s flippin’.” Always the cool one, that Lorez. – Anne Farnsworth

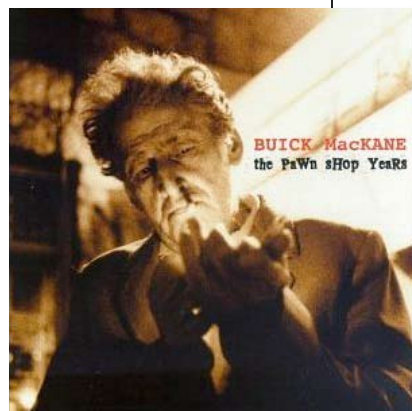


The Paybacks

Knock Loud

Get Hip

In the early 2000s, garage rock enjoyed a renaissance not seen since the mid-1960s, a period that has spawned four excellent *Nuggets* box sets. Yet the hype got the best of the trend; public interest waned, labels lost interest, and the anointed bands failed to deliver solid sophomore albums. Led by the fiery Wendy Case, an androgynous front woman whose five-dollar-steak-tough vocals and scraping guitar tones come on with the business-before-pleasure intent of a girl who's not only hung with but beaten up the boys club, the Paybacks got buried in the retro shuffle despite owning a freshness that many of their peers lacked. 2002's *Knock Loud* lives up to the promise of its title, riding high on explosive riffs, taut interplay, and arena-sized refrains that find Case shouting about everything from African-American women's genitals to getting tied up in knots. Oh, bondage, up yours! — **Bob Gendron**



Buick MacKane

The Pawnshop Years

Rykodisc

Whenever the history of rock is properly reconsidered, Alejandro Escovedo will occupy a much greater place in its pages than he does today. A part-time side project that made just one record, Buick MacKane distills Escovedo's trademark styles—gritty rawk, Texas roots rock, bluesy glam, carefree punk, Americana—into one loud, untamed, brawling conflagration. This 1997 set is the sound of broken guitar strings, bleeding fingers, busted hopes, and primal desires. “Sometimes it’s so messed up/I feel like I should give it up/Then again I feel so fine/I just can’t ever get enough” sings Escovedo on “Black Shiny Beast,” the sentiment epitomizing the magnetic pull and natural inclination that the weathered veteran has always felt toward rock and roll’s dangers, pitfalls, and pleasures. There’s no doubting his passion. Fittingly, *The Pawnshop Years* closes with an intoxicating cover of the Stooges’ “Loose” that both searches and destroys. — **Bob Gendron**



The Muffs

The Muffs

Warner Bros./Reprise

Tinged with a punk edge, the Muffs’ playful 1993 debut stands among the best power-pop record of the ‘90s, thanks to singer-guitarist Kim Shattuck’s dynamic vocals, catchy songwriting, and irresistible melodies. The former Pandoras member does Los Angeles’ rich pop history proud, managing to be silly, sweet, angry, funny, gruff, sexual, and cute as she moves from song to song. Simplicity reigns; the arrangements rely on just a few chords and a basic beat, and the garage-rock energy, brash attitude, and crunchy distortion is the stuff on which memorable careers are based. For the Muffs, any illusions of fame proved fleeting. The band landed a cover of Kim Wilde’s “Kids in America” on the *Clueless* soundtrack and cranked out a handful of charming albums before the decade expired. Yet they’d never again come as close to co-ed perfection as they do here. — **Bob Gendron**

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by **Ben Fong-Torres**
(former senior editor at Rolling Stone)

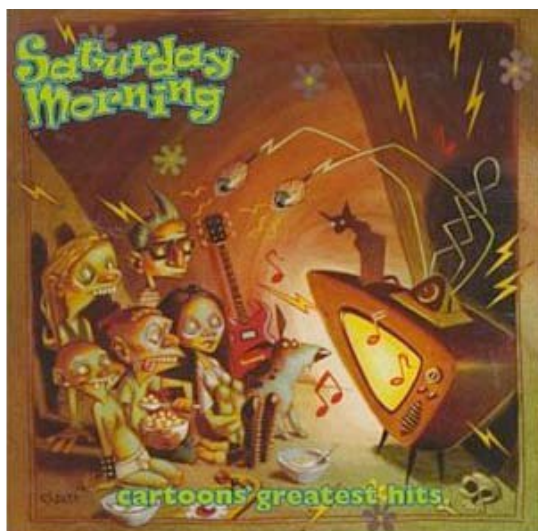
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Betty Davis

They Say I'm Different
Light in the Attic

No, not Bette Davis. However, like the legendary actress, Betty Davis is deserving of special mention in a crowded field. After breaking up with Miles Davis, Davis gigged as professional model before turning her attention toward music. And even in the post-Gloria Steinem mid-1970s, she stood out for possessing an outspoken sexuality, a preference for cutting-edge lyrics, and a flamboyant attitude that made everything else appear sanitized. Of course, it took decades for Davis' sweaty funk and outrageous soul to reach a larger audience; it needed to first pass through the ears of crate diggers, samplers, and hip-hop producers. Anchored by songs such as "He Was a Big Freak" and "Shoo-B Doop and Cop Him"—Ms. Davis didn't shy away from kinky themes—1974's *They Say I'm Different* is a hoot, as much a hedonistic party starter as it is a bold display of confidence, style, and sass.

— Bob Gendron



Various:

Saturday Morning Cartoons' Greatest Hits
MCA

While it's now a distant memory, network television once aired nothing but cartoons on Saturday mornings. Better still, many of the animated series featured jingles that forced any kid (or adult) within earshot to drop their cereal spoon and hum along. (Later in life, the music functioned as good-humored background entertainment for coping with the effects of certain chemicals.) A can't-miss proposition, this 1995 compilation finds more than a dozen bands paying tribute to their favorite cartoon classics. Highlights abound: A pre-commercialized Liz Phair teams up with Chicago power-pop vets Material Issue on "The Tra La La Song." The Ramones put a charge into "Spiderman." Frente! plays a delightful rendition of "Open Up Your Heart and Let the Sun Shine In." And who couldn't love the Butthole Surfers tacking "Underdog?" Wheel! – **Bob Gendron**



Keith Richards

Live at the Hollywood Palladium
Virgin

Granted, nothing made by a Rolling Stones member qualifies as "obscure." But hidden amidst the countless nostalgic rehash that are the last five or six Stones concert albums is *Live at the Hollywood Palladium*, a gem that captures Keef and a top-notch outfit getting down and dirty in a manner that has long evaded the Stones. Yes, it helps that Richards could still sing when the show was taped in 1988 (as much as Richards' cigarette-coughed asides, grunts, grumbles, and mumbles qualify as singing). Still, the big draw is the impeccable sense of rhythm and timing. Richards and his X-Pensive Winos lock into one taut groove after another, and drummer Steve Jordan hits the snare with a purpose that puts the group on immediate notice. Devoid of gloss, fluff, fireworks, and filler, the album kicks with a mean, loose and boozy swagger 20-plus years on. Whip it up, indeed.

– **Bob Gendron**



Th' Faith Healers UK

Imaginary Friend
Elektra

Looking back, it's amazing to consider the risks that major labels took by promoting bands that, despite considerable talent, had little chance at mainstream success. Before greed conquered the business and labels forgot what really mattered, such acts proliferated and grew, and every so often, surprised everyone in the room by breaking through on a minor level. No such luck for Th' Faith Healers UK. Despite being signed to Elektra, the group never graduated from the small-club circuit or benefited from the alt-rock frenzy. Part of the reason was that the English quartet didn't fit in any box; another is that the band's Krautrock fixations, fuzz-drenched melodies, oblique lyrics, and epic soundscapes came either a few years too late or too early, depending on how one views trends. But the out-of-time nature hasn't subtracted from the immense enjoyment and uplifting catharsis that comes with *Imaginary Friend*, as good today as it was the year Kurt Cobain's death signaled the end of grunge. – **Bob Gendron**



The Ex

Turn
Touch & Go

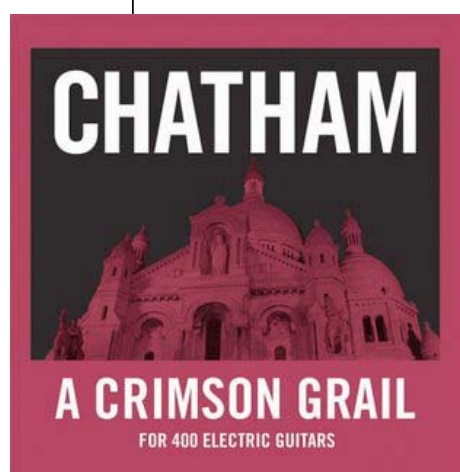
Infused with African percussive elements, The Ex's 2004 double album *Turn* is as good as any place to start learning about the Netherlands collective, whose principles even supersede those of the iconic Fugazi. A discordant cocktail of punk, rock, jazz, skronk, spoken word, and world fusion, their music seethes, rumbles, and celebrates as it ricochets off imaginary walls and non-imagined borders. Divided between the members, the singing is more rant than rave—a reading of anti-capitalist doctrines meant to free the spirit, educate the mind, and trigger laughter. While highly intellectual, the thought-provoking lyrics are balanced by the continual clatter of scraped guitar notes, stray stand-up bass lines, fragmented feedback, and jumbled beats. Invigorating and disarming, engaging and inventive, *Turn* is a lesson in the fine art of persuasion. — **Bob Gendron**

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Fushitsusha

Live
PSF

There's no preparing for the onslaught that is Keiji Haino's Fushitsusha. A legendary underground figure in modern Asian music, the multi-instrumentalist has been unleashing sonic terror on the world for the past three decades, and yet, nothing compares with his noise-rock maelstroms with Fushitsusha during the late '80s/early '90s. Soaked in feedback and loosely inspired by traditional Japanese sounds, the power trio's psychedelic, loud, and improvisational creations remain otherworldly. Oddly enough, *Live* is one of the group's more restrained affairs. Not that it's for the meek. Akin to Fushitsusha's hard-to-find catalog discs, *Live* exists as a secret language—an avant-garde link to the past and future. Haino is similarly obscure. He doesn't play guitar as much as molest, torture, violate, and strangle it—and cares not a damn whether doing so is legal or not. — **Bob Gendron**



Rhys Chatham

A Crimson Grail (for 400 Guitars)
Table of the Elements

For a musician wedded to minimalist ideals, Rhys Chatham loves to maximize potential. Commissioned in 2005 by the city of Paris to write a piece for the all-night La Nuit Blanche Festival, Chatham elected to expand on his previous *An Angel Moves Too Fast to See* (for 100 guitars) by quadrupling the power and mass. Aided by four leaders who listened to his directives via headphones, Chatham and company performed a 12-hour spectacle of shimmering beauty, orchestral might, and textural surrealism that concluded in the Sacre-Coeur church. On album, *A Crimson Grail* is cut down and split into three 20-minute sections, each distinguished by a wellspring of crescendos, silences, atmospherics, and echoes. The third part is what most would likely expect from such an army of instruments; it's thunderous, dense, droning. Throughout, the recurrence of light and shade instill the distinctive movement with a majestic quality that suggests the spiritual presence of something greater than music itself. — **Bob Gendron**



Prince

One Night Alone, The Bonus Disc
NPG

Prince's last live album, *One Night Alone*, is a 3-CD box set that you will be hard pressed to find at the used record store. Long out of print, it commands a price of \$175 - \$450, if you can still find a shrink-wrapped copy. A thousand lucky fans got an opportunity to buy a four-disc set direct from his NPG label online and they went quickly because that fourth disc captures an unplugged set of ten tunes, including a cover of Joni Mitchell's "I Could Drink a Case of You." (In Prince-speak, it's "A Case of U.")

This is Prince like you've never heard him, on piano with minimal accompaniment. At first you get pulled in just by the novelty of Prince performing in such an intimate manner, but after the shock wears off, you realize that he's just as funky and kinky as ever, no matter the setting. Your personal party with Prince begins with the first track, "One Night Alone", where he begins undressing you and gets right down to business on track two, "U're Gonna C Me," when he claims, "There's nothing harder for you than me."

If you've only heard MP3's on various file sharing networks, you're experiencing only a fraction of what *One Night Alone* has to offer. This is a fantastic recording. Yes, it's tough to find, but it's one of Prince's best. – Jeff Dorgay

GRUPPO SPORTIVO



MISTAKES

Gruppo Sportivo

Mistakes
Sire

Still playing clubs in the Netherlands with three of their original six members, Gruppo Sportivo is not obscure in The Hague, where they formed in 1976, but for the rest of the world, they were a blip on the new wave radar screen when Sire Records gave practically every band with cool hair and a bouncy sound the chance to make a record.

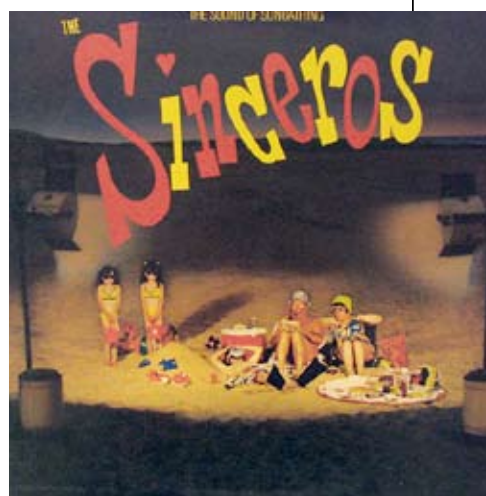
Mistakes had five seconds of fame, with the single "One Way Love" getting play on college stations. The rest of *Mistakes* is quirky and fun, with songs that poke fun at relationships, the music industry and high school. Make no mistake, though: even with two pretty girls in the band and the Devo-esque cover shot by Anton Corbijn, this is nothing like ABBA. – Jeff Dorgay

The Sinceros

The Sounds of Sunbathing
Epic

The Sinceros' debut album was a mixture of power pop and new wave. It wasn't as edgy as XTC but it was every bit as clever as Elvis Costello and the Attractions. The album's main single, "Take Me To Your Leader," received a lot of airplay on the radio and MTV. Perhaps this lack of edginess was the band's undoing. Though the playing on *Sounds of Sunbathing* is excellent and the vocal harmonies tight, there was no "My Sharona" or "Dear God" to push the Sinceros to ultimate radio fame.

Sounds of Sunbathing is still a solid pop record that music collectors bring up when the topic is that prolific new wave period of 1979-1982. Ironically, the Sinceros got another boost in 1984 after they had disbanded, when the Canadian music channel, Muchmusic, debuted. – Jeff Dorgay



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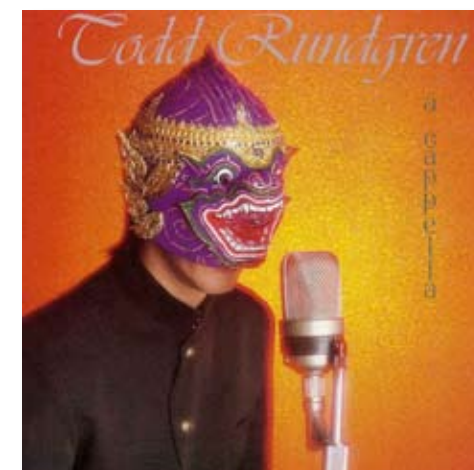
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Rudy Van Gelder in his Studio, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey.



Kevin Gray &
Steve Hoffman



Todd Rundgren

A Cappella
Warner Bros.

How many normal singers does it take to make one Todd Rundgren? Thirteen. That's how many backup singers Rundgren took with him on the tour to support *A Cappella*. And if you were fortunate enough to see this record performed live, it only went further to prove what a genius he is. Staying true to form, just when the single "Crybaby" from his previous album (with Utopia) was getting a lot of attention, Rundgren mixed it up again and started his relationship with Warner Bros. with a record completely different from his last.

The first side of *A Cappella* has a traditional, almost gospel feel, with Rundgren singing all of the harmonies, and producing the album's only single, "Something to Fall Back On." He gets trippier on side two, with the opening cut, "Miracle In The Bazaar," a foreshadowing of the musical structure he would use on the next two WB albums, *Nearly Human* and *Second Wind*. Then it's a quick bounce back to the gospel groove for the last two tracks, "Honest Work" and "Mighty Love."

And that's why so many of us can still be friends with Todd Rundgren. He's always forging new musical paths, and inviting us to come along. — Jeff Dorgay



Fear

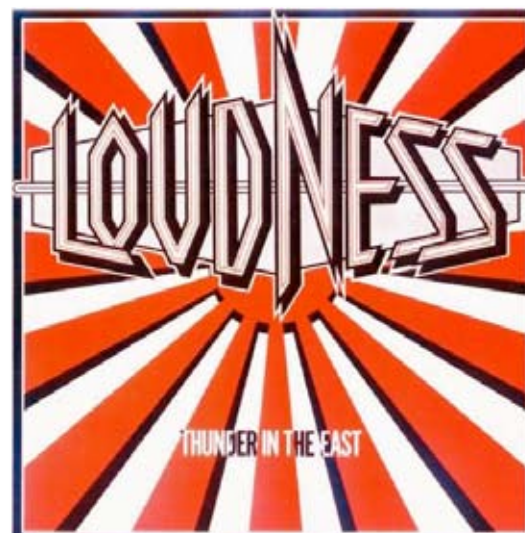
The Record
Rhino

How can you not love a punk album that starts with “Let’s Have a War” and ends with “Fuck Christmas”? Though lead singer Lee Ving played a tough guy in a few movies (remember him as the club owner in *Flashdance*?) he was never more bad-ass than when he was up on stage, singing “I don’t care about you, fuck you!”

This record is full throttle anger all the way through. Fear expresses their hatred of New York (“New York’s Alright If You Like Saxophones”) and girlfriends (“Beef Bologna”). And they even cover the Animals’ classic, “We Gotta Get Out of This Place” with an edge that will have you up off the couch, slamming into whoever or whatever is nearby.

If you missed Fear back in the early ‘80s, you can catch the band at its peak in the Penelope Spheeris movie, *Decline of the Western Civilization*. Filmed in grainy black and white, Ving jumps off the stage to punch a female fan who’s been spitting on him during their performance. Oy!

– Jeff Dorgay

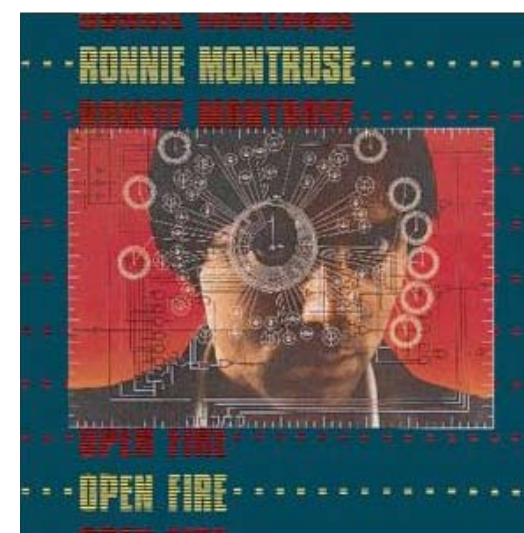


Loudness

Thunder In the East
Atco

Thunder In the East was Loudness’ fifth album, but it was their first commercial success in the U.S., reaching Number 74 on the *Billboard* chart, with the single “Crazy Nights” getting a lot of airplay. Songs from this album and their next release, *Lightning Strikes*, were very popular with the late night metal audience in 1987 when MTV’s *Headbanger’s Ball* had the band in heavy rotation.

Fronted by lead guitarist Akira Takasaki, Loudness had the power of Motley Crue, RATT and Dio rolled into one. Their songwriting – concerned primarily with rebelling and gaining the attention of females – was on par with their metal peers, but between Takasaki’s blistering guitar work and drummer Muetaka Higuchi’s thunderous beats, Loudness was not a band you could ignore. They had it all: the sound, the attitude and the hair, but somehow, Loudness never reached the status in the US that they achieved in their native Japan. – Jeff Dorgay



Ronnie Montrose

Open Fire
Warner Bros.

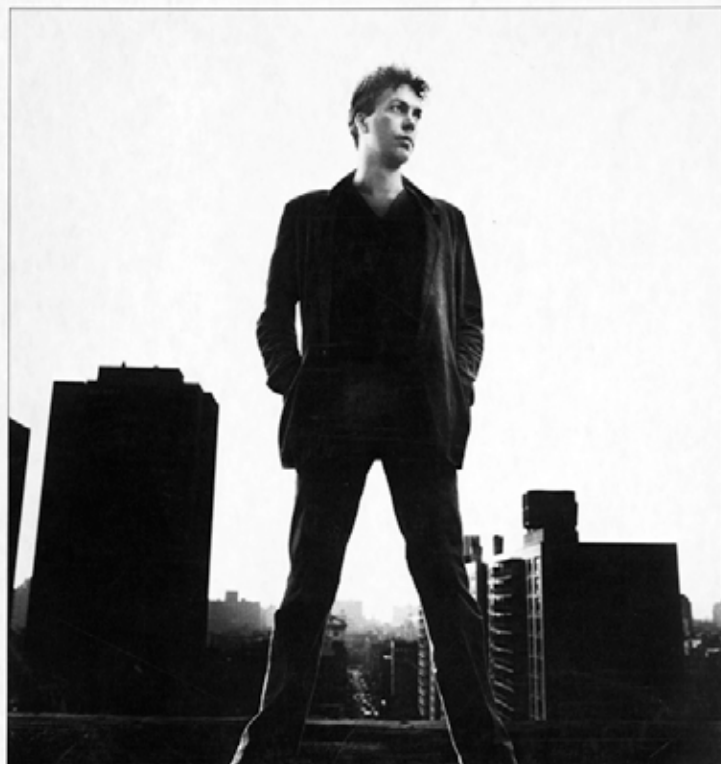
Between the demise of his original band, Montrose, being a top guitarist for hire and starting the Gamma project, Ronnie Montrose produced *Open Fire* in 1978 with ex-bandmate Edgar Winter. Making heavy use of early guitar synthesizer technology, Montrose lays down some interesting guitar riffs in an album that still sounds fresh today, paving the way for solo guitar records to come.

The level of playing on this record is excellent throughout, but Montrose’s treatment of “Town Without Pity” is stellar. While imported CDs of *Open Fire* can command \$50, owners of turntables should be able to purchase a pristine vinyl copy for about \$3.

– Jeff Dorgay

TIM CURRY

SIMPLICITY



Tim Curry

Simplicity
A&M

We're far enough down the road in 2009 that a portion of today's music buying public would find *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, the film that launched Tim Curry's career in 1975, to be an obscurity in its own right. However, many devoted Curry fans don't know that he released three albums between 1978 and 1981, with the help of some top notch studio talent. His final album, *Simplicity*, was produced by music powerhouse Michael Kamen and mastered by Doug Sax of The Mastering Lab. Curry is joined by Earl Slick on lead guitar and David Sanborn on alto sax, with Kamen playing oboe on two tracks.

With an eclectic mix of originals and some well chosen standards, Curry adds his powerful baritone to produce a great collection of crooner tunes. He starts with the playful "Working On My Tan" and ends with a smoky version of "I Put A Spell On You."

Even though he was riding on the buzz of his previous album, *Fearless* (which had made it onto the *Billboard* Top 100), and residual *Rocky Horror* popularity, Curry could not make the transition to be taken seriously as a singer. He commented in a Rolling Stone interview that after three years of touring to support his records, his fans just couldn't let go of his previous role and let him be a musician. They still wanted Dr. Frank-N-Furter. — Jeff Dorgay

Tuff Darts

Tuff Darts
Sire



A one and a half-hit wonder band, Tuff Darts was a New York group best known for their hit "All For the Love of Rock And Roll" and "(Your Love is Like) Nuclear Waste."

Not a pure punk band, Tuff Darts came on the scene as punk was starting to wind down in 1978, and New Wave, with its myriad fusions, began to take hold. Their sound was more of a doo-wop punk, a sort of Leny and the Squigtones meets the Ramones, which always made *Tuff Darts* a fun spin.

Tuff Darts was produced by Tony Bongiovi, mixed by Bob Clearmountain (who would also mix *Van Halen* and *Minute By Minute* that year) and featured the photography of the legendary Mick Rock. The band was poised for takeoff, but broke up just after the record was released. In the album's credits, Tuff Darts pointedly "thanked no one." But they're still welcome. — Jeff Dorgay

The Meatmen

We're the Meatmen (And You Suck)
Touch & Go Reco



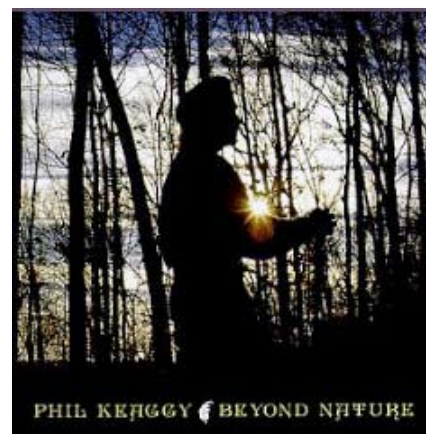
This cheery East Lansing, Michigan punk band, headed by Tesco Vee, was best known for making fun of the hardcore punk scene. They released a string of albums from 1980 to 1997, with numerous personnel changes, but their insulting message remained intact. With songs like "I'm Glad I'm Not a Girl," "One Down, Three to Go," and "Mr. Tapeworm," the Meatmen managed to offend nearly everyone, with their barely intelligible lyrics buried underneath layers of buzzsaw guitars. And that's what it's all about. — Jeff Dorgay



Box of Frogs

Box of Frogs
Epic

Three original Yardbirds members, along with former Yardbird Jeff Beck on a couple tracks, rock the house on this 1984 recording that was sadly overlooked. Beginning with the Howlin' Wolf-like "Back Where I Started," this record had a great vibe and good energy thanks largely to mostly-unknown vocalist John Fidler, with Beck in excellent form on his guest solos. In a different time this band would have caught on, but in a year when Springsteen and Prince ruled the charts, there wasn't much chance of a group of aging British blues-rockers breaking onto the AOR charts. Too bad, 'cause this was a pretty good record by some guys who had some tales to tell and the chops to back them up. You can find it these days as a package with the band's second effort, *Strangeland*. – Rick Moore

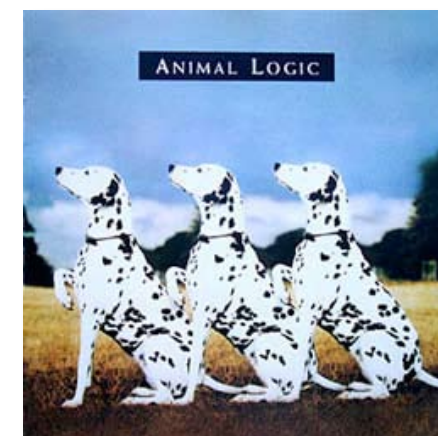


Phil Keaggy

Beyond Nature
Sony

It is rumored, before he was anybody, that Phil Keaggy was admired by Jimi Hendrix. But the Nashville-based Keaggy is universally regarded as a guitarist's guitarist, and not only in the Christian arena where he is best known. This 1992 acoustic album, featuring everything from lilting, Irish-inspired compositions to symphonic pieces adapted for a single guitar, is simply extraordinary. Keaggy's virtuosity and use of open tunings, with strings and woodwinds, never gets old, and while he was already known for great electric guitar playing and good songwriting, *Beyond Nature* set the standard for what an acoustic guitar record – or maybe every instrumental record – would have to live up to in the 1990s. With stellar arrangements, performances and production, there's not a bad note to be found on this beautiful record.

– Rick Moore



Animal Logic

Animal Logic
IRS

Many thought Animal Logic would be the next supergroup back in 1989 when this record came out. With a signing advance that was rumored to be off the charts, bassist Stanley Clarke and Police drummer Stewart Copeland's group played the material of then-unknown songwriter and vocalist Deborah Holland. Unfortunately, much of the material wasn't on par with Clarke's and Copeland's virtuoso playing and arranging. Still, two cuts still stand up: the excellent "There's A Spy (In The House Of Love)" and "I'm Sorry Baby (I Want You In My Life)." With guest appearances from Steve Howe and Freddie Hubbard, and one of the great album covers of the '80s with the three Dalmatians in profile, this is still a record that deserves to be remembered and put on for a spin every now and then.

– Rick Moore



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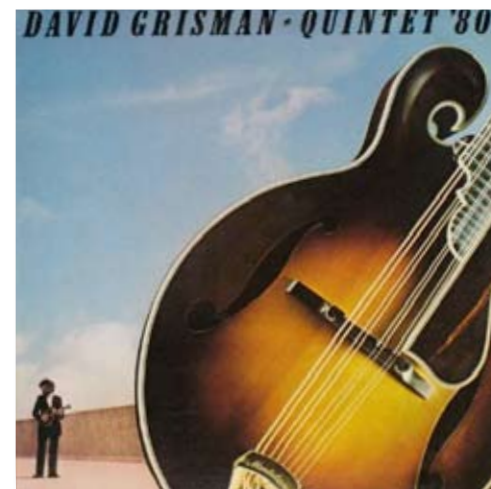
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David Grisman Quintet
Quintet '80
Warner Bros.

Many of David Grisman's fans consider *Quintet '80* to be his finest work. The mandolin playing here might not have been his most spectacular, and he may have included superior compositions on some other records, but the overall feel and continuity of this album made it a masterpiece. The group included a young Mark O'Connor on both violin and guitar, and wonderful strings by fiddler Darol Anger.

Quintet '80 changed the newgrass landscape with pieces like "Sea of Cortez" and "Thailand," and with a stunning reading of John Coltrane's "Naima" featuring Rob Wasserman on bass with a simple and delightful arrangement. This record shows how limitless the role of an instrument can be in the right hands. Hard to find but worth the effort. — Rick Moore

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Stone the Crows

Stone the Crows
Repertoire

Thanks to a thriving R&B scene in the late 1960's, Stone the Crows came together in Scotland to form a powerful group. The mixture of vocalists Maggie Bell and James Dewar (who later achieved great success as the bass player and vocalist for Robin Trower) sounded a lot like a duet between Ray Charles and Janis Joplin with a ballsy backup band.

The first four tracks are split between a softer R&B sound and a blues rave up mix, with a very intriguing rendition of "Fool on the Hill." The final track, "I Saw America," is more psychedelic.

Unfortunately, the band met an early demise when their lead guitarist died after grabbing an ungrounded microphone. – **Tom Caselli**

Delaney and Bonnie

Motel Shot
MSI: ATCO

This album predated Jackson Browne's *Running on Empty* by a few years but used a similar concept, recording informal hotel room and backstage sessions. This recording features most of Derek and the Dominoes and the crew from Mad Dogs and Englishmen; the only one missing is Eric Clapton. The acoustic performances contained on *Motel Shot* have gone down in history as some of Delaney and Bonnie's best work.

It's an intimate album of gospel, blues and old time country mixed with roots rock, captured with such a natural feel it's like having a revival meeting in your living room. – **Tom Caselli**



Man

Maximum Darkness
United Artists

A jam band long before the term was coined, Man was often referred to in underground music circles as the "Welsh Grateful Dead." Think of Phish blended with Quicksilver Messenger Service.

Maximum Darkness was released late in their career, recorded live with their hero, Quicksilver's John Cipollina at London's Roundhouse in 1975. It features their interpretations of "Codeine" and "Babe, I'm Gonna Leave You," along with their own classic "Bananas." Guitar pyrotechnics abound with Deke Leonard rubbing shoulders with Cipollina. For fans of the San Francisco sound, this is indispensable. – **Tom Caselli**





Kabaka/Amao/Winwood (or Third World)

Aiye-Keta
Island

This obscure album is often noted by musicologists as one of the first crossovers between rock and world music. Traffic's Steve Winwood collaborated with African musicians Remi Kabaka and Abdul Lasisi Amao between recording *Low Spark of High Heeled Boys* and *Shootout at the Fantasy Factory*.

The album contains five songs, extended jams that combine much more than the music of two continents into its grooves, with a sound that is at once tribal, ethereal and rocking. Fans of Mickey Hart's *At the Edge* series will be intrigued to hear what Steve Winwood did 20 years earlier. – **Tom Caselli**



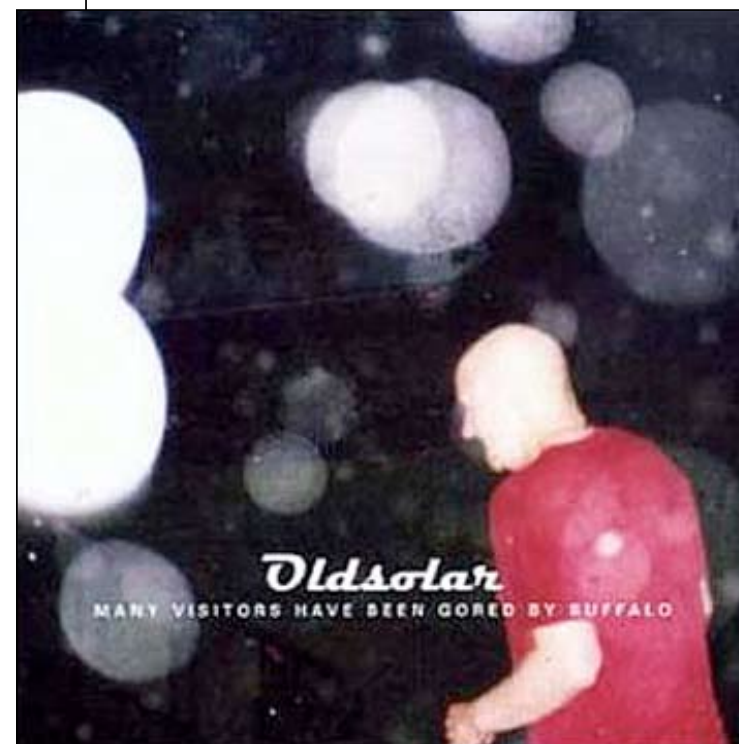
Sir Lord Baltimore

Kingdom Come
Polygram Int'l

Though barely a side dish to most music lovers, this band from Brooklyn, N.Y. is a main course to connoisseurs of fine heavy metal. Brooklyn was an unlikely place for a metal group to be forged in 1970, as the area's claim to fame was doo-wop in the 50's and hip hop towards the end of the 70's.

This power trio featured guitarist Louis Dambra, who soaked his guitars in mud, drummer/lead vocalist John Garner, and bass player Gary Justin. They captured the attention of Mike Appel, the man who launched Bruce Springsteen.

Sir Lord Baltimore created a sound so heavy, it took 20 years for a host of Norwegian death metal bands to catch up. With song titles like "Hell Hound," "Helium Head," and the title track – well, you get the idea. If you want to pass Metal 101, knowing this record intimately is mandatory. – **Tom Caselli**



Oldsolar

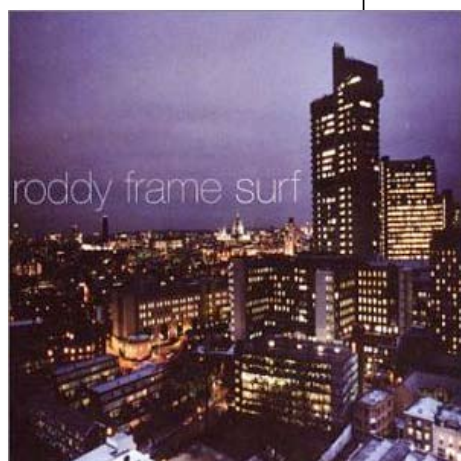
Many Visitors Have Been Gored By Buffalo
Mint Records

I bought this in 2000 based on a *New York Times* review. The critic's description of "slow-core" perfectly fits the dreamy, slow-paced quality of this work. The intimate soundscapes of the record have an edge that makes you want to hang in there to see where it's going, with its layered, repeating notes, dominated by synth riffs.

Perhaps these aren't the greatest musicians, but they've got great ideas. Imagine a slow Joy Division on skunk weed and you're getting close. *Many Visitors...* is a record full of incidental music that flows into a compelling listen. – **Doug Graham**

Roddy Frame

Surf
Redemption



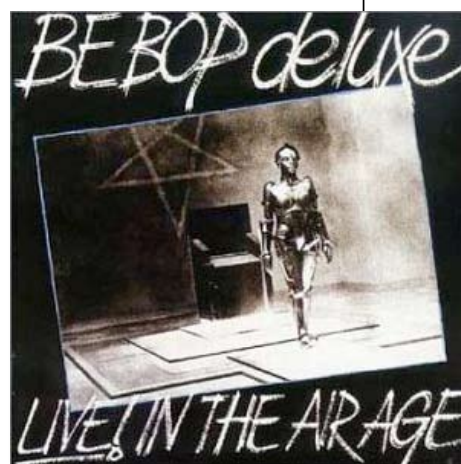
Roddy Frame, the founder and lead vocalist of Aztec Camera recorded this gem at the turn of the century, with a collection of songs that were in his kit bag for a while, in various states of readiness, waiting for a record deal.

Surf is more than an angst-ridden collection of “boy meets girl” songs, stripped bare; just a man with a guitar and a wee bit of 90’s reverb. This is one that will always have you asking “where have I heard that before?” It was overlooked in its time, but it merits a look—and a listen.

– Doug Graham

BeBop Deluxe

Live! In The Air Age
Harvest



Not to be confused with the *Air Age Anthology*, this live recording from 1977 presents a four-piece band fronted by axe-wielding Bill (Waaay ahead of his time!) Nelson. You owe it to yourself to hear this record, even if only for the track “Adventures in a Yorkshire Landscape,” the piece I always reach for when people ask to hear some great guitar work.

But “Great guitar” is insufficient for describing *Live! In The Air Age*. This is a band that can carry a tune and serve it up in an achingly beautiful fashion that will make you weep. BeBop Deluxe had a string of albums in the ‘70s; their most famous was *Sunburst Finish*, producing their only top 20 single, “Ships in the Night.” I, for one, never let them pass, and 30 years later they are still one of my favorite bands. – Doug Graham

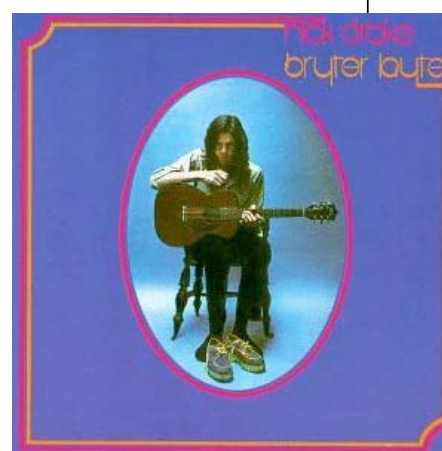
**Dexys Midnight Runners**

Don't Stand Me Down
EMI

This band isn’t all “Too-Rye-Ay!” OK, there is a bit of that on this record, on which lead singer Kevin Rowland started to display a bit of paranoia (he soon started cross dressing). Though *Don't Stand Me Down* has a raw feel, sounding like the Midnight Runners went into a studio, tried a few different things and called it a take, it does grow on you. This is definitely not a spin and win record.

But, ultimately, the reward is huge. “My National Pride” is the standout moment on the record and should be the crowning glory on what is now a faded career.

– Doug Graham

**Nick Drake**

Bryter Layter
Island

This record is arguably un-obscure, as Nick Drake certainly has had a cult following for quite some time. *Bryter Layter* is the second album from Drake, one of the most tragically and chronically depressed singer/songwriters of the late ‘60s and early ‘70s. The record is much more flush with arrangements than his other two releases (*Five Leaves Left* and *Pink Moon*), and the beautiful string and horn parts coupled with his decidedly wistful voice create a poignant and melancholy atmosphere. He said in more than one interview that he was never quite content with any of the music that he created during his short, short life. (Drake died of an overdose of prescription drugs in 1974, when he was 26.) One can distinctly hear a distant and intangible longing in his voice throughout this record.

– Chris Dauray



Clare And The Reasons

The Movie

Frog Stand/Fargo

There is something to be said for a record that is truly easy to listen to. Not music-to-dine-to, not easy-listening, not made for elevators, but just a genuinely pleasant and unaffected album that doesn't ask too much of the listener. There's a certain '50s-era charm to it that begs for sultry lipstick and candlelit consumption of red wine – a great vibe for a record that just happened to be released in this century.

The blissfully angelic voice all over this record is that of Clare Muldaur Manchon, and pretty much everything else is supplied by her husband, Olivier Manchon, an extremely talented multi-instrumentalist who awes both on stage and in the studio. Every song is well-crafted, simple, and delightful. Tiny tidbits of electronica find their way into the pizzicato strings-infused jazz, a little folk sneaks into R&B on another track, and nothing seems out of place at all. Satisfying and simply lovely. – **Chris Dauray**



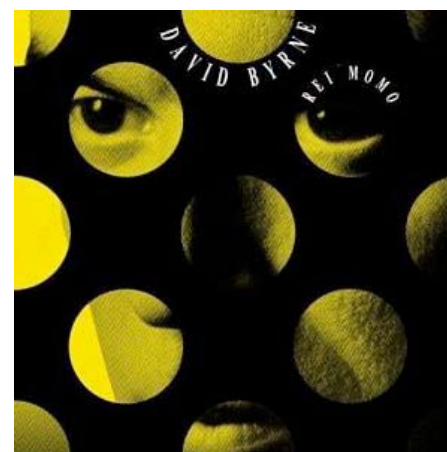
The Dears

No Cities Left

Maple

This album is a bizarre cross-pollination of '90s grunge guitar rock, '70s psychedelic synths, beautifully romantic piano and orchestra, and – above all else – brilliant composition and arrangement. The vocal melodies are sung with the guts, grit, glory, despair, and determination usually confined to opera. The production is excellent, with a level of proficiency seldom seen from a rock band. The album ranges from whisper-quiet passages to violent guitar feedback, feeling quite comfortable at both extremes. *No Cities Left* saddens and excites with equal measure, and this is a rare record that I've felt compelled to share with everyone.

– **Chris Dauray**



David Byrne

Rei Momo

Luaka Bop/Sire

This has to be one of the best party albums of all time. Every riff in *Rei Momo* is a party all by itself; there's not a bad song on the disc and it's best played loud. It's one of David Byrne's most successful ventures into Brazilian territory, with a blend of percussion and horns that just screams, "Get off the couch and dance!" *Rei Momo* has universal appeal to Talking Heads and David Byrne fans and even if dance is not your favorite form of expressing yourself, you may find yourself helplessly bopping around the room. – **Chris Dauray**

Audiophile Pressings

By Jeff Dorgay

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Beck

Sea Change

MoFi, 24kt. CD

This disc is a benchmark for what an audiophile pressing should be; better than the original in every way, by a substantial margin. MoFi's version of *Sea Change* sounds so much better than the original, you can even hear the improvement listening in a rental car.

For those of you with amazing systems, and who like to show them off, I suspect that this disc may become part of your permanent collection. From the second you hit "Play," Beck's voice on "The Golden Age" fills the room, extending way beyond the boundaries of your speakers in a Great and Powerful Oz kind of way. And the layers of Beck's technical wizardry, which usually end up masked, are laid bare for your enjoyment. This is the closest you can get to mind-altering drugs, while staying legal.



Boz Scaggs

Silk Degrees

Pure Pleasure, 180g. LP

If you've worn out your copy of your favorite Boz records, here's your chance to score a fresh one. Originally on Columbia, *Silk Degrees* was Boz Scaggs' biggest record, carrying his biggest hit, "Lowdown," along with "Lido Shuffle."

The packaging is first rate and the surfaces quiet, but the Pure Pleasure version is slightly crunchier than the original, which was bright to begin with. The midrange is more open than the original, revealing extra separation between Boz and the background vocals, but the bass on an original pressing found in the local used record store had better bass as well as top to bottom balance.

Comparing this version to the CBS Mastersound Half Speed edition is a tough call, as the Pure Pleasure version is only \$30, with the CBS copies (if you can find a clean one) fetching about \$50-60, but offering a smoother sound overall.



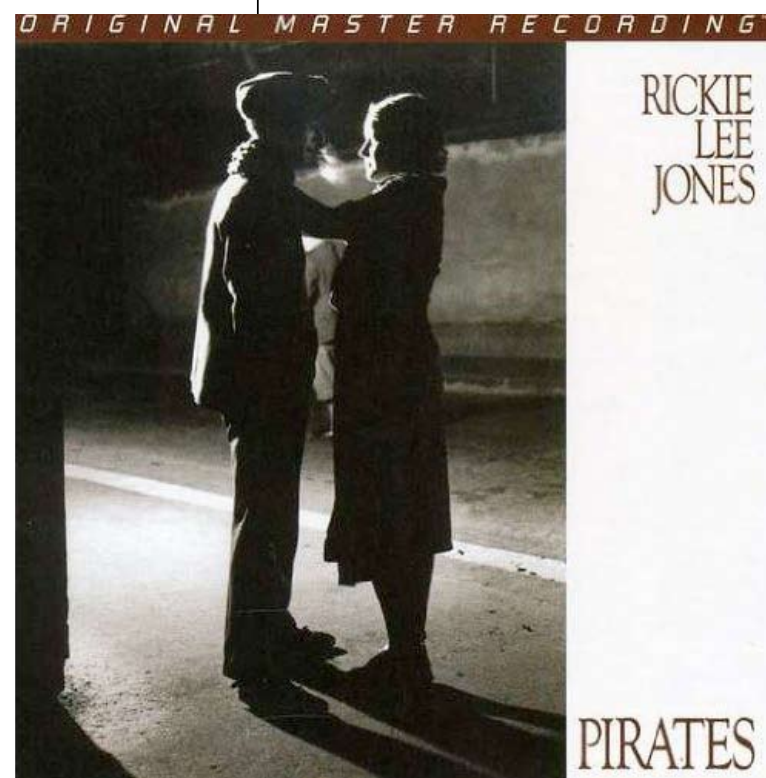
Rickie Lee Jones

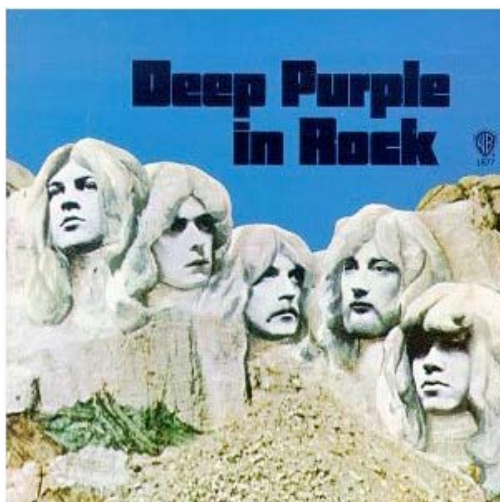
Pirates

MoFi, SACD

Pirates was the followup to Rickie Lee Jones' blockbuster debut album, and although it was just as strong as that album, it was possibly one of the worst sounding rock records of 1981. Recorded with the help of 3M's new "Soundstream digital recorder," *Pirates* had a harsh edge that was the opposite of her previous effort.

The crew at Mobile Fidelity had their work cut out for them, and the result is still bright, but the harshest edges have been filed down to make the record much more listenable, with a healthy dose of warmth now evident through the midrange. Here's hoping that an LP version will be released in the near future with an additional helping of the warmth they found on the two-track analog master that was produced from the digital multitrack original.





Deep Purple

Deep Purple in Rock
Audio Fidelity, 24kt. CD

With more lineup changes than Spinal Tap, Deep Purple was already in the "Mk.II" version of the band when they recorded *Deep Purple in Rock*. Aside from "Child in Time" (which DP still plays in concert today), and

some brilliant guitar work by Ritchie Blackmore, this record is mostly forgettable.

Mastering engineer Steve Hoffman did what he could to salvage the fidelity of this disc, but even after being reworked, the sound quality is still weak. This one is for completist collectors only.

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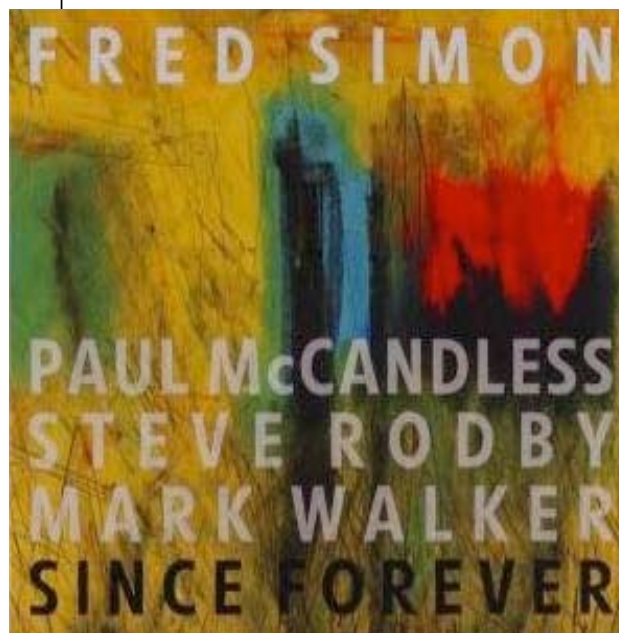


Jethro Tull

Live at Montreux! 2003
Audio Fidelity, 180g. LP

Upon returning from the Montreux Jazz Festival with my memory of the acoustics in the Stravinsky Auditorium still vivid, I was greeted with this legendary Jethro Tull performance, and it's a pleasant treat, indeed. Steve Hoffman and Kevin Grey did a fantastic job on the LP mastering of this two-record set that includes an eclectic mix of Tull favorites and obscurities.

The only thing marring this disc from perfection was a serious off-center pressing. Highly recommended, providing you can acquire a copy that has been pressed on the vinyl properly.



Fred Simon

Since Forever
Naim Records,
24/96 digital download, CD

Recorded by Ken Christianson from Pro Musica in Chicago, this album features Fred Simon on piano, along with multi-reedist Paul McCandless, Mark Walker on drums and Steve Rodby on bass. Simon's last album on the Naim label was more in the solo piano vein, while this one has him returning to a more traditional jazz quartet format.

Captured at Pick-Staiger Concert Hall in Evanston, Illinois, Christianson does a masterful job with his minimalist recording techniques to capture a stunning amount of realism. The true treat, though, is the high-resolution digital file, available from Naim in WAV and FLAC versions. This recording is truly master tape quality, going one step further toward erasing the gap between the best digital and analog recordings.



The Cars

The Cars
Mobile Fidelity, 180g. LP

The boys at Mobile Fidelity have been on a roll for quite a while now, consistently turning out excellent remasters, but they are always at their best when they have a great analog master tape at their disposal. The old saying, "Garbage in, garbage out" has never applied more than when working on a high-resolution mastering session.

When *The Cars* was released in 1978, it was all over the airwaves with "Just What I Needed" and "My Best Friend's Girl" receiving initial airplay and most of the rest of the album following later.

The MoFi disc is much better than the original in every way, it's more dynamic, much more natural on top and all three dimensions have a lot bigger space. This disc is great from start to finish, but "Moving in Stereo" will blow you away on a great system in a big room. The best news for Cars lovers is that *Candy-O* will be next to get the MoFi treatment.



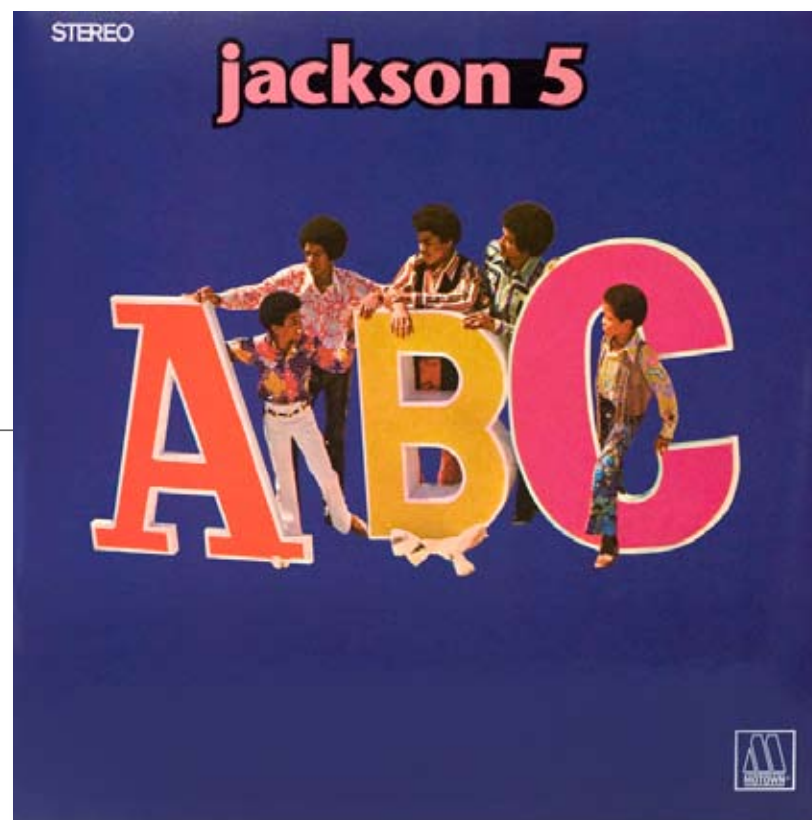
Santana

Lotus

Speakers Corner, 3 LP set

Lotus is a triple album live set, recorded in Japan, that was previously unavailable to US and UK listeners as anything but an incredibly expensive import. In 1991, Columbia brought out a 2 CD set that was terribly compressed and lacked the elaborate artwork from the LP set.

Like many live albums of this period, the bass is somewhat weak, but the music contained within is fantastic. The performance chronicled here covers work from Santana's first four albums and features some blistering guitar work as well as some interesting arrangements to the songs we grew up listening to on the radio.



The Jackson 5

ABC

Speakers Corner, LP

Most Motown records I've heard in my life have been fairly dreadful, with a screechy top end and the life squashed from the grooves to suit AM radio play. Speaker's Corner has done an admirable job on the majority of their Motown remasters but *ABC* is a mixed bag. There is much less compression in this release, but the high end is still on the hot side, varying from song to song.

Speakers Corner has done their usual fantastic job on printing and artwork, with the pressing itself meticulously produced. The surfaces are extremely quiet with the disc flat and perfectly centered. Normally, I wouldn't report on this, but lately I've been getting a few too many \$40 LP's that are lacking in the quality department. I'm glad to see that Speakers Corner remains consistent in this aspect.

This release still sounds much better than the original, with a lot more detail overall. You can hear the Jackson's harmonies as well as the backing musicians with a much better sense of space. If your system has a neutral to warm overall tonal balance, I think you will enjoy these, but those with a highly analytical system may find this record a bit too much of a good thing.

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Jefferson Airplane

Bless Its Little Pointed Head
Pure Pleasure, 180g. LP

This was the first live Jefferson Airplane album, recorded at the Fillmore East and West in the fall of 1968. The record eventually went gold and showed a much heavier, psychedelic side to the Airplane, with some interesting solos. (It also featured some amusing banter between the members of the band.)

Pure Pleasure has taken what was originally barely listenable and transformed it into a treasure, especially considering that this was a live album recorded in the late 60's. An excellent sense of hall ambience has been saved, with the guitars being brought way out of the haze of the original, while hanging on to the gritty sound of the original performances.

An Afternoon with the Focal Grande Utopia EM

By Jeff Dorgay



When things get big and heavy, physics is not your best friend. Especially at 573.2 pounds (260kg) each. With a room on the small side for the Grande Utopia EM's, we made an appointment to go see them instead, just a couple of hours North of our studio at Nuts About HiFi, in Silverdale, Washington where they had a gorgeous pair on display in their main listening room, already broken in.



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Though this is not a full review, after spending almost a full day with the Grande Utopia EM's with a majority of components I was very familiar with and the same Shunyata Aurora cable (and current Shunyata power cords) there was a high enough comfort level to do a "mini-review" on these speakers, to everyone's satisfaction.

If you aren't familiar with the Grande Utopia EM, it is Focal's flagship speaker, with an MSRP of \$180,000 a pair, the stratosphere of high-end loudspeakers.

Unlike many other speaker manufacturers, Focal is one of a handful that manufactures their own drivers and has an extensive research and development complex at their factory in France.

As breathtaking as these almost seven foot tall speakers are, you can't really appreciate the painstaking effort and attention to detail that went into their design until you watch the video at the Grande Utopia EM website:

www.grande-utopia-em.com

Watching this video will give you an idea where the cost of the Grande Utopia comes from as well. The amount of time that goes into building a pair of these is staggering. One of the folks at Focal told me it takes about ten days to build a pair of Grande Utopia EM's. And remember, Focal not only builds the cabinets and crossovers, but every driver in the speaker system.

This is where their considerable expertise in building so many drivers comes in handy. Because Focal builds a full line of speaker systems for the home, car and pro sound worlds (along with supplying other speaker companies with OEM drivers), they were able to put all the best of their technology into the Grande Utopia EM. *(continued)*

What's the EM for Anyway?

Focal went completely back to the drawing board and rethought every aspect of the speaker's design, leaving nothing unturned and they came up with some very novel solutions. The first of which, was the electromagnet used in the 16-inch woofer. Using an electromagnet solved two problems, greater efficiency and the ability to "tune" the bass to your liking. With a simple twist of the external control box, you can vary the damping (Q) of the woofer slightly and achieve a bass response that is more damped or a little more relaxed for lack of a better word.

The curved shape of the Grande Utopia EM helps keep the drivers time aligned, but again Focal takes this a step further by offering a simple yet elegant solution. Upon opening a door behind the speaker, a crank is inserted and by turning it, you can adjust the angle by which the speaker curves towards you from the top, optimizing it for your room's size.

Variable Crossover Adjustments


But that's only the beginning. The woofer, mid woofer, midrange and tweeter also allow you to fine tune level and slope, giving you the ability to completely adjust the Grande Utopia EM to your environment. The 32-page manual is very well written, with plenty of diagrams to walk you through speaker setup.

Focal even gives you some blank pages at the back of the manual to make complete notes of how you've set your speakers. You can download the manual at Focal's website to print additional pages from the PDF document should you get carried away with adjustments. Once you have these set up to your liking, I'd head to Kinkos and laminate that sheet!

You Need a Big Speaker in a Big Room

The one thing I've learned over the last few years is that the room is a big part of reaching nirvana. The room at Nuts About HiFi was about 24 x 32 feet and their owner Jim Lee said, "these speakers will still carry a lot bigger room."

Hooked up to a full compliment of Krell electronics, along with the Pathos Endorphin CD player, connected with Shunyata Aurora cables, the Grande Utopia EM created an enormous soundstage. One of my first selections was "-Ish" from Brand X's *Livestock* album. The cymbal thwacks right at the beginning of the track are incredibly well recorded, possessing excellent timbre and decay. I had listened to this (and my other test tracks) on the Utopia Diablo's that we had in for review last issue, just before I jumped in the car to visit the Grande Utopia EM's. *(continued)*



You can adjust the angle by which the speaker curves towards you from the top, optimizing it for your room's size.



The Focal Grande Utopia fully deserves a spot at the top of the mountain.

Thanks to the Utopia line all sharing the third generation beryllium tweeter, there is a definite family resemblance, but the big speakers do such a better job at reconstructing the spatial relationships of a musical event, that's what takes you from excellent sound, to "being there."

Even though I could only listen to the CD layer of the Hybrid disc, John Hammond's *Rough and Tough* on Chesky opened up the listening room and allowed me to feel like I was in that big church, sitting 20 feet from Mr. Hammond as he played. This is what you get when you write the six-figure check for a well-designed product. You get fooled into believing that you are really there, experiencing the musical event.

A Perfect Report Card

One of the biggest tests for a speaker at this level is its ability to create an illusion of accurate tonality, which the Grande Utopia EM aced. Next, the ability to accurately reproduce spatial cues in a believable manner. Check. The last thing on my list is that a speaker at this level must have endless dynamic range and again the Grande Utopia EM's were fabulous.

With a sensitivity of 94 db and a nominal impedance of 3 ohms, you should be able to match these speakers with all but the lowest power amplifiers and play them quite loud. Matched with the giant Krell amplifier, I was able to really rock the house with these. The opening of track seven, "The Eliminators" on Mickey Hart's *At The Edge* has some drum beats that can drive most speakers to breakup when played loud, but the Grand Utopia EM's just coasted right through with no issue. The massive drumbeats also made for a great test to vary the woofer control and see just how much the sound can be altered to your personal taste. Those prone to audio nervosa beware, this can be just as vexing as setting VTA too often, but for those of you just trying to optimize your system, you will find it very helpful.

Of course I had to play some Led Zeppelin and a little Skynyrd just because, but ended my listening session with Bax' Fifth Symphony feeling all the bases were covered. The Grande Utopia EM is only limited by your room, your amplifier and your wallet. There is nothing that they can't handle.

And for extra credit, the fit and finish of these speakers is the best I've encountered.

Having spent a fair amount of time with quite a few of the mega speakers (the Wilson X-2, Avalon Sentinel, GamuT S-9, The YG Anat Reference II and the Verity Lohengrin), they are all spectacular in their own right. At this price point, I highly suggest a thorough audition.

The Focal Grande Utopia fully deserves a spot at the top of the mountain. The combination of engineering excellence and artistic beauty might just be the ticket for your listening room. Make mine red. ●

The B&W Panorama

By Jeff Dorgay





\$2,295
www.bowers-wilkins.com

Yes, I know you can buy a sound bar from Polk Audio for \$600, and at first glance you might think it insane to spend \$2,295 on a soundbar for a television that probably cost half that much. But there's a lot more to the B&W Panorama than its highly stylish, polished-aluminum exterior might suggest. The Panorama is an understated champion, and although it is priced at the top of the range, its performance justifies the price tag. Let's examine.

Unlike most of the soundbars on the market, the Panorama is powered, with a 50-watt woofer amplifier to power the four 3.5-inch "subwoofers" and five 25-watt amplifiers to power the four surround and center channels. For those needing more bass, there is a high-level subwoofer output on the rear panel.

The rear panel is loaded with inputs. In addition to the subwoofer pre out, there are a pair of Toslink digital inputs, one RCA S/PDIF digital input, a mini-jack analog input and a pair of RCA analog inputs. Like the Zeppelin, you can make the Panorama the hub of your home entertainment system. Along with the internal DAC, the Panorama provides full processing for multichannel movie sound.

Thanks to all these inputs, you can easily make the Panorama your AV hub in the living room. I made it a point to connect a modestly priced CD player and my iPod to see how well it played with others, and I was impressed. Thanks to those six amplifiers, it really can achieve decent SPL levels without a hint of distortion. The Panorama has a very similar tonality compared with the Zeppelin. It's just bigger! *(continued)*



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All of the drivers utilize the technology from B&W's 800 series reference speakers.

Utilizing the same cool, egg-shaped remote from the Zeppelin, the Panorama is easy to set up and easy to use. The well-written instructions should have you up and running in about five minutes.

In order to really feel as if the Panorama's side firing, angled speakers are bouncing off the walls, offering up a surround-like experience, it's best to have it in a small room so that it is in relatively close proximity to the side walls. In this situation, the Panorama offers a convincing surround effect and decent bass response, though I would still consider adding a small outboard subwoofer if your room and budget will allow. In a large room with no sidewalls, the Panorama will sound like one giant speaker under your flat-screen TV.

The Panorama can be wall-mounted or can easily sit right beneath your flat screen on whatever TV stand/rack you happen to be using. If you want maximum sound with a minimum of cables and fuss, I highly recommend the B&W Panorama. ●



US dealers

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Those who agonize between using a DSLR or a compact camera, especially when travelling, I feel your pain. You want the additional optical performance and the high speed ISO performance that your DSLR provides, but you don't want to look like a dork lugging all that gear along with you on vacation. So you settle for a compact camera because it's easy to pack. But when you get home and harrumph over the mediocre picture quality of all the images you tried to capture in low-light conditions, you vow that next trip, you're taking the big guns along.





Fortunately, Olympus has an answer. Their newest camera, the E-P1 blends their latest technology from their E-Series cameras with the form factor of their famous Pen-F rangefinder cameras. Though it is not much bigger than my Canon G9, the E-P1 is just large enough that it won't fit in your pocket, so it requires a strap. But it's not so big and cumbersome that you will get the evil eye during your travels.

The model reviewed here comes standard with a 14-42mm f3.5-5.6 zoom lens that uses ED glass, and its sensor size and dimension is equivalent to a 28-85mm lens on a standard 35mm film camera or DSLR with a full frame sensor.

DSLR Performance, Compact Size

The Olympus website will give you a full run-down of all the E-P1's features. But the most important features of this camera are, by far, its optical performance courtesy of Olympus' *removable*, compact 4/3rd's lenses and its low-light performance. Full-size 4/3rd's lenses will also work with an adaptor, so if you own an E-series DSLR, your lenses are compatible.

Thanks to the 12.3 CMOS sensor from Olympus' more-expensive E-30 DSLR and an improved processing engine, the resulting photos eclipse anything you are used to from a compact camera, and they would take on the DSLR's head to head. The autofocus performance is significantly snappier in the E-P1, with a greater ease of "locking on" to the subject than the E-30 that we reviewed back in issue 21.

Though the camera looks like the Olympus rangefinder camera, there is no optical viewfinder whatsoever. Considering that the one in my Canon G9 is almost impossible to use, this is a feature that won't be missed. So the action takes place on the big, bright three-inch viewing screen. You can toggle between the various modes to go from a blank screen with no info and a histogram view to one that shows the effects of bracketing exposures. But my favorite is the "digital leveler," which puts a crosshair up on the screen. This comes in handy when shooting pictures of buildings or objects that you would like to keep as square as possible.

My only complaint with the E-P1 is that it lacks a small, on-board electronic flash, though there is an accessory shoe-mount flash available. The rest of the E series flash units will also work with the E-P1, but then you start looking again like a photo nerd. The good news is that you can easily shoot at ISO 1600, so you might be able to change your style enough to never again need a flash.

First-rate optical performance

The E-P1 has only two compact lenses at this time, the 14-42mm zoom tested here and a 17mm f2.8 fixed focal-length lens, which is about the equivalent of a 35mm lens on a traditional camera. This lens is extremely compact and *will* allow you to slip the E-P1 in your pocket.

(continued)



For the camera collectors, if you still have some Olympus OM lenses from their legendary 35mm SLR system, an adaptor will allow you to take advantage of these lenses, though without autofocus capability. The optical quality is fantastic and most of the lenses can be purchased reasonably on eBay. One of my favorites is the 50mm f1.4; combined with the E-P1's low noise capability, you can capture some great low-light images.

Real HD video and creative control

If you take my advice and plug a 32gb SD card into your E-P1, you will never be at a loss for space, expanding your creative vision even further.

The E-P1 will shoot more than seven minutes of HD video at the highest-quality setting and the results are spectacular. The sound quality is surprisingly good, too, so other than the time limitation, you should be able to capture just about anything with the E-P1.

Whether you feel the need to manipulate your photos inside the camera or just don't want to deal with Photo-shop, there are a number of built in "art filters" that will give you a plethora of special effects, such as soft focus, grainy film and pale color. The E-P1 also lets you pre-view these effects before you take the picture.

Tripod and macro users will appreciate the live-view close-up function. *(continued)*



There is a tiny yellow rectangle in the center of the focus screen that zooms in 7x so that you can fine focus the image. Unlike Olympus' past cameras, this works with the autofocus engaged and can be used handheld, but you may get a slightly different crop between composing and pushing the shutter button. This function also works with the OM lenses in manual focus mode.

The camera will also shoot in RAW mode. Adobe has added RAW support in

Photoshop by just releasing the Camera Raw 5.5 plug in, so you will not have to use the bundled Olympus software.

Very close to perfection

Even if you eschew all of the special effects that the E-P1 has to offer, the core performance of the camera is excellent, at the top of the range for its price. Complaints? Nothing major, except that big, bright screen eats up the small rechargeable battery rather quickly.

Don't plan on taking more than about 300 pictures on a charge, even less if you use the live zoom or shoot a lot of video. I suggest keeping a spare fully-charged battery in your pocket if on vacation or shooting anything critical.

If you have been searching for the perfect fusion of DSLR and compact with a reasonable price, the Olympus E-P1 is for you. Highly recommended. ●

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The Sound of the Future of Radio

By Ben Fong-Torres

Internet, or online, or Wifi radio, whatever it's called, is here. And it's clear – in more ways than one. The audio quality, depending on one's setup, can be excellent – or as good as digital audio can be. And it's clear that radio future has arrived.



For years, naysayers – many of them in the business of commercial radio – swore that people wouldn't do their listening online. After all, it required being at their computers. And the first Internet stations were slapdash, basement-hobbyist or rabid-music-freaks' audio versions of blogging.

No more. Wifi radio is on cell phones and radio-like tuners (actually computers that connect with networks and sport tuning controls). And virtually all commercial stations, having come to their business senses, have an online version. The majors, including Clear Channel and CBS, offer virtual players and phone apps that can take listeners to any of their myriad stations. Meantime, services that let listeners create their own custom "stations," like Pandora, Slacker, and last.fm, are everywhere.

For me, the real joy comes in being able to pull in virtually any station I've ever dreamt of being able to hear. "Morning Becomes Eclectic" on KCRW in Santa Monica; WWOZ, the legendary blues and gospel station out of New Orleans; K-Earth, an L.A. oldies outlet that stays true to the sound of "Boss Radio."

The ability to pull in such stations is one reason radio has hit a turning point, says Robert C. Crane, who sells Wifi radios, including ones built by his own company. Internet radio gives people "access to the stations they've always wanted to listen to," he says. "Where we've seen the biggest impact is with people from overseas. When they get their hometown stations, they fall on the floor." Even though those stations have been available on their computers, says Crane, it's not the same experience. *(continued)*

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Optional Paradigm Perfect Bass Kit
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With devices like C. Crane's CC WiFi internet radio (\$159.95), a listener has a tuner that can go into any room in the house that reached by a WiFi signal.

Once it's hooked up, it employs the Reciva internet radio aggregator to access any of some 16,000 stations around the world.

If that's not enough, one can also play any music that's stored in his or her computer.

The CC WiFi is a compact set. The sound is OK, but even Crane admits that it's "just a good radio, a lower-cost entry level Wifi radio that is simple to use." Fortunately, he also sells models made by others (along with a wide variety of other radios – AM/FM, shortwave, weather, and even the doomed HD – and loads of electronic goodies) at www.ccrane.com. He raves about the Squeezebox Boom, from Logitech. It's twice as big and costly (at \$299.95) as the CC WiFi, but sounds twice as good—and pulls in Pandora, Rhapsody, Slacker, and Sirius XM. Oh, it's also an alarm clock. "The Squeezebox," says Crane, "has 'flat' audio out, while the CC WiFi has a bit of bass added at the line-out level." Crane calls the Logitech set "probably the best WiFi radio currently made."

The makers of such high-enders as the Sonos Multi-Room System might have something to say about that. But, short of spending \$1,000 and up to create a WiFi radio wonderland, the CC WiFi and its brethren, with prices already dipping below \$100 for a few models, radio lovers who want more options now have them. Radio future is here. ●

For more info on the award winning research behind Paradigm's Perfect Bass Kit (PBK-1) visit www.paradigm.com

The RedEye Remote System

\$188, www.redeye.com

You can read our full review here, on the TONEAudio website:

<http://www.tonepublications.com/gear/the-ultimate-remote-control-is-here/>

If you've always drooled over a megabucks Crestron system and just couldn't get yourself to pony up (though you just bought a rare Blue Note LP for \$1,500) here's the remote for you.

The RedEye works with a transparent blue iPod docking station that works with iPhones and the iPod touch to generate whatever remote control codes you need to completely control your system with your iPod. You can download the proper codes from the RedEye site, or you can have your phone use the RedEye system to learn the codes of your remotes.

All you need to do is read the owner's manual, download the app from the Apple iTunes App Store at no charge and you'll be in business about 20 minutes later. Once done, you can link the RedEye into your wireless network and control the volume of your system from the privacy of your bath tub. It doesn't get any better than this.

Note: RedEye is currently gearing up for production, and these will be available in late October.





Little City Coffee

\$9.40 - \$11.50/lb. www.littlecity.com

Little City Coffee is a small-batch roaster, that has been in business since 1995 in Austin, Texas. And you thought Austin was just a place that had a great music scene and good record stores, hah! What does any of this have to do with HiFi?

Coffee comes in handy when you need to stay up all night cleaning LP's or to get that added edge when about to mount a ten thousand dollar phono cartridge. Can't have crappy coffee at a time like this and Little City makes the best I've had the pleasure of sampling. You can't even buy a lousy copy of The Beatles' *White Album* for what a pound of Little City goodness costs, so drink up and drink often. My self esteem has definitely gone up since I've been drinking their blend. – **Jean Dorgay**

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Nuts About HiFi

Dealers That Mean Business

By Jeff Dorgay

Those working in the audio business (or any luxury-goods business) knows it's been a tough year, but it appears that the storm is starting to clear. The story is not all gloom and doom; there have been some retailers that have done well and even flourished in the last year and I'd like to share some of their stories with you.

As an ongoing feature in TONEAudio, we are starting a series of articles on "Dealers that mean business," and will also start work on a list of "TONE Approved" dealers all around the world. This will take time, but it will only include dealers that we know on a personal basis. Size will not be the determining factor, but the level of enthusiasm and customer service that these dealers provide will be paramount. These will be dealers that I would spend my money with, and ones that I will wholeheartedly suggest that you spend your money with.

The dealers that have done well in the last year have the same things in common whether they have a large store or small one: an underlying commitment to service, substantial product knowledge, a willingness to look for customers who are off the beaten path and, most of all, a true love for all things HiFi.

This isn't a business model that only works in America. I've discussed this with dealers all over the world and the stories they've told me were so similar it was like they lived down the street from each other. Customer service and innovation are border-independent concepts, and the folks who are working hard at it are not in peril. Granted, they are working a bit harder than they did a few years ago, but it's paying off handily.



The first dealer on my list is right in my back yard, figuratively speaking. Nuts About HiFi has been in Silverdale, Washington for almost 20 years, and owner Jim Lee has been building his stores' reputation, one sale at a time. Jim was kind enough to lend me his store for the day so that I could audition the Focal Grande Utopia EM feature that appears on page 128. The minute I walked through the door, his store reminded me of the audio stores I grew up with. There were good-sized listening rooms, helpful sales people and plenty of product in stock that you could actually buy and take out the front door.

We discussed what makes Jim's business work and what keeps him excited about being in the world of HiFi after all these years.

How much does having a store with regular hours help your business, especially with the trend going towards the "in-home dealer?"

I need the discipline of going to a store every day, to get up in the morning and have something to do. We definitely take appointments, but it's a lot of fun having a store. I would never buy a pair of speakers over the Internet and I don't expect my customers to. It's like turning an art form into a commodity.

How long have you been in business?

(Laughs) Thirty years and it still feels like a summer job. It's been a long summer that started in 1976, when I went to college at WSU. A friend got me a job one summer installing stereos at a shop in Spokane. I ended up spending every dime I earned there on stereo equipment.

Yeah, I know that story! When did you start Nuts?

I owned a shop in Tacoma for a while and then started working for Nuts. About 15 years ago, I bought the shop from the owner. We've been in this location for a little over five years now.

How has business been lately?

It's weird, but we've had an excellent year so far. We've had to work a little harder than normal, no question, but business is still strong.

Having a large customer base really pays off at a time like this?

No question.

Have you sold any Grande Utopia EM's yet?

Not yet, but we've only had these for a few months, they are barely broken in. Again, would you buy a 180 thousand dollar pair of loudspeakers without hearing them first? I wouldn't.

So you would agree then, that it's necessary to have gear like this on the floor if you ever expect to sell it?

Definitely. I did sell a number of Focal's previous flagship speaker. But that's not the main reason I keep them here. These speakers are about showing our customers what's possible. We brought them in so they could understand the attitude of a company like Focal. Knowing that they build all of their drivers, the cabinets and even some of the machinery to test the speakers is something that impresses me in a company. That's who I want to be around. *(continued)*



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– Jeff Dorgay, TONEAudio Magazine, Issue 18



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Does having a speaker like this help you sell the Diablos? (Focal's \$15k speakers, utilizing much of the same technology as the Grande Utopia EM)

Absolutely. The Diablo has become one of my favorite speakers to sell. It builds customer enthusiasm to see how much technology from the flagship speaker is in their real world product. You can tell the family resemblance in all of their products.

Do you have a strong relationship with all of the manufacturers of the lines you carry?

Yes, it's very important because you deal with your vendors as much as you do your clients and I have to enjoy working with them.

How would you describe your average customer? What percentage of your walk-in business is brand new customers?

A large percentage of our new customers are referrals. But it's really fun to have someone walk in the door that is truly brand new, with no previous exposure to HiFi. It's great to watch their expressions as they discover good sound for the first time.

You maintain a heavy event schedule for the store. Do you have any idea how much these events result in new business?

It's hard to say, directly. We don't really do them strictly to do business. They are a lot of fun and it's also a way to give something back to my customers. *(continued)*



Our last event featured the Grande Utopias, the one before that was to show off the Sooloos music server. I'm never sure how much new business they generate, but they are good at keeping us at the forefront of our existing customers' minds. I feel that is very important; I don't want a customer to buy a system from us and think we've forgotten about them.

Any expansion plans for the near future?

I'd love to have one more large room; we may add it on this year. I'm discussing it with my landlord.

At the end of the day when you go home, are you still listening to music, or do you close the shop door on HiFi?

I'm a big music guy. I love music, I play guitar; music is always in my head. But it is work. Some days are more work than others, but this is still a great time.

Who has your most unlikely customer been?

I have a few of those that I fondly remember, but one of my favorites was a gentleman who loved music and lived in a hut. Listened to mostly jam bands, Grateful Dead and the like. He was up on an Indian reservation, there was no sheetrock on the walls and it still had shag carpeting from the 70's. You could see the cracks in the floor from his listening room. We installed over a half-million dollar system! He bought gear from me for years and his money always smelled like mushrooms, literally. It turned out he was married to the Chief's daughter. Crazy. No wait, he's our typical customer. We always want to smell their money before we take it.

How committed are your customers to analog?

Some of them are extremely committed and that's all they listen to. We still sell quite a few turntables.

(continued)

What about your personal listening?

I have an extensive vinyl collection but I don't listen to it as much anymore.

Do you have a Sooloos at home as well?

(Laughs) Yeah, that's why I don't listen to vinyl that much anymore! My family really loves the Sooloos; it keeps them engaged in music.

It's fun to use it here at the store for parties, to watch the middle-aged ladies in action; they hover around it all night long and keep drinking wine! It's the perfect party guest. Interestingly, the Sooloos is a product that is almost always driven by female customers. Wives always insist that their husbands buy the Sooloos; it usually only takes about five minutes of playing with it before they want one.

What ultimately influences your decision to take on a product or a line?

Easy, I have to love it.

What was the most tortuous demo session you can remember?

Well, a lot of Patricia Barber is pretty tortuous. It's always torturous when the demo doesn't go as planned. I've had the remotes programmed incorrectly and it flusters me a bit. I don't like to be embarrassed during the demo. For the most part though, it's a lot of fun and I try to roll with it.



Nuts About HiFi has expanded on a basic approach, and has taken great care of their customers over the years, combining that level of service with an excellent environment in which to buy HiFi gear. And it works well. During our visit, Jim had to pop out of the interview a few times to help a customer or write up an order. We saw about seven sales made while interviewing him. If you are near Seattle, Washington, I highly suggest paying them a visit. ●

You can reach Nuts About HiFi at:
360-698-1348

Their web address is:
www.nutsabouthifi.com



Rotel RA-1520 Integrated Amplifier & RCD-1520 CD Player

By Mark Marcantonio

I appreciate those audio companies that have the balls to keep old-school aspects in new gear. Why get rid of a feature just because it's been around longer than some of their younger employees? One such manufacturer is Rotel, a respected long-time member of affordable higher-quality stereo gear.



In my younger days, Rotel was always the next step up from what I could afford. Therefore, I only gave it a cursory look before moving on. One salesperson who I got to know fairly well kept hounding me with one of his favorite phrases, “Someday, you’ll have Rotel in your system.” It only took 25 years, but it’s here now and I’m enjoying it.

Some equipment just begs to be stared at and admired. The Rotel RA1520 Integrated Amplifier and matching RCD-1520 Player are two such pieces. They continue the Rotel movement back to silver finish with a thick, brushed aluminum faceplate. The black side edge trim of other pieces has been replaced by polished aluminum, very nice indeed. The CD player and the matching integrated amplifier each carry an MSRP of \$995.

The integrated amplifier’s ergonomics are outstanding with three different sizes of knobs to differentiate the various controls.

The heavy, tactile feel of the knob rotation leaves no doubt as to the level of adjustment.

My favorite feature of the integrated amplifier is the inclusion of two sets of speaker posts with selectors for Off, A, B and A&B.

The tone controls – yes, you read correctly – use the smallest knobs, something that when paired with budget or vintage speakers still makes sense. For those beyond that point, a tone-defeat button sits just to the right. Instead of a groove, the large, center mounted volume control has a blue LED diode to show its position. The right side holds the small balance knob, then the larger “recording” selector and “listening” knobs that also have a blue LED.

My favorite feature of the integrated amplifier is the inclusion of two sets of speaker posts with

selectors for Off, A, B and A&B. For many buyers, one stereo system is all they’ll want. This way, they can have music in a second room, say a home office, while the spouse is watching television in the room with the equipment. What worked in the 1970s still works in 2009.

The iPod generation isn’t forgotten, with the inclusion of a jack just below the lighted “power” button. The one quibble with the front panel is that the headphone jack is the same size as the iPod jack and sits just below it, which could be potentially confusing.

The top is painted grey with speckles to minimize the visibility of scratches and, let’s be honest, dust. The back panel is divided into sections of RCA jacks. Though there is room between the standard sources and Tape 1 and Tape 2, our publisher’s complaint in Issue 17 about the Rotel Receiver’s closeness of jacks is still evident. *(continued)*

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

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But the fact that the RA-1520 includes two tape input/outputs, REC OUT jacks, as well as a pleasant sounding phono stage, earns Rotel a round of kudos.

Back In Time

Seeing the tape and phono inputs inspired me to visit to my classroom and bring home my Harman/Kardon CD291 tape deck. Not to mention hauling home my Technics SL-QD3 turntable. I admit that playing vinyl helps me get back to the roots of my passion for music. Holding and reading an album cover is one of my fountains of youth. Having the ability to play vinyl again with solid-sounding output made my weekend. The phono stage was good enough to confirm that my cartridge was nearing retirement.

Using the tape section had a bit of ying/yang for me. It was a reminder of how diligent I was back in the first half of the 1980s, recording all my albums on first play onto TDK SA-90 tapes, but only after using LAST record-preservative liquid. Rarely on those tapes can one pick up a pop or click. A few of those albums never made it onto disc, so listening to them again with the Rotel 1520 integrated amplifier and my reference Eficion F200 monitors was a joy. Hearing the Kansas City band Shooting Star's first album with its electric keyboard was a reminder of how good they could have been if they had stayed with that music formula. Those of you who still enjoy your reel-to-reel decks, this integrated amp is your friend. *(continued)*



Excellent Functionality

The RCD-1520 cdp is ergonomically blessed as well. It has a matching power button, and divides up the controls to either side of the display. The higher-level controls of Prog, Review, Random, Rept, Scan and Time take up the left side. The right offers the more basic Play, Pause, Stop, Eject, Scan, and Search buttons. Rotel engineers wisely made the display large enough to offer two lines of detailed information including HDCD and PCM, though it's too bad that the display color clashes with the cool blue power button. The slender remote offers up plenty of room for buttons, even for those of us with sausage fingers. The back panel is clean, with just the analogue and digital out jacks. There are two mini remote jacks along with an Ethernet jack.

Unlike most CD players, the Rotel RCD-1520 uses a slot loading CD mechanism. I'm sure there are plenty of pro and con arguments about this type of transport. I'll just say that it's quiet and efficient and leave the growling to others. It isn't the fastest at spinning up the information, but it's as quiet as a crowd watching Tiger Woods putt.

George Winston's *Plains* CD demonstrated just how silent this unit runs. Hum and buzz just doesn't exist thanks to the toroidal transformer coupled with segmented power supply. The remaining components have all been selected with care so as to keep noise to a minimum, so the Rotel engineers have succeeded very well.

Thanks to this careful parts selection and the latest DAC chips from Wolfson, the normal smearing of the piano's fine details present in most players at this price were not present in the RCD-1520.

System Synergy

These two Rotel pieces took about a week to burn in and show the full scale of their musicality. Upon first powering up, I felt that the amplifier was tight and two-dimensional, but letting them play continuously for a few days before bringing them into my main system took care of that. In pairing with the Eficion monitors, I also used AudioArt cabling and interconnects throughout along with Shunyata Venom power cords.

Once set up, I quickly brought the volume up into the 85db range with the *Making Movies* CD by Dire Straits. The Eficions matched up well to the Rotel amplifier, and they were able to show the edge of the amplifier's performance. With only 60 watts per channel, the bass drum kick lacks the sheer force that makes the track "Skateaway" so distinctive.

Though what it misses in power, it covers nicely with a clean effort. The incredibly pure voice of Alison Krause had just a hint of nasalness that doesn't exist with my reference SimAudio Moon i7, but the Rotel more than holds its own for this price. *(continued)*

Review the Reviews...

"... excellent compared to anything that I have encountered at any price... the beginning of a new era in audio."

Robert E. Greene - *The Absolute Sound*, Issue 183

"I haven't found a product so instantly and confidence-inspiring in years."

Ken Kessler - *Hifi News*, July 2008

"Thanks to all those inputs, the DAC1 Pre is a digital source lover's dream come true."

Jeff Dorgay - *ToneAudio Review*, 2008

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The Rotel 1520 combo really hooked me once I began playing some classical works.

The opening trumpet serenade from Aaron Copeland's *Fanfare For The Common Man* was down-right head turning. To make sure, I quickly set up my budget reference monitors, the Totem Acoustic Rainmakers. Same impression; the Rotel's are not only a synergistic match, but they thrive on playing classical material. Even though I was in the mood for modern jazz that day, the works of Copeland and movie score master, John Williams, reigned supreme.

Most budget gear loses the depth of its presentation in a hurry when it comes to the rigors of reproducing classical recordings, but the Rotel 1520's rode the music like a great conductor. Copeland's *Appalachian Spring* from that same Telarc pressing was as good a presentation as from any amplifier I've heard under \$2,000. A treat indeed!

If you listen carefully with a fine system to Copeland's work *Rodeo*, especially the last movement, "Hoe-Down," one can easily detect the work that went into making sure that in each section of the movement, the musicians were very conscious of the subtle differences in loudness. The Rotel combination passed this test with delicacy and detail.

The RCD-1520 digital out is the only option for those desiring a separate DAC. With my non-upsampling ultra noise-free Pro-mitheus DAC on hand, I was able to gain just a slight improvement in treble frequencies. This says a great deal about Rotel engineers' commitment to noise suppression. *(continued)*



The segmented power-supply design does exactly what the engineers had in mind. Therefore, one would be wise to choose carefully if an external DAC is desired.

Much like the SimAudio i.5 pieces I reviewed in the previous issue, the Rotel 1520's run remarkably cool, even during high-output listening sessions. Even with only modestly efficient speakers, pushing AC/DC's *Back in Black* for 45 minutes worth of head banging only left the RA-1520 slightly warmer than when I began.

Final Call

Rotel has done a fine job of marrying the past with the future with the RA 1520 integrated amp and RCD-1520 CD player. The integrated amp has all the features that audio veterans of the 1970s-80s remember: multiple speaker

outputs, provisions for two tape decks and a worthy phono section. Combining this with 21st Century performance and a punchy 60-watt-per-channel power-amplifier section results in an excellent bargain.

The RCD-1520 may be one of the quietest CD players I've heard at this price in terms of mechanical noise. Even between songs, I was unable to hear the disc spinning inside, even while listening nearfield. I'd love to see multiple digital-output choices, but that was easily forgotten once the music started playing.

Both Rotel 1520 pieces are a welcome addition to the quality, budget audio field. The performance level is such that even when matching them with speakers at twice their price yields a very pleasing experience. ●

The Bang & Olufsen BeoSound 5

\$6,250 (music server only) www.bang-olufsen.com

The Bang & Olufsen BeoSound 5 redefines elegance in a music server component, allowing you to control not only your musical program but the main system volume as well. You can also use the BeoSound 5 with any of B&O's powered speaker systems from small to large and make this your complete control system.

It also offers fixed high level and RCA S/PDIF outputs, so that it can be easily incorporated into a non-B & O system. However for someone wanting to combine function, performance and dashing good looks into the world's most unobtrusive HiFi system, staying all B & O makes it nice and easy.

In addition to working as a music server, the BeoSound 5 also functions as an internet radio tuner, finding internet radio stations from around the world and organizing them by country. All at your control from the main menu, it functions as much as a machine for discovering music as it does for storing your own.

We'll have a full review of the complete system next issue, along with details of our factory visit to Struer, Denmark, where we got to see their current products built, tested and tortured.



Naim Uniti

\$3,950 www.naim-audio.com



If you are looking for the killer all in one box HiFi, this could be your nirvana. Combining essentially the circuitry from Naim's well renowned Nait 5i and the CD5i on one chassis along with a DAC, FM tuner and a phono stage, this is the minimalists dream come true. You can plug in an iPod or USB drive from the front panel and there is a separate subwoofer output on the back panel, so the Uniti can be part of a major system that is very understated.

The great news is that it sounds as good as it looks and if there was ever a piece of gear that was more than a sum of its (already great) parts, the Uniti is it. Review in the Gear section of our website in the next couple of weeks.

Nagra LB Digital Recorder

\$3,000 www.nagraaudio.com

For those of you that don't need six channels, the Nagra LB offers quality approaching their legendary Nagra 6 digital recorder in an incredibly compact package at a slightly lower price. A pair of great microphones and you could start your own audiophile label. For the less ambitious, the LB is a great way to archive some of your vinyl.

Every time I fire up the LB, I feel like I'm back at the Montreux Jazz Festival, where you'll see Nagra gear in every console. Sound, build quality and aesthetics are perfection. What more could you ask for?





Sennheiser HD800 Headphones

\$1,395 www.sennheiser.com

Sennheiser has taken a big jump from the \$600 headphone range with their new flagship phones, and they are currently out on a public “road tour” across America to evangelize about the benefits of great headphone sound.

How much of a quantum leap have they made with the HD800? The buzz on the web is mixed, but we’ve got a set on the way and we’ll bring you up to date the next time we visit Headphone Planet.

Snell K7 Speakers

\$1,250 pr. www.snellacoustics.com



The thousand-dollar price point is fiercely competitive, but the small Snells hold their own. Only 12 by 10.5 by 7 inches, this little two way uses a 5¼-inch woofer and a 1-inch silk-dome tweeter to provide a very pleasant sound. Though they only feature a sensitivity rating of 87db, the K7's are very easy to drive.

Available in black or natural cherry, custom finishes are available. This is something for which Snell prides itself, so integrating these into your decor should be a snap.

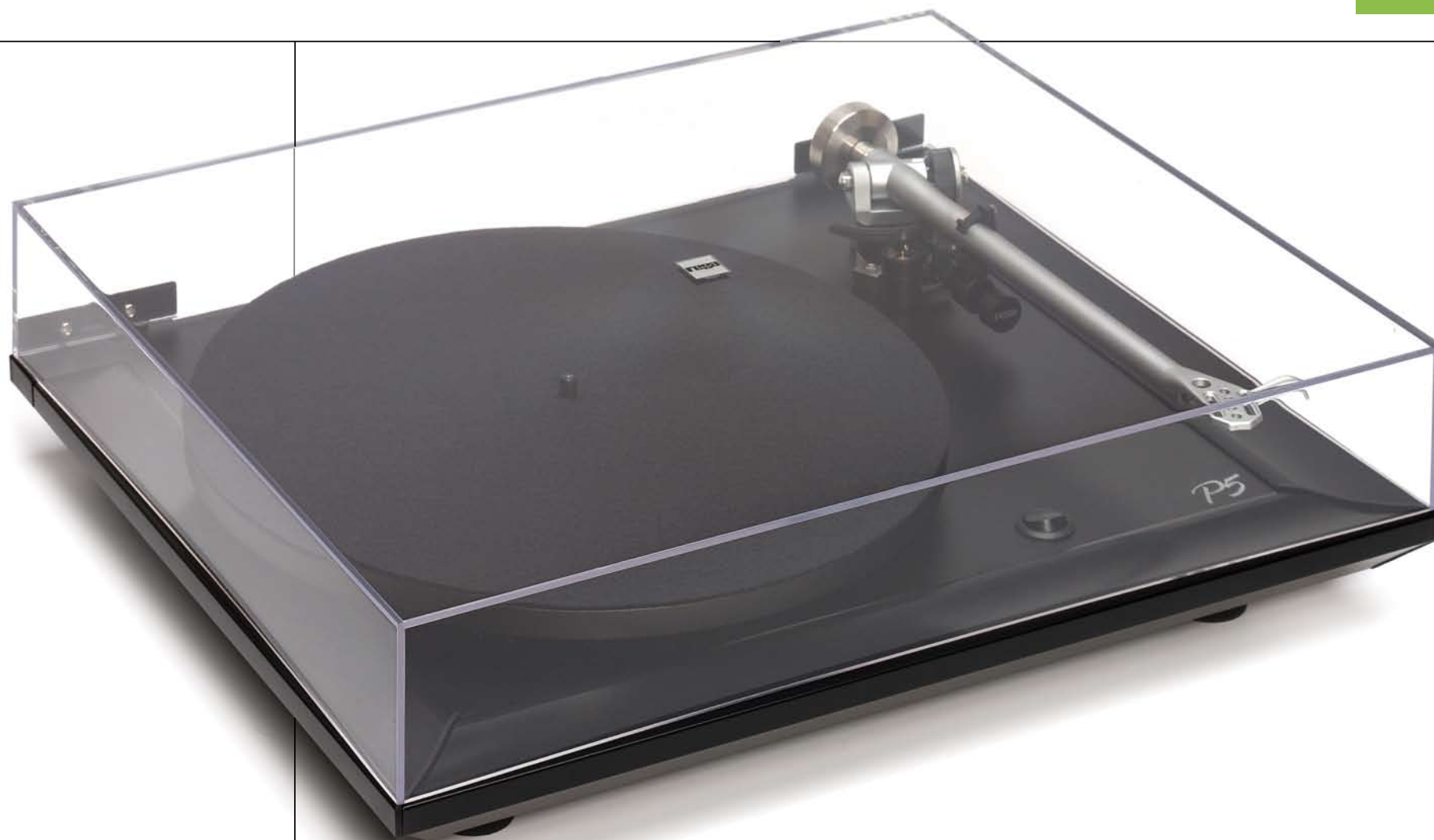
DCS Paganini Digital Player

Approximately \$50,000 (depending on configuration)
www.dcsLtd.co.uk

Here's a triple stack that won't add calories. The replacement for the classic Elgar stack, DCS's latest will pretty much play every kind of digital file you can throw at it. The transport takes CD and SACD, so lovers of physical media will not be disappointed.

Available in silver or black, these are beautiful to behold. Full report in process.





Rega P5 Turntable

\$1,395 www.soundorg.com

Pretty much the only Rega table we *haven't* used over the years, the P5 is an exciting step up from the P3 because it has the more desirable RB-700 tonearm that is used on the more expensive P7. You can add the PSU-TT for a few hundred dollars more, with the benefit of pushbutton speed control and tighter speed accuracy, making this the deck to beat for the price. Not to mention set it and forget it ease. Full review next issue in our analog spectacular.

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Rega ISIS CD Player/DAC

Approximately \$9,000

Nine grand for a CD player from Rega? Nine grand for anything from Rega? Before the communal, budget minded blow a gasket, don't panic. Roy Gandy hasn't sold you all down the river in the chase for the almighty Pound. His values and design ethic are still intact, but in the steady mind of Rega, they have been working on an "ultimate" line of components for some time now.

Gandy feels that his biggest challenge is to produce budget gear, because every speck has to be justified and provide the best value. Now that Rega's been around for quite a while, they've been interested in designing some statement pieces without budget constraints. This has resulted in a top range CD player that also has full DAC functionality, an integrated amplifier and a new turntable. Proving that Gandy is still frugal at heart, while other "statement" pieces approach six figures, his are going to come in around \$9-12k each. Having heard the prototypes in the UK earlier this year, they were indeed impressive, so just as other Rega components offer supreme value in their range, you can bet these will be solid performers as well.

We will have the CD player by the time you read this and a web review will follow shortly thereafter.

Our Visit to Rega

A MODEL OF EFFICIENCY

By Jeff Dorgay



bought my first Rega turntable, a lime green Planar 3 in 1980 from The Audio Emporium in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and almost 30 years later, they are still a Rega dealer, which I think speaks volumes about the company. Though I've moved up to a current spec P3-24 (still lime green) and a P9 (sadly, not lime green) in my present system, that original Planar 3 still spins records in a good friend's system, albeit with a motor upgrade a few years ago. So Rega has major brand loyalty on both sides of the retail counter and my story is more the rule than the exception.



Gandy and his staff have a clear vision accompanied by a sense of practicality that has served them well for over 30 years now.

Located in Essex, about 80 miles from London's Heathrow airport the Rega facility sits at the end of a cul de sac, slightly to the left of a giant silver building. Roy Gandy, Rega's owner and visionary laughed and said, "That building took two years and 10 million pounds to complete. We had a somewhat tighter budget and got our building done in nine months."

Considering the size of the facility, (about 40 thousand square feet) it's amazing that this was finished in such a short amount of time but Gandy and his staff have a clear vision accompanied by a sense of practicality that has served them well for over 30 years now.

This understated practicality is what has kept Rega products such a great mixture of value and performance for so many years. Walking through

the front door, (with the address in Rega's signature lime green) the first stop is a pool table and a few couches where a couple of employees are taking a quick break, enjoying a game before resuming their work. Everyone smiles when Gandy walks through the door and the vibe is very calm.

Straight ahead, voice coils are being wound, and a huge batch of P3's in a variety of colors are being assembled just behind them. To the left, all stages of speaker assembly, from crossovers to final testing, while on the right side of the plant there are a batch of 220 volt Brio amplifiers being assembled. A silver batch of 110-volt models completed are on a rack, awaiting final test. Gandy explains to us that *everything* at Rega is checked 100%. *(continued)*





Everything Under One Roof

With many manufacturers moving their assembly offshore to China to cut costs, Rega does nearly everything in house. The only thing they send out for are the raw CD transport mechanisms. Much like the system approach to their components, it is the same in their factory; they take control of all aspects of manufacturing other than casework. However there is still a full machine shop in the building, which these days is only used for prototyping.

We had the pleasure of watching their employees wind moving magnet phono cartridges, a very delicate operation indeed. There are only two employees in the company that have steady enough hands to wind the coils for Rega's top cartridge, the Apheta, a moving coil design. As Gandy introduces us to the woman working on the winding machine, he remarks, "She's got the steadiest hands here! Apheta designer Phil Freeman is the only other Rega employee qualified to assemble the cartridge." *(continued)*

We had the pleasure of watching their employees wind moving magnet phono cartridges, a very delicate operation indeed.



At the end of the day a seasoned work force that gets it right the first time saves a lot of potential problems later on.



Upstairs, we meet the team of people that assembles Rega tonearms. Today they are building batches of RB-301's, the arm that has taken place of the legendary RB-300. As we watch the careful assembly, measurements and testing that go in to the production of what is essentially an inexpensive tonearm, it's hard to walk away unimpressed at the high level of quality in the finished product. "Now you can see why we don't like others fiddling with our tonearms," Gandy says. "You need to be able to tighten the bearing just so, and it requires a special tool. We've offered to give them to our competitors that modify our tonearms, but no one ever takes us up on it. The level of fine adjustment we do is critical to the ultimate performance."

This is a big key to Rega's ability to maintain such a high level of quality; they aren't wasting a lot of time and money shipping various bits here and there. At the end of the day a seasoned work force that gets it right the first time saves a lot of potential problems later on. It is highly commendable that Rega keeps everything in their UK factory and is able to pay their workers a decent wage while keeping prices in line as well. *(continued)*



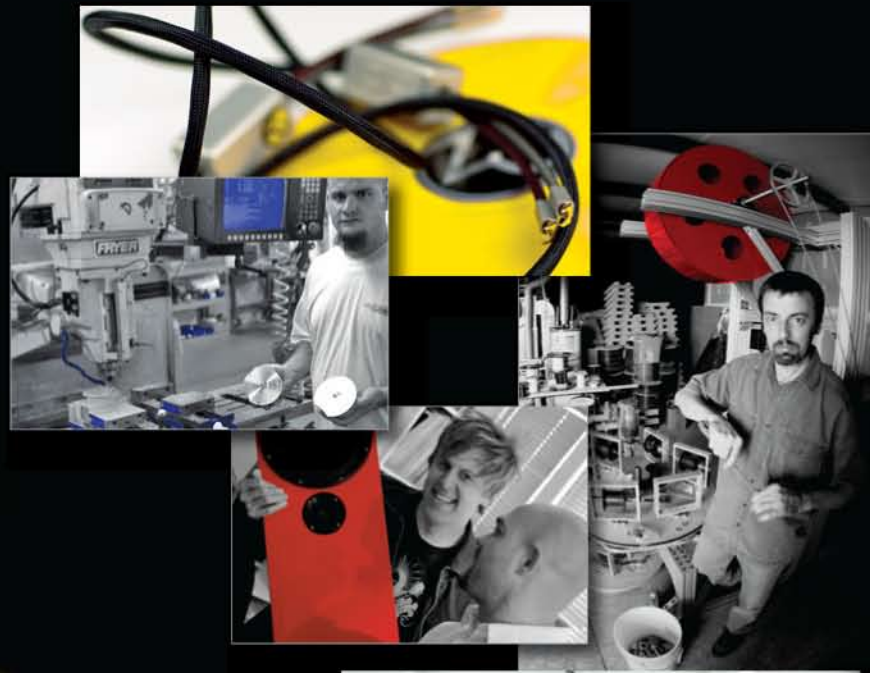
Commitment to Their Customers

Thanks to new and increased warehouse space, REGA keeps about two million dollars worth of inventory on hand and a similar investment in parts. This means that when a dealer needs product, it's on hand to ship and on the rare occasion that something does need to be repaired, the necessary parts are almost always available. During my tour of the factory, I did not even see any units in for repair.

Rega keeps their employees skills sharp by rotating them on a fairly regular basis. An employee might be assembling turntables for a while and then moved around to build speakers and so on. Except for that lady that winds the Aphetas...

The only things Rega doesn't do from scratch is bend their own steel for the chassis and wind their own power transformers. Some circuit boards are stuffed at a local firm down the street and then come back to the factory for full evaluation before moving on. The rest is taken care of inside the factory walls, with their extensive testing on everything from entry level product to the flagship models, including every pair of speakers.

(continued)



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Commitment to the Future

In an industry that keeps pushing prices ever higher and where 30 thousand dollar preamplifiers and 100 thousand dollar turntables are not an anomaly any more, Gandy and his team remain committed to producing products that everyone can afford. Their Brio integrated amplifier has to be one of the best \$600 integrated amplifiers on the Earth, and the P3 turntable has become ubiquitous, probably only surpassed in sheer sales numbers by the Technics SL-1200 and the Linn LP-12.

Building on the success of their los phono preamplifier, Elicit amplifier and P9 turntable, they are heading towards the five-figure component range as well, though just towards the bottom of the price category. During my visit, they were just starting to build the new ISIS CD player and the accompanying integrated amplifiers. These are a bold step from previous Rega offerings, both in design and price point, but once again, Gandy and his team feel that they are building products with no budget limitations. "These are the best products we are capable of building," he told us during the plant tour. "We've chosen what we feel are the absolute best materials for the various functions required by our new designs."

Listening to the final prototypes at his home later that evening proved to be very impressive and considering the parts and build quality, these should both prove to be incredible values as well as offering top of the range performance at a considerably lower price than their competitors. "Just like in racing, what we learn by designing and producing products with no limitations helps us build better products with budget constraints. On one end of the scale, we're working on a table beyond the current P9, yet I'm always trying to find a way to make the P1, P2 and P3 a better value."

The Rega way of doing business has worked handsomely. When I asked Gandy how the economy had affected Rega in the recent year of economic turmoil, he replied, "We're selling everything that we can build. I am hopeful that the top range product will be well received, but one never knows."

Considering the high degree of brand loyalty that Rega has enjoyed during the years, along with their reputation for engineering based change, rather than market favor, you can bet they will continue on their current course. We will have full reviews of the ISIS CD player and accompanying integrated as soon as they become available. ●

"We're selling everything that we can build. I am hopeful that the top range product will be well received, but one never knows."



Long-Term Test:

A Year With the MartinLogan Spire

By Jeff Dorgay



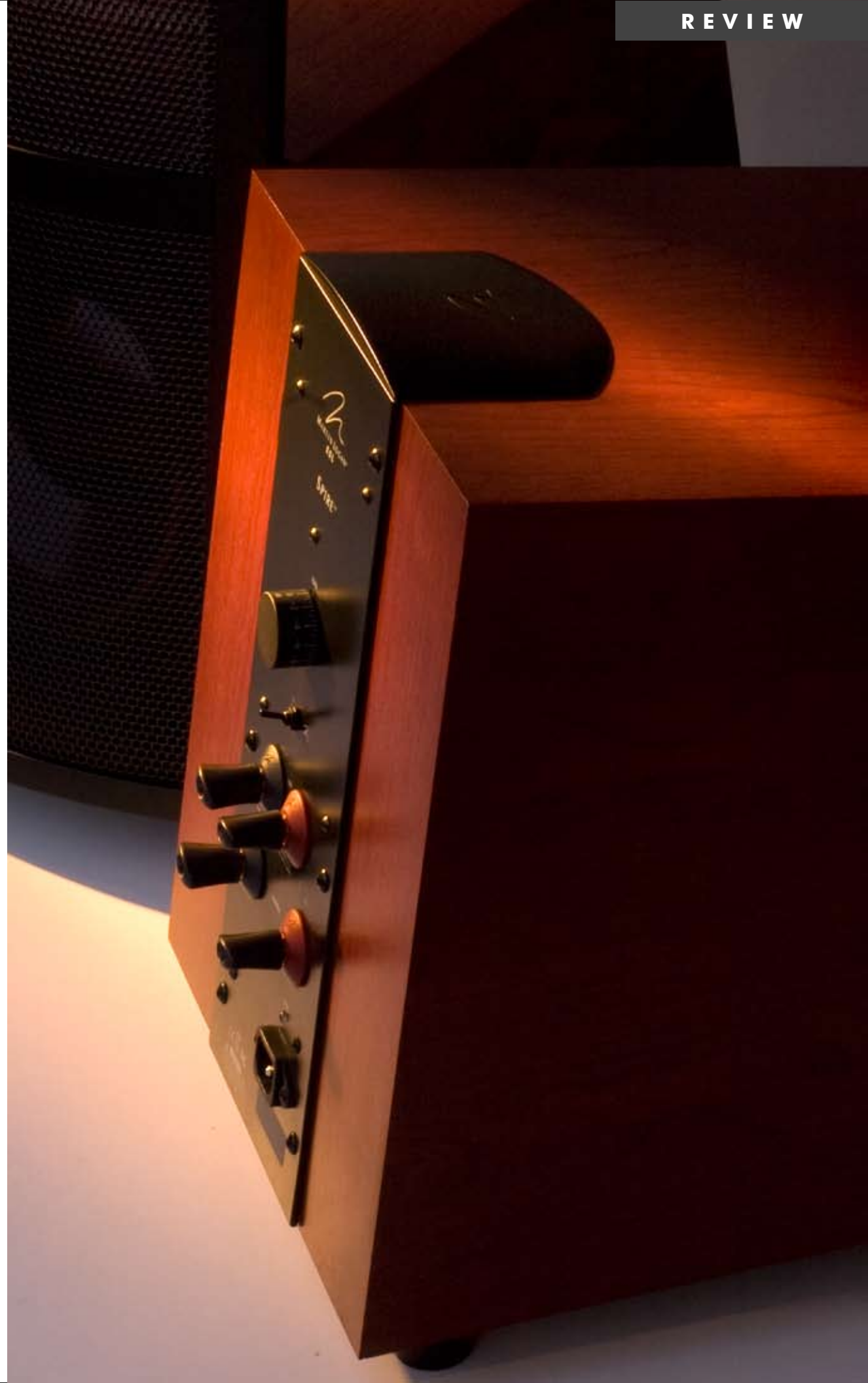
MartinLogan's flagship CLX and their next-from-the-top-range speaker, the Summit X, have been racking up rave reviews all over the world, including us. But for those who don't have a 15,000-30,000 dollar budget for speakers, yet crave the MartinLogan sound, there is a more reasonably priced model that should keep you quite happy.

The Spire is one from the bottom of the ESL range, priced at \$8,495 a pair. Granted, this still is not small potatoes, but after living with the Spires for just over a year I feel that these speakers offer the highest price/performance ratio of the MartinLogan line. Mind you, this is coming from a happy CLX owner.

Similar in size to the Summit/Summit X at first glance, the Spire is lighter and presents a smaller footprint, due to having only a single, front-firing 10-inch woofer where the Summit series have an additional 10-inch woofer that fires down towards the floor with an additional amplifier. Because of the single woofer and amplifier, there is one low-frequency adjustment at 35 hz, where the Summit series have adjustments at 25 and 50 hz.

The First of the New Series

The Spire was actually the first in the lineup of current MartinLogan speakers, having a more open, airy sound through the midrange than the original Summit and Vantage speakers. Some of this comes from an improvement in the ESL panel itself; though it looks identical to the panel on the Summit, the Spire and Summit X share one that has been improved from the original Summit. *(continued)*



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The rest is in the latest generation of crossover improvements, courtesy of Joe Vojtko, who had been steadily refining ML crossover designs for 20 years. While the Summit series speakers crossover to the panel at 270hz, the Spire's crossover is set at 330hz.

Setup

Thanks to a relatively light weight of just 56 pounds, moving the Spires around should be easy for one person, though you might want help unboxing and carrying them to your room. The Spires come from the factory with rubber pads on the bottom of the speakers that can be replaced with spikes depending on your room acoustics and taste in bass performance.

If you are placing your speakers in a room with hardwood or tile floors, you may like the quality of the bass with the rubber feet instead of spikes, so investigate.

As I have had quite a few panel speakers in my listening room over the years, there seems to be a "sweet spot" where most of them work the best, and the Spire was no exception, delivering its best sound somewhere in between where the Summit and Vantage were placed. The MartinLogan manual provides some excellent information on speaker placement and toe-in, with their "flashlight technique" for final setup highly useful. The Spire, like every other panel speaker I've ever used, is not a speaker that you can just toss in the room to get great sound, so plan on spending a good hour or more to get the placement correct. *(continued)*

A good short track to setting up these speakers is to start about six feet apart (center to center) with the front of the panel about three feet from the rear wall. Move the speakers apart until the soundstage breaks up into sound from two separate speakers. Next, move them back and forth from the rear wall until you get the tightest bass response. Experiment with slight toe-in versus moving the speakers further apart until you get the biggest soundfield you can in your room. If you have a friend helping, it will take less time because you can have your assistant move the speakers as you listen.

Once you have done this by ear to the best of your ability, it is worth taking another 15 minutes to align the

For those of you who have spent your life with box speakers, you will immediately notice the “openness” of these speakers.

speakers to each other. Measure the distance from the left side of the panel to the wall and the right side to the wall. Adjust the left and right speakers to the same distance, as well as matching the rake angle, or how much they angle backwards. You can be as OCD with this as you have the patience for, but if you can bring both speakers within about a half inch of each other, you will be rewarded with a wider soundstage and sweet spot.

For those of you who have spent your life with box speakers, you will immediately notice the “openness” of these speakers. But you will also notice that the sweet spot is much more critical than it was before and off axis response, though greatly improved from earlier MartinLogan models but not as good as your favorite box speakers. The good news is that the Spire is definitely a two-person speaker, so if you have a listening partner, he or she will be enjoy them as well.

The Spires will take about 150-200 hours to sound their absolute best, as the cone woofer breaks in at a different rate than the ESL panel. These speakers sound very good out of the box, but you will notice that the bass is slightly heavy and slow. A good measure of this will



disappear in the first 50 hours of play, though you will notice the woofer and panel integrating more over the next 150 hours or so.

Choose Your Electronics With Care

The Spires started in my reference system, with the Conrad-Johnson Premier 350 power amplifier and ACT2/Series 2 preamplifier, but because of the length of this review, I had the opportunity to try them with a wider range of amplification than even a normal review would encompass. Because of the low impedance nature of the Spire (4 ohms overall, dipping to .75 ohms at 20kHz), I am not a huge fan of running these speakers with tube amplification unless they have a 2-ohm output tap.

I had very successful results using the Spires with the Prima Luna DiaLogue 7 Mono-block amplifiers, the BAT VK-55SE and the McIntosh MC75 60th anniversary power amplifiers, as each of these tube power amplifiers have low impedance taps. When trying other tube amplifiers, even on the 4-ohm output taps, the high-frequency response was rolled off too much for my taste.

Even modestly powered solid-state amplifiers with plenty of current reserve worked very well, including the Rega Elicit integrated, the Naim SuperNait, Luxman 590A-II and recently the Lavardin integrated. With the Spire, it's quality over quantity every time. You can start your MartinLogan journey with a relatively inexpensive amplifier, but due to the highly resolving nature of these speakers, as the quality of your system improves, you will consistently hear more musical information from the Spires. It's worth noting that I've used these speakers in six figure systems and have never felt that the speakers were holding the system back.

The Sound

The greatest strength of the Spire is its ability to create a large, three-dimensional field of sound. If you are new to panel sound, you will be amazed at how well these relatively big speakers disappear in the room like a great mini monitor. *(continued)*

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The next big strength of the Spire is its freedom from box-induced colorations. Combining this lack of inherent colorations and the speed of the ESL panel, the Spire is a revelation, offering up a level of detail retrieval that you will be hard pressed to achieve in another speaker at this price point.

Once properly sorted, the Spire throws a very wide soundstage that will extend well beyond the outer edges of the speakers.

The more room you can give the Spires between the outer edge of the speaker and the side walls, the greater you will be rewarded in regards to soundstage, if that's your hot button. The Spire can work as close as a foot to the left and right wall, but image width will be compromised. I was also very impressed with how well these speakers created an illusion of height within a recording. This is probably one of the toughest feats for a great system to recreate, and the Spires always did a great job.

As you would expect with a panel speaker, the Spire has a very transparent sound, yet with a different feel from a set of Magneplans. The Magneplans, because they do not have a cone woofer, have a slight edge in upper mid-bass coherence but lack the overall dynamics that the Spire has in spades. Back to that compromise thing again.

The Spire has very powerful bass response and thanks to their aluminum-cone woofers do an incredibly good job with blending in with the ESL panel. This is the fourth generation of MartinLogan hybrid technology, and they improve it every time. *(continued)*



My test generator validated the claim of these speakers going down to 29hz, with useable (though diminished) output at 25hz.

Whatever music you enjoy, I suspect you will be able to hear further into it with the Spires; this is the magic that usually grabs people with electrostatic speakers, particularly with vocals. One of my favorite vocal tracks is Johnny Cash's "Delia's Gone" from his *American Recordings* album; his voice is mixed with a fair amount of reverb to get a big sound, but through the Spires, it is huge and haunting.

Thanks to the huge dose of resolution that these speakers possess, subtle details are made much more clear as well. I guarantee that the Spires will offer up a fair share of "I didn't hear that before" moments as you go through your favorite recordings that you are intimately familiar with. I had spent a year with the

Vantage and Summit speakers, and the Spire entered the reference system while I was waiting for my CLX's to arrive, so I had the chance to listen to the Spire and (original version) Summit side by side, with the listening room floor adequately marked so that I could keep them in the optimum spot.

The improvements to the overall transparency of the Spire were immediately apparent when switching back and forth between Summit and Spire, especially with vocals and acoustic instruments. While listening to Beethoven's Octet in E Flat, OP 103 from the Netherlands Wind Ensemble's *Beethoven Wind Music* LP, you could just hear the oboe float between the speakers about six feet in front; when listening with the Summits, the oboe stays more on the same plane as the speakers. *(continued)*

I guarantee that the Spires will offer up a fair share of "I didn't hear that before" moments as you go through your favorite recordings that you are intimately familiar with.

This effect was more pronounced with the most delicate of instruments, not so much with more densely recorded albums.

Knowing that my room has a modest bump at 40hz, I could never get the Spire completely dialed in as I could with the Summit, which features a 25 and 50hz control, but that is not the speakers' fault. The Spire always exhibited a slight mid-bass warmth in my listening room that was not present when I took the speakers to a friend's house.

As I said almost two years ago when I reviewed the original Summit, these are panels that rock. The Spire is merely more refined. If you enjoy heavy rock music or large-scale orchestral music, you will not be disappointed with the Spire. These speakers can handle Mahler or Metallica with ease and at very high SPL's. When compared to a very high-performance set of dynamic/cone speakers, the Spire does lack that last touch of leading edge sharpness, but you will have to spend \$25k or more to get this level of transparency.

How Much Woofing is Necessary?

This issue was easily solved by adding a MartinLogan Descent i subwoofer, which *does* have 25 and 50hz controls. This also solved another burning question for many potential MartinLogan owners, wondering if they should buy a pair of Spires and a Descent i (for an additional \$3,495) instead of a pair of Summit X. This is a tough one that can always start up a heated discussion with the MartinLogan Owners Club any day of the week. Your room will really define what combination will work best.

If you have a modest- to medium-sized room and don't need subterranean bass response, the Spire has to be one of the best values in high-end audio today. However, if you have the room for the Descent i, this combination will give you a substantial helping of the sound of MartinLogans' flagship CLX (which really requires a pair of subwoofers to give its all) and in some cases can outperform the Summit X without subwoofers.

Is the Spire for You?

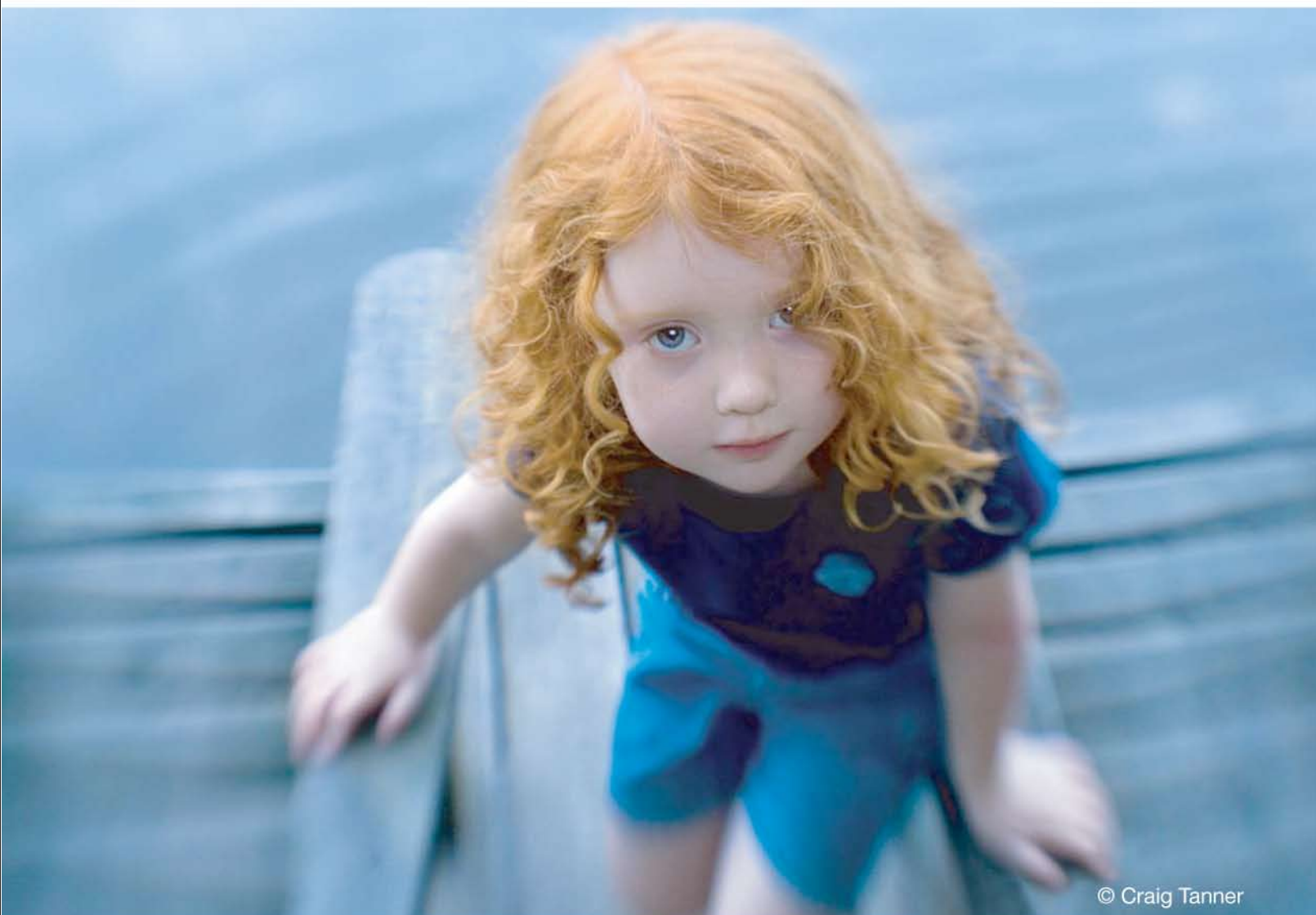
If you've been intrigued with the ESL sound, I can't think of a better speaker with which to jump off the cliff than the MartinLogan Spire. Though it will require attention to source components and room placement to give its best, it will reward you with a higher degree of performance than you can expect in this price range. If there's a more musical speaker for the money, I haven't heard it yet.

While I have had a lot of experience now with the full ESL line and use the CLX as my reference, I feel the Spire is really the sweet spot in the MartinLogan product line, giving you the most performance and flexibility for the money. Thus, we are awarding it one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2009. ●

If you've been intrigued with the ESL sound, I can't think of a better speaker with which to jump off the cliff than the MartinLogan Spire.



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Phono Preamplifiers Nagra VPS with VFS, Naim Superline w/ HiCap2

Power Amplifiers BAT VK-55SE, Burmester 911mk. 3, Conrad-Johnson Premier 350, McIntosh MC252, Nagra PSA, PrimaLuna Dialog 7

Power Running Springs Dmitri and Jaco, Running Springs Mongoose and HZ power cords, Shunyata Hydra 2, Shunyata Anaconda and Python CX power cords

Interconnects Cardas Golden Reference, Furutech Reference III, Shunyata Aurora

Speaker Cable Shunyata Orion, Shunyata Stratos SP

Accessories Burmester V1 and V3 racks, Clearaudio Simple Matrix record cleaner, Furutech DeMag, Mobile Fidelity Record Cleaning products, Shunyata DarkField cable elevators VPI 16.5 record cleaner

The PrimaLuna DiaLogue Sevens

CAN WE TALK?

By Hood McTiernan

haven't had a tube amp in my system for quite a while, and I was looking forward to revisiting bottle heaven with the arrival of the PrimaLuna DiaLogue Seven monoblocks. My last pair of tube monos were Audio Research VTM-120s, which have been sorely missed. And while I haven't ever lusted after a Chinese-made component for my system, I had no qualms regarding expected quality, as PrimaLuna has an excellent reputation of six years.

However, it is a slightly different story with these amplifiers: they are designed in the Netherlands and built in China, with Upscale Audio as the U.S. distributor. And what a design they are. First off, the fit and finish is first rate. The painting on the chassis, the look of the metalwork and the stylish cages make for an interesting presentation indeed. Throw in the fact that they have some unusual and innovative features to go along with their more-than-impressive performance, and you have a formula for success from a music lover's perspective.

All the Right Qualities

There's a lot of goodness in the build sheet here. Four modern production copies of the revered Genelex KT88 output tube plus two each of 12AX7s and 12 AU7s adorn the front of each chassis. There are some specially designed wide-band, low-loss output transformers residing at the back of the chassis covered by a steel enclosure. These transformers are good enough to enable the amp to deliver rated output into a 2-ohm load. Add point-to-point wiring, premium Solen caps and fast-recovery diodes, and the value-for-money factor gets better and better.

Using four KT88s to deliver 70 watts makes for an unstressed output stage. I remember years back when I had Quicksilver Monos that extracted 90 watts from a single pair. Did I mention that they weigh a hefty 64 pounds apiece? Now that's heavy metal. *(continued)*





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But wait, there's more! These amplifiers feature an innovative Adaptive Autobias (TM) circuit that continually monitors the output tubes and keeps them in peak operating range. No matched quads required here; the amp takes care of itself in that regard. For you tube rollers out there (and you know who you are), this amp allows for just about any output tube to be plugged in and enjoyed. If your favorite output tube flavor runs toward EL-34s, 6550s, 6L6s, or 7581s, you're good to go. This handy circuit will automatically adjust for the new tube's characteristics and automatically set bias. Whether you are new to tubes or a veteran, it doesn't get any easier than this.

Tube Magic and a Few Tweaks

The PrimaLunas are a pleasure to listen to. These amps are the polar opposite of my Jeff Rowland 201s. The 201s manage to extract excellent performance from ice-Power modules while the DiaLogue Sevens rely on ancient technology with some clever modern twists to create their magic. The first thing you'll notice is the lush dimensionality of the midrange, a characteristic of most tube amps. Being a lover of horns in jazz and classical music, I was very taken with their ability to reproduce the roundness and the blat of certain instruments without any annoying glare or blare.

The tweeter on the Diablo Utopias is very revealing, but I could not find anything at all to take issue with at the top end. Cymbals had the requisite splash but they also had beautifully rendered shimmering decay. At the bottom end, the pluck of stand-up bass and the slap and pop of an electric bass were delivered in a more weighty manner than I thought possible on my speakers.

(continued)

As with the horns, vocals were lush yet detailed and never annoying or in your face. Add to all of these great attributes a huge sound stage and ole Hood was a very happy camper.

You often hear reviewers refer to rhythm and pace when reviewing products but never groove. Well I'm here to attest that these amplifiers find the pocket and hold down the groove in a most seductive manner.

But in spite of all the enjoyment, I knew these amplifiers could provide even more performance. Not being able to leave well enough alone, I started with replacing the stock power chord with a lower-end Shunyata model. Things got marginally better from a noise standpoint and the music was a bit more focused. Stepping up to one of the big dogs in the Shunyata lineup, the Python CX, paid big dividends in the quietness of the background and the ability to see into recordings better with far more bottom-end slam.

The next step was to add a Shunyata Hydra 2 at the back of each amp. Now we're talkin'! That was followed by placing each amplifier on a nice chunk of spiked and damped granite. Finally, I added an HRS damping plate to each of the steel enclosures on the amps. This might sound like a lot of trouble and expense to go through for amps that sound quite excellent on their own, but for the intrepid tweaker, there's more to be had in this dialog, much more. After all of these tweaks, I was totally enamored of what I was hearing from these amplifiers. Then ... there was the one thing left to try.



Exploring Triode Mode

The DiaLogue Seven can operate either in 70-watt Ultralinear mode or 40-watt Triode mode. The user can change modes via the cool little remote supplied with the amplifiers. For the first three weeks of this review, the amps operated solely in the Ultralinear mode. I had assumed that the Triode mode just couldn't deliver the goods in my situation. And mostly, I was right. But my, oh my, pushing that little button was a revelation. As long as I kept the volume at a reasonable level, the pure musical enjoyment delivered by these amplifiers was mighty fine. The sound stage became wider and deeper, transparency increased and from the mid-treble region on up, there was a seductive rightness that was certainly attention grabbing. If you have very efficient speakers in the 91+ dB range, here's your amplifier. Every time I pressed the button, I was reminded of the machine in Woody Allen's *Sleeper* called the Orgasmatron. Step into the machine, press the button and, well, you know. *(continued)*

If you have very efficient speakers in the 91+ dB range, here's your amplifier.





The only tweak left was to experiment with tubes in the input stage. I didn't go there but was sorely tempted. But I do wonder what nos Mullard or Amperex tubes could do in that part of the circuit. Maybe some other time.

Try as I might, I could find little to criticize about the sound of these amplifiers. Are they the most transparent amps ever? No. Do they have a strangle hold on the woofers? No. Blackest background? No. But to be honest, I didn't really care about these minor quibbles because the whole presentation was so enjoyable. During my time with these amplifiers, I found myself asking over and over how PrimaLuna can deliver so much greatness for such a reasonable price. I would guess that savvy design, savvy production techniques, unique circuitry, cost-effective production-site choice and other intelligent decisions yield a compelling product. Time and again,, my better half overheard me asking, "How do they do that"? When prompted, I just explained that these amplifiers had me talking to myself. Very highly recommended.

I found myself asking over and over how PrimaLuna can deliver so much greatness for such a reasonable price.



Further Listening:

Did someone say tube rolling? Having used various PrimaLuna amplifiers over the years (And my ProLogue 1 runs flawlessly since day one, with only one recent set of fresh tubes after six years), I ran the DiaLogue monos through a few more scenarios, with excellent results.

If you haven't read any of our past reviews on PrimaLuna amplifiers over the years, I'm a big fan of the marque. The build quality is excellent, the failure rate is zero and these amplifiers are easy to customize to your system and/or listening tastes. If you desire the sound of a contemporary tube amplifier, go with the stock KT-88's to get punch and bass extension. If you are willing to sacrifice a few watts for scrumptious midrange, roll in a set of EL-34 tubes. And for those of you that still love the sound of your McIntosh MC-30's and MC-40's, go for broke with a set of 6L6GT's and replace all of the driver tubes with your favorite Mullards, and you'll swear you went back in time.

Versatile Performers

I kept the DiaLogues much longer than the usual week to take photos, so I could thoroughly break them in as well as try them with about 15 different speakers. The DiaLogue Sevens would drive everything I threw at them, from the 84db ACI Sapphire XL's up to the 100db ZU Presence. The Zu's were absolute magic in Triode mode; I probably never used more than about 3 of those 40 watts per channel driving the Zu's.

Thanks to the 2-ohm tap that McT mentioned, you can even drive a pair of MartinLogans with them fairly well. The CLX, Spire and Summit X were no problem at modest levels, without the highs being rolled off as they do with some of my favorite tube amplifiers.

With their high build quality, great sound and versatility, we are happy to give the PrimaLuna DiaLogue Sevens one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2009. – **Jeff Dorgay**

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Quite the Chameleons

THE HARBETH MONITOR 40.1

By Jeff Dorgay

British monitor speakers have a very devoted set of followers. When you mention Spendor, ProAc, Rogers or Harbeth in a room full of audio enthusiasts, a hearty round of applause will usually follow. Much like panel speakers, you either dig the sound of British monitors or they're just not for you.

These monitor speakers often gave up the frequency extremes in the quest for getting the magical midrange right. This approach to speaker design has the side benefit of making them slightly more user friendly, not requiring as much fussing to achieve decent sound in a room as some others that are similarly priced.



The Monitor 40.1 is a different animal, building on everything you love about traditional British monitors but with a huge helping of resolution that is proportioned perfectly so as not to spoil the package. The original Harbeth Monitor 40 left the market a few years ago when Harbeth's original supplier for the 12-inch LF driver ceased production. It returned as the 40.1 in late 2007 when Harbeth sorted out the process to bring the 12-inch driver manufacturing in house.

However, one of the major keys to the modern Harbeth sound is their RADIAL™ drivers, used for the woofer in all of their smaller speakers and the critical midrange region in the Monitor 40.1.

On a recent factory visit, I was able to compare the RADIAL™ cone – before it was installed into a driver – with a standard polypropylene cone. The RADIAL™ cone is much stiffer, nearly impossible to bend torsionally. As Harbeth principle Alan Shaw put it, “The biggest problem with a polypropylene cone is that it comes in a roll, heated and then vacuum formed around a mold tool. Eventually, it does want to return to its own shape, a flat sheet. The injection molding technique of the RADIAL™ cone eliminates this issue, resulting in a much stiffer cone.”

At the top of the Harbeth range, the Monitor 40.1's are considerably larger than the rest of the line, 29.5"x 17"x 15.5" (750 x 432 x 400mm) and weigh 75 pounds (34kg.) each. The grilles look like basic black fabric, but the material is specially designed to be acoustically transparent and are to be left on while the music is playing. “We suggest that the grilles be left on all of our speakers,” Shaw said. The Monitor 40.1's carry a much bigger pricetag than the rest of the Harbeth range as well; MSRP on the current model is \$12,995 in standard cherry finish. Other finishes are available at a slightly higher cost. *(continued)*

One of the major keys to the modern Harbeth sound is their RADIAL™ drivers, used for the woofer in all of their smaller speakers and the critical midrange region in the Monitor 40.1.



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TONEAudio Magazine

Setup

The Monitor 40.1's are intended to be listened to nearfield, which at first might seem intimidating because these are fairly large boxes. But after the first few minutes of listening, I guarantee you won't even notice them in the room.

I used the Monitor 40.1's on the long wall of my 16x24-foot listening room, with the front of the tweeters six feet from the back wall and seven feet apart, center to center. My ears were just seven feet from the tweeters, making a smaller triangle than I'm used to. By experimenting with seating position, this proved to offer the most realistic soundfield. While the Monitor 40.1's worked well on the short wall of my listening room, following Harbeth's guidelines that specify "getting the speakers as far away from room boundaries as possible" created dividends in the expansive soundfield presented.

I must disagree with the master on one issue. I preferred ever so slightly the sound of the 40.1's with the grilles removed to the sound of them in place. It also seems a shame to hide all that craftsmanship behind those big black frames. I agree with Mr. Shaw on the issue of speaker height, where he suggests getting the tweeter "as close to ear level as possible." If you overshoot this parameter by more than a couple of inches, the Monitor 40.1's start to sound muffled and rolled off.

As I spend a large amount of my time moving big speakers around, always searching for the optimum setup, I must commend the Monitor 40.1's for being the easiest speakers I've had the pleasure of setting up. *(continued)*



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They may also be the most amplifier-friendly speakers that I've used. Though they have a somewhat low sensitivity rating of 85db, I had no problem getting great sound with anything from a 30-watt-per-channel tube amplifier to the monstrous solid-state amplifiers that I currently have in for review. All had a different flavor to be sure, but none gave unlistenable results.

If you long for the British monitor sound of old, pair up the Monitor 40.1's with some vintage tube electronics containing a full complement of NOS tubes, and you can relive that nostalgic period. Those wanting a more modern sound need merely switch to a modern amplifier, preferably a high-current solid-state model, and you will be firmly in the 21st Century.

Not a Pair of Audiophile Speakers

The Monitor 40.1's defy convention in the sense that they don't follow current trends in speaker design. The LF and midrange drivers are mounted behind the front panel, and the cabinets will not pass the "knuckle test," giving slightly when you pound on them.

The proof is in the listening. Much like a great reel-to-reel master tape, the Monitor 40.1's have almost endless resolution and depth. They will give fantastic results with your favorite solo vocalist. After spending a lot of time with them and going back to recordings I've heard hundreds of times, I was amazed at how much nuance was lurking in the presentation.

On the lead guitar solo in Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Saturday Night Special" from their *Nuthin' Fancy* LP, not only could I hear each of the three guitarists succinctly, I could hear the two backup vocalists off in the corners of the soundstage. *(continued)*



Much like a great reel-to-reel master tape, the Monitor 40.1's have almost endless resolution and depth.

series 1

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REVIEW

I found the same thing when listening to *Little Villiage*, an early 90s' collaboration with John Hiatt, Nick Lowe and Ry Cooder. Much like the members of Todd Rundgren's Utopia, these three have similar voices and, on an unresolving speaker, tend to sound like multiple overdubs of the same voice. All three voices stood out, and it was easy to tell who was singing lead in each song. The bongos in Lloyd Cole's "Man Enough" sound just behind the rest of the players. This is the kind of subtlety that will keep you on the couch for hours.

But even with all this finesse, the Monitor 40.1's won't wimp out if you need to rock. When partnered with the massive McIntosh 1.2KW monoblocks with 1,200 watts per channel, I was able to easily hit 105 db peaks with the big blue meters only bouncing about two-thirds of the way up the scale. Knowing that Alan Shaw personally inspects blown drivers for damage under a microscope, and fearing for my hearing (or having to explain what happened), I didn't play *Van Helen II* any louder than this. But they were up to the task.

The Monitor 40.1's don't have "pinpoint imaging," but neither does a live performance. They also don't have "overdamped bass," and if you spend five minutes listening to a stand-up bass playing in a room, you'll see that the overdamped audiophile bass might sound great in "Morph the Cat," but that's not how the instrument sounds.

The high end of the Monitor 40.1's is silky smooth and natural. Cymbals and percussion sound incredibly natural with just the right amount of timbre and decay.

(continued)

When listening to some of my favorite analog recordings, the realism was uncanny. MoFi's version of Frank Sinatra's *Nice and Easy* sounded like Sinatra was center stage and standing about four feet in front of me. In the recent release of Beck's *Sea Change*, Beck sounded superhuman, as if he was everywhere in the room.

Of course, the midrange was fabulous. But just as important, the top-to-bottom coherence of these speakers was fabulous as well. For those of you just tuning in to TONE-Audio, it's worth noting that my reference speakers are MartinLogan CLX's and coherence is my big hot button. I appreciate a pair of speakers with a big sound, and the Monitor 40.1's offer up a huge one. When you close your eyes or dim the lights, these big boxes do an excellent job at vanishing in the room, much like Harbeth's smaller monitors do.

Definitely a *Music Lover's Speaker*

Earlier this year at the Consumer Electronics Show, MoFi engineer Rob LoVerde and I spent some time together after he had just finished remastering Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On*. After about 10 minutes with the Monitor 40.1's, he said that not only were the midrange and overall tonal balance of the speakers perfect, but it reminded him of exactly what he heard in the studio with the master tape. I can't imagine higher praise than that.

I've lived with the Monitor 40.1's for about half a year, and I just keep coming back to them. Everyone who has visited my listening room has fallen under their spell, and they are the best party guests one could ask for. These speakers have probably resulted in more late-night listening sessions than anything I've had here for review in a long, long time.

The Harbeth Monitor 40.1's are fairly expensive, compared with the rest of the Harbeth line and in general. Let's face it: you can buy a nice used BMW 330i these days for 13 grand. However, you can spend five times this much on a pair of speakers and not get near this level of musicality.

I can't suggest highly enough seeking out a pair of these fine speakers.

These speakers have probably resulted in more late-night listening sessions than anything I've had here for review in a long, long time.

A Visit to Harbeth

During my last visit to the UK, I made it a point to stop by the factory and pay Alan Shaw a visit. Distilling Harbeth down to two words, they would be “efficiency” and “precision.” The Harbeth factory is not very large, but there is not one square millimeter of wasted space anywhere. One of the reasons that owner Alan Shaw can keep Harbeth speakers reasonably priced is that he doesn’t have an 80,000-square-foot facility on which to make mortgage payments.

“We concentrate on our strengths and core technologies; if we have to make a part in house, we will.” Shaw explained as we went upstairs to see five-inch LF RADIAL™ drivers being built for the next batch of P3ESR monitors. Thirty-six pair went through final assembly during the course of my day at Harbeth. But while Harbeth builds all of its LF and midrange drivers in-house, they still source tweeters from SEAS. *(continued)*

“We concentrate on our strengths and core technologies; if we have to make a part in house, we will.”



"The machinery necessary to build tweeters here would require space that we don't have, and learning to make great tweeters is a very specialized business," Shaw said.

Every single driver is measured and compared with reference drivers in stock for each speaker. Anything measuring outside of $\pm 0.3\text{db}$ is rejected. Once all the drivers have been tested and marked, the appropriate ones are mated together before assembling into the cabinets so that they follow the design specification. Tweeters measuring $+0.2\text{db}$ are matched with woofers measuring $+0.2\text{db}$ and so on. From there, every speaker is logged in a main book with serial number and measurements, so if it ever needs repair or replacement, the proper driver can be sent to a customer.

It is important to the Harbeth story to mention that they are an ISO 9001 certified company. That essentially means they have to keep tabs on *every* aspect of product design, build and repair.



They even have to keep track of response and feedback from their customers and dealers. This is another facet to the organizational side of Harbeth; it assures its customers of not only a very high-quality product but an extremely consistent product.

All completed speakers are then measured again, so by the time they are ready to box and ship, any possible chance of error has been eliminated. As you've probably guessed by now, measurement is very important to Alan Shaw. During the design phase of a speaker, he starts a series of notebooks that outline the overall concept and objectives for a speaker, and he spends quite a bit of time modeling drivers and crossover concepts before prototyping begins.

During my visit, the new P3ESR was just being finalized, I saw the two giant

notebooks full of measurements and technical data and the *fifty* prototype woofers that had been made for this speaker before settling on the final version. While a good amount of time is spent listening to the prototypes in Shaw's offsite facility, quite a bit of time is spent at the BBC Research Facility in Kingswood, Surrey, in their large anechoic chamber, the place where the legendary LS3/5a and other monitors were developed.

As we finished looking at the data, Shaw explained that it usually takes two to three years to go from initial drawings to finished products before he is completely happy with a design. As we are about to close the door for the day, he hands me one of the notebooks that went along with the design process of the Monitor 40.1 in this review. Pouring over a week's worth of data, it's easy to see all the care that goes into every Harbeth speaker. ●

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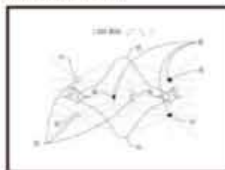
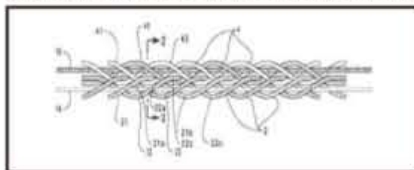
The new *Sky Series Signal Cables* utilize *Shunyata Research's* extremely complex, hand wound *Helix Geometry* braid; granted a patent for its ability to minimize the effects of electromagnetic interference, reactance and self-induced distortion. The dual helix, longitudinally offset, counter-rotating 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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Preamplifiers Burmester 011, Conrad-Johnson ACT2/Series 2, Nagra PLL

Phono Preamplifiers Nagra VPS with VFS, Naim Superline w/HiCap2

Power Amplifiers BAT VK-55SE, Burmester 911mk. 3, Conrad-Johnson Premier 350, McIntosh MC252, Nagra PSA, PrimaLuna Dialog 7

Power Running Springs Dmitri and Jaco, Running Springs Mongoose and HZ power cords, Shunyata Hydra 2, Shunyata Anaconda and Python CX power cords

Interconnects Cardas Golden Reference, Furutech Reference III, Shunyata Aurora

Speaker Cable Shunyata Orion, Shunyata Stratos SP

Accessories Burmester V1 and V3 racks, Clearaudio Simple Matrix record cleaner, Furutech DeMag, Mobile Fidelity Record Cleaning products, Shunyata DarkField cable elevators VPI 16.5 record cleaner

GREAT THINGS IN SMALL PACKAGES

Bel Canto E.One REF500 Monoblock Amplifiers

By Lawrence Devoe

An audio company whose name means “beautiful singing,” must be very confident in its products’ musicality. For 15 years, Bel Canto Designs has produced innovative and well-regarded electronics. The Bel Canto E.One REF500 stands second in their line of Class D monoblock amplifiers, just below the flagship REF 1000 Mk II’s.

A close-up, low-angle shot of a metallic, brushed-silver surface, likely the front panel of the Bel Canto E.One REF500 amplifier. The words "bel canto" are embossed in a lowercase, sans-serif font. The lighting is dramatic, coming from the side, creating strong highlights and deep shadows that emphasize the texture of the metal and the three-dimensional quality of the embossed letters. In the lower-left corner, a small, glowing blue LED indicator light is visible. The background is dark and out of focus, suggesting a studio setting.

bel canto



The Mighty Mites Arrive!

I was pleasantly surprised by the REF500s' absolute lightness of being. My reference amplifier, the Pass X-350.5 is a 150-pound behemoth that delivers 350 watts per channel, staying in full class A mode for the first 40. The REF500s weigh 15 pounds each and deliver 500 watts per channel of Class D power into 4 Ohms. They are rated to produce 250 watts per channel into 8 Ohms. The pair, stacked side by side take up as much space as a modest CD player, so they will work well anywhere space is at a premium.

A Model of Efficiency

Class D or "switching output" amplifiers have been produced for many years. They turn on and off at high speed and generate power very efficiently: The REF 500's are about 90% efficient, requiring much less power from the AC line than a Class A power amplifier of the same power rating, which usually has an efficiency of 30%. You guessed it; all that power goes up to the ceiling in heat with the Class A amplifier. Consequently, the Class D amplifier does not require a massive power transformer, or heat sinks.

Older Class D amplifiers combined analog and digital processing which generated errors in signal delivery, high distortion and headroom compromises. According to Bel Canto's CEO John Stronczer, the REF500 has inherited design improvements that were made in the REF 1000 mk II amplifiers.

These include a custom input stage featuring high common mode rejection and wide dynamic range, custom power supply rectifiers and filters that increase the energy storage of the power supply along with the latest version of Bang & Olufsen's ICE ("Intelligent, Compact, Efficient") power analog switching module. The end result is an amplifier that achieves a low distortion rating with better clarity and high frequency extension than its predecessors.

Putting the REF500s in the System

The fit and finish of these amplifiers is first-rate. Installing them could not be simpler. The only decision needed is to choose balanced or single-ended inputs as either yields the same power rating. The back of each amplifier has a push button that selects the input mode, two high quality WBT binding posts for the speaker cables, a power cord receptacle and an on-off switch. While the REF 500s could be powered directly from wall outlets, Bel Canto suggests that you consider plugging them into a power conditioner to reduce the risk of hum entering your system.

I followed these instructions diligently and connected the REF500s to my Pass XP-20 with Nordost Odin XLR cables. *(continued)*

The fit and finish of these amplifiers is first-rate.



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In 2008, The Absolute Sound honored three of our subwoofers with an Editors' Choice Award.

(The other two haven't been reviewed yet.)



Fathom® f212

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Gotham® g213



GOTHAM® g213
FATHOM® f113
FATHOM® f112

The amps got their juice from individual Nordost Thor power distributors plugged into dedicated wall outlets via another set of Odin power cords. The Thors' architecture ensures that each amplifier is isolated from all other components in the system. Later, I did plug them directly into the dedicated wall outlets but preferred my original set up for listening. The REF500s drove my MartinLogan CLXs for all listening sessions. Analog source components were a VPI HRX/12.7/Rim Drive with Clearaudio Goldfinger v.2 cartridge. Digital source components were an Esoteric P-03/D0-3/G-ORb stack. Although there are no guidelines for "cooking" this kind of amplifier, I left the REF500s on continuously for two days, as recommended by Bel Canto, before putting them through their paces.

Listening to the World Through Switching Amplifiers

Except for the amplifiers driving my Volvo's audio system, I have never auditioned or owned a Class D amplifier. Having heard and owned numerous tube and solid-state amplifiers, operating in Class A or AB, I am very familiar with the various sonic properties of such equipment. However, I was somewhat apprehensive about Class D amplifiers, given their street reputation for being sterile and lacking in dynamics.

The listening sessions began with smaller scale recordings to test these amplifiers' ability to elicit microdynamics. *(continued)*



Most importantly, the REF500s were consistently “musical.”

I started with discs featuring the human voice whose warmth and variation places great demands on everything in the signal path. Holly Cole’s “So and So” (*Don’t Smoke in Bed*, CD) has a passage where Holly mutters some barely intelligible epithets over an alternately tapped body of a string bass. The REF500s made this passage sound as intelligible as it’s likely to get. I continued with Rickie Lee Jones “The Moon is Made of Gold” (*Duets* with Rob Wasserman, CD,) and Margo Timmon’s “Mining for gold” (Cowboy Junkies’ *Trinity Sessions*, CD.). Rickie Lee’s throaty style emerged clearly from a dead quiet background with some tantalizing guitar fretwork at the end and Margo’s take on this depression era ballad floated other-worldly over the obtrusive background clanking of air-conditioning fans, so the REF500’s passed the female vocal test.

I moved on to recordings of solo pianos whose broad tonal palette challenges any playback system. Dick Hyman’s direct-to-digital take on Fats Waller’s music (Reference Records CD) reveals the piano almost mercilessly. With the REF500s, Dick’s rendition of “Ain’t Misbehaving” behaved extremely well, with both melody and rhythm hands well articulated. James Boyk plays the percussive Prokofiev sixth piano sonata (*20th Century Masters*, Performance Recordings CD) in an excellent live recording. The REF500s had no difficulty resolving the opening movement’s complex sonorities.

Realistic roundness, depth, and articulation in bass reproduction are alleged weaknesses of Class D amplifiers. James Welch’s Magnum Opus series (Wilson Audio Recordings LP) has many challenging low bass cuts. I selected the Bach Toccata and Fugue (BWV 565). The lowest chords sounded clean, if not the last word in fullness, and had appropriate overhang from the chosen recording venue.

The next challenge was some “bigger” music. I started with Ry Cooder’s *Jazz* on LP, which features a wide range of instrumental timbres. The CLXs really sprang to life on “Face to Face That I Shall Meet Him,” putting the players in your face as the recording engineers intended. This encouraged me to push them with Loggins and Messina’s “Vahevala” from the *Sittin’ In LP*. Getting the percussive timbre of those background steel drums is the essence of this track and the REF500s appeared unfazed by the transients of all those hammers. Another acid test for the delivery of big sound is the opening number of a legendary Little Feat concert, “Fat Man in the Bath Tub” from the MoFi remaster of *Waiting for Columbus*, one of my favorite live rock recordings. This track blends multiple voices, guitars, dual drummers and a funky synthesizer, with the REF500s delivering a convincing tsunami of sound. (*continued*)

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– Marc Phillips, TONEAudio



I finally challenged the amps with a huge piece, the finale of Berlioz *Symphonie Fantastique* (*Witches' Sabbath*) in the venerable Kojian/Utah Symphony recording on Reference Recordings via 45 rpm LP. As the final notes sounded, the REF500s were still standing in the middle of the ring, their little arms held high!

On Being Heard and Not Seen

The REF500s are small enough to hide easily behind the CLXs, which they drove adequately during my listening sessions. The good news is that they did not convert my sound room into a sauna, no matter how hard I played them. For \$4,995 a pair, they will not require a second mortgage on your home, and an audiophile with a bad back like mine can easily pick them up, a definite bonus.

Given the dimensions of my room (21 x 15 x 8) and the tolerance of my ears, I could not drive these amplifiers to a point where they ran out of gas, developed a harsh edge or audibly clipped. Most importantly, the REF500s were consistently "musical." Ultimately though, they did yield some ground to my reference Pass amplifier. The heft and sheer "roundness" associated with the lower octaves of piano and organ could have used a few more acoustic calories when played through the Bel-Canto amps. This would not have been apparent on most musical selections but could prove disappointing to low bass aficionados. (*continued*)

The REF500s' soundstage, while adequate, was somewhat narrower and shallower than provided by the Pass X-350.5. This was most evident in really big pieces like the Berlioz selection. However, I do not regard this as a serious shortcoming since it was only noticeable in comparison with an amplifier at twice the price and ten times the weight!

A few other points are worth mentioning to potential buyers. First, when run through my power conditioning system, the REF500s did sound better than when run straight out of the wall. If your system doesn't contain a power conditioner, you might consider adding a good one from the many that are now available. Second, their power output may suffice for speakers of average sensitivity in rooms of normal dimensions. However, their 250 or 500 watts per channel rating, (depending on the impedance of your speakers) may not satisfy the hearty appetites of low sensitivity loudspeakers, very large listening rooms or hearing-impaired head-bangers who must listen at fortissimo levels.

After several weeks of serious listening, I know that I could live with these mini-amps as permanent additions to my audio system.

Should you fall into these latter categories, you might consider their larger brothers, the REF1000 mkII's that produce twice as much power and sell for only \$2,000 more per pair.

Classy Class D Amplifiers

Based on my experience with the REF500s, I am convinced that Class D amplifiers have surely come a long way. These amps do, in fact, "sing beautifully" with most source material. After several weeks of serious listening, I know that I could live with these mini-amps as permanent additions to my audio system. Given their lack of energy consumption I could even fuel a great surround system with 5 of them and still save plenty of money on my current electric bill! ●



The BelCanto REF 500's
MSRP: \$4,995/pair

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Pass XP-20/Lexicon 12HD-B

Power Amplifier

Pass X-350.5/Pass X-3

Speakers MartinLogan Summit/Stage/Script-i/Descent-I (2)/Descent

Cable Nordost Odin/Valhalla Speaker Cable, Nordost Odin Power Cords/Conditioning Nordost Thor/Nordost Odin/Valhalla

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The BAT VK-55SE:

A Compact Tube Powerhouse

By Jeff Dorgay

Balanced Audio Technology seems to be better known in the HiFi world for their award-winning preamplifiers, while their vacuum-tube power amps have lurked in the shadows somewhat in comparison.





The result of the BAT circuit is a triode amplifier with all the grunt and bass control of a big pentode amplifier, yet the delicacy of a triode.

The “standard edition” VK-55 sells for \$3,995 and the SE model for \$5,499. The SE version has a much beefier power supply, with five times more capacity, according to BAT, and uses BAT’s custom-made oil-filled capacitors in the place of the polypropylene capacitors in the standard model. In addition to the premium capacitors, the SE model replaces the resistive current sources for a vacuum-tube-based current source, similar to the current source used in their flagship REX preamplifier.

The VK-55SE features a compact design and, while substantial at 50 pounds, it won’t break your back. It also has a big power switch on the front panel with a solitary blue LED. The exterior design is very elegant and has no

homely tube cage to take away from those glorious triodes.

While the VK-55SE is rated at only 55 watts per channel, keep in mind that this is a pure triode amplifier, utilizing the Russian 6C33 power triode instead of a conventional pentode tube merely run in triode mode. The result of the BAT circuit is a triode amplifier with all the grunt and bass control of a big pentode amplifier, yet the delicacy of a triode.

This balance was apparent right out of the box. While running in the VK-55SE amplifier, I still had my Harbeth Compact 7ES-3 speakers in my living-room system, and this was the first time I really heard these speakers rock out in a major way. *(continued)*

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Carefully chosen and tested "active" materials mechanically and electrically

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energy for the finest Furutech Pure Transmission signal imaginable.

After a couple of weeks, the VK-55SE opened up even further, revealing another layer of inner detail.

Setup

Other than a little bit of potential tube rolling, setting up a power amplifier is pretty straightforward, however I suggest making sure the VK-55SE has plenty of air around it for ventilation purposes; those big triodes throw off some major heat!


Being a fully balanced design, I used the VK-55SE primarily with preamplifiers offering balanced outputs, BAT's own VK-32SE, the Nagra PL-L and the Burmester 011, through a 20-foot run of Shunyata Aurora interconnects. For those of you with a single ended preamplifier, BAT provides XLR to RCA adapters that you can purchase from your dealer for about \$75 a pair. Cardas also makes an excellent set of these adapters.

Thanks to BAT's auto bias design, you won't have to hunt for a multimeter or worry about losing a plastic screwdriver. Even better, you won't have to screw around biasing tubes. Just plug it in and listen. I noticed that this amplifier took somewhat longer than most other tube amplifiers I've had in my system, requiring about 90 minutes to really open up, but it is well worth it.

Tube Variations

The rest of the circuit is straightforward, featuring an all-triode design. BAT uses the 6H30 tube (which they introduced to the audio world about ten years ago) in the input stage and the classic 6SN7 triode driving a pair of 6C33's in the output stage. All three of these tubes are very robust and readily available.
(continued)

REVIEW



The 6C33 is also used in BAT's higher powered VK-75 series of amplifiers, so they should last a long time in the lower powered VK-55SE. The 6C33 does not have a depth of NOS variations and the 6H30 only a few, so other than swapping 6SN7's, the VK-55SE will not provide hours of entertainment for tube rollers. The stock EH 6SN7 provided more of the powerful "BAT sound" that they are famous for, and a pair of NOS Sylvania 6SN7GT's (that usually cost about \$100 each) softened the sound a bit too much for my taste with the Harbeths, but they did have slightly more midrange magic.

Though I'm not a big fan of tube rolling, because it often ends up being more trouble

than it's worth (often ending in "different" rather than "better")

there is one swap I would advise for the VK-55SE. If you can find a pair

of the original Russian 6H30's that BAT previously put in their gear when they first started bringing this tube into the U.S., these are worth the effort. I've tried every other variation of current 6H30 in my Conrad-Johnson ACT2/Se-series two preamplifier, and they all pale in comparison to the original. They've become rare and expensive these days, about \$300 a pair, as opposed to about \$40 a pair for new EH tubes. A pair of NOS 6H30's will improve the VK-55SE in every way, with lower noise floor, slightly better dynamics and a less grainy overall presentation.

Should you start rolling tubes in your VK-55SE, be careful. Remember, those big power tubes and the 6H30's get very hot! Find some cotton gloves and let the tubes cool down for a few minutes before handling them. *(continued)*

A pair of NOS 6H30's will improve the VK-55SE in every way, with lower noise floor, slightly better dynamics and a less grainy overall presentation.

The Sound

The BAT VK-55SE is a very special amplifier in many ways. I've always been a fan of tube power amplifiers, but I found them to be something of a compromise. What I ended up gaining in midrange depth or high-frequency delicacy, I lost in bass control and ultimate dynamics. The VK-55SE does it all. Everyone who had the chance to listen to this amplifier made the same comments about the bass control and texture, combined with nuance.

If your speakers have a sensitivity of at least 86db, you should have no problems driving them to levels a lot louder than you might expect from an amplifier rated at 55 watts per channel. My conclusion is that the VK-55SE is rated *extremely* conservatively, as it played louder with the same speakers than other tube amplifiers that I had on hand, which are rated at 70 watts per channel or better.

Another big plus with the VK-55SE is its ability to drive low impedance loads. In addition to having no problem driving the MartinLogan CLX's or the other ML models we've had in for review, this amplifier was also able to take hold of my Magnepan 1.6's and produce excellent sound. I was amazed at how well this BAT amplifier could control the bass panels on the 1.6's, offering up not only meaningful output but bass detail as well.

I brought out some of my standard workhorses in the bass department: Thomas Dolby, Genesis, Stanley Clark and Jaco Pastorius. The opening harmonics in "Portrait of Tracy" on Pastorius' self-titled album were rich and tuneful, with the proper amount of decay. Moving along to the

Verity Audio Sarastro

II's, which present a much more reasonable 4 ohm load and have a 93db sensitivity, I could play music much louder than I needed to before clipping set in.

The powerful combination of resolution and dynamics makes it easy to listen to the VK-55SE for hours on end, easily passing the "go and get another record" test. Tosca's *Delhi 9*, while not the best record in terms of ultimate fidelity and cleanliness, is a very trippy collection of electronica produced by Richard Dorfmeister (of Kruder and Dorfmeister fame) that is filled with cool spatial effects.

If you have a two-channel system that is up to the task, you won't need a pair of rear surround speakers. This was another test that the VK-55SE aced. Throughout the track "Me and Yoko Ono" there is a boing sound that is locked in the right channel, while there is another electronic drip sound from the right channel that appears to bounce from behind the speakers to about a foot in front of them with the VK-55SE. Amplifiers that are less resolving keep the sounds on this record all on the same plane as the speakers. *(continued)*

I was amazed at how well this BAT amplifier could control the bass panels on the 1.6's, offering up not only meaningful output but bass detail as well.





Working within its comfort zone, the VK-55SE is one of my favorite tube power amplifiers, regardless of price.

A Fantastic Amplifier Indeed

Working within its comfort zone, the VK-55SE is one of my favorite tube power amplifiers, regardless of price. Somewhat on the high side of the scale for 55 watts per channel, this robust amplifier is worth every penny, offering a level of resolution and fine detail that would cost a lot more elsewhere. You may find a more powerful amplifier for the money, but I dare you to find one that reveals this much music and can drive such a wide range of speakers.

I'd also like to mention that while the VK-55SE had great synergy with their VK-32SE preamplifier, it played well with others and worked flawlessly with all of the other preamplifiers I auditioned it with. I did notice a slightly lower noise floor when using it in balanced mode with balanced preamplifiers, but the VK-55SE gave a stellar performance with my single ended preamplifiers from ARC, CJ and Manley, so don't let having a single ended preamplifier stop you from enjoying this amplifier.

I highly recommend the VK-55SE and am pleased to say that we have purchased the review sample, to add to our reference fleet of amplifiers. I predict you will see this one in our associated components list for years to come. ●

DeVORE FIDELITY



The Nines

The BAT VK-55SE

MSRP: \$3,995 (standard version)
\$5,495 SE version

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Digital Sources Naim CD555, Meridian 808, Wadia 781SE, Sooloos Music Server

Preamplifiers Burmester 011, Conrad-Johnson ACT2/Series 2, Nagra PLL

Phono Preamplifiers Nagra VPS with VFS, Naim Superline w/HiCap2

Speakers Harbeth Compact 7ES-3, Harbeth Monitor 40.1, Magnepan 1.6, MartinLogan Summit X and CLX, Verity Audio Sarastro II, Zu Presence

Power Running Springs Dmitri and Jaco, Running Springs Mongoose and HZ power cords, Shunyata Hydra 2, Shunyata Anaconda and Python CX power cords

Interconnects Cardas Golden Reference, Furutech Reference III, Shunyata Aurora

Speaker Cable Shunyata Orion, Shunyata Stratos SP

Accessories Burmester V1 and V3 racks, Clearaudio Simple Matrix record cleaner, Furutech DeMag, Mobile Fidelity Record Cleaning products, Shunyata DarkField cable elevators VPI 16.5 record cleaner

Oppo BDP-83 Blu-Ray Universal Disk Player

One for All and All for One

By Rich Kent

Back in the mid '70s before Tivo and PVR's, Sony and JVC started the epic battle over a videotape recording standard, Betamax vs VHS. Sony lost that hard-fought battle and was not about to let history repeat itself with the Blu-Ray vs HD videodisk war.

Now that the dust has settled and Sony has won with the Blu-Ray format, the race is on between manufacturers to release new second- and third-generation Blu-Ray players at affordable prices with improved features and performance.





The rear panel outputs, which consist of network, USB, HDMI, and RCA coax connections, are cleanly arranged and clearly marked for ease of use.

Oppo, known for its direct-to-customer sales and high value-to-performance ratio products, did not rest on its laurels. The previous 980 and 970 series DVD players have won rave reviews for video as well as respectable audio performance at an amazing price of \$169. So expectations were high for the just-released BDP-83 Universal Disk Player.

The BDP-83 plays Blu-Ray Video, DVD-Video, AVCHD, DVD-Audio, SACD, CD, HDCD, and Kodak Picture CD, features VRS-Anchor Bay technology with full HD1080p output and 24 frames-per-second video, all for \$499. It also has network connections for BD Live and updating firmware as well as USB inputs for video and audio media stored on hard drives. Pinch yourself, you are not dreaming, and it is available now. As a price comparison, Denon's universal Blu-Ray player DVD-A1UD costs a pricey \$3,800. Guess which one is selling like hotcakes.

Anyone who has previously purchased Oppo products will be familiar with the stellar packaging in which this company prides itself. The player is wrapped in a black-fabric shoulder bag suspended by foam in a durable cardboard box that contains a HDMI cable, a beefy power-supply cable, your typical RCA cables for audio and video connections, a backlit remote and a copy of the Spears and Munsil benchmark video disk.

Upon removing the player from the package, I was immediately impressed with the weightier feel of this player when compared with Oppo's previous players. The gloss-black finish along with the clean and well-marked panel controls create an impression of simplistic quality. The rear panel outputs, which consist of network, USB, HDMI, and RCA coax connections, are cleanly arranged and clearly marked for ease of use.

Setup Audio and Video

Initial setup requires you have the player connected to a video source to view the menus and configure the player according to your corresponding video- and audio-equipment sources. Video options include output resolution as well as picture adjustment controls such as brightness, contrast, hue, noise reduction and sharpness. Audio options include SACD DSD or PCM, bit stream selection for Optical or Coax connections, and the PCM rate limit.

There are also controls to configure the audio processing for listening space, down mixing to stereo vs. 5.1 or 7.1 surround sound. If you get the feeling you have to be a rocket scientist to set this up, rest easy. Right out of the box, the default Oppo factory settings will work for 95 percent of purchasers. *(continued)*



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Audio Impressions

My two-channel reference system, consists of a McIntosh C2200 preamp, a McIntosh MC 275 power amp, and a Krell KPS 20i CD player. MIT cables used throughout connect to MartinLogan CLS speakers and a MartinLogan Descent sub.

I left everything at factory default on the Oppo and placed Madeleine Peyroux's CD *Careless Love* into the player. I first heard this recording on our publisher's reference system and have been a fan ever since. She has a unique quality of pace and rhythm in her voice that separates itself from the instruments and gives a strong aliveness that draws you into her music.

The Oppo player lost some of this magic when compared with my a 14-year-old Krell KPS 20i. The Oppo is definitely better than the average budget CD player, but when compared to the Krell, the sound-stage diminishes and there is a harshness that creeps into her voice. In comparison to Oppo's previous players, the BDP-83 is an improvement, but the finesse you hear in an expensive reference player is still missing. The rounding and resonance of Peyroux's voice is absent. In lesser systems, one might not even notice this. But it is apparent on a more upscale system.

The debate of software vs. equipment has interested me since the release of "higher resolution" CDs. The SACD disk has higher dynamics and greater frequency range when compared with the standard or "red book" CD. I've also been curious to see if a relatively inexpensive SACD can outperform a reference CD player because of the increased resolution offered by the SACD format. This comparison is made possible by the "hybrid disk" that contains a red-book CD layer and a higher-resolution SACD layer. *(continued)*

With the stage set, I loaded the PentaTone SACD of Mozart's "The Hague" Symphony into the Oppo. The recognizable first pulses of music from the orchestra in pianissimo gave me some hope for the Oppo. The sound was delicate yet also rendering a smoothness that seemed to be missing from the Peyroux CD. Unfortunately, as the strings were introduced to the music, the harshness was present again and became more omnipresent as the volume of the music increased. A little discouraged, I loaded the same disk into the Krell, thinking it could be the recording. But even though the Krell was playing the "standard" low-resolution CD layer of the disk, it definitely sounded better. The crescendos, which involved the full orchestra, were presented with a larger realistic image minus the harshness introduced by the Oppo.

Surround Sound

SACD is not just two channels. The SACD media can carry multiple discrete channels, 7.1 in the case of the OPPO. Replacing my current Oppo 980H with the BDP-83 in my home theatre system is an easy one-cable HDMI connection. My HT system is a modest one consisting of a Yamaha 7.1 receiver connected to Monitor Audio R90 speakers for right, left and surround channels, and a Monitor Audio R180 center channel speaker with a MartinLogan Descent sub.

Returning to the PentaTone Mozart SACD: As the first strains of the orchestra start again, a new sensation of total immersion in the music are quite evident. It is an interesting phenomenon of the music enveloping the senses. As I listen longer, something just doesn't seem right with the soundstage.

Normal live performances do have sound waves reflections from the side and behind, but these seem artificial. The sound presentation from the sides and rear just don't correspond to those from the front. I believe this to be a misrepresentation of the amount of delay that is normally apparent in natural room-reflections.

For now, I'm giving the Oppo the benefit of the doubt until I can audition it in a reference 7.1 system.

Oh Say Can You See

I was having the strange sensation of kicking somebody when they are down after my CD-SACD audio impressions of the Oppo. The BDP-83 was designed for high-definition video first and audio second, so I never really expected it to be a reference-quality audio player, despite the raves it has received on the internet. It was time to let the Oppo do its thing.

Upon loading the Blu-Ray disk of *Batman, The Dark Knight*, the disk menu appeared in less than 30 seconds. I was amazed because I have seen people make popcorn in the amount of time it took to load a disk in a first-generation Blu-ray player.

With the movie playing, I was struck with the vast improvement in sound when compared with my old DVD player. It is not a small or subtle difference; there is a quantum leap in dynamics and clarity. The punch of the bass through my subwoofer, as well as the enveloping surround sound, was an impressive improvement, a truly involving experience.

And the Blu-Ray performance is excellent. I am happy to say the video quality is awesome, sharp and defined, with black blacks, details in the shadow and no voice sync problems as I have experienced in some players. *(continued)*

With the movie playing, I was struck with the vast improvement in sound when compared with my old DVD player.

The difference between a Blu-Ray disk and a standard DVD played on the BDP-83 creates a sound and video improvement that bring the home-theater experience to a new level, especially at this price.

The BDP-83 also will improve the playback of your old collection of DVD's. I loaded several DVD's from my collection and was amazed at the DVD up-conversion of the VRS anchor bay technology. It is a common occurrence to see DVD up-conversion on all DVD and Blu-Ray players these days, but the Oppo does an uncommonly good job. Even my non-videophile friends could easily tell the difference between the Oppo player and my older DVD player when playing standard DVD discs.

A Dichotomy

The Oppo BDP-83 represents itself as advertised. It will play any audio or video disc without so much as a hiccup. The Blu-Ray and DVD video playback of this component is exemplary. Its CD-SACD playback in my opinion is a 7+ out of 10, and many owners will find no fault in this. However, if the Oppo is placed into a highly analytical audio reference system, its faults will be revealed fairly quickly.

One must remember, though, that at just \$499, it would be a steal if it just played videodisks. Throw in the universal disk playback and the ability to play music or video from an external hard drive, and it is just too good of a deal to pass up. That is why the Oppo BDP-83 has found a happy home in my system, warts and all. Pass the Popcorn. ●

The Oppo BDP-803
MSRP: \$499

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

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The Marantz SA-KI Pearl

A Reference SACD Player for the Rest of Us

By Jerold O'Brien

Much like the LP, the high resolution SACD (super audio compact disk) is finally getting the respect it's due after the format has become outdated. There is still a fair amount of new software available and just like LP's there are quite a few titles on the used market. Most titles are still sold at reasonable prices and they usually offer higher quality sound than the original CD's they replace.



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Unfortunately the high resolution audio format died an untimely death for a number of reasons; the home theater market was coming on strong causing many to abandon two channel audio altogether, and the consumer was stuck in the middle of a format war, like Betamax and VHS with two opposing formats; SACD and DVD-a.

DVD audio is all but dead and nothing has been released in this format for years, but SACD soldiers on, with new classical releases popping up as well as remastered jazz and popular music on some of the audiophile labels. A quick search on eBay and a-sacd.com reveals that there are still about 5500 titles available on SACD that can be purchased right now.

Putting the arguments aside about SACD's performance (count me in the camp that does think they sound better), if you have a library or would like to build one, the number of available players has dwindled in the last five years, but they have been making a comeback recently. The budget combination players from Oppo and the like will *play* everything, but these are not audiophile players, with the jewels still rather expensive.

The Details Make the Difference

I spent a fair amount of time with Marantz' top of the line SACD player, the SA-7S1, last issue, borrowing it from our publisher for a few weeks to get a feel for what an almost \$10,000 dollar player would sound like in my system. While the improvement was definitely noticeable, it was also out of my league. *(continued)*



A number of discussions went down the “now if they could only give me a substantial helping of this player for \$3,000...” path, and the SA-KI Pearl arrived.

According to Kevin Zarow, Marantz USA's Sales Manager, the Pearl SA-KI is a “factory hot rod.” Legendary Marantz designer Ken Ishiwata has personally gone over every detail in the player, upgrading parts where he felt necessary to take an already great product and make it something really special. Zarow added, “When Ken produces a component like this, he spends a lot of time swapping parts and optimizing circuit layout, but most of all listening to every change.” With so many modders out there today, why not get it done by the master?

To see further into the personality of Mr. Ishiwata, peruse the Pearl section of the Marantz site here. It is immediately obvious, that this man is passionate about his work:

<http://www.marantz.eu/kipearl/>

Enter the Pearl SA-KI

The Pearl SA-KI plays SACD and CD along with an optical input that will accept digital data up to 24bit/96khz, switchable from the front panel or the remote. My only disappointment

with this player is the lack of a standard S/PDIF input, but I was very pleased with the results going from my Squeezebox to the SA-KI optically. I also had excellent results with a Mac Mini connecting in this manner, so some of you might be able to either simplify your system or add a music server component.

Unlike the other Marantz Reference components that come is a slightly retro and very sexy gold tone, the SA-KI (and it's matching integrated amplifier that has also been worked over by Mr. Ishiwata) is covered in a satin black. The SA-KI shares the copper plating on the chassis that the Reference components use as well. Picking up this 32 pound player tells a significant part of the story and you know immediately that this is something special indeed.

The front panel controls are easy to use, from the front panel or the supplied remote. Just like the Marantz components of the 70's, there is a 6-foot RCA interconnect included (we used to call em' patch cords...) so you can at least connect the SA-K1 into your system until the megabucks cable arrives. I used a 6-foot pair of Cardas Golden Reference cables in my system and was very pleased with the results. The SA-K1 only has analog outputs for single ended RCA cables. *(continued)*

Legendary Marantz designer Ken Ishiwata has personally gone over every detail in the player, upgrading parts where he felt necessary...

Great Sound from SACD and CD

As most of you will probably use this player primarily for standard CD's, a lot of time was spent auditioning the SA-KI with CD's. As the staff curmudge, I don't have the latest White Stripes disc, but I do have a great collection of Japanese Steely Dan CD's. Starting with *Pretzel Logic*, I was impressed at the air in the recording that was not coming through anywhere nearly as clear on my reference Proceed PDT 2 transport and Benchmark DAC. The keyboard lines in "Any Major Dude" stayed just right of center as they do on the LP, with my Proceed/Benchmark combo, the keyboard remained almost dead center, with the vocals and guitar tracks all on the same plane.

Those of you with large CD collections will appreciate the switch able digital filter. There is a "Filter 1" and "Filter 2" position, with 2 being standard playback and 1 having a somewhat warmer, feel that has an ever so slight HF rolloff. If you have a lot of CD's from the early days, you will learn to love position 1, it makes those terribly harsh discs in your collection much more enjoyable.

You will also notice that Filter 2 has a higher playback level, so it does take some getting used to.

SACD playback is a definite jump up in quality, and to pay my respects to Mr. Ishiwata, my first SACD selection was his 30th Anniversary disc, produced and recorded by Mr. Ishiwata personally to accompany the Pearl series components. If you are a female vocal lover, this disc is a treat that you should purchase with your SA-KI; it's definitely a case of digital done right and will amaze you at just how good a \$3,000 player can sound. Staying in the Jazz vein, the next disc up was the *Groove Note Sampler, Vol.2*. The first cut, "Chitlins Con Carne" by Anthony Wilson features a very sparse arrangement, allowing the trio plenty of space to stretch out.

(continued)





Again, this player's lack of grain at this price point amazed me, as did the tremendous amount of front to rear separation the SA-KI provided. I was also very impressed at the texture revealed in the drum solo of this tune, with the cymbals fading so gradually off into nothingness, my mind was suggesting that I was listening to vinyl at times. If you have some gems in your SACD collection, I guarantee that you will be extremely impressed with this player!

The textural correctness and dynamics that were always on tap went a long way towards conveying the emotion that Mr. Ishiwata feels is so important in a Pearl component. The SA-KI has a huge helping of the delicacy that the much more expensive SA-75S1 has (as well as some of the *incredibly* expensive players I've heard

in our publisher's system) and this is the key component that makes this disc player so easy to listen to for very long periods of time. I've yet to hear a player at this price-point that is this musical overall.

You'll Want to Expand Your SACD Collection

If I were to purchase this player, I know my SACD collection would double straight away. No matter what kind of discs you are playing, the Marantz SA-KI is a top performer. If you are someone like me that has a very good system that does not consist of unobtainium components, this disc player could be all you ever need and then some. I'm getting the feeling it's time to retire my Proceed and do a little shopping myself.

No matter what kind of discs you are playing, the Marantz SA-KI is a top performer.



Further Listening:

Playing the SA-KI side by side with a handful of five figure players, I was amazed at how well this one did with the musical fundamentals. The tonality is remarkably close to the Marantz flagship SACD player and the major difference to me was the level of resolution.

You still have to pay a lot more money to get that last bit of believability, but Mr. Ishiwata has put together a fantastic digital player for \$3,000. He's not kidding when he talks about the emotional component of the music being the most important thing to him. While it's not easy to make an excellent SACD player for \$20,000, it's way easier than it is to accomplish it for just under \$3,000 retail.

Mr. Ishiwata has succeeded brilliantly. The Pearl SA-KI greatly exceeded my expectations, so you better get to your Marantz dealer now; there are only 499 left. I'm keeping this one so I have a benchmark at this price level. This is the player that I will use as a reference standard for other disc players in the three to six thousand dollar ranges going forward. – Jeff Dorgay

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Digital Source Proceed PDT transport, PS Audio Digital Link III DAC, McIntosh MS 300 Music Server

Preamplifier Conrad-Johnson Premier 17LS, ARC SP3 (restored and modded)

Amplifier Conrad-Johnson MV-55, Dynaco Mark III Monoblocks

Speakers AV123 Strata Mini, Harbeth Compact 7-2, Klipschorns

Interconnect Cardas Golden Presence

Speaker Cable Cardas Golden Presence

Power Shunyata Hydra V-Ray, Shunyata Venom power cords



Top of the SACD Food Chain

The Wadia 781i

By Jeff Dorgay

As you can see from the other gear and music reviews in this issue, the SACD format is far from dead. While there aren't many new releases outside of the classical arena, Mobile Fidelity and a few other audiophile labels keep flying the SACD flag for one main reason: higher performance. John Shaffer, the president of Wadia Digital put it quite simply: "As long as the discs are available, we will stay committed to the format."

Keeping an eye on the future, Wadia offers the “i” model of the 781 player, reviewed here, which includes a full complement of digital inputs (AES/EBU-XLR, S/PDIF-BNC, Glass Fiber (ST) and Toslink) that to allow you to use the 781i as a 24bit/96khz DAC as well. This will greatly benefit those with music servers and Wadia’s 170i iPod dock, and it will add functionality to your digital system.

If you are a completely “digital” person and have no need for a turntable, you may have no need for a preamplifier. Wadia is the only company that has truly mastered the art of a digital volume control that does not lose resolution as the level goes down, so the 781i can serve as the preamplifier in your system as well. It features single ended RCA and balanced XLR outputs and with its Class A output stage had no problem driving 25-foot lengths of cable. My only complaint is that I would love to see one analog input, so that the vinyl lover assembling a minimalist system could take advantage of using the 781i as a preamp as well. *(continued)*

“As long as the discs are available, we will stay committed to the format.”



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The Wadia 781i has an MSRP of \$14,995. Considering the amount of change in the digital world, and so many high-resolution digital files available for download, I can't imagine why anyone would want a player this good and *not* want to take advantage of the DAC capabilities.

Unlike most other disc players that use a variety of chipsets to convert the digital bitstream to analog output, Wadia takes a different approach with their Digimaster software, utilizing a high speed processor (not unlike having a PC inside) running at 31.8Mhz. This additional digital-processing hardware is the reason for some of the extra circuitry you see when removing the 781i's cover. This is certainly not one of those expensive CD players with a lot of empty space inside a big box.

Power Supply Updates

Sounding slightly congested out of the box, the 781i will take about 300 hours to reveal its full potential, like most other high-quality HiFi components. The first 48 hours will show a dramatic improvement, tapering off gradually until about the 300-hour mark.

Some of this is a direct result of the massive power-supply upgrades that a 7 series Wadia player receives over the 5 series. There is a larger transformer and some larger power supply capacitors under the hood, easily visible when you pop it open on both machines. In addition to the bulk, Wadia has added a few more stages of local regulation, and some extra attention has been paid to vibration control. *(continued)*

Personally, I'll take the cool aesthetics over a front panel covered with writing.

Aesthetics

Wadia players are built like tanks; the 781i weighs 55 pounds. The casework is a fantastic work of industrial art, with a rather spartan appearance. Our test player came in the standard Wadia black anodized finish, with a dark grey and silver color scheme available at no extra cost.

The 781i comes a proper rubberized-metal remote with nice buttons, it features 1-point type. It looks and feels great, but anyone over 25 will probably need reading glasses. Not to single Wadia out, but I wish all the manufacturers of this sort of remote control would color code the play, stop and pause functions, so the rest of us could easily operate the deck in moderate lighting situations without reading glasses.

The clean front panel of the 781i has five buttons, but their use is vague until you get the hang of it. A quick perusal of the owner's manual will give you the complete layout, so it's no big deal. Personally, I'll take the cool aesthetics over a front panel covered with writing.

Make the 781 the center of your digital hub

If you have more than one digital source, the 781i would be a great control center. In addition to the

plethora of outputs, Wadia has just announced that all current 781i's will have the same USB input that their newest player, the 381i does. With so many people using their computer as a source for digital files, this is smart thinking indeed.

While I'm telling the folks at Wadia how to redesign the 781i, I'd can the Glass Fiber input and add an extra RCA S/PDIF input. I'm quite sure Wadia is the only company that ever used this form of connectivity, so why not make the 781i more accommodating to other sources? Perhaps the next generation of iPod dock will have a Glass Fiber output. Who knows?

For the duration of our review, I used my Sooloos Music server through the S/PDIF input and occasionally swapped it out for the Wadia 170i iPod dock, which was our digital product of the year last year. While the iPod/170i combination sounds better than an iPod has a right to, it does not have the ultimate performance of the internal transport. Very handy, though.

Sans preamplifier

I started the test without a linestage in the system because Wadia's digital volume control is so accurate. Thanks to their Digimaster software, it does not throw away critical information at low signal levels, muddying resolution provided you keep the volume level above 69 on the numeric scale. *(continued)*



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This should work just fine with most power amplifiers, but should you require more or less gain, the 781i can be adjusted internally to keep the volume control within the required range. You can find an in-depth explanation of how this works on the Wadia website, but the short explanation is that it works. Perfectly.

The first system configuration utilized the 781i with my BAT VK55SE power amplifier, running through the Verity Audio Sarastro II speakers. The system was connected with a 20-foot pair of balanced Shunyata Aurora interconnects and Shunyata Stratos SP speaker cables. The Sooloos Music Server was connected to the 781i's S/PDIF as an additional source. If analog playback is not a requirement, this could be a system you could easily live with, requiring a minimum amount of rack space and very high versatility.

It is worth noting here that even when using the single ended RCA outputs of the 781i, I could still drive a 20-foot pair of unbalanced inputs without any consequence.

I was also impressed that both the XLR and RCA outputs could be driven simultaneously, so a powered subwoofer could be incorporated into the system.

This system was very dynamic, and played to the strong suits of the 781i. It has a tremendous amount of weight and slam, giving a very forceful presentation. I suspect heavy-rock and classical-music lovers alike will enjoy the large musical image this player portrays, with effortless dynamics. When rocking out with the MoFi SACD of Edgar Winter's *They Only Come Out At Night*, I was playing "Frankenstein" at ear splitting levels without loss of image clarity. (continued)

When switching to an SACD of David Bowie's *Aladdin Sane*, the piano in the title track floated in mid air between and just slightly behind the speakers, as it does with a good analog pressing of this record. So the 781's presentation is not without finesse. The more discs I listened to, the more I grew accustomed to the sound of the 781i, which was always dynamic, expansive and neutral tonally. Acoustic instruments had the proper timbre and natural decay, which is somewhat lacking in all but the best digital players.

While the Wadia is not clinical, harsh or edgy sounding, it would never be mistaken for warm or euphonic. When using it as a standalone control center/linestage, I must admit I enjoyed it most when paired it up with one of my favorite tube power amplifiers, which injected a small helping of richness into the sound. Of course, your mileage may vary. And starting with such a neutral component will allow you considerable latitude in fine-tuning your system.

In the traditional position

The rest of my listening was with the 781i in my reference system as a conventional disc player, and a DAC for my Sooloos Music Server, as well as the other music servers we've had in for review from McIntosh and QSonix. I also made it a point to use the TOSLINK input to stream some 24/96 files from the Naim Music Store via my Mac Book Pro.

While I got great results with the 781i as a pre-amplifier, I got even better results feeding it into my reference preamplifiers from Burmester and Conrad-Johnson. This gave the overall sound even more air and delicacy. At the end of "Who's Afraid of The Art of Noise" on the *Daft* disc, when the vocalists scream "Boo, Boo" and break into laughter, it all sounded incredibly realistic and bounced from about six feet beyond the left speaker to about six feet beyond the right speaker, filling the room. Another current favorite on SACD is John Hammond's *Rough and Tough*. This straight-ahead blues album was recorded by Chesky and captures a ton of ambient hall feel. On lesser players, the soundfield collapses, but on the 781i, this is invading on analog territory. *(continued)*

The more discs I listened to, the more I grew accustomed to the sound of the 781i, which was always dynamic, expansive and neutral tonally.





Bigger is Better, at Least More

A year ago, I mentioned in the review of the Wadia 581SE that it was one of the only players to really do justice to the SACD format. Think of the 781i as a super-sized 581. Still having the 581SE on hand for most of the review period enabled me to compare both players with the same software and cables in a highly resolving system.

Both players are almost identical tonally, but the 781i throws a bigger soundfield in all three dimensions and has the most powerful bass response of any digital player I've ever heard in my system, including my \$32,000 Naim CD555. This became more evident towards the end of the review, when the JL Audio Gotham replaced the JL F110 subwoofers I was using previously. If dynamics and weight are your hot buttons, you will enjoy the 781i.

Many multifunction digital players can only play back one type of digital really well,

often sacrificing redbook performance to concentrate on high-resolution playback. I am pleased to report that the 781i is equally capable in both formats. Most of you probably have more standard CD's than SACD's, so rest assured, this player can easily function as a great CD player too.

What's in an algorithm?

Another benefit of high-speed, software-based DSP processing is that it allowed Wadia's engineers to create three different decoding algorithms to optimize the playback sound. Their DSP processing also takes care of pre and post echo artifacts quite handily, which contributes greatly to the very clean, open sound that this player presents.

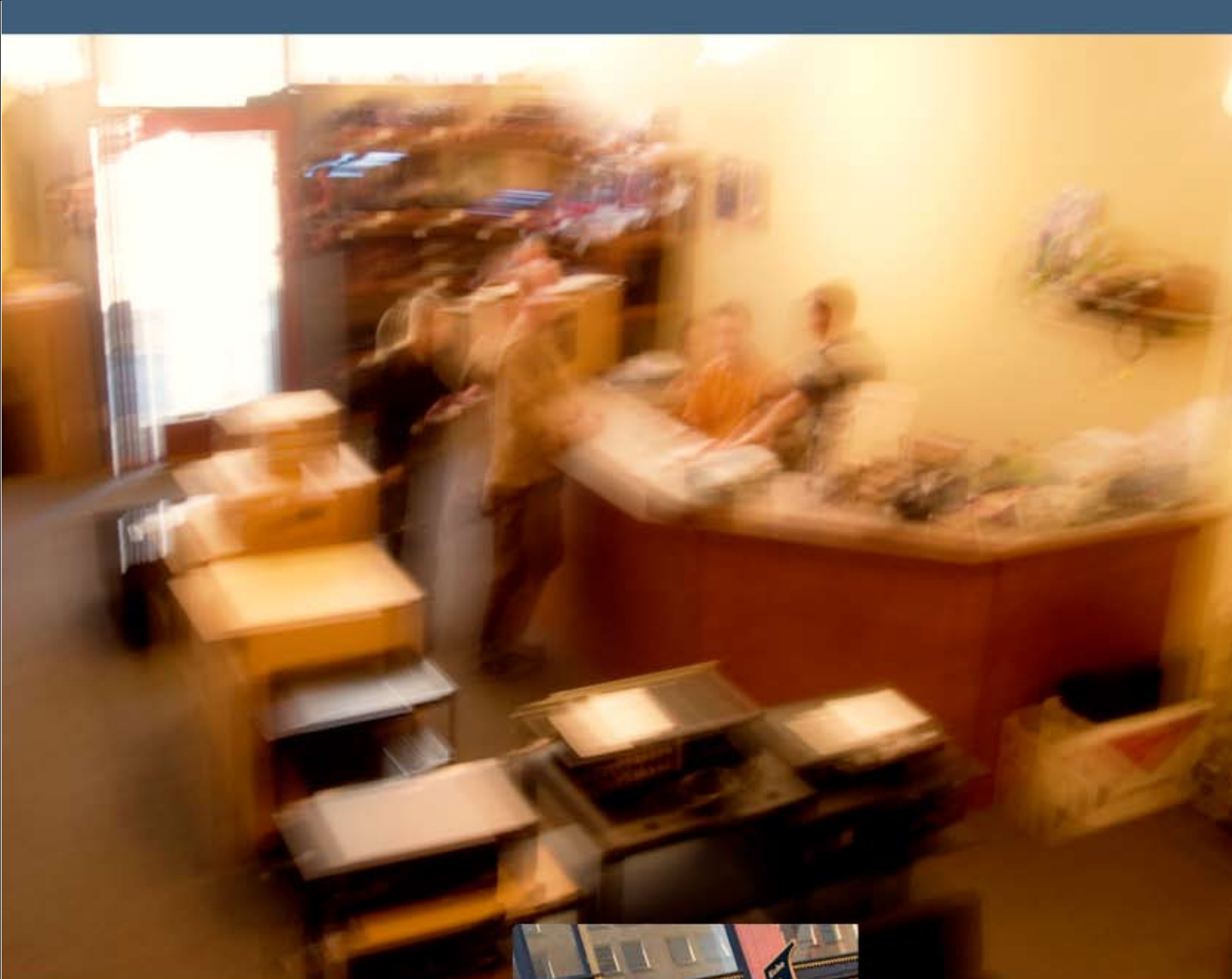
Position A is the standard Wadia decoding that they have used for years, with position B appearing to have a slightly harder edge and position C slightly softer. I must point out that while I ended up in the end preferring the standard setting the best,

the other two did work on recordings that were too soft (rare in the digital world) or a bit harsh. I wouldn't mind seeing this taken a step further in the future. Perhaps an Algorithm D that filters out all the harshness of my favorite CD's from the mid 1980s, so I can enjoy the Pet Shop Boys in their full glory?

Conclusion

The Wadia 781i is at the top of its class in every aspect, but its ability to serve as a DAC as well as a preamplifier makes it a much more viable component than just a stand-alone CD player. Wadia's commitment to software upgrades for legacy models assures that it can stay there for the future, and its exceptional SACD performance will satisfy anyone with a good collection of these discs. I have been using the 781i as a reference component for the better part of the year, trading up from my past 581i.

Highly recommended. ●



The Wadia 781i

MSRP: \$14,995

MANUFACTURER

Wadia Digital

1556 Woodland Drive

Saline, MI 48176

734-786-9611

www.wadia.com

PERIPHERALS

Preamplifiers Burmester 011, Conrad-Johnson ACT2/Series 2, Nagra PLL

Power Amplifiers BAT VK-55SE, Burmester 911mk. 3, Conrad-Johnson Premier 350, McIntosh MC252, Nagra PSA, PrimaLuna Dialog 7

Power Running Springs Dmitri and Jaco, Running Springs Mongoose and HZ power cords, Shunyata Hydra 2, Shunyata Anaconda and Python CX power cords

Interconnects Cardas Golden Reference, Furutech Reference III, Shunyata Aurora

Speaker Cable Shunyata Orion, Shunyata Stratos SP

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The Trends TA10.2 Amplifier

Are We Serious?

By Jeff Dorgay



The Trends Audio TA 10.1 class T amplifier has been the darling of the internet for close to a year now, getting an equivalent amount of press in various audio related websites as well as a heated topic of conversation on numerous audio forums. When the chance to review one of the first 10.2 amplifiers came along, I was very curious to see just how much amplifier you can get for \$189. It turns out quite a bit, indeed.

The TA 10.2 is miniscule, only weighing about a pound (without power supply) and is smaller than the power supply that powers it. There is a volume control knob on the front, speaker output jacks and one pair of input jacks on the rear, along with an input for 12 volts DC. With one input and one output, setup is quick and easy.

To be a wise guy, I started with the big guns, putting the TA 10.2 in my reference system with a Naim 555 CD player and the GamuT S-7 speakers, wiring the system with Shunyata Aurora interconnects and Stratos SP speaker wire. Why not hook up a \$189 dollar amplifier to a six-figure system?

Very Big Sound in That Small Box

I'd be lying if I told you that the 10.2 had the weight and dynamics that my Burmester 011 preamp and 911 mk. 3 amplifier does, but it was damn good! Some of the graininess that I've heard with chip amplifiers was still there, but the top to bottom tonality was excellent and the bass control on the GamuT's was much better than I expected. When listening at modest levels, this amplifier gave a very strong performance on every kind of music but the most dynamic, because the GamuT speakers really do their best with more power.

While the 10.2 is not harsh sounding, it does throw a very wide soundstage, but a relatively two-dimensional one. All of that front to back depth and holographic imaging is what you pay the big bucks for, but again, comparing the 10.2 to a number of thousand dollar integrated amplifiers, was very good.

My audiophile buddies were quite shocked when they heard my system with the 10.2. One thought it was a headphone amplifier and upon picking it up, saw the massive Shunyata cables coming out of the back, only to realize I was running the whole system with this tiny little amplifier that isn't even the size of an output transformer on a modest sized tube amplifier.

Back to the Real World

Let's face it, no one is going to use the 10.2 like I did, but it proves the point that this is a phenomenal little amplifier. I tried a few other speakers and the 10.2 was a fantastic match for the 100db ZU Essence speakers, which only need a few watts to blast you out of the room. No matter how loud I wanted to rock out, the 10.2 was up to the task, with excellent bass weight and control.

But the best place for the 10.2 is the beginning audiophile/music lover. I assembled a system with the Trends amplifier, a mint pair of Spica TC-50's that I purchased on Audiogon for \$225 and my trusty Pioneer 563 universal player that can usually be found for about \$50. \$100 worth of Blue Jeans cable rounded out the package to



just under \$500 total for an incredibly musical system that takes up almost no space. I would have killed to have a system like this when I got into the hobby.

Mods, etc.

In the past, there have been quite a few mods available for the 10.1 amplifier, but I feel this defeats the purpose of a budget component. However, one tweak that is worthwhile is a large, 12 Volt battery. I'm sure you could modify one of the popular SLA batteries, similar to the type used by Red Wine Audio and a few others, but if you want to try battery power on the cheap, you can get a lantern battery from Radio Shack here:

<http://www.radioshack.com/product/index.jsp?productId=3740316>

Taking the 10.2 off the grid dramatically reduces the noise floor and takes a layer of grain out of the overall presentation. *(continued)*

No matter how loud I wanted to rock out, the 10.2 was up to the task, with excellent bass weight and control.

The highs became much less “electronic” sounding and in my budget system, dazzled everyone that heard it.

It doesn't get any better than this for \$189

Regardless of whether you need a second system for your garage, office or desktop, or just beginning your HiFi journey, I can't think of a better place to start if you can live with one source component. The Trends Audio 10.2 is a small box with mighty performance and is worthy of being paired with components considerably more expensive than its size might suggest. ●

The Trends TA-10.2 Amplifier

MSRP: \$189.00, standard 10.2
\$249.00, SE model

MANUFACTURER

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PERIPHERALS

Analog Source Technics SL-1200 w/ Sound HiFi Mods, Sumiko Blackbird

Phono Preamp Audio Research PH3 SE

Digital Source Pioneer 563, Marantz Pearl, Naim CD555

Speakers Harbeth Monitor 40.1, Spica TC-50, Verity Audio Sarastro II, Zu Essence

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Slummin'

By Jeff Dorgay and Mark Marcantonio

This issue we dug up a pair of great classics for you, both from about the same point in time. In the late 70's, Harmon Kardon was at their peak with the Citation series and in the early 80's Paradigm was just getting off the ground with some inexpensive, yet high performance speakers. Though both of these products still have strong a strong following, it's interesting to see how these companies have changed position in the audio industry.

Harmon/Kardon Citation Seventeen

\$125, Echo Audio

I sold a pile of these back in the late 70's and always wanted one, so it was pretty tough to pass up in Kurt's shop the other day. Though very robustly built, most 17's are usually looking worse for the wear and tear at this point, but the one you see here is almost perfect.

Two phono inputs, a headphone amp and a five-band graphic EQ for \$125? You can't beat it. And the damn thing sounds pretty good too. I see an upgrade to the garage system in the works.



Paradigm 3SE Mini

Gift — No charge

In 1987 Paradigm was just beginning to gain recognition across the United States. The upstart Canadian company had a full lineup of great budget speakers that made many competitors sweat. The 3SE mini at 90db efficiency got plenty loud for any dorm room system, with enough one-note bass to keep the headbangers happy.

Today, these are tough to find, even on eBay, with many are still pulling duty in basement or garage systems. After all, good sound for the price never goes out of style, it just gets redeployed. If you can find a clean pair, expect to pay between 50 and 100 dollars a pair.

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