

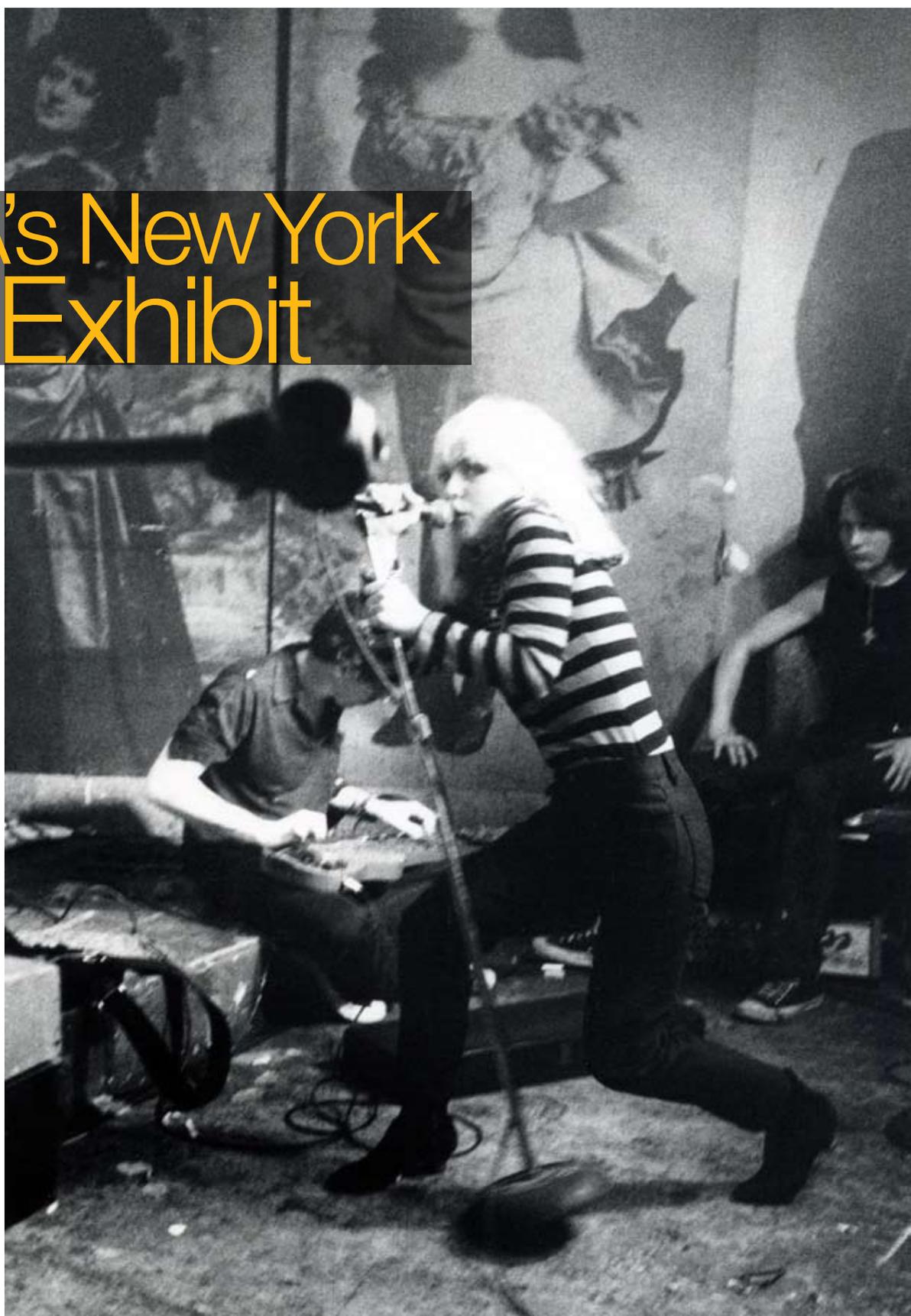
# toneAudio.

The e-journal of analog  
and digital sound.

no.24

2009

## MoMA's New York Punk Exhibit



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**PUBLISHER** Jeff Dorgay

**EDITOR** Bob Golfen

**ART DIRECTOR** Jean Dorgay

**MUSIC EDITOR** Ben Fong-Torres

**ASSISTANT  
MUSIC EDITOR** Bob Gendron

**MUSIC VISIONARY** Terry Currier

**STYLE EDITOR** Scott Tetzlaff

**CONTRIBUTING  
WRITERS** Tom Caselli  
Kurt Dosl  
Anne Farnsworth  
Joe Golfen  
Jesse Hamlin  
Rich Kent  
Ken Kessler  
Hood McTiernan  
Rick Moore  
Jerold O'Brien  
Michele Rundgren  
Todd Sageser  
Richard Simmons  
Jaan Uhelszki  
Randy Wells

**UBER CARTOONIST** Liza Donnelly

**ADVERTISING** Jeff Dorgay

**WEBSITE** bloodymonster.com

**Cover Photo:** Blondie, CBGB's. 1977.

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**tonepublications.com**

Editor Questions and  
Comments:

tonepub@yahoo.com  
800.432.4569

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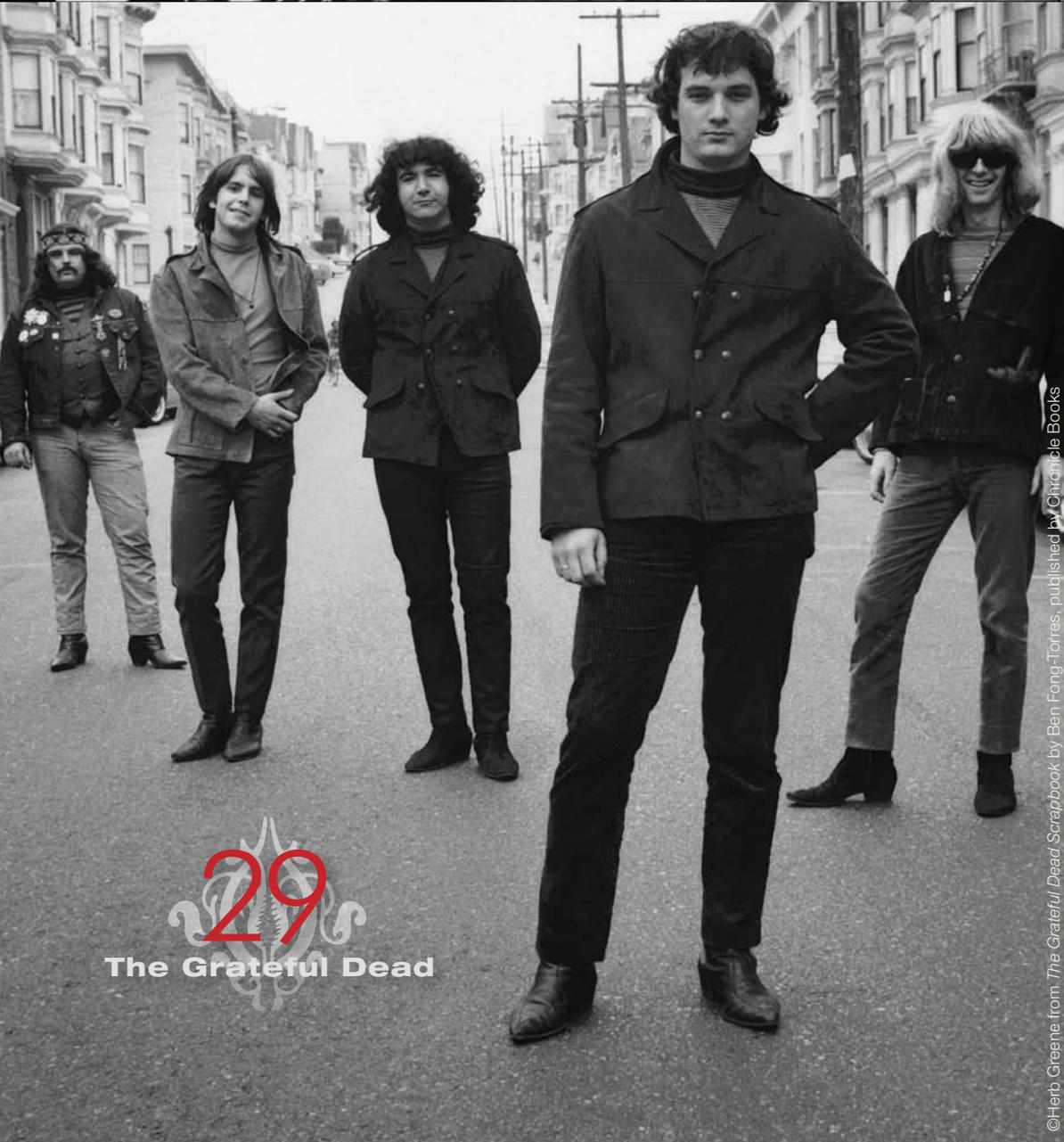
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(on the cover)  
MoMA's Punk  
Exhibit



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The Grateful Dead

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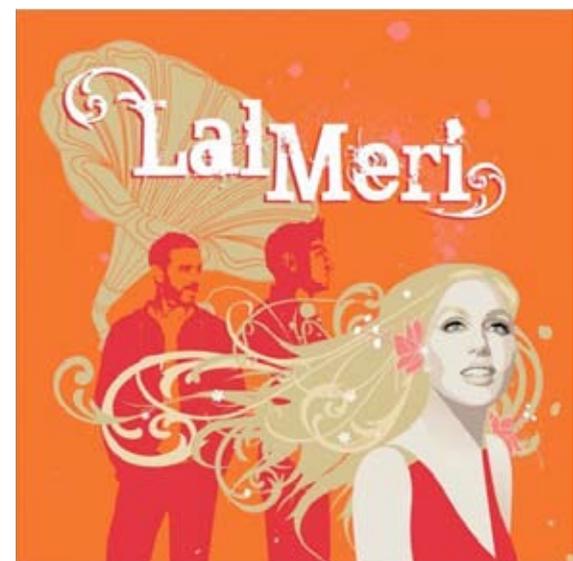
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# CONTRIBUTORS

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## new in tone this issue

### **BAILEY S. BARNARD**

Bailey was born and raised in the San Francisco Bay Area. For the past two years he has served as the music, home electronics, and personal technology editor for *Robb Report* magazine, a Malibu, California-based luxury lifestyle publication that has afforded him access to some of the best hi-fi gear on the market.

He has played music since the age of six, when he began taking piano lessons. He quickly became bored with the piano and moved on to drums at age ten. He began playing guitar and writing music in high school and has since maintained amateur status as a recording artist, having also performed at a number of small venues in the San Francisco and Los Angeles areas. When he's not slaving away at the next great American novel, Bailey can be found at a few select pool halls in West Los Angeles.

### **STEVE GUTTENBERG**

Doesn't like being confused with the washed-up actor and "Dancing With the Stars" hooper of the same name; our Steve Guttenberg's show business career started as a movie theater projectionist in New York City. He built a fairly decent sounding Zuckermann harpsichord and became the world's worst piano tuner before he found his calling as a high-end audio salesman.

That led to working as a producer for Chesky Records, which in turn ignited his writing career. He's contributed to a number of magazines and websites including *The Absolute Sound*, *Stereophile*, *Listener*, *Audio*, *Home Theater*, *Home Entertainment*, and Steve writes the *Audiophile* blog for CNET.com three times a week.

<http://news.cnet.com/audiophile/>

### **JACOB HEILBRUNN**

Jacob Heilbrunn lives in Washington, DC, where he is a senior editor at the *National Interest*, a foreign policy magazine. He also writes regularly for *The New York Times* and the *Huffington Post* as well as contributing to *The Absolute Sound*. His interest in all things audio dates back to his childhood, listening to 10" Jelly Roll Morton LPs while munching on peanut butter and jelly sandwiches during lunch hour. He studied trumpet at Oberlin College before plunging into the political fray. His book *They Knew They Were Right: the Rise of the Neocons* appeared in 2008 and was named one of the 100 best books of the year by *The New York Times*.

### **JENNY SMITH**

Jenny Smith lives in Indianapolis, Indiana, home of the famous brickyard. She is the national marketing manager for Naim Audio in the US and is a passionate motorcyclist. Who better for us to recruit to test drive the new Ducati Supermotard 1100 during the MotoGP race at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway?



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# PUBLISHER'S LETTER

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**W**ow, here we go into year five! Seems like just the other day I had arrived at the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest showing people the first issue of TONEAudio, and here we are. As Ben Fong-Torres likes to say, "Crazy."

I'd like to thank all of you for your support. The readership keeps growing daily and we've received encouragement from all corners of the world. Keep the cards, letters and emails coming – we appreciate it. I'd also like to thank my staff for doing an awesome job. They always deliver more than I ask and that's what truly makes TONEAudio great.

After lifting heavy speakers all summer, this issue is all analog, primarily cartridges and phono preamplifiers. Nothing too heavy to give my back some rest! There are a few more pieces that we didn't have time to squeeze into this issue, so watch the gear section of our website this month. There are still some more cartridge and phono preamplifier reviews to come.

It's exciting to see analog so strong after all these years. Back in the late '80s, it looked pretty dismal for the analog world. CD's were well-entrenched and new records disappeared from the music store shelves in a very short period of time. I remember my local record store going from a small CD section to *no* vinyl over about three months.

Much as the audiophile press would like to take credit for "saving" vinyl, if you are one of the many analog lovers who withstood the criticism of your family and friends for still having a turntable, you were a big part of it. And if you took the time to offer a quick demo only to have said family and friends discover, "Wow, that sounds a lot *better!*" we owe you a debt of gratitude. As Paul Stanley likes to say, "You deserve to give yourself a round of applause. Let's go!"

The best news is that it's a good day for music lovers, no matter what format you prefer.





*"These are the winter amplifiers."*



## The Audio Research SP-9

By Kurt Doslu

**A**s the long time owner of a used HiFi shop, it's rare that someone stumps the band, so to speak, but about 12 years ago, a young fellow walked into my shop with a tube preamp and power amp manufactured by Electronic Industries. The preamp was well built with a silver faceplate, some sparsely laid out knobs and a few toggle switches. The RCA jacks on the rear panel were spaced unusually far apart and there was an onboard phono stage.

Beyond industrial in look and feel, this gear looked like the military had put dials on a toaster oven. The customer said he came across them while cleaning out his Grandfather's storage unit and had no other clues.

Of course I wanted to lean back confidently in my chair and say "Ah, Electronic Industries". Maybe I did, but the truth is that I had absolutely no clue. Usually I can surmise the pedigree of a piece, or at least have a sneaking suspicion of its link in the audio chain, but this time I was flailing in the audiophile abyss — as if trying to catch butterflies out of mid-air.



I gave the guy \$75 for both pieces and as he walked out the door he said, "I think there might be a tuner to go with them." Later on, while inspecting both pieces, I still hadn't connected the dots, though they sounded unbelievably good. As I dozed off that night, I remembered that this was the beginning of Audio Research; I had just never seen an example in person!

### Recalling the Past

The next day I was in the shop early to test my memory. Volume, balance, yes. Selector, yes. On/off, mute, yes. It was definitely an early Audio Research piece! It reminded me of one of my favorite ARC pieces, the SP-9 which we are featuring here. After owning a used HiFi shop for over 20 years, there's no such thing as a bad piece of Audio Research gear. They make solid gear that is built to last and they continue to support their legacy pieces, which keeps them in demand.

Unwittingly, we had just purchased what was the hi-fi equivalent of a Gottlieb Daimler/ Karl Benz prototype. It was the work of Bill Johnson, founder of Audio Research, who in 1951 started a company called Electronic Industries that built tube amplifiers, serviced all types of electronic equipment and pioneered the resurgence of tube equipment in high end audio.

Clearly, the Electronic Industries preamp I had on the bench was quite a bit different from the Audio Research SP-9, which was created later in 1987. This preamplifier was a standard tube design. The latter, as Johnson explains it, is the culmination of numerous experiments with transistors and eventually FETs to come up with a hybrid design that was "superior to the early tube units." *(continued)*

---

**Unwittingly, we had just purchased what was the hi-fi equivalent of a Gottlieb Daimler/ Karl Benz prototype.**

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Not to get too technical, but conceptualize the amplification of a tube as an ascending line that has a bit of a curve at both ends. Similarly, imagine the gain through a FET (field effect transistor) as a corresponding "line" has an opposite curve at both ends. In order to get the lowest distortion, you want that line to be as straight as possible. So by combining the two amplification devices (a tube and a FET) it's much like squeezing together a pair of curved salad tongs to get one straight spork. Voila! Super low distortion and a tube that will last a very long time because it is not being run hard.

Moreover, the single-ended circuitry fed one of the best and most long-lasting tubes of our time, the 6DJ8 (6922). The results were amazing and the phono stage of the SP-9 was superb. Factory set to be mated with any MM cartridge, the low noise and clear gain made it capable of handling medium output MC cartridges perfectly.

**This hybrid design proved impenetrable. The Audio Research SP-9 redefined the term "bullet-proof."**

While previous all-tube models often encountered noise, channel imbalance, hiss and distortion, this new hybrid design was dead quiet, linear, and most of all, musical. The SP-9 hit retailer's shelves in 1987 with an MSRP of \$1,695 and offered tremendous value.

Audio Research obviously knew it was on to something, later offering Mk II and Mk III upgrades, costing \$1,795 and \$2,495 when discontinued in 1996. *(continued)*



With each, there were wiring changes, power supply upgrades and better circuit boards to improve low level distortion and better grounding. Throughout these revisions, the SP-9 continued to be one of the best values in high-end audio for those wanting an onboard phono stage.

Now I know that everything improves over time. Cars get faster, computers get smaller, and people get, well anyway. And it was clear to me how much better the SP-9 was than my cherished Electronic Industries preamp, so I was very intrigued to compare this very clean SP-9 to the current offering from ARC, their SP-17 preamplifier, also reviewed in this issue.

In the TONEAudio main listening room, I was able to listen to the SP-9 in a mix of old and new gear. Our publisher had it warmed up and in a system featuring a classic SAE 2200 power amplifier (also astonishingly good) and a pair of Harbeth Monitor 40.1 speakers. Sitting on top of the rack was a Technics SL-1200, complete with SME 309 arm and a Sumiko Blackbird high output moving coil cartridge to spin records and a Luxman combination player for digital. Nice.

I head straight for the vinyl rack and put Todd Rundgren's *Something/Anything* from Mofi on the Technics and fade back to an earlier day. "Hello, it's me. I've thought about us for a long, long time. Maybe...." Wow, it couldn't get better than this, I thought. The tonal balance of the vocals was as I remembered, the clarity and musicality was perfect. I was definitely grooving on this 70's classic, when I heard a voice:

"So, you ready to hear the SP-17?"

"Sure" I said abruptly, as if the dentist just rudely awakened me from the laughing gas.

Still slightly pissed from being taken out of my trance, I sat back in the chair as he started the same song again.

The new preamplifier sounded completely different. The "Hello" jumped out of nowhere and the words "it's me" elevated in pitch and sustained themselves in a way I'd never heard before. While I hate to admit it, the focus of Todd's voice and the finish to the notes was quite clearly superior to the SP-9. The SP-9 had all of the warmth and richness, but the SP-17 offered the dimensionality and finish of a very fine wine.

Nevertheless, I'll bet I could 'hot-swap' an SP-9 into almost any new audiophile's system and have them appreciate the lyrical and sanguine qualities of a 20-year-old piece that has stood the test of time. The enduring greatness of Audio Research and one of Bill Johnson's best works is still one of the best values in hi-fidelity today. For roughly \$650, you can find a used Audio Research SP-9 hybrid tube preamp with a phono stage that will still exceed your expectations. Try to get one if you can. The phono stage alone is worth the price of admission.

Lastly, that fellow did walk back into the store again, with the tuner he promised. It had a silver faceplate just like the others, but this one said "Audio Research FM-1" on the front. It was a Dynaco FM-3 tube tuner with custom mods and a special Audio Research faceplate. Go figure. ●

**Ed. Note:** Kurt Doslu is the owner of Echo Audio; Portland's premier used HiFi shop. Over the years he's had the privilege of getting his hands on just about everything at least once.

---

**The enduring greatness of Audio Research and one of Bill Johnson's best works is still one of the best values in hi-fidelity today.**

# Moving Up the Cartridge Food Chain

By Jeff Dorgay





If I were doing one of those word-association tests with a psychiatrist and he said “Moving-Coil Cartridge,” the first word out of my mouth would be “expensive.” To most audiophiles, stepping up to a moving-coil cartridge often promises more analog bliss, but the cost of entry is usually upwards of a thousand dollars.

To make things more challenging, there have been some fantastic moving-magnet and moving-iron cartridges in the \$500 - \$1,000 range that somewhat blur the picture. However, too many choices is often the plight of the audiophile, so here’s one more to add to your analog madness: the Audio-Technica AT33EV. This is a serious moving-coil cartridge at a reasonable price. While Audio-Technica claims an MSRP of \$899 for the AT33EV, most online retailers and dealers have a street price of about \$500.

### Setup

A quick look at the specs reveal this to be an easy cartridge to integrate into your system, requiring a tracking force of 1.8 – 2.2 grams and an output of .3mv. (Though I think this is somewhat underrated, as I swapped the AT for a cartridge with a claimed output of .5mv, and didn’t hear a substantial drop in system output.) The suggested loading impedance is 100 ohms, though I ended up preferring 200 ohms in my system.

For those who are interested, the AT33EV uses a .3 x .7 mil elliptical stylus, while their top moving-magnet cartridge, the AT150MLX uses a “microline” stylus. Where the AT150 has a user-replaceable stylus, the AT33EV does not. Moving up into a moving-coil cartridge has its price in more ways than one.

I used the AT33EV on my Technics SL-1200 with Sound HiFi mods and SME 309 tonearm exclusively for the review and was quite pleased with the results. I split the time between the SimAudio Moon LP5.3 (without additional power supply) and my reference Nagra VPS with VFS platform. The SL-1200 with the AT33EV also spent a fair amount of time in my living-room system.

### The King of Smooth

What instantly impressed me about the AT33EV was its smooth and natural overall sound. On many levels, it reminded me of the Shelter 501 II, with slightly less of a midrange bump, but the same silky reproduction of the high frequencies. This is not a harsh or forward-sounding MC cartridge at all.

What stood out the most about the AT33EV was the great job it did with less-than-stellar recordings. If your record collection consists of a lot of used records that aren’t first-edition stampers, this cartridge will add some resolution to the mix without revealing the warts. I recently picked up quite a few of these sorts of records from a friend that has lost his interest in physical media. Thumbing through and spinning some of my favorites from the 70s, I was impressed at how much of a bigger window on the music I was hearing compared with the two budget cartridges that I had in for photography, the Shure M97xe and the Grado Red.

Moving along to some acoustic music, the AT33EV did an outstanding job at its pricepoint. Listening to David Grisman’s *Hot Dawg*, the layers of his mandolin playing held their own, allowing me to hear the overdubs in the presentation easily, while still reproducing the necessary amount of weight exhibited by the mandolin.

This cartridge did lose a bit in the dynamics department, which was more noticeable when I played some Michael Hedges tunes. Hedges is known for an aggressive, plucky style of guitar playing, and the AT33EV softened the leading and trailing edges of the guitar somewhat. It wasn’t enough to be unpleasant, and was well above what I would expect from a comparably priced moving-magnet design. In the end, this is why you buy the \$2,000 to \$5,000 cartridges. You can’t have it all for \$499.

However, that slight bit of softness is what will make all your 60s and 70s rock records sound more engaging, and your favorite vinyl from the 80s (much of which was digital mastered anyway) much more tolerable. *(continued)*

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FEATURE

If you decide to bounce around the house listening to a Depeche Mode superset, this cartridge will make those records sound better than you might imagine. The AT-33EV does not emphasize or detract from any part of the frequency spectrum. It is well-balanced from top to bottom, and I feel that is its real magic.

It's also worth mentioning that the AT33EV proved to be an excellent tracker. I had no problems with mistracking on any of my favorite torture-test records. It also did a great job at higher velocities, handling the Blue Note reissues with ease, zooming along at 45 rpm.

### The Boundaries

The only time I was disappointed with the AT33EV was when comparing it with the mega-bucks stuff. The rest of the time it was very easy to enjoy the music. When I moved the SL-1200 into my living-room system, which now consists of Naim's brilliant Uniti all in one amp/preamp/dad/cd player, mated with a Cambridge Audio 640P MC phono preamp (the matching Naim Stageline is in transit), the AT33EV sounded like a much-more expensive cartridge, throwing a very wide soundstage between my Zu Essence speakers.

The best test of any piece of HiFi gear is whether it reaches that point of engagement where you want to keep playing music and not check your email, etc., etc. I can happily say that the Audio-Technica cartridge passed this test handily, and more than one of my "champagne taste" audiophile buddies were surprised when I told them they were listening to a \$500 cartridge. *(continued)*

Just to be sure of the limitations of the cartridge, I spent some time with the AT33EV on a stock SL-1200 as well as my Rega P3-24. It certainly got the most resolution for which the stock Technics was capable and if anything, more cartridge than I would use here. I think the AT33EV is certainly worthy of any table in the \$500 - \$2,000 range you might mate with it and depending on your music collection, might be all you ever need. If you are trying to make a decision in this price range and would like to get the extra resolution from the moving-coil design, the AT33EV will not disappoint you. ●

**The Audio-Technica AT33EV**  
MSRP: \$899, street price, \$499

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**Preamplifier** Burmester 011

**Phono Preamplifiers** Nagra VPS w/VFS platform, SimAudio Moon LP5.3, Cambridge Audio 640P

**Power Amplifier** McIntosh MC 1.2kw's

**Integrated Amplifier** Naim Uniti

**Turntables** Rega P3-24, Rega P9, Technics SL-1200 w/Sound HiFi mods and SME 309 tonearm

**Speakers** Gamut S-7, Zu Essence

**Interconnects** Shunyata Aurora, ED 422

**Speaker Cable** Shunyata Stratos SP, ED 213, Zu Libtec

**Power** Running Springs Jaco and Dmitri power conditioners. Shunyata Python CX power cord, Running Springs Mongoose and HZ power cords

**Accessories** Furutech DeMag, Clearaudio Weight Watcher, Shunyata Dark Field Cable Elevators

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# Alice In Chains

## House of Blues

Chicago, Illinois

**September 9, 2009**

By Bob Gendron

**A**lice In Chains has managed to replace lead singer Layne Staley's singing, but not the deceased vocalist's gloomy personality or bleak reality. Performing a sold-out show at Chicago's House of Blues days before the release of its first album in nearly 14 years, the Seattle band tested out three new songs with singer William DuVall, but primarily relied on its dependable back catalog.

To his credit, DuVall (ex- of Comes With the Fall) replicated Staley's haunted timbre and wordless expressions to near-frightening effect. And with the rest of the band's membership intact—guitarist/vocalist Jerry Cantrell, bassist Mike Inez, drummer Sean Kinney—Alice In Chains seems to be poised for a credible comeback. However, such success hinges on the strength of its new material and whether fans accept DuVall standing in for a moody frontman who lived nearly every word he sang. Through no fault of DuVall's, the latter challenge may indeed prove too tall of an order.

If ticket demand is any indication, fans are at least curious. Scalpers controlled the market outside the venue, and inside, the quartet's familiar fare drew fervent applause.

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# BLUE NOTE

*You listen, you look, you're there...*

Some of the reaction is likely due to the fact that, aside for an ill-begotten comeback tour with DuVall in 2006, Alice In Chains hasn't toured since the mid-90s. Inez, in particular, looked thrilled to be back onstage, puffing on cigarettes while flashing a constant smile and throttling his bass. Cantrell also appeared humbled, gratified by the audience's acceptance of DuVall and eagerness to hear favorites such as "Man In a Box." The metal-laced classic served as a reminder that the group wrote a batch of excellent songs in its heyday.

Augmented by grinding chords, staggered tempos, and swampy distortion, Alice In Chains' brooding hard rock and murky drones gave the sonic impression of a rusty steam shovel dredging the bottom of a lake. Rhythms growled and rumbled, chords scraped and snapped. Yet the band's finest tunes--"Love Hate Love," "Angry Chair," "Would?"--also featured dynamic contrasts that took the form of explosive pop hooks or smoldering psychedelic accents that complemented the lyrical thrust. Most of the time, the narrative sentiments were dark and dreary, honest reflections of Staley's drug addictions and chronic depression. And despite his doppelganger vocal resemblance to Staley, it's in this arena where DuVall was frequently overmatched.

**Staley was a major reason that Alice In Chains' music worked on so many emotional and physical levels.**

The singer didn't have to sell what he was singing; he was living it. No one ever doubted the sincerity of ominous refrains from the dopesick "Junkhead" ("What's my drug of choice?/Well, what have you got?"), the thematic *(continued)*

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“We Die Young” (“Faster we run/ And we die young”), or prophetic “Them Bones” (“I feel so alone/ Gonna end up a pile of them bones”) when the reserved Staley commanded the microphone. DuVall is another matter.

Lanky, mobile, and fit, he resembles MC5 vocalist Rob Tyner in his prime. Well-rehearsed and energetic, DuVall clearly enjoys his role in the band. Yet his up-front (and occasionally happy) demeanor is at odds with the music and its frequent references to sickness, decay, and disgust. (His amateur pleas for crowd approval and flashing of devil horns further illustrated the divide between his attitude and Staley's.) Despite meticulously recreating Staley's murmurs and moans (boosted by Cantrell's support harmonies), authentic feelings of ache, pain, and self-defeat remained absent. Yes, DuVall is his own person. And he's not out to replace Staley. But he happens to be crooning deeply personal words that don't lend themselves to substitution as easily as would an arena-rock or pop band's compositions.

**Some artists leave too permanent an impression on their work; Staley is one of them.**

As for the quartet's new material? So-so. Given Alice In Chains' lengthy hiatus, fans may have expected better material than the disjointed two-songs-in-one arrangement of “Acid Bubble.” The doom-laden “A Looking In View” evoked visions of 1994, and the spring-loaded “Check My Brain” chased an elusive chorus. Nothing egregious, but nothing extremely memorable, either. Not at all unlike the nostalgia-based 90-minute set.

# The Derek Trucks Band

## Public Square

Nashville, Tennessee

September 17, 2009

By Rick Moore Photo by Bev Moser

**A**n overflow crowd of music lovers, seemingly ranging in age from seven to 70, showed up to see Derek Trucks, who has become a leader in the next generation of guitar gods while revering the traditions of the giants who inspired him. Barely 30, Trucks has played guitar, including a lot of slide, for more than a decade with the Allman Brothers Band with his uncle, founding ABB member Butch Trucks. His slide playing has endeared him to the generation who came up listening to Duane Allman revolutionize the instrument 40 years ago. But by incorporating influences from jazz players and Middle Eastern and Indian musicians, Trucks has taken slide playing to another level.

The always-stoic Trucks and his excellent, groove-conscious band burned from the beginning of the show, opening with the Muddy Waters-Johnny Winter inspired "Get What You Deserve" from the new CD *Already Free*. (continued)





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The band smoked on this tune, rendering the studio track pale by comparison. In fact, that can be said for the entire night's offerings, as the group's energy and a good mix made this band a dish best served live.

While Trucks was the focal point, vocalist Mike Mattison was in great form all night. Obviously influenced by the Stax/Volt and Motown rosters, he was especially impressive on the Curtis Mayfield classic "We're a Winner," with Trucks putting down his slide to play some standard lead.

**Trucks ably demonstrated why he was included on Rolling Stone's list of "The 100 Greatest Guitarists of All Time" for the nearly two-hour set, with perfect intonation and a one-of-a-kind guitar tone.**

Former ABB guitarist (and Nashville resident) Jack Pearson sat in on an extended version of the blues classic "Key to the Highway," made popular in the early '70s by Derek and the Dominoes. (That's where Trucks got his name.) In fact, pretty much every song was performed as an extended version. Jam band fans weren't disappointed as Trucks and company stretched out, at one point settling into a quiet dynamic passage straight out of the old *Allman Brothers Band at Fillmore East* playbook. The band encored with a great version of Dylan's "Down in the Flood" (also on the new album).

It can be difficult to impress people in Nashville, where great guitar players play for tips. But Derek Trucks put on a display of slide playing perfection that won't be duplicated here until the next time he comes to town.

# Mott the Hoople

**HMV Hammersmith Apollo Theater**  
London, United Kingdom

**October 1-6, 2009**

By Terry Currier

**M**ott the Hoople may not be a household name, but the fans they had stayed passionate fans for life. Thirty six years after the original five members started to fragment, the band decided it was time for a reunion. Two shows were scheduled last February for the Hammersmith Apollo, a venue that holds 3500. Tickets sold out quickly, inspiring the addition of three concerts.

October 1st was the opening night and the fan frenzy could be felt even before the band came on stage. An instrumental started as the lights came down, and after a couple of minutes, the band hit the stage. They opened with “Hymn For the Dudes” off *Mott*, from the second phase of their career, which got a huge jump-start from super fan David Bowie in 1971, when he heard the band was breaking up. He gave them an image adjustment – to glam rock – and a few songs, including “All the Young Dudes.”

Ian Hunter’s vocals were amazingly strong; he may be 71, but he displayed the energy of a 20-year old throughout the night. The reunion included all five original members of the band including Mick Ralphs, who left the band in 1973 to start Bad Company, on guitar; Peter “Overend” Watts on bass, Verdon Allen on Hammond organ and Dale “Buffin” Griffin on drums. Due to Griffin’s Alzheimer’s, Martin Chambers from the Pretenders did most of the drumming.

The band did not hold back as they played rockers like “Walking with a Mountain,” featuring Ralphs’ excellent guitar work. Mott offered a great mix of songs from their first four albums, mixed with material from their last three albums from their Bowie-inspired period. Although Mott the Hoople began as a hard-rock unit, you could sense a fine line between the songs from those two periods, especially on “Sweet Angeline” from *Brain Capers* and “All The Young Dudes.”

A third of the way into the show they did a trio of acoustic songs, “Moon Upstairs,” “The Original Mixed Up Kid” and “I Wish I Was Your Mother.”



© Photo Courtesy Concert Live

Mick Ralphs got his turn at center stage singing “Ready For Love,” which Mick took with him to Bad Company for Paul Rodgers to sing. Again Mick’s playing shined, but it was apparent why Ian was the singer in the band. Overend also took his spotlight with “Born Late ‘58.”

A background chorus composed of Ian’s children and pre-Ian vocalist/former manager Stan Tipton joined in towards the end of the set and into the encore. Griffin, the original drummer, came out for the three-song encore, playing side by side with Chambers. It was both sad and joyous as he was helped to his kit, but a glimmer in his eye and a smile told fans that this was a grand moment for him.

The band returned for another encore with “Saturday Gigs,” a song that the crowd sang along to, and kept singing, even after the band had waved farewell and departed the stage. I think the words of one of their songs summed it all up: “You’re never too old to rock and roll.” These guys proved that they weren’t doing a show for nostalgia’s sake. They were out to give their fans a show to remember. And they did.

**Ed.Note:** For those of you that missed the show, the concerts are available from [www.concertlive.co.uk](http://www.concertlive.co.uk)

# Lyle Lovett & John Hiatt

**Arlene Schnitzer Hall**

Portland, Oregon

**October 16, 2009**

Photos and Text  
by Jeff Dorgay



Master songwriters Lyle Lovett and John Hiatt walked out on stage to a standing ovation from a sold out Schnitzer Hall crowd. On his tour with his Large Band, Lovett had woven in some acoustic shows with Hiatt; this evening's would be one of the last of those concerts.

After they took their seats, they began chatting about their previous visits to Portland and about various on-tour antics. This turned out to be the rule rather than the exception as the evening unfolded, feeling increasingly like a salon for Lovett, Hiatt and their 2700 friends in the audience. They spent almost as much time bantering about their songs as they did singing them, offering a more intimate connection to these two artists than one might normally experience in a concert.

Hiatt took the lead, with "Drive South," then alternated with Lovett at the mike. They performed only a couple of songs together, "I Will Rise Up" and "My Baby Don't Tolerate." Interestingly, Hiatt provided guitar fills on a few of Lovett's songs, but Lovett did not participate on any of Hiatt's songs. Perhaps it had to do with Lovett being somewhat more structured in his live performances and Hiatt being more improvisational. Either way, the two blended perfectly.

At one point, Lovett commented on Hiatt's performing so many new songs during their shows, and Hiatt mentioned a new album coming out sometime next spring. He asked, "Don't you have a new one coming out, too?" "Yeah, tomorrow," Lovett deadpanned, as he led into "Whooping Crane" from the new album, *Natural Forces*.

They wound up the show with Hiatt performing "Thing Called Love" and Lovett coming back with "If I Had a Boat" for the encore. The evening was flawless from start to finish; the only thing that could have made it any better would have been the two of them performing a few more songs together. Perhaps a live recording of this tour is in order?





# Wilco

## UIC Pavilion

Chicago, Illinois

**October 18, 2009**

By Bob Gendron

“Enjoying the arena rock?” joked Wilco leader Jeff Tweedy at the band’s first concert of a two-night stand at Chicago’s UIC Pavilion. The front man’s sarcastic jest served as an acknowledgement that fans were in rather unfamiliar surroundings. Indeed, apart from major festivals, the largest venue Wilco had ever previously headlined on its home turf sported a capacity half the size of UIC’s 8,000-seat barn. From an extraordinary five-night Winter Residency at which the sextet ran through its entire back catalog to its tradition of booking multiple concerts at acoustically intimate theaters, Wilco is renowned for giving Chicago extra love.

Such history made the group’s decision to deviate from protocol for its only 2009 homecoming all the more puzzling. Not that Tweedy and Co. didn’t let loose—it just took them too long.

Having gelled for five years, Wilco’s current (and most talented) lineup can now run on auto pilot and surpass a great majority of its peers without problem. But the band is best when stepping out of comfort zones and chasing fresh musical angles, edges, and shapes. As they have on the group’s last two records, those moments proved the exception to the rule at the solid albeit safe 140-minute show. Drawing liberally from the new Wilco (*The Album*) and preceding *Sky Blue Sky*, Wilco appeared content to treat recent material with straight-up readings that seldom varied from the studio versions.

The power pop novelty “Wilco (The Song)” and murderous “Bull Black Nova” offered natural opportunities to shine in a live environment. Yet the former lacked fizz and the latter failed to ratchet up the noir-inspired suspense, settling instead for good but not exceptional results. Similarly, the blue-eyed soul pledge “I’ll Fight” and jangling “Sonny Feeling” pleased but didn’t surprise or astound. Somber calmness also trumped adventurousness on “One Wing,” which cut off just as it threatened to take flight. By contrast, Wilco’s extended take of “Impossible Germany” stood as an example of how the band can effectively boost the wow-factor of recent fare. Replete with mellow vibes and golden-hued tones that mirrored the mid-October fall weather, the arrangement evolved into a mesmerizing jam, with Tweedy playing Bob Weir to lead guitarist Nels Cline’s Jerry Garcia. The jump-blues “Walken” also possessed a keen flair, with flexible rhythms doubling as brass horn accents.

Ironically, the group stepped up the energy and sonic chaos on songs originally played by former lineups. “I Am Trying to Break Your Heart” came complete with jarring tempo shifts, sudden violence, and cascading pianos that sounded as if they were falling down flights of stairs, while the emotional “At Least That’s What You Said” came on with the furrowed-brow frustration and impromptu thud of a hardcover book being thrown across a room. *(continued)*



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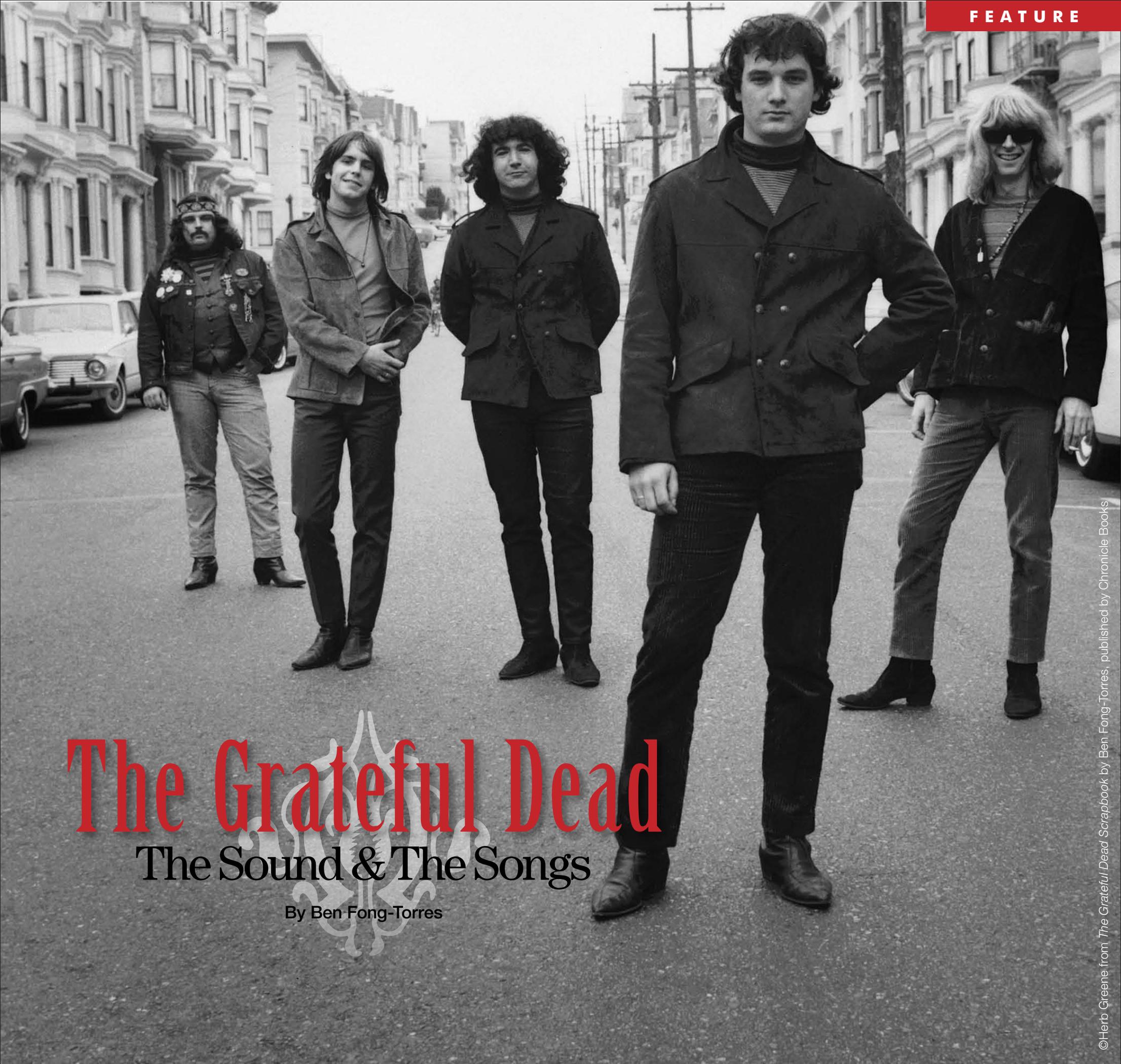
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These songs, performed early in the set, hinted at the promise Wilco fulfilled after the capacity crowd sang the lead vocals on the beautifully woozy gospel “Jesus, Etc.” The mass karaoke seemingly freed the band from any constraints.

With the lanky, animated Cline whipping his right hand across guitar strings as if he were a jockey prodding a racehorse, percussionist Glenn Kotche blending atmospheric textures, and keyboardist Michael Jourgensen utilizing an array of makeshift accessories to drag over his piano keys, Wilco threw open the doors to a good-time honky tonk. After a dialed down “I’m the Man Who Loves You,” unhinged elation came courtesy of the hyper-melodic “Heavy Metal Drummer” and the na-na-na bounce of “Just a Kid.” The party was on.

The back-to-back-to-back punch of “Kingpin,” “Monday,” and “Outtasite (Outta Mind)” harkened to Wilco’s raucous country-rock roots, with Tweedy relishing the moment by intentionally overdriving his falsetto until it resembled a drunken hiccup. Not to be outdone, Sansone and Cline engaged in a mock guitar duel at the close of the boogie-woogie “Hoodoo Voodoo.” Evoking the poses of overblown shredders and finger-tappers, each musician pointed their instrument towards the sky, reveling in the fun, silliness, and scope that comprise arena rock—a style that, despite its occasional flashes of brilliance, Wilco should leave to others. ●



# The Grateful Dead

The Sound & The Songs

By Ben Fong-Torres

After forty—don't count 'em—forty years of writing about music out of my home in San Francisco, I've published my first book that has anything to do with the music scene that came out of here in the Sixties. Sure, my *Rolling Stone* pieces on the Airplane and the Dead, on Janis and Santana, and on Sly and the Family Stone were included in my anthologies (*Not Fade Away* and *Becoming Almost Famous*). But *The Grateful Dead Scrapbook* is a first.

That's not easy to say, in light of the fact that there are dozens of books about that iconic band on bookstore shelves and remainder bins. But the people at Becker&Mayer!, a book packager in Bellevue, Washington, came up with a new angle. They hooked up with the Dead organization and gained access to the Grateful Dead Archive to produce a Dead version of what's being called scrapbooks, or treasuries. These books feature pages that contain removable objects—say, handbills, backstage passes, correspondence and postcards—from the archives of the subject. Jim Morrison, Frank Sinatra, Elvis Presley, and Quincy Jones have received the treatment, and there's a great one on reggae.

Now, it's the Grateful Dead's turn. I was commissioned to write a narrative history and to put the spotlight on ten songs that reflect the band's trip, which I will refrain from describing as lengthy and odd, or words to that effect.

Since the Dead focused on live performances rather than the recording studio, I'll begin with excerpts from the *Grateful Dead Scrapbook* that touch on their first three albums. Following those will be a selection of my song sidebars, including one that didn't make it into the book – all about "Truckin'." — BFT



**GRATEFUL DEAD**

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A week after the Human Be-In of mid-January, 1967, the Dead traveled to Los Angeles, to record their first album. Using a producer who had, among his credits, early albums by the Rolling Stones, they stuck to their blues and folk roots. The album included only a couple of originals, including a single, "The Golden Road (to Unlimited Devotion)," but, aside from support from the first "underground" FM rock stations that were beginning to surface, the album didn't get any radio airplay. The band professed that they were less interested in trying for hit records than in making the best recordings they can, reflecting the music they like to play. "I think our album is honest," said Jerry Garcia. "It sounds just like us ... We made it in a short period – four days – and it's the material we've been doing onstage for quite a long time. It sounds like one of our good sets."

**"I think our album is honest," said Jerry Garcia. "It sounds just like us ..."**

... In July, the Dead released their second album. *Anthem of the Sun* was unlike any rock album of the time – and, in 1967, rock fans were getting used to accomplished, even conceptual albums from artists ranging from the Beatles and the Stones to Simon & Garfunkel, the Mamas and the Papas, and the Beach Boys, and to the Byrds and the Dead's fellow San Francisco band, Jefferson Airplane (in fact, Garcia played guitar on several tracks on the Airplane's *Surrealistic Pillow*).

Although they worked hard on recording an album of original compositions, they struggled in the studio with Dave Hassinger, who'd supervised their first album. That recording had taken only a few days. As this one dragged on from September in Los Angeles and headed towards a New York studio in December, Hassinger gave up. Instead of assigning another producer, Warner Bros. gave the band permission to produce themselves. With Garcia, bass player Phil Lesh, and Dead concert sound mixer Dan Healy behind the control board, the album became increasingly experimental. The trio began mixing studio material with recordings from their concerts. The idea, Garcia said, was a "collage." The result, to Dead fans, was a bold and innovative album. Dead chronicler Blair Jackson called it "a dense, trippy mind-full, light years from the Summer of Love." (continued)

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To Warner Bros. Records president Joe Smith, the album was “the most unreasonable project with which we have involved ourselves.” This from a company that was signing such iconoclastic artists as Captain Beefheart, Van Dyke Parks, and Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention.

Twenty years later, Smith published a collection of recollections by musicians and industry people, including himself.

“The Dead used a lot of acid,” he wrote, “and the fallout from that was this instantaneous switch from reality to fantasy ... We were talking about recording, and one of them said, ‘What we ought to do is record thirty minutes of air in the summertime, when it’s hot and smoggy. Thirty minutes of heavy air. Then we could go to the desert and record thirty minutes of clean air. Then mix the two together, get a good sound, and record over it.’”

**“I looked around expecting someone to laugh, but there was complete agreement that that was the thing to do, record the air, because no one had ever done it before.”**

With whatever lessons they had picked up while producing *Anthem of the Sun*, the Dead continued to expand their repertoire and to map out their third album, which they would release in November. *Live/Dead*, a double-LP compilation of recordings of Fillmore and Avalon performances from early in the year, included a 21-minute “Dark Star” that took up all of the first side, a version of “St. Stephen” that writer Blair Jackson called “a thousand times more potent than the *Aoxomoxoa* version,” and keyboard player/vocalist Pigpen’s signature workout on “Turn On Your Lovelight.” *Live/Dead*, Jackson said, “remains the absolute apex of psychedelic rock ‘n’ roll.” (continued)

## The Songs of the Dead

### “The Golden Road (to Unlimited Devotion)”

Jerry Garcia's friendship with Robert Hunter dated back to their times in and around the folk scene in Palo Alto, but when the Warlocks became the Grateful Dead, Hunter wasn't on the scene. He was in New Mexico, and although he'd been writing poetry and songs, he didn't submit anything to the band until May 1967. By then, the band had recorded and released its first album for Warner Bros.

Out of nine songs on their self-titled debut album, the only one not recorded in Hollywood was cut in a studio in San Francisco. It was the only track that Warner Bros. released as a single.

“The Golden Road (to Unlimited Devotion)” is credited to all the members of the Dead; Phil Lesh remembers it as “our first collaborative composition.” With carefree abandon, the band credited one “McGannahan Skjellyfetti” as the composer. The name came from a character in a Kenneth Patchen novel, and was also, according to Lesh, “Pigpen's whimsical moniker for the five of us writing together.”

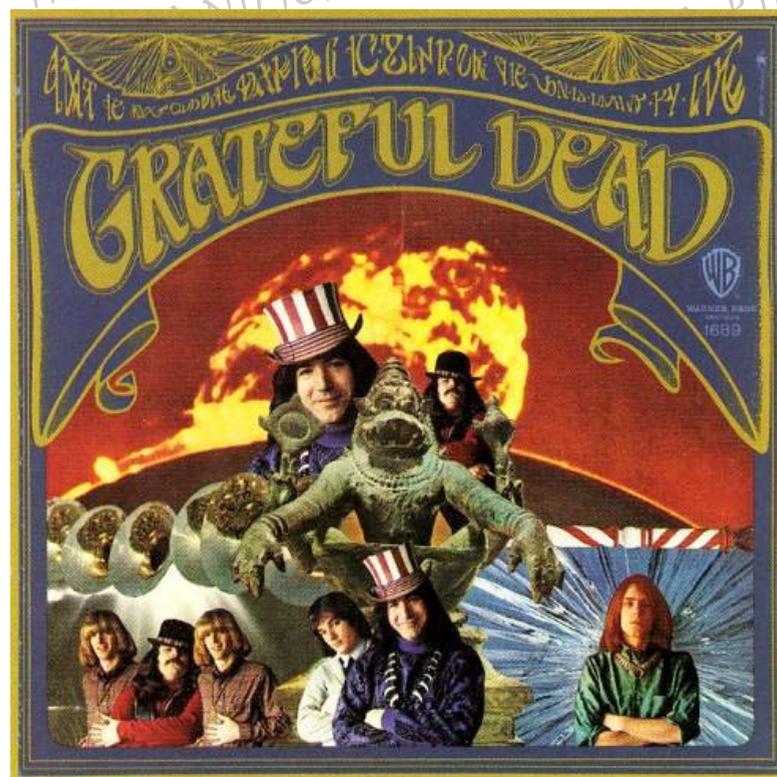
It's a perfect kickoff for their album—a jaunty, follow-me-I'm-the-Pied-Piper tune for what was going on in San Francisco, on the eve of a “Summer of Love.” Take a break, the singer urges. “Summer's comin' in, and it's goin' outta style.”

The day after the album's release in March, the Dead performed “The Golden Road” in concert. But, despite being their first group songwriting effort, their first non-hit single, and the first track on their first album, “The Golden Road” earned only limited devotion. To the band, it was fine for a first try, but not worth keeping in their repertoire, and, by year's end, “Road” had come to an end. No matter; Robert Hunter was on the case, and they would soon have a lot of new songs to try.

### “Dark Star”

“Dark Star” illuminates and reflects the Dead as well as any song in its vast repertoire. Like the Dead, it has a twisted history, a split personality, is perceived as both intelligent and cosmic, and is given to improvised jamming.

It was Robert Hunter's first joint effort with the Dead. While he was still living in New Mexico, he sent Garcia lyrics for “Alligator,” “St. Stephen,” and “China Cat Sunflower,” and the band added music. “‘Dark Star’ is the first lyric I wrote with the Grateful Dead,” he said. He wrote it after hearing them play the tune early in September 1967. “I just started scratching paper and got the ‘Dark star crashes, pouring its light into ashes’ part,” he told Jeff Tamarkin in *Relix* magazine, “and I said, ‘Why don't you try this with it?’ It worked well, and then they wanted more verses.” He finished up the second set of verses back in San Francisco, at 710 Ashbury and in Golden Gate Park. *(continued)*



**It's a perfect kickoff for their album—a jaunty, follow-me-I'm-the-Pied-Piper tune for what was going on in San Francisco...**

# TRUCKIN'

"Dark Star" was first issued as a single, timed with the release of *Anthem of the Sun*. Once the Dead began playing it on stage, it was never the same. "By 1968," says David Gans, host of several Grateful Dead radio shows, "it became the fulcrum of Grateful Dead improvisation."

In 1972, Garcia said he was hearing the song "in each performance as a completely improvised piece ... 'Dark Star' has meant, while I'm playing it, almost as many things as I can sit here and imagine, so all I can do is talk about 'Dark Star' as a playing experience."

"Dark Star" remained a band and fan favorite for many years, and even survived Garcia's death. Said Lesh: "'Dark Star' is always playing somewhere; all we do is tap into it."

## "Truckin'"

More than anything else, the Grateful Dead were a travelin' band. They were all about concerts, all across America and around the world. Yes, they were recording artists, but their own fans recorded them far more often than any record company.

It's appropriate, then, that one of the best known songs in popular music, as well as one of the best-loved among the Dead's legion of fans, is a chronicle of some of the band's more rugged times on the road, including a drug bust in New Orleans in 1970. Within a year, while on the road with the Dead, Robert Hunter composed the song and wrote about the Dead's disdain for New Orleans after being "set up—like a bowling pin."

And, then, the weary refrain: "What a long, strange trip it's been."

Almost from the moment it was first sung, that phrase has been quoted in newspaper, magazine, and book titles, regardless of whether the subject is the '60s or the sciences.

To Hunter's puzzlement, the Library of Congress designated "Truckin'" as a "national treasure" in 1997. More understandable is its long-term popularity with Dead fans—and the band itself.

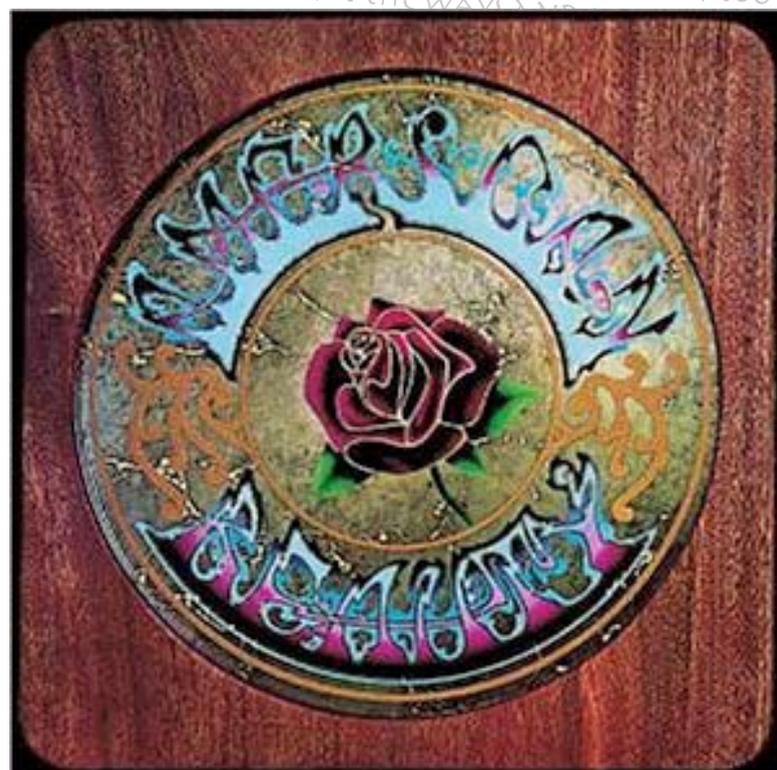
Garcia said that the song marked a change in Hunter's songwriting. "Originally he was on his own trip, and he was a poet," he told *Rolling Stone*. "The early stuff he wrote ... was stiff because it wasn't really meant to be sung. After he got further and further into it, his craft improved, and then he started going out on the road with us, coming out to see what life was like, to be able to have more of that viewpoint in the music, for the words to be more Grateful Dead words."

Mission accomplished.

## "Feel Like a Stranger"

No matter that they had devoted legions of fans, and no matter that they had stuck together an extraordinarily long time for a rock band; the Dead often addressed the subject of being outsiders, detached and insecure.

(continued)



To Hunter's puzzlement, the Library of Congress designated "Truckin'" as a "national treasure" in 1997.



## GamuT S5

They spoke both from the point of view of their fans (“Estimated Prophet”) and from their own perspective—as with a trio of songs by guitarist-vocalist Bob Weir and his songwriting partner, John Barlow on *Go to Heaven*: “Lost Sailor,” “Saint of Circumstance” and “Feel Like a Stranger.”

Of those three, “Feel Like a Stranger” connected more strongly with the band and Dead Heads. *Go to Heaven* was produced in 1980, at a time when various band members had surprised fans by expressing enthusiasm for disco music. There had been some signs in previous albums, such as “Dancin’ in the Street” on *Terrapin Station* and “Shakedown Street,” which both featured falsetto harmonies. “I think we were really influenced by that Bee Gees stuff,” drummer Mickey Hart said. “We really liked it.”

So did Weir, who provided one of the falsetto voices on “Dancin’,” along with Garcia and vocalist Donna Godchaux. His song “Feel Like a Stranger” had an R&B flavor pumped up in the studio by Brent Mydland’s synthesizer. The music fit the lyrics, about a couple at a nightclub firing mixed signals to each other. The singer, the “stranger,” sings, “Your eyes tell more than you mean them to, lit up and flashing ...”

**The song, Blair Jackson wrote, “accurately summed up all the fake-cool and insecurity of the disco era, with a fine blend of lyric power and shifting musical textures.”**

Those textures and words, about a long and crazy night, inspired the Dead to turn the song’s breaks into extended instrumental experiments, leading to some of their most memorable jam sessions. *(continued)*

## “Touch of Grey”

“Touch of Grey” may have been a fresh song for the masses, who bought the single in great enough numbers to give the Grateful Dead their first hit record in 1987. But it had been composed at least six years before, and it made its onstage debut in September, 1982 in Landover, Maryland.

The span of the years seems right, as, in the early Eighties, most of the band were approaching age forty—old by rock ‘n’ roll standards—and, through numerous ups and downs, had displayed perseverance and endurance, two of the song’s themes. Whenever they sang it, their audiences roared in appreciation; they were celebrating the survival of their own community.

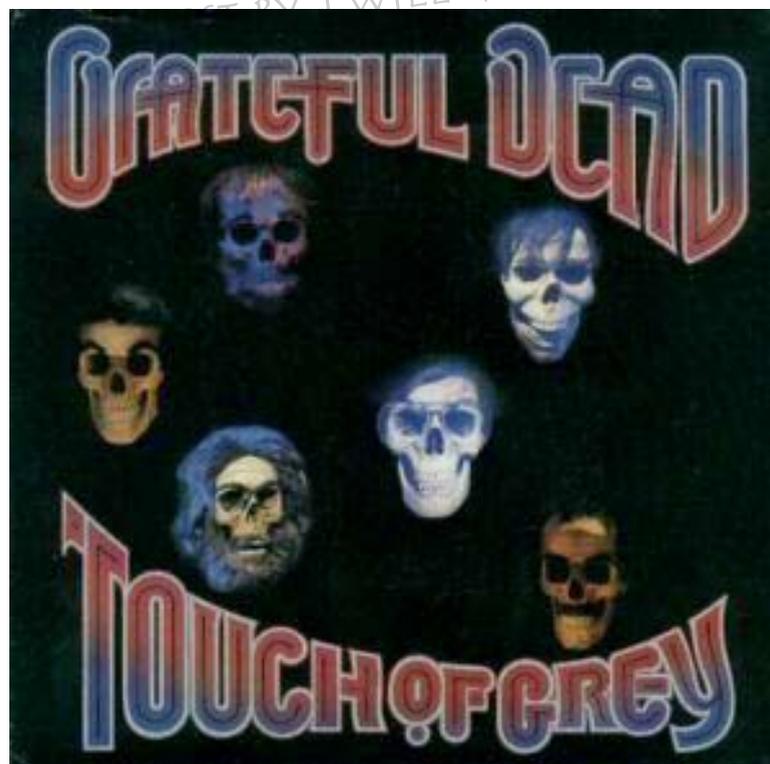
Robert Hunter wrote the song in 1981 while in England, visiting his girlfriend. “I had been up all night,” he said, “and I was looking blearily through the window the next morning, wondering, ‘How do you survive?’ And I thought, ‘You just do.’ And I sat down and wrote from the world-weary point of view I was experiencing right then. I started detailing the things that were happening to me.” As a performer, Hunter had been singing the song for several years before Garcia took it to the Dead.

Phil Lesh recalls hearing that when Arista Records heard their recording, one executive shouted, “A fucking hit! The Grateful Dead wrote a fucking hit!”

But Garcia was just trying to fit the song to himself. “Hunter sang ‘Touch of Grey’ as a sort of dry, satirical piece with an intimate feel,” he said, “but I heard something else coming through it. ‘We will get by’ said something so me, so I set it to play big. My version still has the ironic bite in the lyrics, but what comes across is a more celebratory quality.” ●

(The Grateful Dead Scrapbook, published by Chronicle Books, is available in two editions. The original version includes a CD of interviews with the band by Ben Fong-Torres, David Gans and others, and is available at all book retailers, with a retail price of \$40. A deluxe edition, which also contains a DVD including rare videos, as well as a ticket to a past Dead concert, costs \$75 and can be found at [www.Dead.net](http://www.Dead.net).)

# TOUCH OF GREY



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## AC/DC

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Columbia 2CD/DVD Standard Edition or 3CD/2DVD/LP Deluxe Collector's Limited Edition Box Set.

It turns out that AC/DC has recorded a ballad, after all. Titled "Love Song" and originally released on the Australian-only issue of the *High Voltage* LP, it presents a surprisingly tender side of the otherwise brawling, boozy band, whose typical idea of romance involves loose, well-endowed women, a pack of smokes, and a few shots of whiskey. The obscure track is just one of the myriad treasures included on *Backtracks*, a career-spanning collection of rarities, B-sides, live treats, and various ephemera that also includes *Family Jewels Disc 3*, a DVD that presents the quintet's videos, concert footage, and promotional clips from 1992 to 2009. In that it brings the group's archival matter up to date and provides a sense of closure, *Backtracks* feels like AC/DC's way of saying farewell.

Available in two different configurations, *Backtracks* isn't short on energy or amusement. The standard edition encompasses a disc of studio rarities and a second disc of live rarities, ranging from a raw 1977 performance of "Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap" to an edgy rendition of the underrated "Safe In New York City" from September 2000. The *Family Jewels* DVD picks up where the initial two-DVD volume left off—specifically, with the music video for 1993's "Big Gun" (recorded for the *Last Action Hero* soundtrack) and takes fans up to this year via footage and clips associated with 2009's *Black Ice* album.



Most listeners will be content with the slimmed-down set. However, for hardcore devotees—and those with \$200 to spend—there exists a ridiculously lavish Collector's Edition that ups the ante on clever packaging and reproduced memorabilia.

Housed in a 12"x12"x4" box that doubles as a fully functional, vintage-styled AC/DC guitar amplifier (no lie), initially limited to 50,000 numbered pieces, and offered exclusively through the band's Web site, the set includes everything that's in the standard version, plus the following: a second disc of live rarities; an additional six cuts of studio rarities; a 180-gram LP containing the hard-to-find studio tracks; a *Live at the Circus Krone* DVD of the band's 2003 club show in Munich shot from a front-row perspective; a 164-page coffee table book; and an Original Memorabilia Reproductions Envelope overflowing with such goodies as facsimiles of the original AC/DC button, 1976 tour flyer, and various concert souvenirs. Let there be rock, indeed. *(continued)*

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

Aside from the obvious cool factor, of course, the only question is whether the material is worth seeking out. Not surprisingly, the disc of studio cuts reveals that the band—renowned for its down-to-the-bone simplicity and economy of scale—didn't leave much on the cutting-room floor. However, the Bon Scott era work merits attention, particularly the hilarious novelty item, "Crabsody In Blue," quite possibly the best tune ever written about STDs ("Oh but when they start to bite then it's time you saw the light for an appointment, I know/Before you start to scream that's when you apply the cream blues ointment," Scott instructs). The Brian Johnson era leftovers don't fare as well; at best, "Cyberspace" and "Down on the Borderline" are disposable curiosity items.

The same can't be said for the live disc. Scott needs nothing more than guitarist Angus Young's frantic bad-boy boogie to light up "Shot Down In Flames" with howling ecstasy. While evergreens like "Back In Black," "Sin City," and "You Shook Me All Night Long" already appear on an assortment of AC/DC concert DVDs as well as 1991's *Live* album, they are classics, and are presented here from earlier eras that reveal the group cutting with sharper teeth. In addition, the almost-forgotten tunes "Guns for Hire" and "This House Is On Fire" explode with a previously unimaginable gritty vitality. And one can't own enough versions of "For Those About to Rock," complete with deafening 21-gun salute.

Is *Backtracks* indispensable? Not in the sense of *Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap*, *Highway to Hell*, *Back In Black*, or even *The Razor's Edge*. A few more live nuggets from *Ballbreaker* and *Stiff Upper Lip* would've been welcome additions. But as it stands, if this is indeed AC/DC's parting shot, it's compulsory listening (and viewing) for fans old and new. — **Bob Gendron**

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**This is art rock at its best. To all the wannabe's out there, you're being served by a 76- year old lady.**

**Yoko Ono Plastic Ono Band**  
*Between My Head and the Sky*  
 Chimera, CD and LP

**W**hile some might argue that Yoko Ono's past work has been undecipherable at times, her current record is a clear stroke of genius. Recorded with her son Sean Lennon and a large cast of musicians now known as the Yoko Ono Plastic Ono Band, *Between My Head and the Sky* features a wide-open sonic landscape and has been mastered with care by Greg Calbi at Sterling Sound. Though the CD is slightly compressed, the LP is definitely audiophile quality.

The record opens with "Waiting for the D Train" and a grinding punk beat, with Ono's voice piercing through the mix, feeling like "Rock Lobster" played at 78 r.p.m. The next track, "The Sun is Down," features some spacey, Kraftwerk-like synthesizer riffs and electronica effects, with Yoko repeating, "The sun is down...it's getting dark...does that matter?" Ono has released this track with a Creative Commons license, so that you can remix it to your liking and send it back to her. The top ten best mixes will be featured on her site and receive a "special prize." [www.yopob.com/remix.html](http://www.yopob.com/remix.html) Power to the people, right on.

There is a wide range of vocal and textural styles present, as you might expect from Ono, but she never goes so far out into the ozone that she loses your attention. The middle tracks, "Moving Mountains," "Calling," and "Healing" start to float away from the main groove, but "Hashire, Hashire" returns to the edgy guitars, sax riffs and beat-like vocal delivery that makes this record so intriguing. The title track is perhaps the best mash-up of all the styles on the record, with Ono bouncing back and forth between a spoken word delivery and her trademark squeakiness.

This is art rock at its best. To all the wannabe's out there, you're being served by a 76- year old lady. – **Jeff Dorgay**



**Baroness. Relapse**

*The Blue Record*  
 CD, limited-edition 2CD, or 2LP

**Baroness** is not the heaviest, darkest, or most experimental metal band in the South, let alone North America. Rather than being preoccupied with harsh doom or smothering speed, the Savannah, Georgia quartet's interests reside in early prog's psychedelic sonic topography, unconventional indie-rock structures, and arena rock's twin-guitar harmonies, characteristics that regularly enter into its often astonishing compositions.

Not to say that the foursome doesn't pound the iron-clad gavel with the mightiest of the gods. John Baizley's deep-lunged vocals erupt like commands shouted by a weathered ship captain desperate to save his vessel in the midst of a perfect storm. Similarly, the group's side-swaying rhythms and turbulent grooves suggest the sneak-attack surge of a seiche, where a fast-rising standing wave swallows everything whole.

*(continued)*



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Yet, on *The Blue Record*, the band's sophomore recording and a companion to 2007's *The Red Album*, Baroness displays an atmospheric awareness, along with an innate talent for beautiful melodics, that place them among hard rock's elite. Even with the presence of multiple interludes, there are no signs of wasted notes or excessive indulgence. A stained glass palace of nuanced textures, hallucinogenic tones, and teeth-gnashing riffs, *The Blue Record* unfolds with the kinds of melodic surprises, confident songwriting, and creative freshness that defined thrash's golden era in the mid-'80s. This time, though, more diversity is at hand.

With instrumental breaks providing segues between thematically connected songs, Baroness maintains a fluidity that spills over to the narrative tracks. Despite glazing arrangements with acoustic guitars, pastoral pianos, watery guitar-pedal effects, calming folk accents, and, on the jazz-flecked swish of "O'er Hell and Hide," electronic washes and surreal spoken-word dialogue, songs never feel overwhelming, awkward, or weighed down. The group strikes a balance that accommodates a wide range of sounds and styles, yet still avoids the crammed-together claustrophobia that typically plagues such an approach. While harder and more intense, *The Blue Record* isn't far removed from the language spoken by Radiohead's future-gazing efforts.

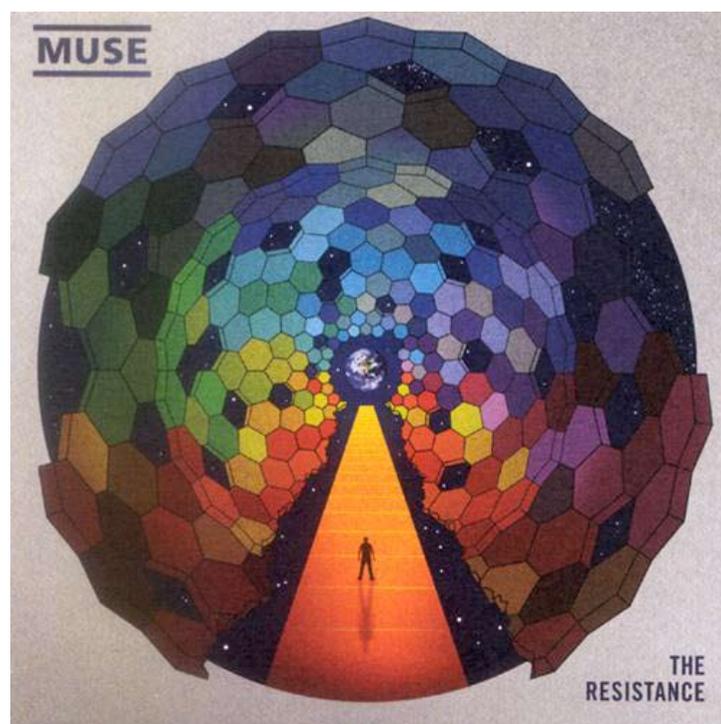
At its simplest, Baroness utilizes proven metal strategies—call-and-response vocals, thumping percussion, galloping tempos—to set up bold turns. *(continued)*

Spiraling guitar leads and curling bass lines burst with colorful tones that suggest those of Brian May and Cliff Burton, respectively. Gang choruses on “Jake Leg,” a brute slugfest that evokes a scamper through a dense jungle, prelude an eventual free fall that adds to the adrenaline rush. By contrast, the gorgeous hymn “Steel That Sleeps the Eye” seems born of desert campfires and soothing mediations.

Tunes jog before they run—a facet that lends to their magnetism and catchiness. Baizley and fellow guitarist/vocalist Pete Adams constantly converse through singing as well as interwoven fills and solos.

There’s no better example of the band’s dynamic than on “A Horse Called Golgotha,” a wrestling match of push-pull tension, scampering motion, imperial toughness, momentum shifts, and explosive hooks from which it’s impossible to turn away. “Bullhead’s Lament” closes the album on a cautiously uplifting high—or perhaps it simply signifies relief. Picked, slow-dancing guitar notes and enmeshed solos come on as if they’re waltzing away from a wasteland. If the song was a film, the camera would gradually increase its distance and fade away from the landscape it’s gazed upon.

Given his excellent shaping and shading of the material, producer John Congleton functions as the band’s silent fifth member on *The Blue Album*. Balances, soundstage dimensions, and, most notably, the sense of atmosphere rival those on any mainstream release. A colossal statement. — **Bob Gendron**



### **Muse**

*The Resistance*  
Warner Bros, LP and CD

**F**ollowing the gloriously showy success of 2006’s *Black Holes and Relations*, Muse’s lead singer and guitarist Matt Bellamy was quoted as saying that the band’s next album was going to include a “15-minute space guitar solo.” While he didn’t go quite that far (which can be considered good or bad, depending on your politics), *The Resistance* finds Bellamy and his bandmates taking their music in an even more operatic and climatic direction, for better or for worse, but always with the amps turned to 11.

*The Resistance* leads off with the album’s first single, “Uprising,” a sizzling track with a dancey beat, a soaring chorus, huge guitars and fresh batch of Bellamy’s paranoid lyrics.

Unfortunately, the next two tracks, “The Resistance” and “Undisclosed Desires,” are just more of the same. The singles fare better as individual elements, but strung together in album format, they lose a lot of their power.

However, once the romantic piano riff of “United States of Eurasia (+Collateral Damage)” descends into a triumphant Queen-like chorus topped off with sweeping Middle Eastern strings, the power returns. The rest of the album concentrates on the band’s virtuosic playing and flare for the dramatic, densely filling each song with soaring vocals, classical digressions and power chords.

By the time Muse launches into the 13-minute, three-part “Exogenesis: Symphony” that finishes the album, you’ll get the feeling that nothing you could be doing while listening to this album could ever be epic enough to live up to these songs. But all that “epicness” comes at a price. *The Resistance* feels like a constant build-up to the next aural explosion, and it’s a bit exhausting to listen to all the way through. Some will love it, while others might disregard the album as pure glam rock excess.

But in a time when bands are often shunned for reaching for the rafters and playing things as big as they can, Muse shines though as the unabashed carriers of unbridled rock ambition. Turn it up.

— **Joe Golfen**



### The Black Crowes

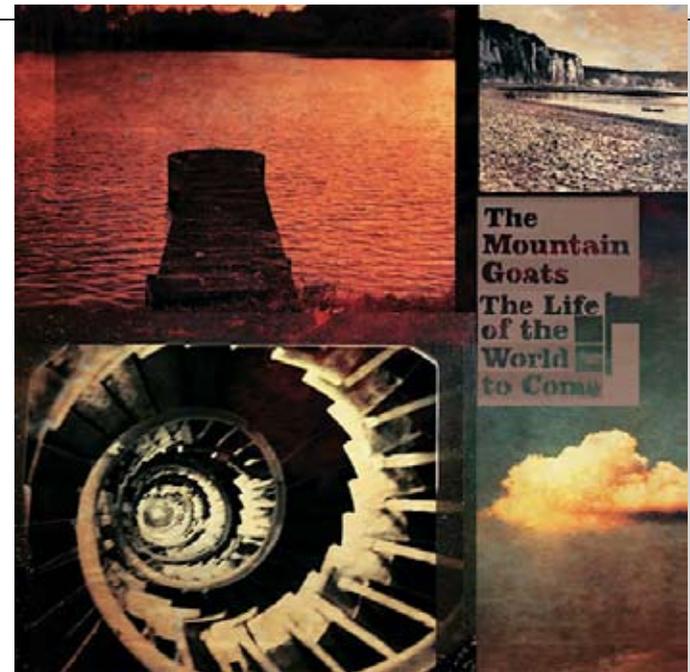
*Before the Frost...Until the Freeze*  
Red Distribution CD or 2LP

**B***efore the Frost...Until the Freeze* could easily be the best effort of the Black Crowes' career. Simply put, this record is excellent from start to finish. Less simply: The CD version has eleven tracks, making up *Before the Frost*, and gives buyers a code to download, for free, the nine additional tracks that make up *...Until the Freeze*. Those buying the vinyl version get two LP's containing all 20 tracks. And there isn't a clunker in the bunch.

When The Black Crowes hit the music scene with *Shake Your Money Maker* in 1990, they had two speeds; rock and rock harder. In *Before the Frost...* they add about ten more speeds to the mix. The disc opens with "Good Morning Captain," a straight-ahead blues rock tune, followed by the psychedelic "Been a Long Time" and "Appaloosa," which sounds like an outtake from the Allman Brothers Band's *Hitting the Note*.

The eleven tracks making up the *Before the Frost* album were performed in Levon Helm's studio in upstate New York, in front of a small group of friends and fans, giving this record even more immediacy. The mix is sublime and the recording itself is easily the equal of what you'd pay \$50 for on an audiophile label. Interestingly, the mastering engineer wasn't even given a credit in the liner notes.

Like fine whiskey, the Black Crowes just get better with age, paying homage to some of rock's finest, while staying true to their own vision. Both the content and the sonics make this one of the best rock records of the year. — **Jeff Dorgay**



### The Mountain Goats

*The Life of the World to Come*  
4ad, LP and CD

**T**here have been 16 Mountain Goats LPs since John Darnielle first recorded his musical ruminations in 1991, armed with nothing more than an acoustic guitar and a Panasonic boombox. Since then, the nasal-voiced songwriter has woven his vivid imagery and thoughtful poetry though a myriad of themes, ranging from meth-heads in woeful relationships on *Tallahassee* to his own troubled childhood on the fantastic *Under the Sunset Tree*. These albums saw Darnielle crafting elaborate stories filled with rich characters, complex emotions and raw power.

Darnielle's lyrical ambition has clearly expanded over the years and with *The Life of the World to Come*, he has set his sights on the density and complexity of the Christian bible. Each track is named after a bible verse, which in the hands of most writers would seem too pretentious to believe, but Darnielle manages to get it right. The verses at times expand the theme of the lyrics, while others turn the meaning on its head. *(continued)*

The beautiful "Matthew 25:21" tells the heartbreaking story of watching a loved one die, yet the spirit of the song is changed by the verse, "His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!'"

Likewise, the fact that Genesis 30:3

reads "Then she said, 'Here is Bilhah, my maidservant. Sleep with her so that she can bear children for me and that through her I too can build a family,'" can either distort or enhance Darnielle's simple love song.

While the lyrics continue to excel, musically the album is lacking and often falls flat. The lightweight tune of "Genesis 3:23" can't support the thoughtful words,

and many of the piano tracks simply crawl along. While some of the starkness on this album harkens back to Darnielle's boom-box days, nearly all of the seething emotion and angst that filled those early songs is gone. While there are moments of true beauty, *The Life of the World to Come* feels too much like a writing exercise, so focused on the concept that it forgets the reason behind it. — **Joe Golfen**

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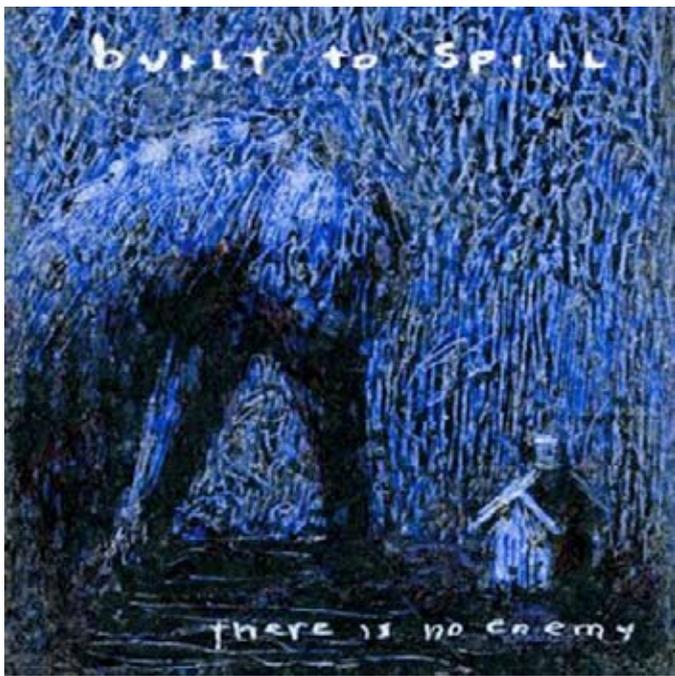
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### **Built to Spill**

*There Is No Enemy*  
4AD, LP and CD

**F**or all the multi-tracked guitar lines, musical digressions and increasingly obscure lyrics, the best part of Boise, Idaho's Built to Spill has always been their ability to write some great pop songs.

The band's mix of complex musical breakdowns amid undeniably great tunes came to a zenith on 1999's *Keep It Like a Secret*, while the constant guitar noodling and broken down song structures of 2006's *You in Reverse* did nothing to highlight frontman Doug Martsch's addicting songwriting.

*There Is No Enemy* doesn't find Built to Spill returning to its roots exactly, but the band seems to be letting the songs speak for themselves again. The instrumentation on this album is relatively relaxed, slimming down the guitar work to just the essentials, lending each note a stronger place in the song. This is actually one of the most straightforward rock albums the band has ever made, but it keeps the group's off-kilter charm in perfect balance.

The power pop of "Hindsight" and the bluesy sway of "Life's a Dream" really benefit from this toned down approach, letting the nasal vocals and Martsch's innovative guitar rise to the top, without weighing down the rest of the songs. – **Joe Golfen**



### **Beck**

*The Velvet Underground & Nico*  
Beck's Record Club

**C**over songs are always tricky, and covering an entire album, especially a beloved classic like *The Velvet Underground & Nico*, takes a certain amount of either gall or genius. Fortunately, Beck has plenty of both.

This free album, available on Beck's website, is the first installment of the Record Club, in which Beck pulls together a crew of L.A. cronies to rework an entire album. Iconic songs might seem like the easiest to tamper with, but they hurt the worst when you get them wrong. The further the Record Club strays from the original, the more you wish they'd play it straight.

Working with uber-producer Nigel Godrich, members of Beck's touring band, the Icelandic singer Thorunn Magnúsdóttir (as Nico) and actor Giovanni Ribisi, Beck starts things off simple with a charming version of "Sunday Morning." Beck's sad-eyed baritone is a pretty good substitute for Lou Reed's sneer, and the quirky additions to the track never steal the song's simple thunder. The untuned, directionless blur of "I'm Waiting for the Man" robs the track of the twitchy shuffle and starts to sound less like experimentation and more like some people jamming without practicing while high. Come to think of it, wasn't that what the Velvet Underground did?

However, there's a certain charm in the ramshackle nature of this album. Though some songs plod along meaninglessly, some of Beck's deviations are for the best, including the trip-hop reverb of "Run, Run, Run" and the spacey version of "All Tomorrow's Parties." The slurred sitars and vocal distortion on "Heroin" only serve to expand the original's tripped-out sorrow.

Zip over to Beck's Web site and judge for yourself. [www.beck.com](http://www.beck.com)

**Note:** You have to play these on your computer; there is no way to download them. – **Joe Golfen**

# See in a new way.



© Craig Tanner



## Islands

*Vapours*

Anti, LP and CD

**A**fter stretching their sound to the limit with their overblown sophomore effort *Arm's Way*, the Montreal-based Islands have shed their excess weight and created a near perfect pop album in *Vapours*, which now features the band's original lineup.

Islands is the second musical collaboration of Jamie Thompson and Nick Diamonds, following the departure of their former groups The Unicorns and Th' Corn Gangg. But after their breezy debut *Return to the Sea*, the duo amicably went their separate ways, leaving only Diamonds to sort out what to do next. Now that Thompson has returned for *Vapours*, the unsuitably grand scale of *Arm's Way* has been replaced with synths, drum machines, guitars and real bass.

This album is the perfect soundtrack for the hipster beach house set, if such a thing exists. While the album doesn't feature the Caribbean beats and rappers of *Return to the Sea*, the relaxed feel of the title track or the early Strokes vibe of "Switched On" should put a smile on anyone's face. The sparse instrumentation is done just right, making darker tracks like "No You Don't" shine in all the right places and lets all the great melodies speak for themselves. — Joe Golfen

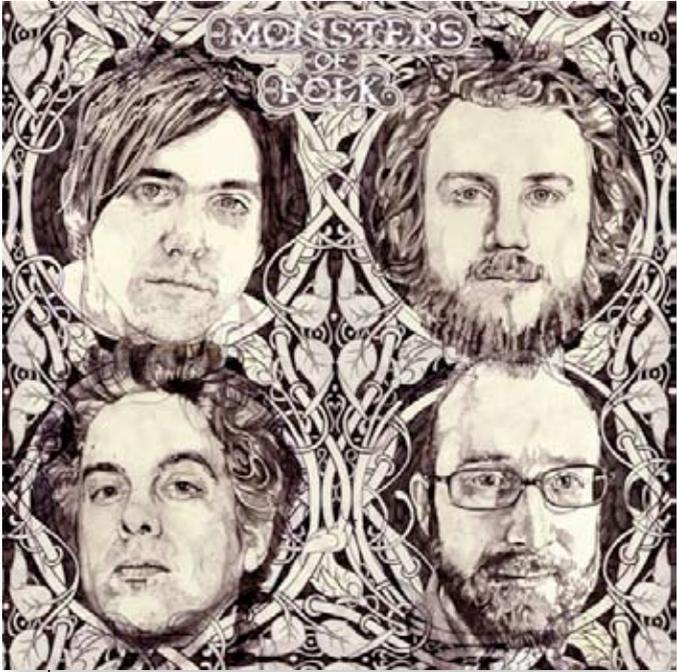
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### Monsters of Folk

*Monsters of Folk*- Shangri-La CD,LP

The term “super group” gets tossed around a lot, and in most cases, the music made by these groups is anything but super. Although recent ventures into this genre (see *The Dead Weather* or *Tinted Windows*) have proven that great bands are more than just a sum of their parts, the *Monsters of Folk* manages to take the brightest spot of each of its players and make them shine even brighter.

This delightful folkie album finds indie icons M. Ward, Jim James of *My Morning Jacket* and Conor Oberst of *Bright Eyes* singing and jamming together, while producer/multi-instrumentalist Mike Mogis fills in all the cracks. Each member of this band has taken the blanket term of “folk rock” and made it his own by blending it with vintage rock and roll, experimental southern rock or confessional bombast, respectfully, and the results of their combined jams are often surprising.

Even when they all sing together, the individual personalities shine through on this album, sometimes to the song’s detriment.

Each member of this band has taken the blanket term of “folk rock” and made it his own by blending it with vintage rock and roll, experimental southern rock or confessional bombast ...

Some of the tunes just sound like a member’s solo effort, whether it’s Ward’s wave-washed crooning on “The Sandman, the Brakeman and Me,” Oberst’s fiery lyricism on “A Man Named Truth” or James’ spun-out grandness on “Losin Yo’ Head.” But the tracks that shine brightest are the ones that let each member play a part of in the song without overpowering it.

The album starts with one such song, the cinematic, brilliant “Dear God (Sincerely M.O.F.),” which features swelling harps and a stuttering drum loop lifted from Trevor Dandy’s 1970 gospel song “Is There Any Love.”

In this tune, all three players offer up unanswerable questions to the Almighty, each showing his true colors in the process. James sounds like a desperate man as he croons in a pleading falsetto, Ward’s warm voice is restrained and serene, and Oberst’s shaky tenor drops each line like a cynic who wants to be proven wrong. It’s a great song, made even greater by the people singing it.

While the album never quite lives up to this early watermark, tunes like “Baby Boomer” and “Say Please” make great use of the different dynamics each singer brings to the table. At 15 tracks, this album could use some editing, but overall *Monsters of Folk* is a joy. Maybe “super group” isn’t the wrong term, after all. — Joe Golfen



### The Gates of Slumber

*Hymns of Blood and Thunder*  
Metal Blade, CD

The Gates of Slumber don’t mess with subtlety. Damning disbelievers and disparagers, the Indianapolis metal band makes no secret of its obsession with *Conan the Barbarian*-style combatants, battlefield fantasies, power-trio heft, and thick volumes on the aptly titled *Hymns of Blood and Thunder*. Yes, at a time when heavy music continues to branch off in exciting directions, Gates of Slumber are more than content to worship at the altar of old-school traditions. Theirs is the doom-leaning sound of downtuned guitars, bludgeoning low-end range, gruff vocals, and lead-weighted drums that come on like a stampeding elephant herd. Devoid of irony and trendiness, the album goes hand-in-hand with curtain-shaded van windows, dirty shag carpeting, and generic cigarettes. Everything from the sketched drawing of the sword-wielding, armor-clad warrior on the record’s cover to the stubborn, boulder-thick riffs shouts 1970’s metal. (continued)

Gates of Slumber make their ancestral music heroes proud. Melodic accents and acoustic fills help balance the scales, but the songs are primarily dirge-based stormbringers that remain bent on stomping or crushing anything that stands in their way.

**Such *sturm-and-drang* violence owes to Godzilla-sized drive and wrought-iron-tough riffs. Nothing here is for the faint-hearted.**

“Death Dealer” functions as a vice grip; “Descent into Madness” doubles as a slow-moving whirlpool of sonic quicksand; and “Beneath the Eyes of Mars” marches into an unnamed enemy’s territory. Melancholy, bleakness, and loss dominate, as they should, given the war-themed scenarios. While *Hymns of Blood and Thunder* seldom breaks from a set pattern (the medieval gothic chant “The Mist in the Morning” is an exception), the record’s honed-in focus and concentrated aggression make it an archetypal example of a work that does one thing, and does it well.

Credit must be afforded to burgeoning metal producer Sanford Parker, whose excellent work on the boards is becoming second nature. Recorded in analog, the muscular production is as tight as a sealed pickle jar, and the enormous percussive wallop—key to the record’s success—is worth cherishing.

— **Bob Gendron**



### KISS

*Sonic Boom*

KISS Records, 3 CD box set

**G**ene Simmons and Paul Stanley must have higher testosterone levels than any other old dudes on Earth, making them the ultimate alpha males after all. Ted Nugent has a mouth full of false teeth and Bob Dylan has issued an album of Christmas songs, but Gene and Paul are still doing what they do best; singing songs about getting women to take their clothes off and men having their way with them. In this politically correct 21st Century, it’s a breath of fresh air to see someone stay true to their vision.

Always at their best live, KISS has made more than its share of lame studio albums, but *Sonic Boom* is their most consistent release in decades. While the power ballad “Stand” is pretty sappy, it’s not as sap-drenched as “Beth,” and the rest of the record is high-octane rock and roll, served up KISS style. *Sonic Boom* picks up right where *Destroyer* left off in the timeline of KISS-tory.

The KISS Army is polarized on this album, I hear. Loyal fans either love it or hate it, but for the same reason; it doesn’t break any new ground. Still, it is a finely polished example of what KISS is capable of. Make no mistake:

Although most of the songwriting credits still read Stanley and Simmons, this is Paul Stanley’s record. It’s more diplomatic than past KISS albums. Lead vocal tasks are spread out; current lead guitarist Tommy Thayer and drummer Eric Singer get to take the mic more than Ace Frehley and Peter Criss ever did.

If you want a modern hard rock album, go for Tool, but if you want a great KISS album, check out *Sonic Boom*. It’s their best studio effort yet. The three-disc set includes a bonus disc of “KISS Klassics” that has the current band performing their top tunes, and a DVD of their 2004 Buenos Aires performance.

— **Jeff Dorgay**



### Ace Frehley

*Anomaly*

Essential Music, CD, LP and MP3 download

**W**hile the new KISS record succeeds by sticking tightly to formula, ex-KISS guitarist Ace Frehley creates a killer rock record by breaking with his past. Noted for his live work, Frehley has never been able to harness that fire on his solo releases. *(continued)*

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But he brings a new intensity to this record. Even the MP3's downloaded from Amazon were dynamic and powerful. Of course, the physical media sound much better, and hats off to Ace for delivering a copy on vinyl as well.

Frehley still pulls some of his lyrics from his love for space and science fiction with "Outer Space," "Space Bear," and "Fractured Quantum," but the rest of the tracks stick closer to girls, relationships and other down-to-earth matters.

**But, just when you start to get comfortable with the format, Frehley jabs you with a rowdy cover of the Sweet classic, "Fox on the Run."**

While you reel from that, he moves in for the kill with the prog epic, "Genghis Khan." *Anomaly* is worth the sticker price for this track alone and it sounds fantastic on the LP. It makes you wonder if Ace was taking notes and listening to *A Wizard, A True Star* on the tour bus.

Frehley has never played better. He is out on tour supporting the record in the U.S. in November and heads to Europe in December.

– Jeff Dorgay



By Jeff Dorgay

After quite some time, the so called “analog resurgence” is probably here to stay, at least until the three or four old guys left on Earth who still repair the cutting heads go to that big mastering room in the sky. Or we can’t get the raw vinyl to make records anymore. Who would have ever dreamed back around 1990 that there would be more turntables, phono cartridges and phono preamplifiers than ever before?

Or that this stuff would command stratospheric prices? I don’t think we had many \$5,000 phono cartridges back then. Today it’s commonplace. Around \$10k seems to be the ceiling for the outer limit of tracing grooves these days. The Vendetta Research Phono Preamplifier was top of the heap in 1990, if you could find one, for about \$2,500. Today, the top phono preamplifiers are in the \$20,000 – \$30,000 range, with \$5,000 mid level and \$10,000 not so outrageous anymore. And there are at least a dozen turntables with price tags in the six-figure range. Crazy.



As my favorite Irish pastor used to say, “Now I’m going to give you some good news.”

A lot of this technology has trickled down to entry-level products and you can find an excellent turntable for under a thousand bucks all day long, with quite a few great choices for \$300 to \$500. Same thing with cartridges and phono preamplifiers. There are more budget cartridges than ever before, and we’ve even reviewed three priced under \$100 that provide great results. Even a few companies, such as Audio Research, are building full featured preamplifiers again with highly capable on-board phono preamplifiers. Thanks to eBay, Audiogon and Craigslist, there’s a good \$100 turntable somewhere in every major city of the world that needs a new home, and sometimes it has a stack of records to go with it. So you don’t need to spend a king’s ransom to enjoy analog.

Rather than tell you what to buy, let’s start with some questions that I think apply to almost all analog lovers. So before you start to get wacky with your checkbook, ponder these: *(continued)*

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Marc Phillips  
*TONEAudio Magazine*



Do you enjoy the ride more, or would you rather just get there and start having fun? I think this is the question you need to answer honestly before proceeding in earnest with vinyl, or you could be seriously disappointed. Regardless of what many would like you to believe, good analog takes a fair amount of work in the setup department, no matter how much money you spend. More often than in any other aspect of HiFi, a meticulously setup budget table can offer surprisingly good sound, while an expensive one that has been sloppily set up will usually prove underwhelming. And yes, an awesome table set up with care will take you to another plane of existence.

If you are prepared for the journey, get in, get your hands dirty and get started. Depending on the level of performance, you will need somewhere between \$100 to about \$750 worth of tools. Part of your journey will be to master the art of using a good level, a voltmeter, an alignment protractor and perhaps a few things specific to your table.

The journey vs. destination approach also applies to building a record collection. If you already have a substantial collection, ignore this and move down to the next subheading. But if you are LP curious and starting at zero, you could be in for a lot of work. Are you a bargain hunter, or do you just want to get some great records and get going? *(continued)*

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While I often hear tales of major record finds at the Salvation Army, I've never seen an example of good records there. The bad news is that your chances of finding some Pink Islands or first-pressing Beatle albums at a garage sale for fifty cents each are slim to none. Even record stores in the most remote locations are buying and selling on eBay and more often than not, they want too much for their "treasures." I miss the mid 80s when everyone was buying CD players and *giving* their records away. You could go into a record shop and buy a huge handful of records for \$50. But I digress.

Expect the rare records to cost hundreds of dollars each and the better remasters to run 25-60 dollars each, so plan accordingly for software in your budget. It often comes as a shock to vinyl newbies that after dropping \$5,000 on a turntable, a thousand bucks for records doesn't go as far as it used to.

If you approach new tasks with excitement, this will be fun, but if you are a destination person, your next step will be...

### FINDING A GREAT SETUP PERSON

If setting the suspension on an LP-12 or adjusting VTA in fractions of a millimeter doesn't sound like your idea of how to spend a Saturday evening, you must find a good setup person. If you are lucky, the person who sold you your turntable might be one, but maybe not. In the good old days (the 70s and early 80s), most HiFi shops had at least one crack turntable setup person on staff, and they took pride in setting up your table before you took it home. But for the most part, that ship has sailed.

If you are lucky enough to find someone in a store or a friend who is capable, treat that person like the master of the universe that he or she is. Buy the master a nice holiday gift and make it a point *not* to hover around while your \$5,000 phono cartridge is being mounted or bad things might happen.

### CLEANLINESS IS NEXT TO GODLINESS

Nothing torques me more than reading articles in the mainstream press that usually say something stupid like, "Listening to music on LP's can be a lot of fun, if you don't mind putting up with all of vinyl's problems. The ticks, crackles and pops add a vintage dimension to the music." That's crazy. Even relatively inexpensive records with a little bit of TLC and a good record cleaning machine can sound very quiet.

I could write a book about cleaning regimens, but I advise getting some kind of vacuum machine (Nitty Gritty, VPI and Clearaudio come to mind first), some decent cleaning products, such as those from Mobile Fidelity, and some archival sleeves to put your freshly cleaned records in so they *stay* clean.

We can argue forever about who makes the best record cleaning goo, but again, I suggest finding something you like, master the application and use it religiously. I've had excellent, consistent results with the MoFi stuff, so that's what I use. Just don't let anyone talk you into using alcohol or dish soap. Seriously. If you are spending 50 bucks a pop on new remasters or more than that on rare recordings, don't be a cheapskate when it comes to record-cleaning fluid. I clean a lot of records and maybe burn through \$100 worth of it a year.

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**Expect the rare records to cost hundreds of dollars each and the better remasters to run 25-60 dollars each, so plan accordingly for software in your budget. It often comes as a shock to vinyl newbies that after dropping \$5,000 on a turntable, a thousand bucks for records doesn't go as far as it used to.**

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### BE PREPARED FOR SOME FRUSTRATION

The best thing about the compact-disc format is that with a great player, you push one button and go. A music server is no picnic because you have to be an IT guy, and a turntable means you have to be part watchmaker, part mechanic and part magician. But once you finally get your table set up as close to perfection as you can, the resulting analog bliss is wonderful. Sure, you're going to make a few mistakes along the way but there will be some triumphs as well. You might even find a first stamper British pressing of *Sgt. Pepper* in a garage sale. That's what makes having a turntable and a record collection so much fun in the end. And remember, that's what this is about. Don't let analysis paralysis get the best of you! ●

*Button provided by [www.emmi.co.uk](http://www.emmi.co.uk)*

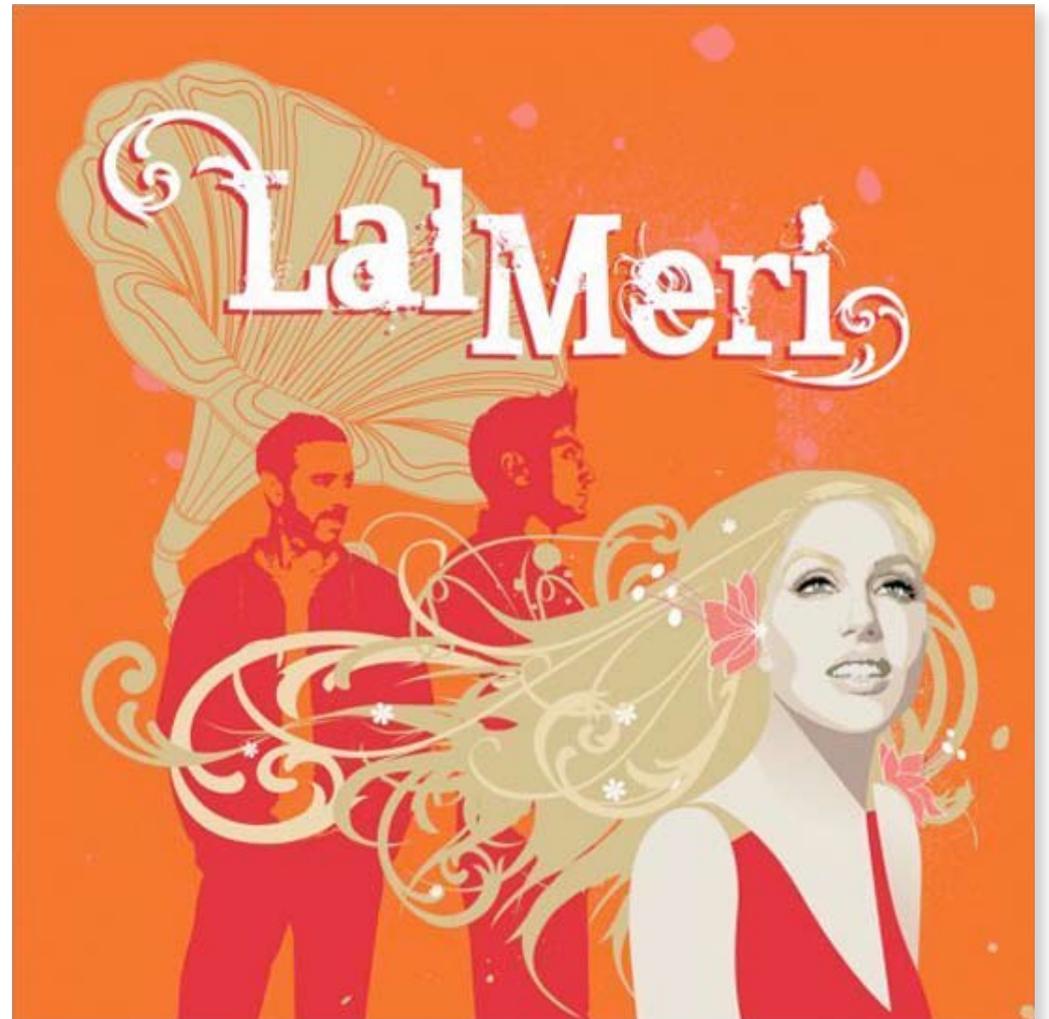
# Club Mix

By Scott Tetzlaff

**B**ack in the 1960's, before there was an Internet, sociologists at MIT ran experiments to prove that we are more interconnected than we realize. Allowing their test subjects only the use of their wits and a phone book, they discovered that anyone is only six people away from being connected to anyone else.

Keeping that in mind, what could be a better name for a record company that specializes in world music than Six Degrees Records? ([www.sixdegreesrecords.com](http://www.sixdegreesrecords.com)) Since 1996, they've been turning out some interesting titles in the international, ambient, jazz and eclectic categories. You might consider them the "Pier 1 Imports" of music; The Orb, Alice Russell, Ceu, Dzihan and Kamen, Karsh Kale, DJ Cam and Bebel Gilberto are just a few that have recieved the Six Degrees treatment.

Here are a few of my recent favorites from the Six Degrees catalog.



## Lal Meri

*Lal Meri*

CD and MP3 download

**L**al Meri is one of the newest artists on the Six Degrees label. This Los Angeles-based act combines the talents of Nancy Kaye, Ireesh Lai and Cameron Rizzo. All three are vets, seasoned in a wide range of musical styles, and have some heavy producer credits as well.

The best tracks on the album highlight Kaye, whose lush vocals sound like a chilled-out Edie Brickell, layered over hindi rhythms tinged with some sparse synthesizer riffs around the edges of the soundscapes. It's all done at a nice, leisurely pace.

Their debut disc has an international flavor, yet maintains a comfortable feel. It's quite a balancing act and Lal Meri does it very well. The sitar-laced "Dream of 18" and the pop fusion "Bad Things" are perfect examples of this formula; it's just different enough to be intriguing but strange enough to scare you away.



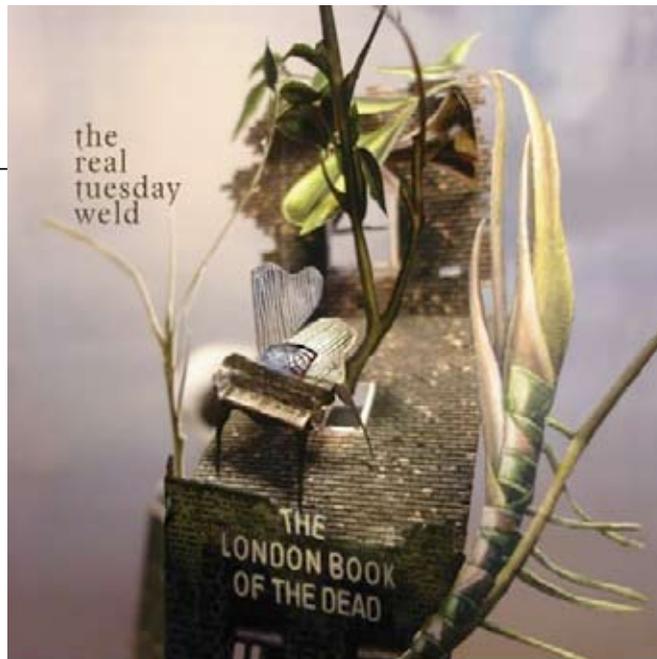
### **Banco De Gaia**

*You Are Here*  
CD

**B**anco De Gaia's Toby Marks has been a staple of the UK music scene for years, as an ambient dub group that has had a number of mutations. Their last few records have always carried reggae and Arabic influences, but this record is a re-release of one of their earlier works from 2004. *You Are Here* has a stronger techno influence, with some homages to prog rock as well.

The record begins with "Down From the Mountain," which is the most Arabic sounding track. It also features synthesizer riffs that remind me of *Theme of Secrets*, an obscure record by Eddie Jobson (of King Crimson, UK, etc.). Hence, the prog reference.

"Zeus No Like Techno" is straight-ahead techno and by far the most danceable track, with a grinding 90's beat. While "Waking up in Waco" has a more off-kilter beat, with William S. Burroughs riffing in the background. If you're still with me and you enjoy this kind of thing, Marks is back in the studio right now, with a release slated for December.



### **The Real Tuesday Weld**

*The London Book of the Dead*  
CD and MP3 download

**T**his band's name came from one of founder Stephen Coates' dreams, in which Tuesday Weld (best known as a teen ingénue in the '50s, and more recently for gracing the cover of Matthew Sweet's *Girlfriend* album) is chatting with the 1930's crooner Al Bowlly.

It all makes sense as the first track, "Blood, Sugar, Love" begins and the chorus states, "Life is good when you're filled with blood." Trippy, indeed. The rest of the album's songs consist of cabaret and burlesque vocals, layered over old radio transmissions with some Moby-like shouts that were on the cutting room floor from the Play sessions.

Although the title sounds glum, the songs are mostly upbeat. "Kix" features more 30's vocals mixed in with some clarinets and some subtle scratching going on way in the background. "I Believe" has a great rap going on over a muted trumpet and snare drum. The result is quirky and old fashioned, with a modern twist.



### **MIDival PunditZ**

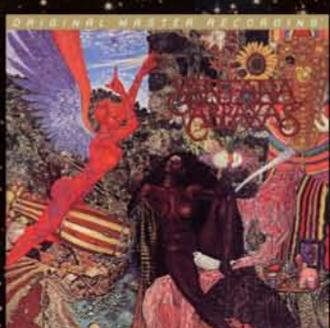
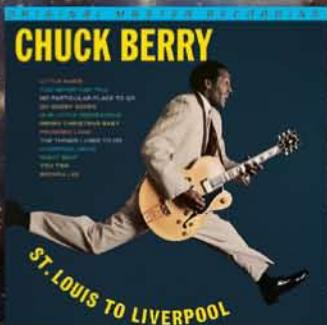
*Hello Hello*  
CD

**M**IDival PunditZ is comprised primarily of Gau-raz Raina and Tapan Raj, well known for fusing 21st century beats and instruments with traditional and folk pieces of classical Indian music. They integrate the dhal, sitar and bansuri with sequencers, drum machines and synthesizers in a unique way.

On their latest effort, *Hello Hello*, the duo is joined by longtime friend and collaborator Karsh Kale, who adds his acoustic guitar, vocal and production talents to the mix. Kale is featured heavily on the first track, "Electric Universe," which has a disco feel, with processed vocals not unlike what you might hear on a Kanye West tune.

The mood of the disc takes a complete about face on track four with an Asian/ambient cover of Led Zeppelin's "Four Sticks," changing gears again, with a series of four very slow, ethereal tracks. The pinnacle performance is the driving "Har Ek Baat," with lyrics based on Mirza Ghalib's poetry. Don't worry, you don't have to speak Urdu to enjoy it.

Bassheads take note: this disc will really rumble your house.



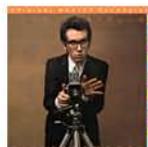
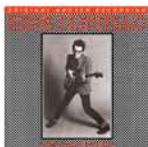
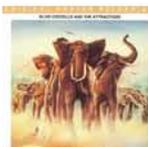
### Dzihan and Kamien

*Freaks and Icons*

CD and MP3 download

Dzihan and Kamien are often referred to in club circles as “the other awesome Austrian band” (the first being Kruder and Dorfmeister), but, in a slight twist, D&K often has a heavy Eastern European and Turkish influence mixed in with their own blend of trip hop and ambient chill. This is no surprise, considering that Kamien is part Swiss and Dzihan hails from Bosnia.

*Freaks and Icons* is the perfect after party chill record, with a few distinct moods. “After” kicks off the album in an ambient groove (which is revisited later in the record), “Dabudei” is a model of jazz vocal perfection, touched with trip hop, and “The Streets of Istanbul” pays homage to Kruder and Dorfmeister with some Theivery Corporation grooves on the side. “Homebase” is littered with cool jazz riffs throughout and effectively combines all of the styles on this record, while staying simple and elegant. ●



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**Sonic Youth** 1983 Photograph by Stephanie Chemikowski

## Here Today, Gone Tomorrow

### MoMA's New York Punk Exhibit

By Bob Gendron

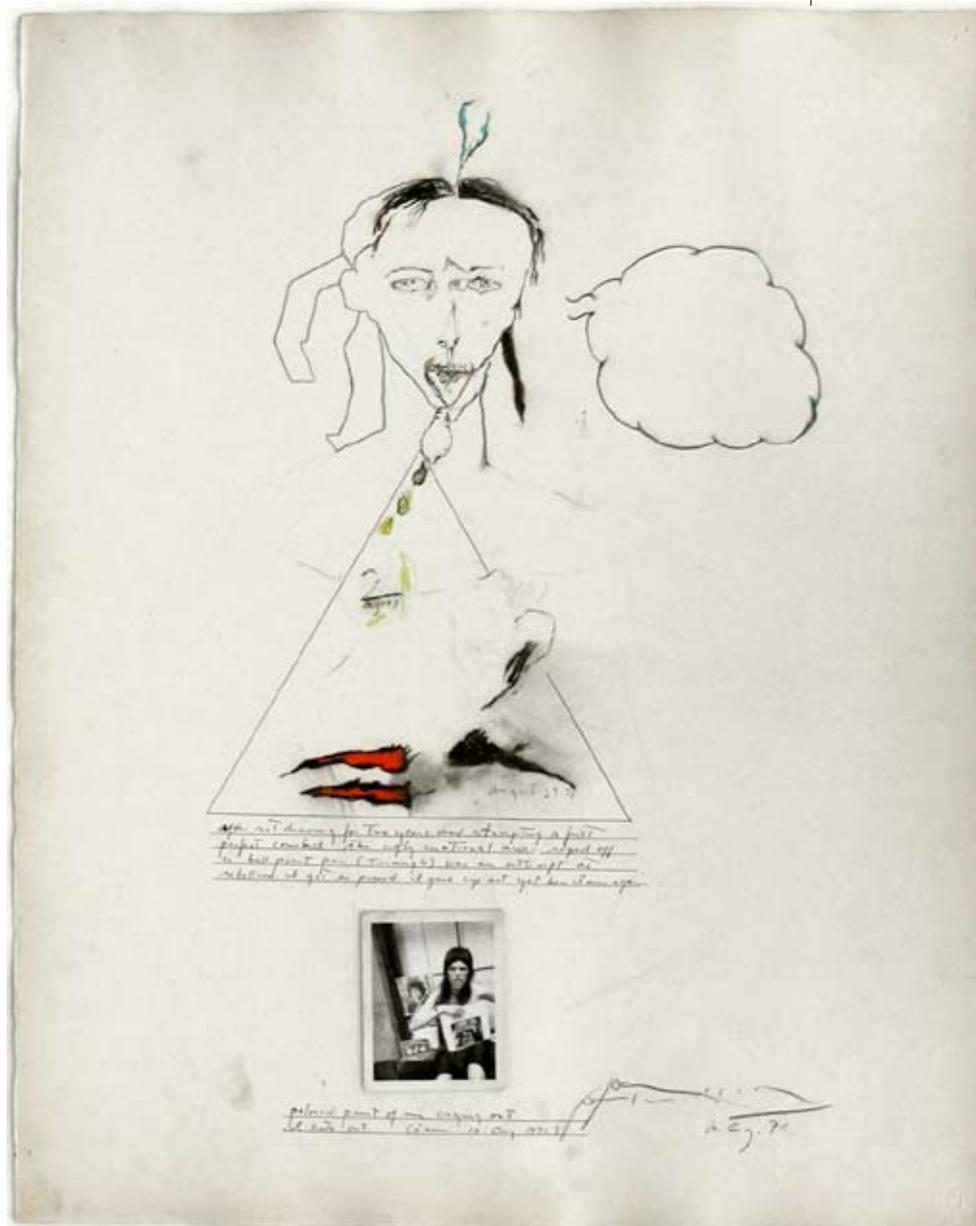
**S**troll through Times Square during the day or night, and it's impossible to get a feel for the New York City that existed in the late '70s. Amidst the walking mall of tourists and constant glow of bright lights, there is nothing the least bit dangerous, seedy, or, one could strongly argue, authentic about the district. With no dealers, pimps, or prostitutes in sight, it is an airbrushed façade. New York street poet Lou Reed once sang of "different times," but this transcends what he could've imagined; his city is now an entirely different place. As is America, which, despite the recession, has seen several of its larger cities managing a recovery of urban centers that some 30 years ago seemed doomed to blight, poverty, and neglect.

Much has been written about the Disneyfication of the Big Apple's epicenter, which preceded the gentrification that continues to impact the Bowery, a once-gritty neighborhood that decades ago would've been on few people's radars unless one was a sociologist studying homeless trends, a vagrant looking for a place to crash, or a fan of punk music—or, at the least, a visitor with a burning curiosity to glimpse the real New York.

An exhibit featuring a collection of multimedia artifacts encompassing album covers, songs, videos, paintings, magazines, books, photographs, handbills, and other ephemera provides an unvarnished look at New York and the city's underground music/arts scene during the transitional period of the mid-70s through the early 80s. Housed at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) until the end of November, *Looking at Music: Side 2* also attempts to tackle (and ask) loaded questions and make crucial points often lost amidst music's background noise. Implicitly, the display demonstrates the importance that social, environmental, and historical context plays on what we hear. In addition, it serves as yet another reminder that not everyone starts a band or jumps on a stage to get paid. At its best, the exhibit also forces the conscientious viewer to ponder whether or not in our global economy and information age a similar movement could happen again.

While the meaning of the do-it-yourself ethic has transformed over the years, the no-wave and punk performers who comprise the bulk of the exhibit's focus weren't interested in commercialism or personal gain. Lacking the nihilistic mindset of many of their English peers, the collective set out to expose the system's fundamental flaws and speak for an underclass while co-opting traditional methods to illustrate contrarian views in a minimalist fashion. The resulting combination of goals and techniques led to the disappearance of the separation between visual artist, poet, and musician; all three groups fed off and complemented the work of the other. In myriad cases, the roles fell to a single person.

And so the presence of Patti Smith's 1971 self-portrait is a most appropriate entry point.



**Patti Smith**  
Self Portrait, 1971

Smith subtitled the piece "Portrait of me crying out I hate art," and from every angle, it's terrifyingly brilliant, a work that seethes with the anger and rebellion that became part of punk's rallying cry. Her infatuation with Bob Dylan is readily apparent, as she clutches copies of *Blonde on Blonde* and *Bringing It All Back Home* in her hands. Apart from the medium, there is no pronounced division between this picture and Smith's first 45 rpm single, "Hey Joe/Piss Factory," cut for Mer Records and available for anyone to hear. "Jesus died for somebody's sins but not mine," she'd declare several years later in one of the most famous opening lines to a record, echoing a rebuttal that could've served as a theme statement for the entire movement. *(continued)*

**"Jesus died for somebody's sins but not mine," she'd declare several years later in one of the most famous opening lines to a record, echoing a rebuttal that could've served as a theme statement for the entire movement.**



**Glenn O'Brien's TV Party**  
 NYC, 1980

Not everyone took such a hard line or personal stance to get messages across. A video of Glenn O'Brien's *TV Party* broadcast from January 8, 1979 is hilarious not just because of the manner in which the amateurs hijack public television airwaves, but because it still resonates with the sort of realism completely absent from most modern television shows. The cable-access program serves as a jolting reminder that nothing like this random, wild, disorganized, and impromptu free-for-all "talk" show would receive clearance today. "Do you realize you're setting back TV?" asks one bemused caller, much to the delight of the program's participants, who, slumped on a couch in their shades, black leather, and assortment of disheveled apparel, must've upset the values of the suburban dwellers who happened to tune in in a deep-seated way that no amount of foul language or violence ever could.

A giant poster displaying many of Jenny Holtzer's "Truisms" is equally provocative. The visual/literary artist's various aphorisms parallel many of the sentiments expressed lyrically and sonically by various New York bands that came of age in the city's underbelly. Refuting blindly

accepted knowledge and challenging popular perception, Holtzer's statements trigger critical thinking. Her purpose seems less concerned with agreement or disagreement than with confronting stereotypes and generating stimulating dialogue; again, the divisions between artist, poet, and musician shrink, as it becomes easier to understand how a band like the Talking Heads seized upon such intellectual devices and took CBGB audiences by storm. Seen alongside the cover of Television's *Marquee Moon* album, the sleeve for David Byrne and company's "Take Me to the River" single (as well as the accompanying audio) carries a bold musical complexity and pioneering melodic approach that, initially, seems at odds with punk's prevailing simplicity and rawness. Yet, minimalism and the free exchange of ideas (through sound, performance, pictures, and words) that exist independently of the mainstream remain the common denominators. Sure, Television and Talking Heads could cheaply be labeled as "arty"—and have been. But such high-brow terminology ignores and dismisses context. Moreover, nonconformity, and the refusal to submit, hangs in each band's music, which remains rife with a healthy, wound-up tension. *(continued)*

**"In some instances it's better to die than to continue."**

**"Inheritance must be abolished."**

**"It's better to be lonely than to be with inferior people."**

**"Leisure time is a gigantic smokescreen."**

**"Moderation kills the spirit."**

**"It's just an accident your parents are your parents."**

**– Jenny Holtzer**

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The struggle between order and unrest, acceptance and denial, submission and rebellion, is more evident in works by photographer Jimmy DeJana and artist David Wojnarowicz. The latter's "Savarin Coffee" utilizes comic strip vignettes and a supermarket ad to emphasize commercialism's grasp on every phase of life. Here, identity is equated with buying and selling, concepts rejected as empty, unequal, and controlling.

**Lower East Side residents and artists had good cause to harbor such emotions. In addition to being marginalized, the neighborhood was on a fast track to becoming a wasteland.**

In 1979, up to 80 percent of the Lower East Side's housing stock was either abandoned or seized for non-payment of taxes. Action and solidarity were needed. ABC No Rio, a large collective that aimed to connect the growing squatter movement with the burgeoning arts scene, organized the "Real Estate Show" that ultimately occupied an abandoned building at 123 Delancey Street and turned it into an art gallery housing a critique of the city's land use policies. A handbill from January 1980 spells out the group's objectives to foster an "exchange about landlord speculation, tenant rights, property misuse, projected housing developments, [and] arbitrary urban planning..."

ABC No Rio successfully occupied the property for a year before opening it up to the public on January 1, 1980. The next day, the city locked up the premises. On January 11, the city vandalized the space and ransacked the gallery.  
*(continued)*



**Laurie Anderson**  
*O Superman, 1983*

No wonder, then, that a handbill advertising shows at Artist's Space (105 Hudson St.) claims bands such as the Conformists, Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, Daily Life, and the impeccably named Tone Death—all for \$3 a head. The exhibit's point is loud and clear: With members comprised of disenfranchised castaways and aspiring artists, bands—as well as their monikers, music, and album artwork—merely reflected the economic plight and disinvested environments, conditions that, ironically, afforded them control of garages and theaters that became ground zero for publishing 'zines, pressing records, writing tomes, and fluid debates.

As much as the music, it's this cultivation of visual artifacts and grassroots text that remain the movement's legacy. Few, if any, movements utilized evocative visuals and disjunctive contrasts in such an effective manner. While it seemed they should've been given greater thrift in the exhibit, the Ramones epitomized just how intimidating a black leather

jacket, ripped blue jeans, and a cold stare could look. Certainly, the quartet's chain-saw guitars and crude backbeats reinforced its street-tough appearance. Yet the songs' contagious melodies and carefree hooks were entirely something else—they were fun. Sonic Youth's music tied into a more experimental aesthetic, but the icons also held fast to a liberating sensation conveyed by the cover to *Confusion Is Sex*, designed by bassist Kim Gordon.

The band's longtime collaborator, multimedia artist Dan Graham, recognized the promise of seizing on visuals to illustrate, titillate, and agitate in conjunction with the scene's music and poetry, thus establishing a cross-cultural relationship reflected in his admittance that "I love magazines because they are like pop songs—easily disposable, dealing with momentary pleasures." However momentary, the hybrid confluence of music, art, and written word seems anything but disposable when seen up close via various homemade 'zines, 45 rpm jackets, and B&W photos. *(continued)*

**Few, if any, movements utilized evocative visuals and disjunctive contrasts in such an effective manner.**

On the surface, the leering sneers and goofy stances assumed by the likes of Blondie, Richard Hell, and Legs McNeil come off as if they're intentionally designed to sardonically reinforce mainstream opinions of the subjects. Still, there can be no doubting, despite the on-the-cheap production methods and often-crude results, the degrees of passion and permanence that emanate from 'zines and broadsheets with names like *File*, *Private Elvis*, *X*, *Punk*, *Search & Destroy*, *Art-Rite*, *Rock News*, and *Tuesday Night*. These artifacts, and the DIY seven-inch records, seemingly announce that everything about them is temporary, that they live on borrowed time and donations. But the subject matter is addressed with a devotional comprehensiveness that's built to last—and, as this exhibit proves, did indeed, even if it's now behind a piece of glass. Any parody is an illusion—a trick played on mainstream values and artifice, again evidence that the movement, in spite of the obvious anger and resentment, retained a sense of humor.

The visual elements also affirm the inclusive participation of women. Blondie leader Debbie Harry subverted convention by rising to the top of the charts as well as using her sex appeal to her advantage to gain an equal floor with her male counterparts; by comparison, Patti Smith flirted with androgyny. In spite of and because of the contrasts, each artist made distinct albeit equally weighty statements involving identity, balance, and expectations.

*(continued)*



**Any parody is an illusion—a trick played on mainstream values and artifice, again evidence that the movement, in spite of the obvious anger and resentment, retained a sense of humor.**

#### **Blondie**

1977 Photograph by Godlis



As thrilling as Harry and Smith appear in their heyday—wiry visions of tireless energy, strange beauty, and fuck-all attitude—no image in the MoMA exhibit radiates the explosiveness, terror, ugliness, and intensity of the 5 x 7 black-and-white snapshot of Suicide at CBGB. Perhaps it's fitting that the oft-forgotten and little-known duo—whose sonic discharge and confrontational concerts were too punk for punk—should receive its recompense not via musical familiarity, but by sheer virtue of the fact that, decades on, the band still looks more threatening than any other act one could care to name. Within the borders of the shadowy photo, the movement's entire reason-to-be can be seen, heard, felt, and understood. Here is the New York of slum tenements and staggering drunks, blue-collar stiffs and wandering junkies, starving artists and unemployed immigrants, cunning hucksters and cracked sidewalks, a place where toughness is a prerequisite and contradictions flow as freely as cheap beer, and where, once every great while, all of the circumstances, characters, and conditions collide to yield art that's as life-affirming, messy, and honest as that which formed it. ●

### **Suicide**

*1977 Photograph by Godlis*

**Within the borders of the shadowy photo, the movement's entire reason-to-be can be seen, heard, felt, and understood.**

# Audiophile Pressings

By Jeff Dorgay  
Presented by Music Direct

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## **Thelonius Monk**

*The Complete Thelonius Monk At The It Club*  
Mosaic Records, 4LP set

**K**evin Gray and the staff at Mosaic have hit a home run with *The Complete Thelonius Monk at the It Club* box set. Monk live was always unforgettable, but these sessions recorded on October 31 and November 1 at the It Club in Los Angeles are said by many jazz lovers to be two of his best performances.

Live recordings are always a dicey proposition, and back in the early 60's they didn't go back into the studio and overdub the dodgy bits like they did with *Frampton Comes Alive*. This is pure Monk, without a glitch. Even though you've probably heard "I'm Getting Sentimental Over You," "Blue Monk," and "Nuttty" before, he keeps it all fresh.

Mosaic Records took the original three-channel masters and produced the stereo recordings here, presenting all six sets played those two evenings for the first time. This could very well be the most sonically pleasing live record I've had the pleasure of hearing, regardless of musical genre.



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### Stanley Turrentine

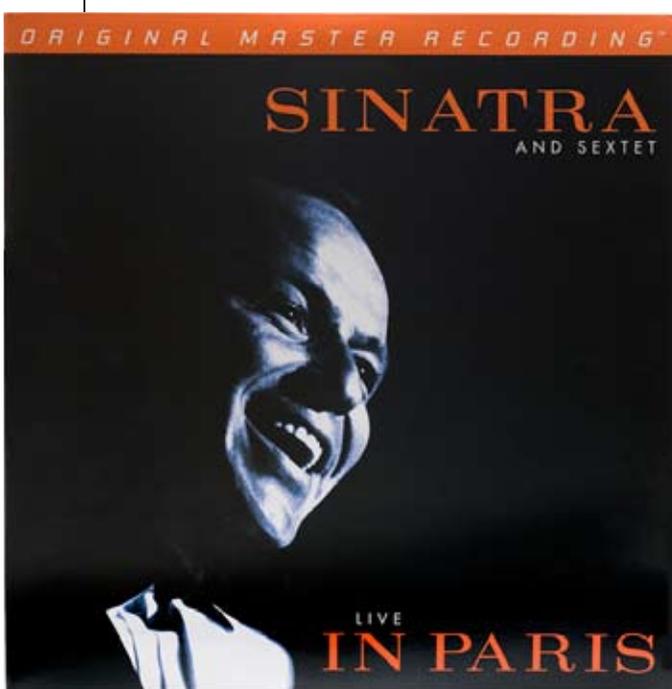
*Sugar*

Pure Pleasure Records, 180g. LP

Probably one of Stanley Turrentine's most popular albums, the folks at Pure Pleasure Records did an admirable job at repressing this jazz staple. Most of the CTI records had spotty quality control at best, so even the originals of this record aren't fantastic.

A jazz staple, and probably one of Stanley Turrentine's most popular albums, *Sugar* has benefited from an admirable job of re-pressing by the folks at Pure Pleasure Records. Most of the CTI records had spotty quality control at best, so even the originals of this record aren't fantastic.

The Pure Pleasure pressing is clean, the surfaces quiet. Side two features a bonus, live version of "Sugar," resulting in the grooves going all the way to the label's edge. But it still tracks remarkably well. The overall mix is tipped up and forward, so on vintage systems, it will sound fantastic, but on highly resolving systems, the overall balance may be too bright for some.



### Frank Sinatra

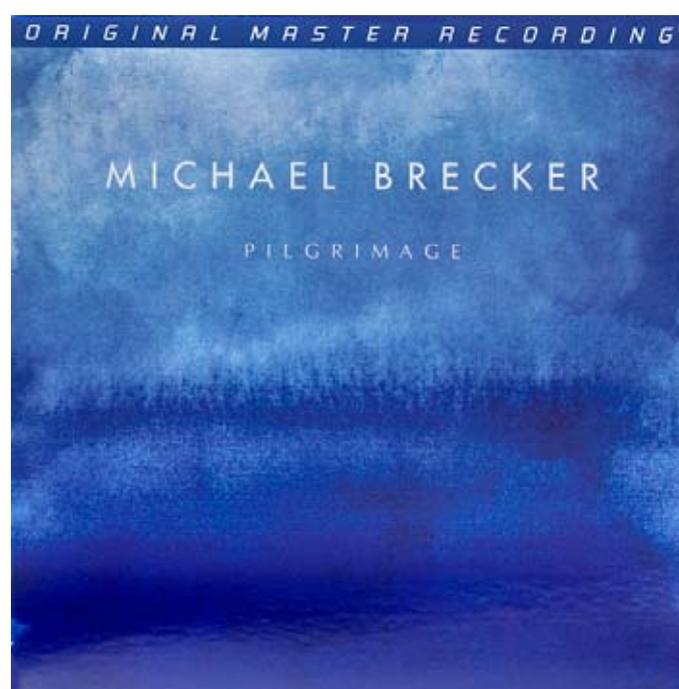
*Live in Paris*

MoFi, 180g. LP

The latest in a series of Sinatra re-releases on MoFi, *Live in Paris* is a snapshot of his world tour in the summer of 1962, captured on his third night in the city of lights. A number of good reviews exist of the actual performance, so if you are not familiar with this recording, the *Rolling Stone* review should bring you up to speed.

(<http://www.rollingstone.com/reviews/album/320612/review/5941242/sintrasextetliveinparis>)

Those owning the original 1994 CD release will be pleasantly surprised at how well the MoFi team has been able to bring out the inner detail, and to eliminate most, but not all of the harshness present in the original recording. Conspiracy theorists on various message boards still suspect that this recording was mastered from a digital safety master, but the tape's origin remains a mystery.



### Michael Brecker

*Pilgrimage*

MoFi, 180g LP

Jazz aficionados may argue whether Michael Brecker's last album, *Pilgrimage* was his best, but regardless of what side of the fence you find yourself on, *Pilgrimage* is an excellent example of how to assemble an all-star cast of jazz greats (Herbie Hancock, Pat Metheny, Brad Mehldau, John Patitucci and Jack DeJohnette) and end up with a cohesive result. Every player's individual style is easily recognizable, but no one player dominates the music, not even Brecker.

This two-record set is mastered for maximum bandwidth. Although it is 33 r.p.m., there are only two songs on each side, so the grooves never go too far into the disc, thus avoiding inner groove distortion. MoFi engineer Rob LoVerde takes the helm on this one, maintaining a light touch throughout. He's stayed true to the ultimate goal of an audiophile remaster – enhance but don't alter – resulting in a record that has a very wide dynamic range and perfect tonality. This one is a treasure.



### **The Pretenders**

*The Pretenders*

Audio Fidelity, 24kt CD

**T**he recent group of remasters from Audio Fidelity have been spotty, and the company's treatment of the first Pretenders disc just adds fuel to the fire. Even mastering engineer Steve Hoffman admits on his forum that "there were problems with this release."

Although our sample had no major glitches, the overall sound of this one is not typical of Hoffman's trademark "Breath of Life," leaning more towards being bright and compressed. The only pressing of this record I've heard that's worse is the Nautilus half-speed pressing from the early 90's, on LP. If you love the Pretenders, a decent LP copy of this can be purchased for about five dollars. That's the one you want.

### **Alice Cooper**

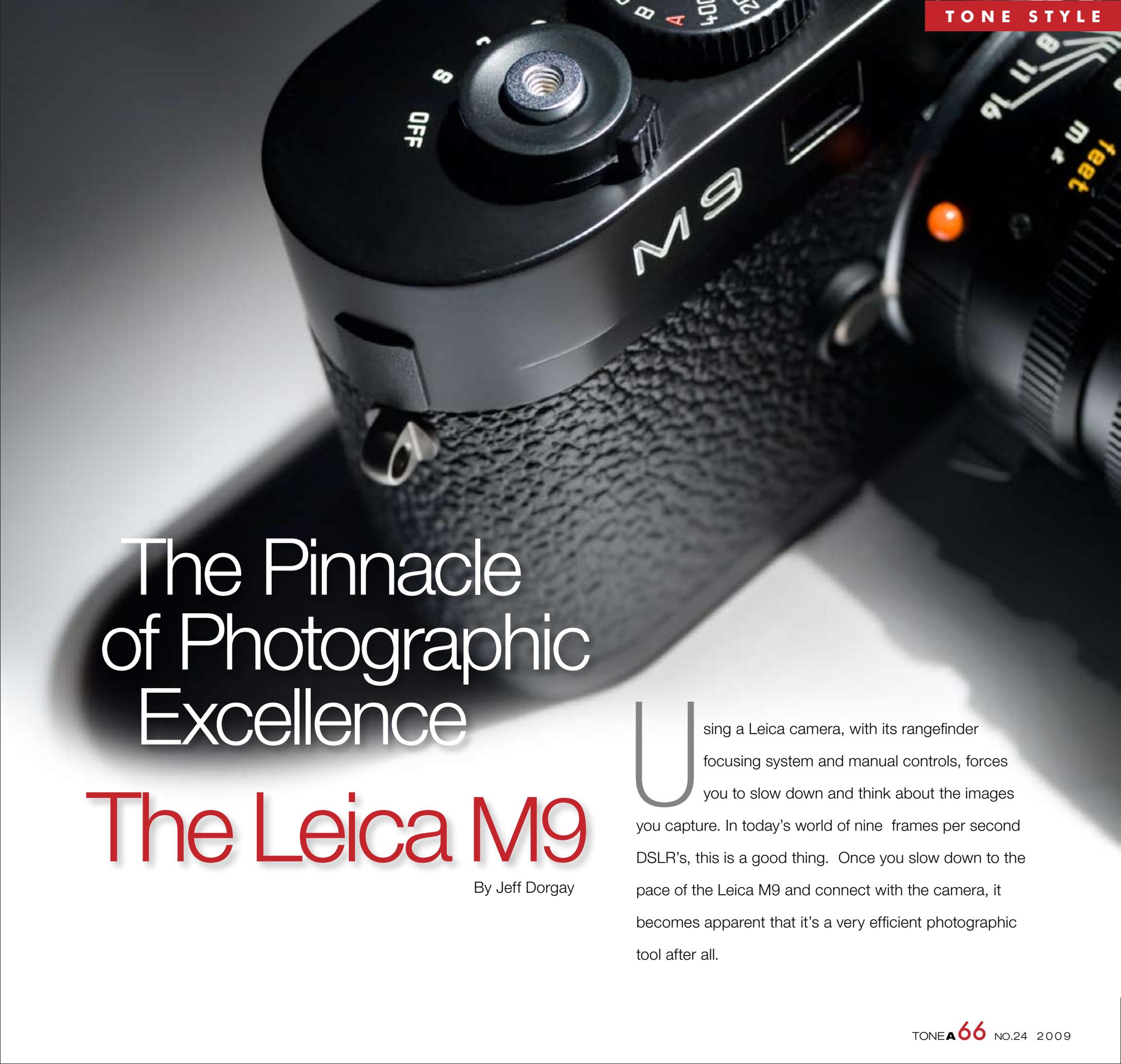
*Killer*

Audio Fidelity, 24kt CD

**A**lice Cooper's fourth album built on the success that began with *Love it to Death* and featured the singles, "Under My Wheels" and "Be My Lover." Though not as popular back in the early 70's as *School's Out* and *Billion Dollar Babies*, *Killer* has gone on to achieve platinum status.

Audio Fidelity did an excellent job with *School's Out*, and their treatment of *Killer* offers a similar level of fidelity. I don't know how much more detail in "Dead Babies" you need to hear, but if you love Alice Cooper, this is the cleanest copy you'll find of *Killer* on CD. ●





# The Pinnacle of Photographic Excellence

## The Leica M9

By Jeff Dorgay

Using a Leica camera, with its rangefinder focusing system and manual controls, forces you to slow down and think about the images you capture. In today's world of nine frames per second DSLR's, this is a good thing. Once you slow down to the pace of the Leica M9 and connect with the camera, it becomes apparent that it's a very efficient photographic tool after all.



**The biggest news with the M9 though, is the 18 megapixel full-frame sensor.**

**Besides, you *should* be thinking a little bit more about the pictures you take.**

As with anything Leica, the cost of admission isn't cheap, but this is a camera that you will hand down for generations. The new M9 body weighs 40 grams more than the M8.2 that it replaces and looks almost identical. Unfortunately, the battery and picture indicator window is gone from the top left hand side of the M9, a feature I found handy on the M8.2. The 2.5-inch LCD viewfinder is retained and the rest of the camera's controls are as they were in the M8.2. Current MSRP of the M9 is \$6,995 and the 50mm f1.4 ASPH lens is \$3,295. The camera is available in black, silver or a variety of custom finishes. *(continued)*

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## And it's worth every penny.

The Leica owners in the crowd already know what I'm talking about. The previous generation digital camera the M8 (and later, upgraded M8.2) came close to perfection, but the early models were plagued with color issues and the sensor was not full frame, having a 1.3 magnification factor. I'm sure that put off a number of Leica photographers who prefer to shoot with wide-angle lenses. As I've always preferred a short telephoto, that 50mm f1.4 became a 65mm and my favorite Leica lens; the 90mm f2 APO-Summicron ASPH became a 117mm lens.

The biggest news with the M9 though, is the 18 megapixel full-frame sensor. Developed with Kodak and optimized to the Leica lens system, you can dust off your wide-angle lenses again to take the breathtaking shots for which Leica is famous. Bucking the current trend of CMOS image sensors, the M9 uses a CCD sensor. Leica claims that though this has some compromises at high ISO speeds, (ISO 1250 and up) it provides cleaner images at low to medium ISO speeds.

## The Basics

The M9 uses standard SD and SDHC cards, and you must remove the camera's bottom cover to access, just as you would with a film Leica M camera to remove the film. While you might find this a bit cumbersome, it does prevent you from ever losing the memory card, and you don't have to worry about a plastic door becoming detached from the body of your camera. That's the kind of insight a manufacturer brings to the table that's been building cameras for over 100 years. *(continued)*



The top plate of the camera is incredibly simple: there is a shutter speed dial, a shutter release (that uses a standard cable release) and hot shoe for an electronic flash. The rear of the camera features five function buttons so that you can play and delete pictures, as well as access the main menu and change the camera settings. Leica has moved the ISO setting to this group in place of the “protect” button on the M8.2, which now makes it easier to change, no longer requiring you to access the menu.

The LCD screen is 2.5 inches diagonally and is incredibly bright and contrasty, with exceptionally good color fidelity. My only real complaint about this camera is that the screen and the shutter speed dials are a bit hard to read for those of us over about 35 years old, but that’s the price you pay for compactness.

It’s also worth mentioning for those of you not familiar with the ways of Leica, this is not a traditional rangefinder camera in the sense that you compose with the viewing screen. You cannot work this way with the M9. Focusing is carried out with the ultra precise coupled optical rangefinder. It might take newbies a while to get used to it, but once you do, you’ll be a convert for life. *(continued)*





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## A Step Beyond Fantastic

Comparing images that were captured with the M9 to the ones I have on file from the M8.2, my workhorse Canon EOS 5D and the new Nikon D3x, the Leica is definitely the leader of the pack at modest ISO settings. That f1.4 lens is so crisp, even at maximum aperture, that you can shoot at ISO 400 almost all the time anyway. And thanks to the M9's perfect balance (and no reflex mirror bouncing out of the way every time you take a picture), those of you with steady hands should have no problems capturing images at 1/15th of a second. Try that with your bulky DSLR.

The M9 has made a big step forward at its maximum speed of ISO 2500, with the images substantially less grainy than the M8.2 at max speed. Though the grain was starting to show up at maximum ISO, I was very impressed at the level of color fidelity and contrast still available at this speed. Shooting at high ISO speeds with a digital camera is reminiscent of push processing transparency film in the old days; there is no exposure latitude, so your metering has to be spot on. Fortunately, the M9's light meter can be trusted under any circumstances.

## Ease of Capture

Unlike almost every other digital camera manufacturer, who changes the specs for their "RAW" files with every new model, Leica has taken the sensible route of using Adobe's digital negative format (DNG) for their raw files, and you have your choice of compressed or uncompressed capture. *(continued)*

**Roses photographed at dusk were still magnificent, even as the light was escaping for the day.**

Now that 32GB SD cards are commonplace and affordable, I'd suggest getting one or two of these and shooting everything uncompressed. Just like digital audio, the less the data stream is manipulated, the better. Thanks to the DNG format, even older users of Photoshop will not have to run out and upgrade to view their photos from the M9.

### **The Beauty is in the Details**

We can discuss engineering all day, but the minute you open up the first frame taken with the Leica M9, you will be spoiled for any other camera. If you've been using any of the other popular DSLR's, I guarantee that you won't be ready for the increase in resolution, dynamic range and color fidelity that the Leica system offers.

Just like a perfectly set up HiFi system, the M9's ability to remove a few layers of noise and grunge from the picture is unbelievable. One of my favorite camera tests is to photograph red flowers. This is the area that digital capture always falls to reproduce; subtle gradations of red always become one shade of red. The M9 passed this with ease, even at high ISO. Roses photographed at dusk were still magnificent, even as the light was escaping for the day.

### **You Need One**

If you truly love photography and the M9 is within your budget, this is the finest photographic instrument money can buy. I guarantee it will change your creative perspective. I know it's on my Christmas list. ●

[www.leica.com](http://www.leica.com)



# The Ducati Hypermotard 1100

By Jenny Smith



**M**usic exists in many forms. It's a child's laughter, the tinkling of wind chimes on a summer morning, the sighing rush of waves breaking on a beach, or a really tight jazz quartet on a good night. For some, it's also the distinctive throaty staccato of a motorcycle engine working its way through the gears.

This is an instrument that you play, not just sit back and listen to. It's one that's accompanied by a deluge of other sensory input that only heightens the experience.

Now, you should know something about me right up front: I like twins. And I mean sport twins, something built to handle twisting canyon roads, that pulls out of corners like a rodeo bull and that pops and spits like a WWII fighter plane when you downshift. A bike with character.

That generally means something with a European pedigree, with some exceptions. Honda's RC51 and the latest generation of Buells are the most notable. When most people think of a sporting V-twin motorcycle, their first thought is Ducati.

This is completely justified, as Ducati has built an enviable reputation on manufacturing hand-assembled sport bikes that perform exactly the way one would expect an Italian race-bred motorcycle to perform. Put simply: they rock. When I heard that an opportunity had come up to take a new Ducati Hypermotard for a 24-hour evaluation run during the MotoGP race in my hometown of Indianapolis, I jumped at the chance.

MotoGP is the motorcycling equivalent of Formula 1, where manufacturers compete at the highest level of technology and sophistication, and the riders attain a sort of god-like status among their fans.

*(continued)*

*Ducati has built an enviable reputation on manufacturing hand-assembled sport bikes that perform exactly the way one would expect an Italian race-bred motorcycle to perform. Put simply: they rock.*



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On a crystal-clear Saturday afternoon inside the Ducati Island enclosure at the Indianapolis MotoGP, I was led to the bikes and given my choice of colors: red or pearl white. The 1100 S version also comes in black – a finish that lends a certain meanness that is quite appealing in a Mad Max kind of way. But in my opinion, there's really only one color option for a Ducati, so that's what I chose: bright red.

The Hypermotard looks tall, narrow and light – because it is. With a seat height of just over 33 inches, a dry weight of 394 pounds and an 1,100 cc air-cooled, 90-degree Desmo engine thumping away between your legs, the Hyper feels like a dirt bike on steroids. The vertically challenged need not apply unless you're comfortable only touching the ground on tiptoes.

The riding position is upright with wide handlebars, relatively steep rake and big, spiked footpegs that are placed directly under the rider. The effect is one of ultimate control and flickability, ideal for both urban commuting and tight canyon carving.

*Turn the key, push the start button and the Desmo engine growls into life, the signature race-inspired dry clutch chattering away.*

The instrument panel is a smallish but efficient digital display that includes such trick features as lap timer, maintenance schedule and injection-system diagnostics. The high-beam button on the left handlebar functions as a stopwatch timer and allows you to run through the lap times you've recorded on-the-fly. *(continued)*



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Available as an add-on option is the Ducati Data Analyzer. With the purchase of the DDA – which includes PC software, a USB-ready data-retrieval card and instructions – owners can review and analyze the performance of the Hypermotard and its rider, and make comparisons between various channels of information. At the end of a ride or track session, up to 2MB (approximately 3.5 hours) of data can be downloaded to your PC.

It didn't take me long to figure out what this bike does well and what its weaknesses are, slight as they may be. I headed south into the rolling hills and curvy blacktop of south-central Indiana before returning to the city and putting the Hyper through its urban-jungle paces, with plenty of high-speed highway riding in between.

My only real gripe about the bike is the mirrors. In typical Ducati fashion, they look great, curving in two 4-inch symmetrical spikes from the end of each handlebar and incorporating the turn signals for a super clean look. They also fold in towards the grip, in what Ducati calls "Hypermotard," for a more aggressive track look.

But they range from barely usable to absolutely useless, depending on your speed. They're too small, and engine vibration renders what little you can see into a blurry mess. And because they stick out so far from the ends of the already wide handlebars, if someone brushes too close – easy to do when it's parked along a curb next to other bikes – they're too easily knocked out of kilter.

Once you've gotten the Hyper into its element, you forget the minor annoyance of those little mirrors. The bike is an absolute hoot to ride, delivering up 76 pound-feet of torque and aggressive, precise handling that encouraged some extreme lean angles on the twisting two-lane roads. The Hyper wants to be ridden fast and hard, and it makes no apologies for telling you so.

Kicking the rear end out and sliding through the corner, flat-track style, feels totally natural. Even as a slim female rider, I never felt like I was fighting the bike or wrestling it into corners. It doesn't feel like an 1100 cc motorcycle, until you twist the throttle back! Stopping power is provided by the ample four-piston Brembo Monoblocs, heightening the feeling of absolute control.

*(continued)*

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***The Hyper wants to be ridden fast and hard, and it makes no apologies for telling you so.***



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Back in the city, I discovered the Hyper's urban commuting prowess. The slim frame, upright riding position and torquey engine combine to make this a formidable traffic-dodging machine, although again, the wide mirrors were a weak spot. Lane splitting could be difficult unless you fold them in, but by doing so, you lose visual cues.

Cruising through downtown Indy, however, with the throaty growl from twin exhaust pipes mounted high up under the tail, most drivers seemed too distracted by the red Ducati's unusual look and sound to get in the way.

*In fact, in a city filled with thousands of motorcycles for a world-class racing event, the Hypermotard drew plenty of attention wherever it went.*

I was sorry to give it back when my time was done. As a canyon carver and explorer of the urban landscape, the Hypermotard offers a thrilling and unique riding experience. On a track, I imagine that it's just plain silly fun. Predictably, it's tiring to ride for an extended distance on an interstate or other long, droning highway, but when in its element, it's utterly raw, aggressive and grin-inducing.

I probably wouldn't own a Hyper as my only ride, but it would make a perfect second or third bike to have in the stable: a purpose-built animal of a motorcycle that feels somehow barely legal. If you're like me, and an open, throaty exhaust note is music to your ears, the Hypermotard is definitely worth the ride. ●



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**ANALOG ACCESSORIES**

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You can't be a hard core analog enthusiast and resist the urge to tweak your setup. Here's a few of my favorite accessories from Clearaudio and Furutech that will help your turntable perform at its best. Most are reasonably priced, a few are more expensive, but the holiday season is upon us. Print these few pages and put them under your favorite person's pillow so they are sure to get the hint! Note: Full reviews of these products are in progress, so tune back in to our website later.

**Furutech Monza LP Stabilizer**

\$495

**T**his clamp is machined from aluminum with a sweet carbon fiber insert. Furutech has made this clamp the perfect size. It's massive enough to hold LP's firmly to your platter mat and they've made the diameter just small enough so that your tonearm won't bump it as it moves to the center of record. I've had excellent luck with this clamp on my Rega tables as well as the SL-1200 and the Raven Two.



**Furutech Silver Arrows Tonearm Cable**

\$1700

Last year we gave Furutech's AU12 tonearm cable an exceptional value award, and the new Silver 12 takes things a big step further in clarity and dynamics. It uses Furutech's Alpha Pure Silver conductors, Alpha Rhodium/OCC RCA connectors and a CF or L DIN connector along with Furutech's Alpha Cryo process. Bottom line: this is the best tonearm cable I've had the pleasure to use.



**Furutech La Source Cartridge Lead Wires**

101 (Long version) \$280

102 (Short version) \$250

**L**ooking for that last bit of resolution? Often those tiny wires that connect the cartridge to the tonearm can be the weak link. Even my SME iV.Vi. was able to benefit from upgrading the wires to these silver leads from Furutech. You'll be surprised at how well these work and this is one of those fun upgrades that only takes five minutes to install and does not require recalibrating your turntable. Instant gratification doesn't get any better than this.

**Clearaudio Strobe**

\$180

**T**his is a handy device to make sure that your turntable's speed is spot on. The included disc with proper markings for 33 1/3, 45 and 78 r.p.m at both 50hz and 60hz voltage is the best I've seen, because it also has grooves, so you can check speed while taking stylus drag into consideration. I double checked my work with the Acoustic Sounds test record and my voltmeter and the speed was perfect; I love German precision.





### Clearaudio Weight Watcher

\$250

**H**ere's a weight program you can stick with. If you spend a fair amount of time with turntable setup, forget those cheapie digital scales. Built with the same amount of precision as the Clearaudio turntables, the Weight Watcher is easy to use and super accurate. This has become an essential part of my analog toolbox. ●

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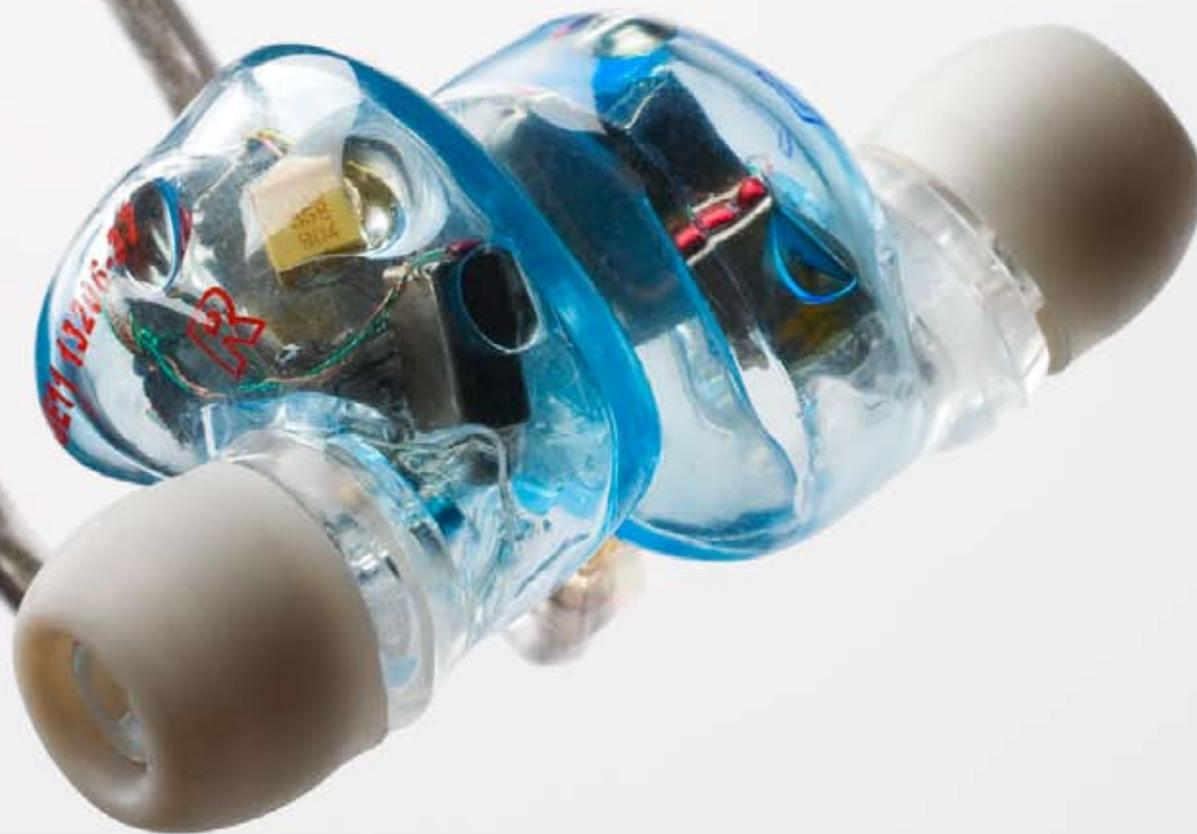
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# Finding Your In-Ear Beauty

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By Bailey S. Barnard



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I recall a Rolling Stones concert that my parents took me to when I was about 12. It was during the *Voodoo Lounge* tour and, even in his 50s, Mick Jagger must have run a total of 10 miles back and forth across the enormous stage throughout the sold-out show at Oakland Arena. You can be sure that the stage was not lined with dozens and dozens of wedge monitors so that Mick could hear himself every sweaty step of the way. In fact, Mick was sporting a pair of in-ear monitors—or IEMs, which require an external body pack to receive wirelessly the monitor mix from the main soundboard.

I'm not sure which brand or model the storied rocker was using back then (undoubtedly a pair with which he wasn't fully satisfied as IEMs were in their infancy in the mid-1990s), but during the Stones' *A Bigger Bang* tour in 2006, Mick wore a pair of custom Sensaphonics ProPhonic 2X-S (\$750), which remain today among the best available models on the market.

*(continued)*





### Get Yer In-Ears Out!

While there are innumerable options available for universal-fit earbuds, pros and discerning amateurs go with custom-fitted IEMs that require an audiologist to take an impression of the ear canal. The process is painless and doesn't take more than about 10 minutes. Among the benefits of getting your IEMs custom fitted, the most prevalent are the comfort and the passive noise canceling provided by the seamless fit. Most universal-fit models never seem to fit quite right and typically require constant adjustment while on stage, which is not only annoying for the musician but distracting to the audience. The passive noise canceling of the seamless fit is of immeasurable value, most noticeable when playing venues where the noise level of the audience tends to compete with the band.

The quality level of universal IEMs tends to run on the cheap side compared with custom models so that their sound reproduction pales in comparison with the more expensive and better-constructed custom monitors. These also have come a long way since they started making an appearance on the live-performance scene about 20 years ago. *(continued)*

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**Among the benefits of getting your IEMs custom fitted, the most prevalent are the comfort and the passive noise canceling provided by the seamless fit.**

# DeVORE FIDELITY



Back then, many of the models available were uncomfortable and didn't meet the audio-quality standards of touring musicians. It wasn't until 1995, when Jerry Harvey (then the sound engineer for Van Halen) founded a company called Ultimate Ears, that IEMs became the standard for touring professionals. Drawing from his experience with large arena sound systems, Harvey engineered the first two-way, custom-fit IEMs. Since then, Ultimate Ears has remained an industry leader.

Sensaphonics also is at the forefront of IEM development is founded in 1985 by an audiologist whose main focus was providing an on-stage solution to help performing musicians avoid hearing damage.

**When IEMs caught on in the mid-90s, Sensaphonics started manufacturing their own versions that became the favorites of many of the pros, Mick Jagger and Keith Richards among them.**

Sensaphonics' top-of-the-line model today is the 3DHW-2, which has garnered a lot of attention since its introduction early last year. Those models are equipped with dual drivers and tiny ambient microphones that pick up your bandmates' voices and help to filter noise from the crowd. These ambient sounds are then incorporated back into the in-ear mix by way of an external body-pack mixer.

Although the 3DHW-2s are quite popular, many musicians prefer the dynamic range provided by three-way IEMs. Westone's \$800 custom ES3X Musicians' Monitors sit at the top of the company's product line as an excellent option for musicians looking for an affordable three-way IEM. Westone, which began manufacturing IEMs in the early 1990s, started out in 1959 producing custom earplugs and earpieces. *(continued)*

# The Nines

**Ultimate Ears does have a much broader product range than does JH Audio, and it includes everything from \$50 earbuds to the top-of-the-line UE11s.**

### Carpe IEM

While both Sensaphonics and Westone have an established list of big-name professional clients, Ultimate Ears (as well as a new company recently established by Jerry Harvey) has seized the ears of both amateur and up-and-coming musicians. With the intention of letting the music industry and IEM technology evolve so that he could focus on his love of aviation (Harvey has been a pilot since 2003), Harvey sold off his interest in Ultimate Ears in 2007 to its current parent company, Logitech, then founded a headphone company in his name. Jerry Harvey Audio now consists of two segments, JHA Aviation (which produces high end noise cancelling phones for professional pilots) and JHA Pro Music, which produces both two- and three-way IEMs. Sitting at the top of Harvey's product line are the newly released JH13 Pros—arguably the best IEMs available today.

The JH13 Pros are equipped with dual low-, mid-, and high-frequency drivers and an integrated three-way crossover. With a frequency response from 10 Hz to 20 kHz and noise isolation all the way down to minus 26 dB, the JH13s offer an incredibly robust and accurate soundstage. The treble, midrange, and bass responses are lightning quick and as clean as can be. The audio reproduction of the JH13s rivals that of even the highest-end dynamic ear cups, including those from Grado and Sennheiser. I reviewed a pair of Sennheiser's \$1,400 HD800s earlier this year, and the precision provided by the JH13s is right on par, almost indistinguishable from that of the HD800s.

When Harvey had the idea to manufacturer these masterpieces of audio engineering, he undoubtedly intended to show up the high-end IEMs produced by his former company. The Ultimate Ears UH11 Pros are indeed IEMs to be bested, though it is debatable whether these or Harvey's now reign supreme. Offering nearly the same technical specs as the JH13s, the UE11s provide a huge soundstage and are certainly not lacking in precision. If I had to choose which IEM is better, I would have to say that the JH13s have the slight edge on the UE11s in terms of quickness and fullness of sound – and for about \$50 less. Ultimate Ears does have a much broader product range than does JH Audio, and it includes everything from \$50 earbuds to the top-of-the-line UE11s. *(continued)*

Both JH Audio and Ultimate Ears offer an array of color options for their custom earpieces as well as customizable artwork, so you can have your band name or logo printed on them. Both companies' custom IEMs also come with carrying cases. JH Audio's carbon-fiber case has a convenient foam slot for your monitor pack (or MP3 player), while the sleek and simple UE case is more compact. To give you a true sense that these IEMs are distinctly your's, each case comes from the factory with your name printed on it and the earpieces with your initials as a standard feature.

For musicians such as me who aren't quite ready for the \$1,100-plus commitment, both Ultimate Ears and JH Audio produce two-way entry-level custom IEMs. The new UE4 Pro and JH5 Pro are each priced at \$400.

### In-Ear on the Go

While these products are designed specifically for use by performing musicians, many consumers have found such IEMs useful for everyday applications because of the high-end drivers implemented across the UE and JH product lines. For instance, custom IEMs can double as earbuds for simply listening to music. As IEMs are compact, comfortable and provide incredible sound reproduction, audiophiles will find them ideal for use while traveling. Using the JH13s with my iPod is an experience I didn't think the Apple-built driver of my iPod's headphone jack would be capable of providing.

Recording music also benefits from the use of IEMs. The passive noise canceling provided by the custom fit prevents audio playback from being picked up by the microphone, while the precision and clarity of the sound will certainly aid in staying on key when cutting vocal tracks.

IEMs, regardless of brand, definitely provide near total immersion in your favorite music, whether it's your own band or the Stones. In fact, the only way to get closer to the sound would be to hardwire Mick and Keith directly to your brain. ●



**As IEMs are compact, comfortable and provide incredible sound reproduction, audiophiles will find them ideal for use while traveling.**

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## PRODUCTS

**Sensaphonics 3DHW-2**  
 MSRP: \$2,500 (includes monitor  
 pack and 3D-2 earphones)

**Westone ES3X Musicians' Monitors**  
 MSRP:\$800

**Jerry Harvey Audio JH13 Pro /JH5 Pro**  
 MSRP: \$1,100 / \$400

**Ultimate Ears UE 11 Pro / UE 4 Pro**  
 MSRP: \$1,150 / \$400

## MANUFACTURERS

**Sensaphonics**  
 660 N. Milwaukee Ave.  
 Chicago, IL 60642  
 312-432-1714  
[www.sensaphonics.com](http://www.sensaphonics.com)

**Westone Laboratories, Inc.**  
 2235 Executive Circle  
 Colorado Springs, CO 80906  
 800-525-5071  
[www.westone.com](http://www.westone.com)

**Jerry Harvey Audio**  
 1321 Apopka Airport Dr. Unit 143  
 Apopka, FL 32712  
 866-485-9111  
[www.jhaudio.com](http://www.jhaudio.com)

**Ultimate Ears**  
 5 Jenner St., Suite 100  
 Irvine, CA 92618  
 800-589-6531  
[www.ultimateears.com](http://www.ultimateears.com)

## PERIPHERALS

**Personal Monitor Systems**  
 Shure PSM 400, Nady EO3

**Recording Equipment** Tascam  
 DP-01 digital recorder, PreSonus  
 FireBox audio interface

**Audio Sources** Apple iPod,  
 McIntosh Labs MCD500  
 SACD/CD Player

**SACDs** Miles Davis Kind of Blue,  
 Pink Floyd DSOM, The Who Tommy  
 Deluxe Edition, Beck Sea Change,  
 Beethoven Symphonies Nos. 1-9

# Just how much analog magic can you get for under \$100?

By Jerold O'Brien

Up in the stratosphere of analog, where exotic moving-coil cartridges routinely sell for \$5,000 and turntables have Porsche pricetags, it's easy for those of us who have been playing the game for a long time to remember what it was like to save a summer's worth of paper-route money to buy a turntable. And we were worried about vinyl going away! Looks as if the newspaper in its printed form will have a gravestone long before the LP record. But the question remains; where do I start?

Thanks to eBay, there are tons of great, semi-vintage turntables available for \$100 or less. Technics prices bounce up and down, so if you are in the right place at the right time, an SL-1200 or one of its variations can usually be yours for right around a hundred bucks. If not, there are plenty of Dual, Pioneer, Sony and a few others that will get you on the analog path.





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## Next, you need a cartridge.

I'm assuming that if you are buying a budget record player, you are in the moving-magnet camp, which means you should be able to plug your new turntable into the back of anything (receiver or amplifier) that has an input marked "phono." If you don't, I would highly suggest purchasing the Cambridge Audio 540P. For 99 bucks, you can't go wrong. It's solid-state, quiet and sounds way better than anything at this price should. If you are on a tight budget and really lucky, keep your eyes on eBay; I've seen these go for \$50 used.

There are plenty of cartridges in the \$50 - \$100 range and you can waste days of your life arguing with people on various Internet forums about which one you should put on your turntable. Here's a shortcut to three tried-and-true examples. And no matter what you read on the Internet, avoid vintage phono cartridges. The major part of a phono cartridge that wears out is the tiny suspension that allows the stylus to wiggle around 10 thousand times per second. It will go to hell way before the diamond tip on the stylus does.

## The Ortofon Super OM-10, \$89

While Ortofon has officially stopped making the OM-10, there are still quite a few in stock at the major audiophile retailers. The OM-10 is easy to mount and weighs only five grams, so it should work on almost any turntable. *(continued)*

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TONE **90** No.24 2009

The Ortofon has a very neutral tonal balance overall, and if you'd like to upgrade later, you can install the stylus assembly from the Ortofon Super OM-40 and get almost all of the benefits of the more-expensive cartridge. You can also swap the stylus from the OM78 into your Super OM-10 if you'd like to listen to 78's now and again.

The Super OM-10 is a great tracker, and this is critical to not putting undue wear on your records, especially if the vinyl bug bites hard and you eventually move to a more upscale record player some day.

#### **The Shure M97xE, \$89**

The Shure has always been billed as another great tracker, and thanks to its little brush on the front of the cartridge, will help dig a little of the surface dust out of your record grooves. It also helps when tracking warped records. This is not a replacement for buying a proper record-cleaning machine at some point, but that's another article for another day.

The Shure has always come across to me as a bit dry tonally, but with good bass extension and control. Of the three here, it does retrieve the most detail and matches up well with vintage gear, especially vacuum tubes. If you have a nice old Scott, Dynaco or McIntosh integrated or preamp that's full of tubes, keep the M97 in mind. You'll be amazed at how well this can work.

#### **The Grado Red, \$140**

Ok, I'm getting a little carried away here, going over budget. But everyone always chooses the \$60 Grado Black in these articles, so I had to break out of the mold. And it's well worth it. If you save a few bucks on the table and have money burning a hole in your pocket, consider the Grado Red.

Definitely more romantic sounding than the other two cartridges here, the Grado Red does wonders at making inexpensive records sound lush. If you compare the sound of a Red on a used Dual 1228 to a \$250 CD player, you'll be hooked; you'll never want to listen to CD's again.

#### **So what are you waiting for?**

If you want to see what all the fuss is about with vinyl and you'd like to explore for a minimal cash outlay, any of these three cartridges will get you rolling. If you can take the time to master the art of setting up your particular turntable, and go a step further with a basic record-cleaning system, you will be amazed at just how good budget records can sound with a little care. ●





# The Burmester 911 mk.3

**\$29,995**

[www.burmester.de](http://www.burmester.de)

**A**ccording to the *Auto Trader*, \$29,995 will get you a slightly pre-owned Porsche 911 with very low miles on the clock, but it won't play Mahler's Fifth like the Burmester will. After living with the 911 mk.3 for the better part of the year, I'm pretty convinced *nothing* plays Mahler's Fifth like the Burmester. This is a spectacular amplifier that should be a final destination for the most discerning audiophiles. I've yet to hear anything (tubes or solid-state) that is more natural. Watch for a full review in Issue 26.

# The KEF XQ 20's

**\$1,999/pr**

**U**tilizing KEF's patented Uni-Q driver, these small and stylish mini monitors have a coherence that rival your favorite panel speaker, with a healthy dose of bass wallop to boot. Whether you use them on stands in your living room or with the small feet you see here on your desktop, these are great little speakers. Watch for Hood McTiernan's review on the web very soon.



# The YG Acoustics ANAT II's

---

**\$70,000/pr**

**YG** Acoustics claims that they make the “Best Speaker in the World.”

While we've only had these in for a few weeks, they are incredibly impressive. Everyone that has heard them so far sees the YG's as a major paradigm shift in speaker performance.

Review to follow soon...



# Rega P5

Plug and Play  
Analog Enjoyment

By Rich Kent





must admit I've lost some of my interest in vinyl lately, and my LP12 has been collecting some dust. So investigating Rega's latest P5 had me both intrigued and apprehensive. My review sample arrived fully appointed; the optional TT-PSU power supply was included along with Rega's top-of-the-line Exact 2 MM cartridge. This takes the standard price of a P5 from \$1,395 up to \$2,265. (If you purchase the cartridge with the turntable, you can take another \$100 off the purchase price.)

Using a Rega cartridge streamlines the setup procedure because they have three mounting holes instead of the usual two, allowing you to install the cartridge and get right down to the business of listening to records. When installed on a Rega arm, VTA is already optimized, so all you need to do is set tracking force (1.75g) and anti-skate.

As a longtime LP12 owner, I immediately noticed the fundamental difference between two tables; Linn takes the suspended approach, using a lightweight aluminum platter, while Rega fastens the drive motor directly to the plinth and uses a fairly massive glass platter. Both use belt drive. Rega says that their parts have been selected and optimized to reduce resonances to inaudibility, while Linn claims the suspension isolates the vibration. *(continued)*



The benefit of the external power supply on the P5 is immediately apparent when you spin a 45-rpm record. Without it, you have to remove the platter and manually move the belt on the drive pulley. With so many new audiophile releases in the 45 rpm format, being able to just change speeds with the push of a button is much better than the hassle of switching the belt around. A lot of LP12 owners went to the Lingo power supply for the same reason.

### **The Rega P5 Pays a Visit to a Friend**

One of my closest friends, who is a musician as well as a music lover, invited me to bring the P5 over for a test drive. Though he has a modest system, consisting of Focal 706 speakers, a Cambridge Azur 740A integrated and an old school Technics SL-10 turntable, his record collection is meticulously organized. But lately, he's been listening to a lot more CD's, concentrating on remastered imports. The perfect guy to expose to a new analog machine!

We pulled a pristine copy of Stanley Turrentine's *Sugar* on CTI and briefly listened to the Technics before moving to the P5. Many of the CTI records were ahead of their time in terms of sound and content, making it great to revisit this classic. It was just as I remembered it: clean and simple, but with just a medium-size soundstage that we both agreed was no match for a great digital remaster.

### **A Revelation**

We stopped talking about the music to listen just as the cymbals met the initial bass line on the first track. The soundstage opened up much wider, easily going beyond the speaker boundaries, with a level of detail not present on the last listen.

*(continued)*

---

**The benefit of the external power supply on the P5 is immediately apparent when you spin a 45-rpm record.**

**We couldn't believe it was the same LP; it was a revelation.**

I realize this word is overused in audiophile circles (even with small changes), but this was a much larger difference than I've ever heard switching CD players or DAC's in the digital world. And all with a modest system, no less.

After a brief silence, we both agreed that the hardware is the weakest link, not the software. Moving on to the Beatles, we agreed that the current remasters were superior to the original CD releases in 1989, so it was time to compare the current remaster of *Abbey Road* to the British original pressing on LP. Playing that famous bass line of "Come Together," my first reaction to the LP was negative. But the more I listened, the more right the LP actually sounded. I preferred the natural balance of the LP to the additional dynamics of the new, digital version.

Again, the P5 was fantastic, even when we listened to some poorly recorded LPs. It certainly made them more listenable, but no turntable can perform miracles with inferior software. However, the difference it makes with decent recordings will easily justify its cost, if you've been thinking of getting off the analog bandwagon. If you've got a lot of vinyl collecting dust, this is an affordable package that provides a lot of performance.

### Homeward Bound

I had to pry the Rega from my friends' tightly clasped hands as a mightier contender waited at home, my Linn Sondek LP12. *(continued)*



[www.ZuAudio.com](http://www.ZuAudio.com)

With a renewed enthusiasm for vinyl, I arrived home and immediately wiped the dust off my Linn and VPI record-cleaning machine, and sat down to compare these two great British turntables.

The Linn Sondek's iconic design has been around since the early '70s and through the years has been subjected to multiple upgrades that can be installed on most of its earlier tables, of course at a substantial cost. The upgrade path is long and diverse with descriptive names such as Cirkus and Vahalla, the majority of them addressing the motor, power supply and spring suspension. Each of these upgrades gets you closer to Linn's version of vinyl nirvana.

While volumes have been written about the correct setup of a LP12 turntable, it still can be tough to get one set up properly. But using the P5 with the Exact 2, you can be spinning records in 15 minutes. This is plug and play at its very best. Advantage Rega.

Upgrade path notwithstanding, my LP12 is still in the same state that it was in 1976, and I enjoy it as is. It held its own, having a warm sound with a dark, quiet background that is very musical. While it has an uncanny ability to mask noise, it does so with a loss of dynamics. This may be bothersome to those liking full-scale orchestral recordings, but it works its own magic with string quartets and small chamber works.

Listening to Classic Records 200 gram mono version of Jimi Hendrix *Axis: Bold as Love* on the P5, it exemplifies Hendrix' absolute mastery of the Telecaster guitar with a complex intricate singing tone that is tough to nail with anything less than the best digital playback. If you are a Hendrix, Jimmy Page, Jeff Beck, or Mike Bloomfield fan, you will be floored by Rega's ability to portray each of these individual guitar players with a depth and tonality that will easily exceed anything you have experienced on a comparably priced CD player. Advantage Rega.

### **Fear of a Different Sort**

The initial apprehensive fear of this review has been replaced with a financial fear and realization that I need more vinyl. Admittedly, I purchased some new vinyl for this review, and now I can't stop. I run past the CD aisles to peruse the new and used vinyl offerings and can't wait to play them on the Rega. Vinyl recordings are back with more popularity than ever, and the P5 turntable with Exact 2 cartridge is just the ticket for replacing your old table or starting anew. The Rega will bring life to your old record collection and have you shaking your head in wonderment at the sound of new-issue vinyl. Be forewarned, though, that you are at the top of a slippery slope.

If I were doing this again today, I'd buy the P5 without hesitation. It offers almost all of the musicality and warmth for which the LP12 is famous, but with a lot more resolution. I loved its ability to wring the extra details out of my LP collection. I also love the clean design and the simplicity of setup that the P5 offers, making this a choice for someone who wants to enjoy analog without becoming a turntable setup expert.



**Using the P5 with the Exact 2, you can be spinning records in 15 minutes. This is plug and play at its very best.**

## Further Listening: Jeff Dorgay

As the resident Rega guy on the staff, the P5 was intriguing because this is the only Rega table I've never owned. I agree wholeheartedly with Rich that this is a very high-performance table, yet not out of the reach of the new analog enthusiast. But the big question that I'm always asked is, "How much better is the P5 than the P3?"

Thanks to my new Nagra LB digital recorder, I was able to mount the Exact 2 on both tables, sample the same recording and play them back side-by-side. I made a full track sample of MoFi's 200g pressing of Aimee Mann's "High On Sunday 51" from *Lost in Space*, the Yim Yames' "My Sweet Lord" from *A Tribute To*, and ORG's recent remaster of Beck's *Odelay*.

While digital will never be analog, the Nagra LB recording at 24/192 comes scarily close, even with a \$100K analog source. When playing back the samples side by side, it was easy to hear the increased finesse that the RB700 tonearm possesses. When playing the Aimee Mann cut, I always listen closely for the male vocal singing behind her on the chorus. The more resolution a system has, the more distinct this vocal. The other recordings revealed the same traits; the P5 gives you more resolution and less grain throughout the range.

The P5 costs about \$500 more than a P3 (with or without external power supply), but if you can make the stretch, you will be rewarded with more sound. The P3 is a fantastic table that has been my budget reference for almost 30 years, but as Rich says, if I had to do it again, I'd go for the P5. It offers tremendous value along with an excellent dealer network, and you don't have to be a surgeon to set it up. ●



### The Rega P5

MSRP: \$1,395 (turntable alone)

TT-PSU \$345

Exact 2 Cartridge \$495

### US Distribution

The Sound Organisation

[www.soundorg.com](http://www.soundorg.com)

### Rest of World

[www.rega.co.uk](http://www.rega.co.uk)

### PERIPHERALS

**Analog Sources** Linn LP-12 w/Sumiko Blue Point Special, Nakamichi Dragon

**Digital Sources** Krell KPS20i

**Preamplifiers** McIntosh C2200

**Power Amplifiers** McIntosh MC275

**Cable** MIT, Shunyata and Cardas

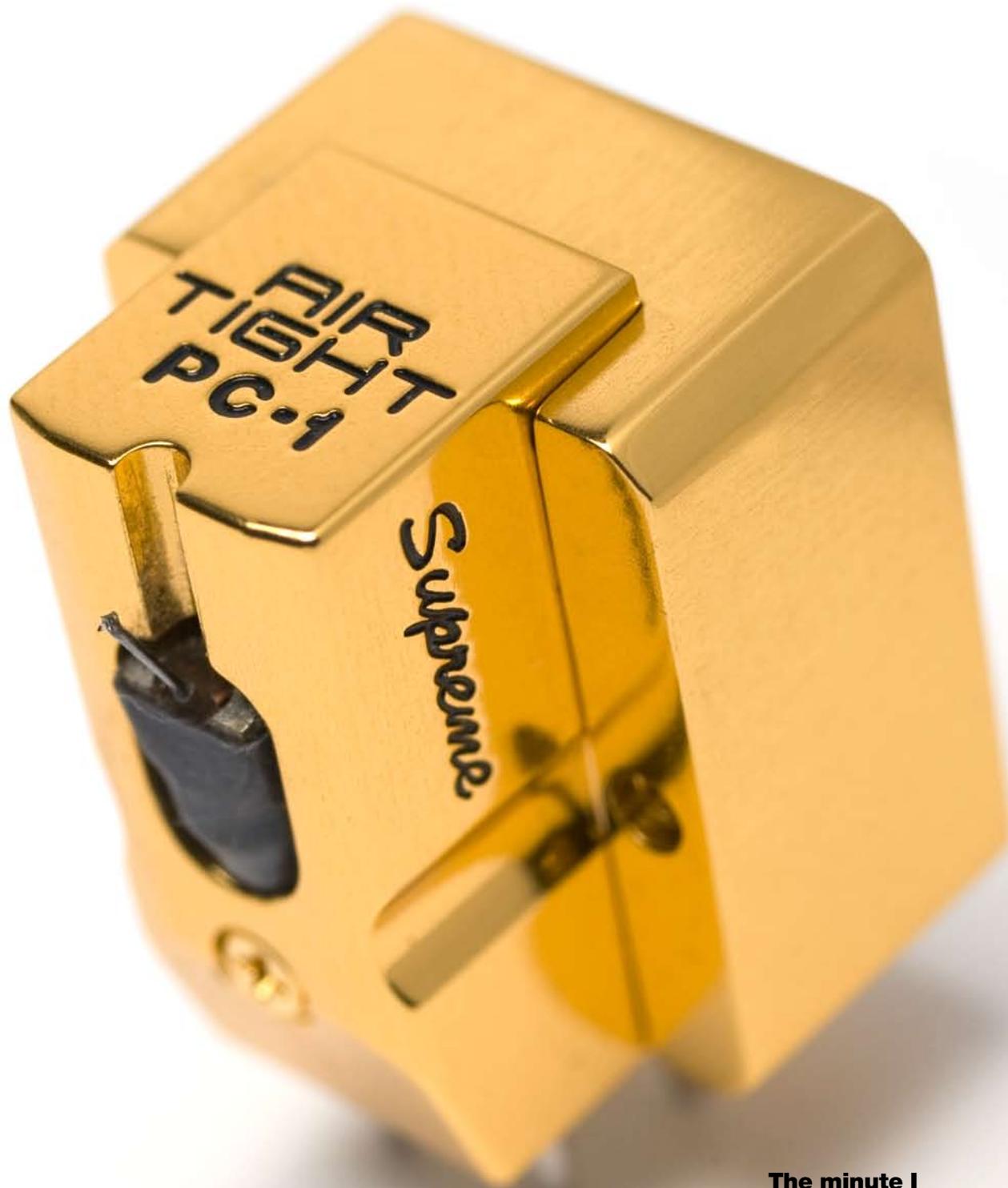


# AirTight PC-1 Supreme

By Jacob Heilbrunn

Any product that sports the name “supreme” in its title is asking for trouble. Supremacy, after all, is not something that’s easily achieved, whether in business, international relations, or even audio, where dozens and dozens of products vie for the designation of the best. But AirTight’s nifty new cartridge just might deserve the appellation. If Britannia once ruled the waves, then the moving-coil AirTight Supreme bids fair to rule the small and wacky world of high-end cartridges.

Clocking in at a not inconsiderable \$9,000, the Supreme is an upgraded version of AirTight’s PC-1, which caused a stir when it first appeared a few years ago. Both cartridges are imported by Arturo Manzano of Axiss Audio, who judging by the formidable array of equipment he carries, does not do anything by half measures. The PC-1 was notable for its powerful bass reproduction, but it could be a little astringent in the mids and highs. The Supreme features an output of .4mv, an internal impedance as low as 1 ohm, which is said to make it a friendlier load for phono preamplifiers. The cantilever is made out of boron. The Supreme also features a semi-line contact stylus that is a superb tracker. The new housing is made out of gold and is supposed to increase the cartridge’s immunity to vibration. As far as I can tell, it does.



**The minute I dropped the needle on my Caliburn, I was taken aback by the sheer depth of the soundstage.**

But enough geek talk. How does the thing actually sound? Boffo. Cartidges never fail to amaze me in their sheer variety of presentations of what's actually lurking in those little black grooves. The minute I dropped the needle on my Caliburn, I was taken aback by the sheer depth of the soundstage. The Supreme didn't simply take the Caliburn to another level, as the somewhat trite phrase has it, but seemed to allow it open up, to decompress the LPs, endowing with the clarity of CDs coupled with the warmth and continuity of analog sound. For me, it was something of a revelation.

One of the most remarkable attributes of the Supreme was the way in which it seemed to divorce bass reproduction from the mid-range, producing a palpably lucid soundstage. Now it might sound a little odd to say that the bass appeared to be detached from the midrange. But this didn't mean that the presentation of the Supreme was disjointed. Quite the contrary. It meant that each part of the frequency spectrum sounded smoother and more articulate – occupying its own space, so to speak.

The Supreme has conquered the astringency mentioned above that characterized the PC-1. Any hint of stridency or thinness has been replaced by bloom. The Supreme produces a supremely relaxed and luxurious sound, complete with ravishing tone colors. But it does not come at the cost of a lack of dynamics, either. Instead, orchestras are reproduced with the requisite ferocity, but only when called for. In this regard, I was floored by the stupendous tympani whacks in Classic Record's 45 rpm re-issue of *Mussorgsky's Pictures At An Exhibition*. This is one of my favorite discs to wheel out when visitors are present because it displays such an abundance of tonal colors and a roller-coaster ride of emotions. Plus, it's simply a gas to listening to the Chicago Symphony going full tilt with Fritz Reiner wielding the baton. Whether it's orchestral music, Madonna or Duke Ellington's band roaring away, the Supreme will never let up, never sound even slightly fazed. *(continued)*

**The virtue of the AirTight is that it doesn't seem to stand out in any one area at the expense of another. It's the most even, all-around cartridge that I've heard.**

Indeed, another virtue of the Supreme is that it effortlessly navigates the treble region, where nasty grem-lins can often lurk in the form of shrill female vocals or rebarbative violins soaring into the ether. The Supreme presents a full and round sound rather than pinching the sound as it ascends into the treble. A lesser cartridge might be envisioned in the form of a diamond – a nice midrange, but dropping off in reproduction as it heads toward either the highs or bass. The Supreme, by contrast, never thins out or loses its supple character. This was particularly noticeable on one of my favorite LPs, an Erato disc featuring the legendary trumpeter Maurice Andre and Hedwig Bilgram. Andre's piccolo trumpet soars into the tessitura region with remarkable aplomb, and the AirTight wasn't in the least fazed by having to reproduce it.

Meanwhile, the soundstaging abilities of the Supreme also shone on such cuts. The organ was firmly placed behind the trumpet in its own space. So finely detailed is the Supreme that you'll hear the stops in the background. Sometimes you'll hear the organist's feet shuffling as well. Is this detail for detail's sake? Not exactly. It's letting you know that the cartridge is capable of capturing the slightest musical nuances as well.

No doubt there are other cartridges circulating in the stratosphere: the Lyra Olympus and the Clearaudio Goldfinger, among others. But it's a select group. The virtue of the AirTight is that it doesn't seem to stand out in any one area at the expense of another. It's the most even, all-around cartridge that I've heard. The Goldfinger may pack more punch. Listening to the Goldfinger on a Clearaudio Statement turntable was quite an experience in this regard. It's also the case that a Koetsu will likely sound more luscious. That, after all, is the hallmark of a Koetsu, and if you value that quality above all else, then a Koetsu is for you.

But the AirTight combines these virtues to offer the complete package. Serene, dynamic, and possessed of uncanny pitch accuracy, it's the best cartridge I've heard. At its ungodly expensive price, there's no question that the Supreme should deliver the goods or something is seriously wrong with it. But if you have a killer turntable, the Supreme will allow you to unleash its performance to a degree that you may never have suspected. The AirTight allows you to revel, wallow, and whatever else may float your boat when it comes to vinyl. Supremacy is a daunting level to achieve, but the AirTight Supreme may have achieved it. It's a triumph. ●

**The AirTight PC-1 Supreme**  
MSRP: \$9,000

#### **MANUFACTURER**

Importer: Arturo Manzano

#### **Axiss Audio**

17800 South Main Street,  
Suite 109  
Gardena, CA 90248  
(310) 329-0187  
www.axissaudio.com

#### **PERIPHERALS**

**Turntable** Continuum Caliburn

**Preamplifier** Messenger  
linestage and phono stage, Nagra  
phono stage

**Amplification** Classe Omega  
mono blocks and VTL Wotan

**Loudspeakers** Magnepan 20.1

**Subwoofers** JL Audio Gotham

**Cabling** Jena Labs

**Power Cables** Shunyata and  
Isoclean Supreme Focus



MANLEY  
STEELHEAD RC

# Much More Than A Phono Preamp

## The Manley Steelhead RC

By Jeff Dorgay

There's a great episode of *The Simpsons* where Homer Simpson goes to work at his brother's car company, and his job is to design his dream car. When the engineers come back with the first prototype, Homer is offended by the small drink holder and says, "No, I want it to hold MY drink, a 128-ounce one." The engineers sigh and make the necessary revisions, and Homer gets what he wants in the end.

I've often thought the same thing about expensive phono preamplifiers. I have three turntables (sometimes more) and have always wanted a phono stage that would accommodate MY turntables, the entire collection. While most people have a lot more restraint than I do, they probably don't review turntables and cartridges for a living. For those of you with multiple tables, the Steelhead can be your ideal phono preamplifier, too.



In case you find the \$7,500 price tag a little bit steep (personally, I think it's a bargain), here's your daily justification: if you are primarily an analog lover and don't use a digital source, or only need room for one, you can use the Steelhead as a linestage as well. It has one high-level input and comes with a remote control. So now when you look at the new Steelhead as a great linestage with a killer three-input phono stage (1MM and 2 MC), it looks more like the deal of the century. There isn't a \$3,500 linestage out there that sounds this good, nor is there a \$3,500 phono stage that sounds this good with even one input. Put them together on one chassis so you don't need an extra power cord or set of interconnects, and you have a better combination than a Reeses' Peanut Butter Cup. And your fingers won't get dirty.

Should you fall in love with the Steelhead RC as much as I did and you just have to have more inputs, you can always pick up the handy Manley Skipjack and add four more high-level inputs to your Steelhead. Problem solved.

### Setup

The Steelhead is a monster. It features a two-chassis design with a gigantic power supply that feels like it weighs a lot more than 18 pounds that the website claims, which is three pounds more than the actual, 15-pound preamplifier. There is an umbilical cord that connects both boxes, that Manley says has no voltage present until the sensing circuit kicks in. Though it is a very rugged ABS plug, I still suggest turning gently until you feel it move into the socket and then tighten the outer ring. *(continued)*



# Actually, you CAN have it both ways.

*The lucidity and harmonic "rightness" of a tube amplifier and the muscle and control of a solid-state amplifier.*

Introducing the conrad-johnson ET250S enhanced triode amplifier. The sole source of voltage gain, a single-ended triode establishes the harmonic character, while a high-current, high damping factor transistor output stage produces the muscle (250 watts/ch) and control. Hear one for yourself at your nearest conrad-johnson dealer. Write or visit our web site for more information.

Once connected and fired up, you can leave the Steelhead in "sleep" mode. After about 100 hours on your new Steelhead, leaving it asleep means it only needs about 15 minutes to be warmed up all the way.

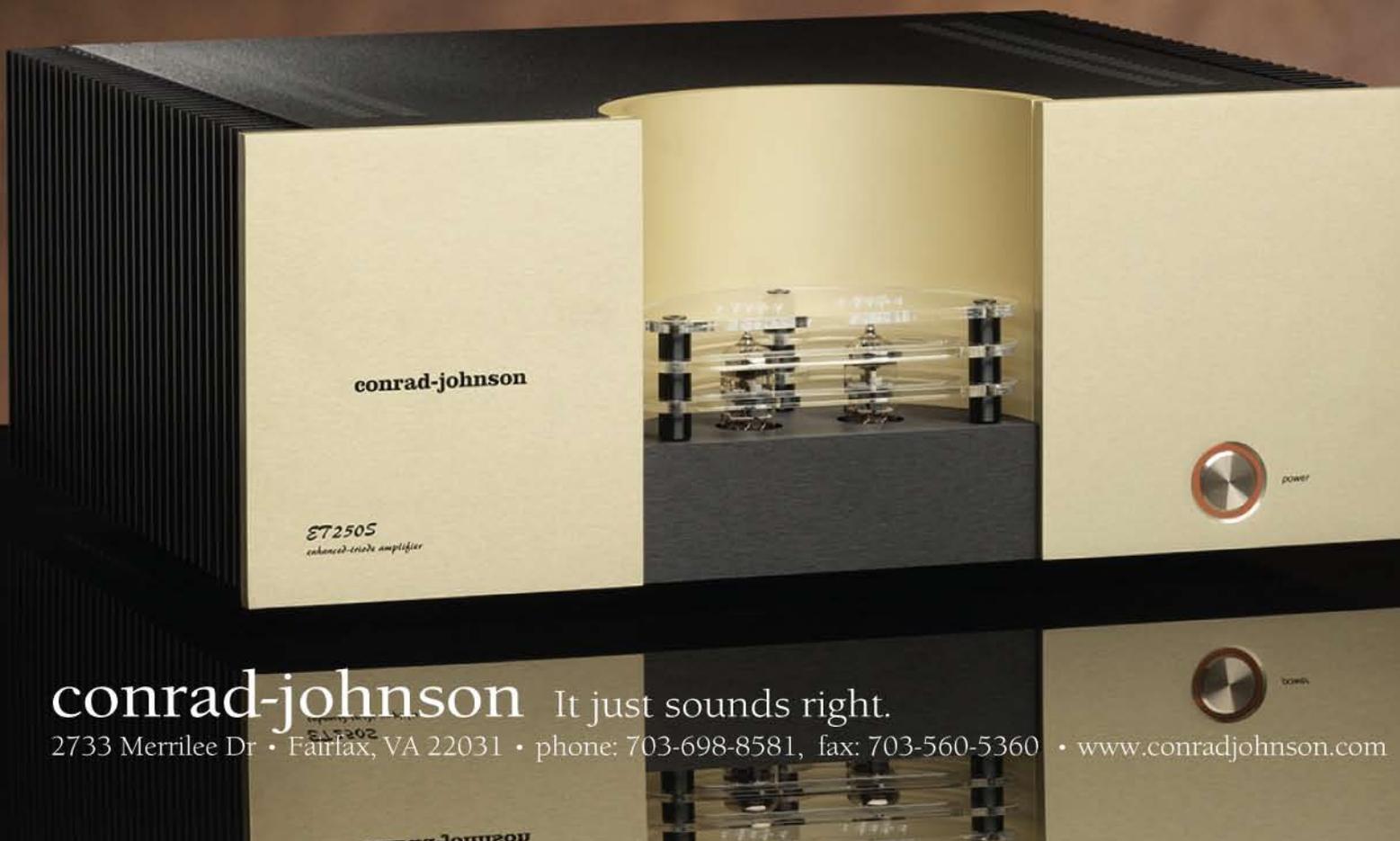
A pair of 6922 tubes handle the gain portion of the Steelhead, and two pairs of 7044's are used as output buffers. Tube rollers can screw around with 6922 (6DJ8's or 7308's) till the cows come home. While Manley Labs claims no direct replacement for the 7044, EveAnna Manley does bless the 5687's or some extremely rare and expensive Bendix 6900's for the White Follower output tubes, but I love the Steelhead the way it sounds right out of the box. Folks at Manley always have a good stock of replacement tubes on hand for a reasonable price.

## An Instant Classic

The Steelhead RC has a gorgeous dark-blue finish just like all of the other Manley products with big, beefy knobs on the front and glowy, blue function buttons. There are front-panel adjustments for capacitance that can be adjusted in 10pf steps from 10pf to 1100pf, so you can perfectly dial in your favorite moving-magnet or moving-iron cartridge. This was incredibly handy during all the recent cartridge testing we've been doing.

Next, moving-coil loading can be set from 25 to 400 ohms. I'd like to see a 1000-ohm setting, but I'm happy to see 25- and 50-ohm settings. This is critical with some of the more exotic MC cartridges that work well in the 25-50 ohm range, preserving the delicacy for which they are famous. The MM input adds a 47K-ohm setting to the mix in place of the 400-ohm setting.

*(continued)*



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Right below the input loading control, there is one more to set gain at 50, 55, 60 or 65db. I highly suggest adjusting this control so that you get a reasonable range of volume-control adjustment and no more. Not enough gain and a tiny bit of noise creeps in; too much gain and dynamics suffer. Get it just right, and just like Goldilocks, you'll be in analog heaven.

Using the Steelhead strictly as a phono preamplifier, even with fairly low-output MC cartridges, I rarely had to go above 60db. My reference Burmester 011 linestage is dead quiet and has tons of gain. Cartridges in the .5mv output range worked just fine at the 55db setting. The Steelhead auto mutes itself whenever you make a change, so you don't get any tweeter popping clicks. Definitely a nice touch.

### Turn that big knob, why don't you

As mentioned earlier, you can use the Steelhead as a fixed-level phono preamplifier, but it works incredibly well as a full-functioning linestage. Thanks to those two tube buffers and a low output impedance of 75 ohms, I had no problem with a 20-foot run of Cardas Golden Reference interconnects, driving any of my reference power amplifiers. I particularly liked the combination of the Steelhead driving the McIntosh MC1.2kw monoblocks.

Now that the Steelhead has a big, beefy, Manley remote control, you can control volume from your listening chair.

But remember, while the high level input does not have any gain, it will only go through the buffer stage. I had good luck with everything I tried, as most CD players have 4 volts of output (or more) these days. There is more information on the Manley website in the Steelhead section explaining this further should the need arise, or if you have questions before purchasing one.

### A Touch of Romance

Every preamplifier has a signature sound and so does the Steelhead. You won't ever mistake this preamplifier for a solid-state design, but it's not old-school syrupy, either. My reference Nagra VPS is a vacuum-tube design (with a solid-state output stage that can be switched in as needed) but sounds very close to a solid-state phono preamplifier, with great dynamics and extension on both ends of the frequency spectrum. As I've said in other reviews, it has "a drop of tubeyness" in the mix. It's just slightly richer tonally than an all solid-state design, but no more.

With that in mind, the Steelhead has two, maybe three drops of tubeyness, and I love it. *(continued)*





It has a slightly bigger sound than my VPS overall, with slightly more tonal richness across the spectrum. Depending on your record collection and musical choice, this will strike you somewhere between pleasant and nirvana. Put me more on the nirvana side of the scale. Sure, the PBN Olympia that is also reviewed in this issue has more ultimate slam and an even bigger soundstage, but I'd rather listen to the Allman Brothers or Neil Young on the Steelhead. You can carve through the corkscrew at Laguna Seca faster on a Ducati 1098, but if you are just going out for a ride, the Monster looks a lot more enticing. And so it goes with the Steelhead.

Bass is tight and well-controlled. Zooming through my favorite classic rock records, I never found the Steelhead to sound thin, possessing just the right amount of meat on the bone, yet with a level of detail that let me know I was listening to something special. The combination of the Steelhead and the Clearaudio DaVinci was otherworldly good. When I set the tonearm down on the Music Matters release of Sonny Clark's *Leapin' and Lopin'*, the trumpet leapt right out of one channel while the sax leapt out of the other, and the bass line stayed rock steady in its own space. Lopin', if you will.

As much fun as my 70's-to-current rock favorites are, I gravitated more to jazz recordings while evaluating the Steelhead. Granted, it was ever so slightly forgiving to those rock warhorses, making them sound better than I ever remember. Acoustic instruments really shine with this preamplifier. Cymbals have perfect timbre and decay, often fooling you into thinking there really is a drum kit in your room, while the piano has just the right amount of weight and decay. I must have listened to every one of my Blue Note reissues during the course of this review.

To top off a great thing, the Steelhead offers up a huge, spacious sound, probably due in part to that massive power supply. My system got spooky towards the end of this review, when the stellar YG Acoustic Anat II's made their way into the mix. These speakers throw a wider and deeper soundstage than anything I've ever heard, and coupling this with the big sound of the Steelhead bordered at times on psychedelic. The Yim Yames's *Tribute To...* put Jim James about five feet in front of my couch, with his banjo hanging off to the left and back about 10 feet.

### Why You Need Three Turntables

I made it a point to use the Steelhead with every one of my own cartridges, as well as everything we've had in for review this issue. The verdict is that it worked incredibly well with everything from my bargain Shure M97 up to the DaVinci. *(continued)*

If you have a wide range of recordings and the luxury of three cartridges, the Steelhead can help you to enjoy a much bigger percentage of your record collection. I settled on the Clearaudio DaVinci for the perfect pressings with a lot of detail and the Dynavector XV-1s to be slightly forgiving, yet extracting the maximum from my less than perfect records. The Clearaudio Maestro Wood proved to be fantastic with bargain records. This somewhat warm MM cartridge, combined with the rich tonality of the Steelhead, makes cheapo records sound way better than you would expect them to. (After a good cleaning, of course.)

### My Highest Recommendation

I'm happy to award the Manley Steelhead one of our Publishers' Choice awards for 2009. This is one of my favorite components, period. Much like Homer finally getting the car of his dreams, this is certainly the phono preamp of mine. It always stays true to the music, offers a dynamic presentation, and will offer up great sound with your *whole* record collection, not just a handful of meticulously produced audiophile discs. And for me, that's what a great system is all about. ●

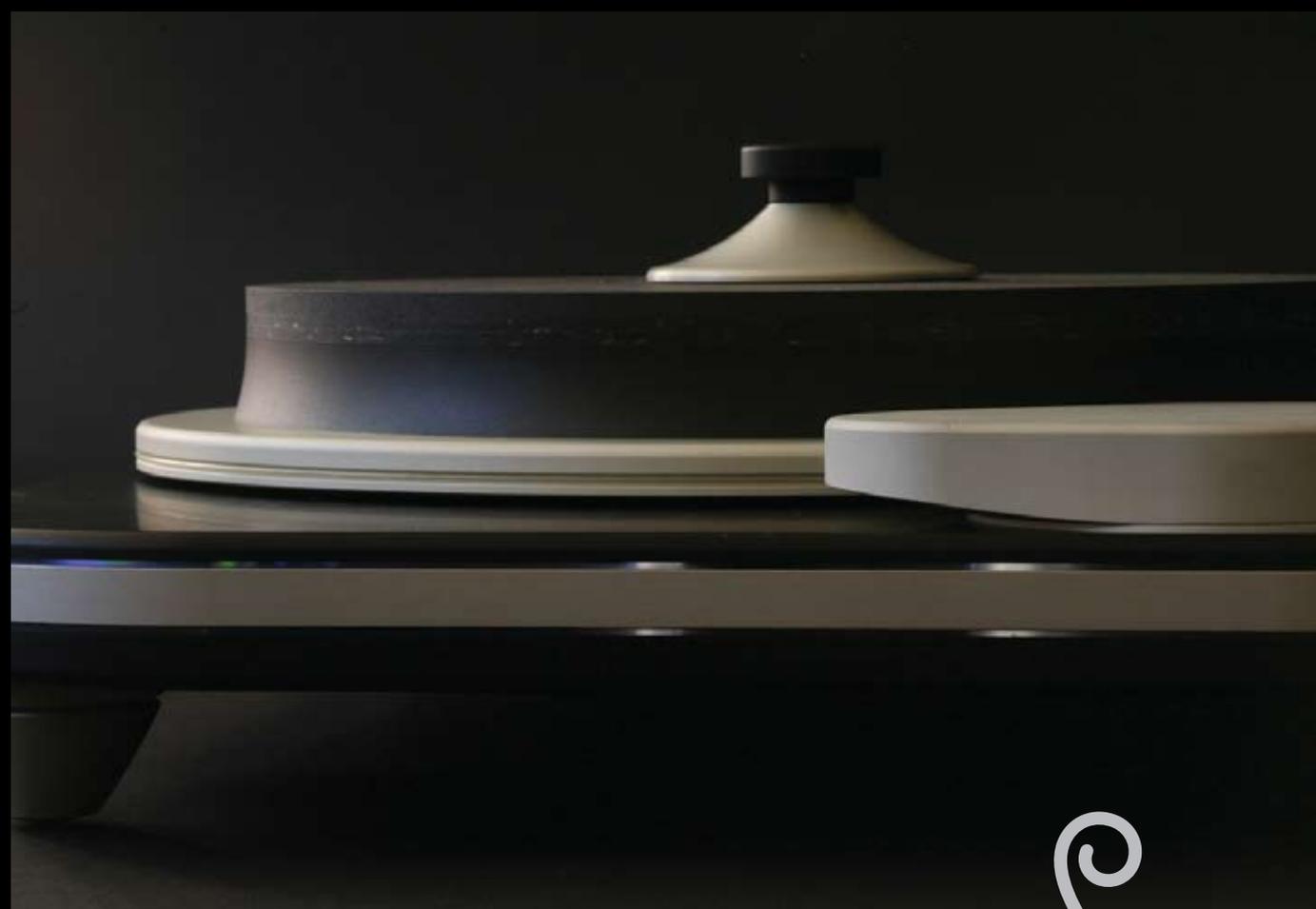
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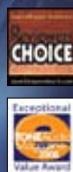
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## PERIPHERALS

**Turntables** Spiral Groove SG-2 w/Triplanar VII Arm, TW Acoustic Raven Two w/SME 309 and iV.Vi, Rega P9 w/RB1000, Clearaudio Innovation w/TT-2 arm

**Cartridges** Shure M97xe, Grado Master, Clearaudio Maestro Wood, SoundSmith "The Voice", Lyra Dorian, Lyra Skala, Dynavector XV-1s, Clearaudio DaVinci

**Preamplifier** Burmester 011

**Power Amplifier** Burmester 911mk.3, McIntosh MC1.2kw, SimAudio Moon W-7's

**Digital Source** Naim CD555 CD player

**Speakers** Martin Logan CLX w/ JL Audio Gotham Subwoofer, Gamut S-7, YG Acoustics Anat II

**Cable** Shunyata Aurora Interconnects, Shunyata Stratos SP Speaker Cables, Furutech AG-12 tonearm cables

**Power** Running Springs Jaco and Dmitri power conditioners, RSA HZ and Mongoose power cords, Shunyata Python CX power cords

**Accessories** Furutech DeMag, Clearaudio Simple Matrix Record Cleaner, Shunyata Dark Field Cable Elevators

**TEA2**  
*triode equalization amplifier*

# The Ultimate Diplomat

**Conrad-Johnson's TEA2**

By Randy Wells

**T**he closer we come to the end of the CD era, the happier I am that I never gave up on vinyl. There seems to be more and more amazing analog products every day – turntables, cartridges, accessories, and last but not least, phono stages. No matter what level of performance your analog front end possesses, a new phono stage can transform your system and give you a new perspective on your record collection. It's hard to put a price on that.

Conrad-Johnson's new TEA2 is another one of those reasonably priced phono stages that can transform the sound of a system, especially one using the pre-amp's phono section for analog playback. This little brother to CJ's flagship phono stage, the TEA1 (Reviewed in Issue 16), features two single-ended triode stages connected in parallel with a zero loop feedback circuit. Available in both high-gain and low-gain versions, the review unit was the higher gain model (55 dB).



The 14 lb TEA2 follows the CJ low-key aesthetic: a gold-colored brushed aluminum faceplate with an on/off switch and red LED. The rear panel features a single pair of input and output RCA jacks (unlike the TEA1 with two), a turntable ground, and a standard IEC receptacle. Inside are two 12AX7 tubes for the input stage and a third 12AX7 for the second gain stage. The tubes supplied (The New Tube) are excellent sounding and use rubber O-ring dampers. It should be noted that the interior of this unit is spotless and very well laid out – it really gives a feeling of quality. Output impedance is 200 ohms.

Cartridge loading is adjustable from 130 ohms to 47K ohms by removing the top cover and flipping DIP switches for each channel. When matched with my Koetsu Rosewood MC cartridge (.6mv output), I started with 200 ohms but settled on the 400 ohm setting for the review period.

### Setup and Break In

As the TEA2 arrived with about 50 hours already on the clock, it took another 50 to break in fully. Straight out of the box, the TEA2 sounds slightly thin, so make sure you give it ample time before fully judging its character. I've found this to be true for other CJ products as well so was not really surprised by this requirement. After the requisite break-in period, the CJ TEA2 delivered excellent overall tonality and heft. Treble was extended and silky smooth, the midrange was open, effortless and a bit laid back, and the bass was deep, though not a taut as I've heard from admittedly more expensive phono stages. Inner details were convincingly retrieved with very good resolution, and the soundstage was wide and deep.

The TEA2's noise floor was very low - in fact, this was one of the quieter tubed phono stage I've heard. Surface noise, when present on an LP, was never spotlighted, which is a big plus for those who search out used vinyl. Sweet and smooth, this phono stage never put a foot wrong during the review period. I concluded that its sonic presentation is more refined than robust, always providing a remarkable view into the performances I know well.

### Spinning Some Favorites

One of the first LPs I played was an original Contemporary pressing of Art Pepper's *Getting' Together*, recorded in 1960 with Miles Davis' back-up band. This seminal piece of jazz is a litmus test for any audio component's ability to reproduce what is essentially a live acoustic performance. The TEA2 passed with flying colors as it deftly navigated the groove laid down by Art's alto sax. Jimmie Cobb's drum kit was rendered with believability and his cymbal work had a distinct and natural decay. Likewise, Paul Chamber's bass plucks were as realistic as I've heard them.

Tonality was spot-on neutral – so much so that I was transported to Contemporary's small makeshift studio in the middle of this great set. Spurred on, I pulled out one after another of Music Matters Blue Note 45-RPM pressings. Hank Mobley's *Soul Station* has tremendous ambience, and the TEA2 reproduced it distinctly with all its subtle nuances conveyed. Bass was deep and taut, and a good sense of air surrounded around each instrument. There was none of the hyper-realistic presentation found on lower priced phono stages. Listening to this classic West Coast Jazz was an easy and relaxed experience through the TEA2. *(continued)*

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**Transparency is one of the TEA2's strong suits, but it never came with any hint of distortion.**

For example, an original green label Warner Brothers pressing of America's debut album has strumming guitars and double tracked harmonies, which were portrayed with the rich timbre and textures intact. On the recently released *Fotheringay 2*, Sandy Denny's vocals and Trevor Lucas' guitar were served up sweetly. This pleasant recording by the great John Boyd has some densely mixed tracks and even on those, Jerry Donohue's tasteful lead guitar was revealed in all its complexity.

Next up was a 4 Men With Beards reissue of *Big Star - 3rd*, which was presented with its entire eerie atmosphere intact. This relatively unknown classic is less upbeat and melodic than its predecessors, but like Velvet Underground's final effort it is one of the best "beauty through chaos" survivors. Though not particularly an audiophile LP, this record gave more of an idea on how the TEA2 performed with ordinary rock reissues. Again, the CJ passed with flying colors, keeping me very involved with the music.

Moving on to Classical, I dug out my venerable copy of Rimsky Korsakov's *Scherzade* on an original RCA Living Stereo pressing (LSC-2446). The presentation here was all liquidity with excellent imaging and bloom. Low-level details were reproduced well, and stringed instruments were rendered with a grainless delicacy that was simply enchanting. The dynamics found on side 2 of this record were presented with gusto, if just lacking in ultimate slam. *(continued)*

## Additional Listening: Jeff Dorgay

The expansive character of the TEA2 was repeated when I played Elgar's *Cello Concerto* with Jacqueline Du Pre (EMI ASD 655). Again, spatial cues were delivered convincingly with a velvety sheen that allowed me to sink into the performance.

### Conclusion

Always musical, never harsh and always smooth, the TEA2 is the ultimate diplomat. It politely treats a variety of sources democratically – polishing the rough spots while championing the strengths of each pressing. If you are looking for a refined phono stage that effortlessly reveals natural timbres and provides for accurate tonality, then this could be the one for you. It is certainly worth an audition in the \$2,500 price range. With only three tubes, this phono stage will be easy to maintain for years to come.

With Conrad-Johnson's legendary reliability and customer service, owners will sleep well at night knowing they have made a great choice. For those who never gave up on vinyl, and for those who are just now joining the retro analog movement, it's nice to know there are products like the TEA2 out there that can put a big smile on your face without breaking the bank.

While the TEA1 that I reviewed last year was a sonic masterpiece, with world-class dynamics and weight, it had a lofty pricetag to match. If you want to live on top of the analog mountain, the real estate is indeed spendy, but there are some great deals to be had as you travel down the hill.

I was curious to see how much of the TEA1's soul would be captured in this much-less-expensive version. For starters, the TEA1 has only two inputs (high and low gain), where the TEA2 has one fixed gain setting. However, thanks to the 47k impedance setting, you can easily use this cartridge with the Grado Statement moving iron cartridge, which has a .5mv output. This was my favorite combination with the TEA 2, offering a huge soundstage and a tonality that fooled me into thinking I was listening to a much more expensive analog front end.

I also made it a point to try a number of other cartridges, varying in price from just under \$1,000 (the Lyra Dorian) to more than \$5,000 (the Clearaudio DaVinci and Dynavector XV-1s).

While most audiophiles at the top of this range will probably be hunting for a higher priced phono stage, the TEA2 was not embarrassed by these cartridges. Most of my listening was done in an all-CJ system, consisting of their ACT2/ Series 2 preamplifier and the Premier 350 power amplifier. The Raven Two turntable with a pair of SME iV.Vi tonearms was used for comparisons between cartridges and my reference Nagra VPS/VFS phono preamplifier.

**It's also worth noting that for those of you who like to roll tubes, you can change the TEA2's sound slightly.**

It's also worth noting that for those of you who like to roll tubes, you can change the TEA2's sound slightly. The folks at CJ are always somewhat down on this practice, and I have to agree with the masters in this case. All that was accomplished by swapping out the stock tubes for my favorite Telefunks was to soften the presentation. So just like my Nagra VPS, I prefer the factory tubes on this one. I say, keep it simple.

Because the TEA2 is not stuffed with CJ's premium CJD Teflon capacitors, it has a bit warmer overall character than the TEA1, so plan your system accordingly. *(continued)*



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While the heart of the TEA1's sound remains, the ultimate resolution and dynamics are diminished, as it should be at this price, but the hallmark of this phono pre-amp (and all CJ products for that matter) is its perfect tonality. While the TEA2 may be slightly rich for some, I feel this will only add to the presentation of the turntable/cartridge combinations with which it most likely will be paired.

Much like the way a Porsche Boxster is more forgiving than a 911 GT3, fooling you into thinking your driving skills are better than they really are, the TEA2 will do the same for your record collection. Make no mistake: it plays at the top of its class for \$2,500 and would certainly be my choice if I were buying a phono stage in this category. ●

### PERIPHERALS

**Preamplifier:** Vacuum Tube Logic TL-5.5 line stage

**Power Amplifiers:** Vacuum Tube Logic Signature Triode MB-250 monoblocks

**Speakers:** Magnepan MG 3.6, Revel Performa B-15 subwoofer

**Analog Source:** Rega P9 with RB1000 arm and Koetsu Rosewood cartridge

**Other Phono Stage:** Cary PH302

**Interconnects:** Harmonic Technology Magic Link One, Grover SC

**Speaker Cables:** Transparent Audio Musicwave Ultra MM

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

**Power Conditioners:** Running Springs Haley and Duke

**Vibration Control:** Fim rollerblocks, Mapleshade platforms and Isoblocks, Target wall stands

# Two Top Cartridges for Mono Lovers

## THE BENZ RUBY MONO AND THE LYRA TITAN MONO

By Lawrence Devoe

**M**y first real exposure to music in the Lyon and Healy music store in Chicago just happened to be in mono. That image of hearing the Chicago Symphony Orchestras' rendition of "Pictures at an Exhibition" is still firmly rooted in my consciousness and though my stereo system has undergone numerous improvements over the years, I haven't lost my excitement for mono recordings.

Here are two of my favorite mono cartridges for those of you who share this passion with me. Both the Lyra Titan Mono (my current reference) and the Benz Micro Ruby 3H are statement products from their respective manufacturers.

### Monaural Sound Basics

Many of my audiophile friends question the need for a mono cartridge in the first place, when many high-end preamplifiers possess a mono button. If you listen to a mono record replayed with a stereo cartridge, you *will* get the *music* in the lateral (vertical) undulations *plus* the *noise* that occupies horizontal regions. True mono cartridges yield only the lateral signals and will return nearly pristine sound from records that might have been on the shelf since the dawn of time. This can be a real eye opener if you've never experienced it.



## Setup and Listening Sessions

With two turntables and tone-arms at my disposal, it is relatively straightforward to make side-by-side cartridge comparisons. The Titan was mounted on a VPI 12.7 arm on a VPI TNT HRX and the Ruby, on a VPI 10.5i arm on a VPI Aries/Flywheel set up. Both cartridges were quite easy to install in their respective tonearms; standard counterweights were used and they worked well with impedances up to 47k ohms, which is where I left them for the remainder of the test sessions. Matching Pass X-ONO phono preamplifiers for each turntable setup fed a Pass XP-20 preamplifier and all system cabling was Nordost Valhalla.

**Break-in time for moving coil cartridges can vary considerably; therefore, I played each cartridge for about 50 hours before serious listening began.**

The Ruby 3H has an elegant wooden body. It shares a proprietary boron cantilever and diamond stylus configuration with the Ebony LP, the top of the Benz Micro heap. While it brought warmth and roundness on my selected recordings, it didn't skimp on articulation or microdynamics. On vocal recordings, the Ruby imparted a palpable body to the singer's voice that was most appealing. This was clearly illustrated on Harry Belafonte's plaintive "Suzanne," (*Belafonte/RCA*) and Julie London's sexy "Cry me a river." (*Her Name is Julie/Liberty*) A simple but stunning mono recording of voice and guitar, "For My True Love," (*Capitol*) is preferable to its stereo counterpart, which puts the singer in one speaker and the guitarist in the other.

*(continued)*

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Dowland's "Come again, sweet love" heard through the Ruby has a naturalness that rewarded this listener each time the stylus hit the groove. Turning to larger works, the Ruby tamed the aggressive 1951 CSO *Pictures at an Exhibition* (Mercury) into a much more listenable work. "Espana" (Espana: Various composers/London) sounded as smooth as I have ever heard it, though you may have not purchased this record for "smooth."

The 1953 Callas *Tosca* (EMI) is a perennial "Great Recording of the Century" but not a sonic showpiece. Though all of my previous listening sessions with stereo cartridges introduced considerable groove noise into the aural mix, the experience with the Ruby was like hearing these records for the first time. The voices were right in front of me and I heard delicate touches in the orchestra that had been concealed for half a century.

Summing up the Ruby, it made enjoyable listening out of every single selection. It also tracked superbly and had no trouble resolving complex musical passages.

The Titan Mono is the top of Lyra's mono range, since the Olympos can only be custom-fashioned out of a "donor" (and no longer manufactured) Parnassus. It has a titanium body and a no-compromise dual mono coil design that only generates a signal in response to horizontal excursions of the stylus-cantilever unit. This cartridge got it all out of the grooves and then some. I started with the Salt City Six's rendition of "the William Tell Overture." (*Salt City Six Play The Classics/Audiophile*) Even if you are not a Dixieland jazz fan, this recording heard through the Titan will get you tapping your toes. It didn't stop there.

I have owned the Weaver's first Carnegie Hall recital since 1957 (*Live at Carnegie Hall/Vanguard*). Although their stereo "Reunion" disc gets all of the kudos, this live recording is better. The Titan extracted hall ambience, fret work and terrific vocal harmonies that combine to make this one of my favorite records. The legendary Columbia original cast catalog includes the first *My Fair Lady* mono LP. These performances have an appealing freshness absent from the stereo remake three years later with essentially the same cast. The Titan dug deeply into these well-worn grooves and brought new sparkle to this 50-year old record. Finally, I cued up the historic Toscanini broadcast recording of the Verdi *Requiem* (RCA). The solo voices and mixed chorus were as clear as a bell and the Titan handled the many dramatic crescendos without breakup or distortion. Like the Ruby, the Titan is a flawless tracker. In contrast to the Ruby, it has less intrinsic warmth but provides more resolution in terms of depth and space around instruments and singers. (*continued*)

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**Summing up the Ruby, it made enjoyable listening out of every single selection.**

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**The right one for you will depend on the size of your mono record collection, your system and of course your budget.**

### **Final Impressions**

It has been a limitless pleasure to compare and contrast these two high performance mono cartridges. As vintage mono recording levels and equalization can vary considerably, the sweeter sounding and higher output Benz may be preferred for some recordings while the more detailed and lower output Lyra may work better for others in your collection.

As with stereo cartridges, manufacturers may have suggestions for their mono products with certain arm/table combinations. This is where a knowledgeable dealer can come in handy. Of course, your ears should be the ultimate arbitrator of cartridge choice. The right one for you will depend on the size of your mono record collection, your system and of course your budget. Like many AARP-member audiophiles, I have many (more than 2500) mono records, mostly original pressings from the earliest stampers: Mercurys, Decca/Londons, RCAs, Columbias and the like.

The good news for younger ears is that labels like Simply Vinyl, Classic Records, Sundazed, Speakers Corner and Testament have gotten the message and are reissuing mono popular, jazz and classical titles. Even better news- there are thousands of used mono LP's for sale on the internet, and garage sales everywhere. Be prepared to give used recordings a good cleaning before playing. Then if you are considering a substantial investment in some of the greatest recordings ever made in their original or reissued forms, either of these two superb cartridges will open the gates to mono nirvana.

### **Additional Listening: Jeff Dorgay**

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I agree with Lawrence wholeheartedly on the necessity of a great mono cartridge if you have the record collection to go along with it. Switching from my reference Grado that is only about an \$800 cartridge, there was a level of delicacy and resolution that I wasn't hearing before. I now find myself with something else on the list of "must haves."

I only had the chance to sample the Benz, but came away very impressed with how much more detail was lurking in the grooves of my mono records. I went through my share of Blue Note reissues from Classic Records, as well as a few early mono Beatle's pressings and of course my early Byrds albums.

For whatever reason, the mono recordings always seem to have a solid tonality that many stereo recordings do not and there is a definite weight that I preferred, especially with classical recordings. It almost makes one wonder why recording engineers "progressed" to stereo sometimes. ●

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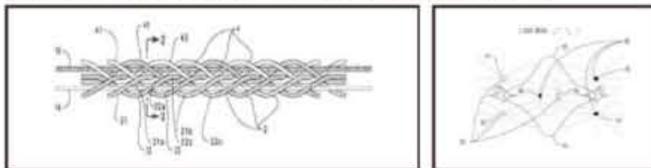
The new *Sky Series Signal Cables* utilize *Shunyata Research's* extremely complex, hand wound *Helix Geometry* braid; granted a patent for its ability to minimize the effects of electromagnetic interference, reactance and self-induced distortion. The dual helix, longitudinally offset, counter-rotating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

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The Benz Micro Ruby 3H  
MSRP: \$3,500.00

US Distribution

**Musical Surroundings**  
5662 Shattuck Avenue  
Oakland, CA 94609  
510-547-5006

www.musicalsurrroundings.com

### PERIPHERALS

**Digital Sources** Esoteric  
P-03/D-03/G-Orb/UX-Pi/Logitech  
Squeezebox Duet

**Analog Sources** VPI HRX/12.7  
Arm/Rim Drive/VPI Aries/10.5i Arm  
w/Flywheel/SDS Controllers

**Phono Cartridges** Clearaudio  
Goldfinger v.2/Clearaudio Stradivari

**Phono Preamplifiers**  
Pass X-ONO (2)

**Preamplifier** Pass XP-20/Lexicon  
12HD-B

**Power Amplifier**  
Pass XA-100.5/Pass X-3

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

**Interconnects**  
Nordost Odin/Valhalla

**Speaker Cable** Nordost Odin

**Power Cords/Conditioning**  
Nordost Thor/Nordost Odin/Valhalla

**Vibration Control**  
Black Diamond Racing

**Room Treatment** Echo Buster/  
Corner Busters/Bass Busters/  
Double Busters



# An Excellent Mix of Old and New

The Audio Research SP-17

By Jeff Dorgay



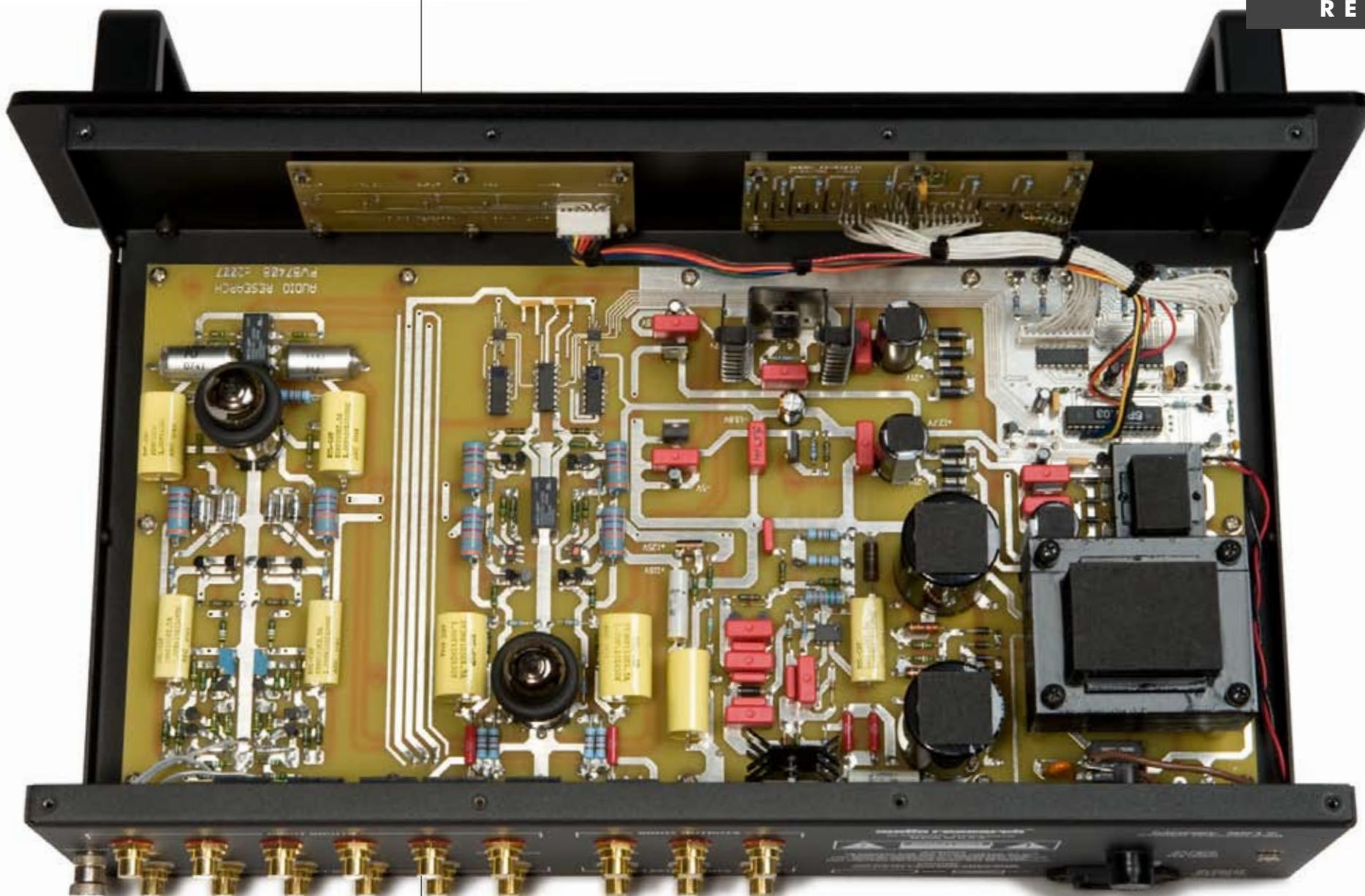
**D**uring my last discussion with Dave Gordon from Audio Research about the SP-17 that he was sending us for review, he asked me if I would like the version with the phono section. As I had been spending a lot of time with my vintage ARC SP-9 preamplifier (featured in the Old School section this issue), I was very excited about Audio Research returning to the good old days when a top-notch phono stage was included with a preamplifier.

For those who are new to the Audio Research lineup, their preamps *all* used to have the SP (stereo preamplifier) designation, and there were a few legendary preamplifiers that bore that title. As LP playback started to fade into the distance and digital became more popular in the late '80s, ARC moved to the LS (line stage) designation for most of its preamplifiers. It's great to see a new SP model.

With the analog revival showing no signs of slowing down, having it all on one chassis is an excellent idea for a number of reasons. You are assured of maximum phono-stage-to-line-stage compatibility, and now that interconnects and power cords have become major considerations in system building, having it all under the hood can save considerable expense; a second power cord and set of interconnects are no longer required. With low-level phono signals, it can only help signal integrity by keeping the signal path as short as possible. Last but not least, a combined preamplifier uses less rack space.

#### **A Quick Visual Tour**

My sample came in black anodized finish with green LED's and the standard ARC rack handles. You don't really need the handles to move the SP-17 since as it only weighs about 20 pounds, but they look great. Although the front panel has the current ARC motif that is devoid of control knobs, featuring an LED readout to let you know the status of the inputs and volume levels, you can still see the lineage to ARC products past. Thoughtfully, all functions can be controlled by the six push buttons on the front panel and do not require the remote to operate. The standard silver ARC finish is also available. *(continued)*



**Removing the top cover reveals a very clean layout with premium parts inside.**

This is a somewhat entry-level preamplifier, priced at \$3,495 *with* phono stage and \$2,995 without, so there are no balanced inputs or outputs on the rear panel of the SP17 – it is a single-ended design. The SP-17 is a hybrid preamplifier, utilizing FET's in the first stage as well as the phono preamp along with a pair of 6H30 tubes in the output stage. Removing the top cover reveals a very clean layout with premium parts inside. There are four high-level inputs, a processor pass-through along with two sets of variable outputs and a fixed record output. Those still using a tape deck or performing digital capture will appreciate this extra feature. The SP17 also features a 12-volt trigger output, should you have a power amplifier that can take advantage of this.

### Setup

You should be able to play music in about five minutes. Remove the two tubes from their boxes, install them in their sockets and fasten the cover back in place. The phono stage has a fixed impedance of 47k and a gain of 47db, so it can be used with some of the more modest output cartridges such as the Grado and SoundSmith moving-iron models. *(continued)*



I did just that, using the SP-17 with the SoundSmith "Voice" cartridge, which has an output of .9mv but requires an input loading of 47k.

Just like my PH3SE, you can physically change the loading resistors for the phono input of the SP-17 and, you should have no problem adjusting the input loading accordingly to take advantage of MC cartridges with an output in the .6 - .9mv range if your system has enough overall gain, making this a very versatile preamplifier indeed.

**This is truly a full-function preamplifier in the best sense of the word...**

A hundred hours were put on the SP17 before I settled down for critical listening in a system that consisted of the Harbeth 40.1 signatures and the Moscode 402au power amplifier. The Rega P9/RB1000 combination along with the SoundSmith "Voice" cartridge proved to be a fantastic match for the SP-17, as did the Sumiko Blackbird that was mounted to my Technics SL-1200, which has a full complement of Sound HiFi mods. I just happened to have an ARC PH3SE phono preamplifier on hand, so it made for an excellent comparison between this and the onboard phono stage.

The cables used were Furutech Reference III RCA's along with Furutech's reference speaker cable. The whole system was plugged into my Running Springs Jaco power conditioner on a dedicated 20A line after listening to the preamplifier plugged directly into the wall with the stock power cord per ARC's instruction manual.

**Spinning a Lot of Records**

The comparison between the PH3SE and the onboard phono stage was enlightening. When new, the PH3SE was a \$3,000 phono stage, considered excellent by many. While the stand-alone PH3SE had more dynamics and slightly more refinement overall, the onboard phono stage of the SP-17 held its own and was more enjoyable than the add-on phono stages that I've heard on many current preamplifiers, including a few fairly expensive preamplifiers. This is truly a full-function preamplifier in the best sense of the word, and for many users buying turntable/cartridge combinations in the \$500-\$5,000 range, it is an excellent anchor on which to build your system.

Thanks to the FET input stage, the SP-17 was very quiet, yet it had that touch of body that comes from a pair of tubes being in the circuit. The 6H30 definitely has a more-powerful, punchy sound than the 12AX7 or 6DJ8 tubes, so I suggest an audition to make sure this preamplifier is right. Where my vintage SP-9 has a more "classic tube" sound, the SP-17 is more modern, with more weight, more high-end extension and a lower noise floor than its all-vacuum-tube predecessor.

While listening to Ali Farka Toure's *Niafunke*, I found his plucky guitar style just hanging in midair, while the drums kept a solid line that was well separated from the vocal tracks. *(continued)*



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C-600f

STEREO POWER AMPLIFIER  
M-600A

Tone and timbre with acoustic instruments were excellent, going through my standard playlist of jazz and classical pieces. I was continually impressed with the overall high performance that the SP-17 delivered at this price point.

## Powerful In More Ways Than One

The 6H30 is a very robust and powerful tube. Even the stock 6H30's can last for more than 10,000 hours, meaning that the SP-17 will probably play a long time before you have to even think about replacing them. It also has more output drive than a pair of 6922's or 12AX7's. While most of my listening was done with a one-meter pair of interconnects, I had no problems driving a 20-foot pair of Cardas Golden Reference interconnects or a 30-foot pair of DH Labs cable, so there should be no problem placing your SP-17 a long way from the power amplifier, should your system require it.

As I mentioned earlier, those 6H30's contribute to a dynamic and open sound, yet they don't have an overly "tubey" presentation. After so many years of pre-amplifier design, ARC has refined its products to a point where by using vacuum tubes, the sound is linear and transparent, offering up that last bit of airiness that tubes bring to the table without romanticizing the presentation. If this sounds like your slice of audiophile nirvana, then the SP-17 will be for you.

## Conclusion

I am happy to award the Audio Research SP-17 with phono stage one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2009. *(continued)*



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– Jeff Dorgay, *TONEAudio Magazine, Issue 18*



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With so many products in the five-figure range these days, a solid linestage with an excellent phono stage from a legendary company is a perfect fit for many audiophiles who are LP lovers. The SP-17 hits a perfect target, offering someone building a system in the \$8,000-\$15,000 range a destination preamplifier that they can enjoy for years to come. ●

**The Audio Research SP-17**  
**MSRP: \$3,495 with phono stage**  
**\$2,995 linestage only**

## MANUFACTURER

### Audio Research Corporation

3900 Annapolis Lane North  
 Plymouth, Minnesota 55447  
 763-577-9700

[www.audioresearch.com](http://www.audioresearch.com)

## PERIPHERALS

**Power Amplifier** Moscode 402Au, Nagra PSA, Prima Luna DiaLogue 7 monoblocks

**Speakers** Harbeth Monitor 40.1, Zu Essence, Magnepan 1.6

**Analog Source** Technics SL-1200 (w/sound HiFi mods)/SME 309 tonearm: SoundSmith "Voice" cartridge, Grado Statment cartridge, Sumiko Blackbird cartridge

**Digital Source** Bel Canto CD-3, Neko Audio D-100 DAC and Sooloos Music Server

**Cables** Cardas Golden Reference, Furutech Ref III (interconnects and speaker)

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

**THE TOP OF THE MOUNTAIN**

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# Shunyata Aurora Interconnects & Stratos SP Speaker Cable

By Jeff Dorgay

On any given day, you can start about 50 separate arguments about whether high-performance signal cables make a difference in how your HiFi system will sound. Unfortunately, most of the arguments are fairly flawed, and will confuse anyone just tuning in. One so-called expert claims that everything sounds the same and that expensive cable is snake oil. Others have flavors of the month, with unbridled excitement for the latest concoction.

My reality, if you choose to follow along with my rationale, is that cables *do* make a difference in how your system sounds. But because of the electrical properties of cable (resistance, inductance, capacitance, just to name a few), they can be tone controls at the worst and an effective conduit at the best. The most-effective cable will transmit everything your equipment is capable of delivering without altering the signal, and trust me, this is always much easier said than done.

Taking this logic to its ultimate conclusion, the more expensive cable at the fringe of affordability requires the most care; I believe it can make or break a high-performance system.

For about six months, I have been living with the Shunyata Aurora interconnects along with their Stratos SP speaker cables. The Aurora interconnects represent their top product range and the Stratos, one step from the top. The interconnects cost \$7,500 a pair (one meter length) and an eight-foot pair of the Stratos SP speaker cable runs \$6,000.

I realize that this is a lot of money for cable, but in an extremely high performance system, it's not outrageous. Fortunately, the Shunyata not only delivers the goods, it provides a level of performance that a number of cables from other companies in the \$800 – \$3,000 range simply do not.

### **The Product and the Process**

All of Shunyata's cable products are hand-built by one of their master technicians at their factory in Poulsbo, Washington. If you'd like a little more background information, take a peek at Issue 22, where we interviewed company principle Caelin Gabriel and took a tour of the facility. Everything there is race-shop tidy and all the Aurora and Stratos cables are meticulously assembled.

Each cable is hand-braided using Shunyata's patented Helix geometry, then terminated and tested. The RCA-based cables utilize WBT NEXTGen RCA plugs, and the XLR connectors use Shunyata's own XLR connectors with gold-plated OFC copper. Once finished, all cables undergo cryogenic treatment, which is all done in house.

Gabriel is a perfectionist, and he pays incredibly close attention to even the most-minute details. Having visited the sound room at Shunyata, I can vouch for their listening room. It is a very musical yet very resolving room so that the smallest details can be identified and modified until Gabriel is pleased with the results. This underscores my point that a high-performance system is necessary for hearing minute differences in cable. *(continued)*

---

Each cable is  
hand-braided  
using Shunyata's  
patented Helix  
geometry, then  
terminated and  
tested.



## Review the Reviews...

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

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Ken Kessler - *Hifi News*, July 2008

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Jeff Dorgay - *ToneAudio Review*, 2008

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### Setup

Most of my listening was done with my reference components, consisting of a Burmester 011 Pre-amplifier, Burmester 911mk. 3 power amplifier, Nagra VPS phono stage and Wadia 781SE SACD player/DAC, along with the MartinLogan CLX speakers and JL Audio F110 subwoofers. All interconnects in this system were terminated with XLR connectors. I keep all my cables off the floor with Shunyata's Dark Field elevators for the final touch.

I had been using a combination of Shunyata Anteres interconnects and Orion speaker cables, with a little bit of Cardas Golden reference sprinkled in. It would be an understatement to say that my system took another substantial jump in resolution immediately after installing the Aurora/Stratos combination. About a week of round-the-clock playing, things settled down even more.

It's worth noting that even though these are fairly substantial cables with 12 conductors of 13-gauge wire in the interconnects and 12 conductors of 9-gauge wire in the speaker cables, they are very easy to work with and not stiff, like some of other mega cables I've tried.

### The Sound

Let's cut to the chase. After six months of listening, I think the Aurora/Stratos combination is fantastic. I've had the chance to listen to these cables with my reference gear as well as making them part of about 50 product reviews. What really stands out is that these cables not only let more information through my system than I've ever experienced, they do so without the least bit of change to the tonality of my system. *(continued)*

I've had the opportunity to listen to a *lot* of cable over the years. When I substituted these for the last generation of Shunyata cable (which I was very fond of), the sound was so clean, I could hear the grain present in the older cables when I swapped them back in.

I have an extremely revealing system, so it's quite easy to hear how and where a cable affects the tonal balance. Some things bump the highs while others alter the low frequencies, and others can round off the fine details in the music. These two top cables from Shunyata had none of these issues, and they were extremely consistent no matter what speakers or electronics I used them with.

### **Much Ado About Nothing**

The toughest part about this review is that the best part of the Shunyata Aurora/Stratos combination is their high degree of nothingness. No matter what I was listening to, I never felt that the cables were altering the sound quality of any gear I auditioned. If you are a crazed audiophile, you probably have a few different cables (as do I) in your bag of tricks for problem components.

These top-of-the-line Shunyata cables are not tone controls; they let all the music through in a way I haven't experienced before. No matter what recordings I listened to, I just heard *more* music. Backgrounds were deeper and blacker but not at the expense of rounding off leading or trailing transients. This also resulted in a larger soundfield, exhibiting an image that was noticeably bigger in all three dimensions.

After extended listening with pieces of music that I've heard repeatedly on my reference system, everything was much more relaxed overall, yet with all the dynamics firmly in place. The closest thing to which I can compare the Aurora/Stratos experience is listening to a master tape for the first time, as opposed to hearing a record or CD that has been made from a copy a few generations removed. You are familiar with the music, but so much more nuance comes through.

Just to make sure I wasn't drinking the Shunyata Kool-Aid, after months of getting accustomed to the sound of these cables, I went back two steps to see just how much difference there really was. Even going back to the top-quality cable that I use in my living-room system (which costs about an eighth of what the Shunyata cable does), the whole soundfield collapsed substantially. I not only lost dynamics and fine detail, but I also lost the top to bottom coherence to which I had really grown accustomed. *(continued)*



---

**The better your room, system and recordings are, the easier it will be for you to hear just what these cables can do. Or more accurately, what they don't do.**

Next, I swapped between the Shunyata and off-the-shelf Radio Shack cables. These were dreadful. All of my curmudgy audiophile friends who don't believe in cable, they get this demo and all cave in and admit that, yes, cable just might be a critical component.

On another note, the Aurora cables have been a fantastic tool to use when reviewing gear across the price spectrum. While they are certainly overkill for a modestly priced amplifier or CD player, I know the cable is not getting in the way of the evaluation process, and that has made them invaluable.

### **The Bottom Line**

As I mentioned at the beginning of the review, outfitting your system with cable like this is a serious investment. Shunyata has an excellent dealer network and I highly suggest giving the Aurora/Stratos combination (or perhaps an all-Aurora combination) a test drive in your system. It's definitely my favorite and my system has never sounded better.

Keep in mind though, that I suggest this cable only for someone who has a top-notch system. If you have a modest system or serious room issues, keep in mind that this kind of cable is not going to make a \$1,000 amplifier sound like a \$20,000 amplifier or fix a bad room. Actually the better your room, system and recordings are, the easier it will be for you to hear just what these cables can do. Or more accurately, what they don't do.

After a major audition, I am happy to award Shunyata our Product of the Year award in the cable category. This is truly a state-of-the-art product that I am very happy to be using as a reference component. ●



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Shunyata Aurora Interconnects  
MSRP: \$7,500 (one-meter pair)

Shunyata Stratos SP  
Speaker Cables  
MSRP: \$6,000 (eight-foot pair)

#### MANUFACTURER

**Shunyata Research**  
26273 Twelve Trees Lane  
Suite D  
Poulsbo, WA 98370 USA  
360-598-9935  
www.shunyata.com

#### PERIPHERALS

**Digital Source** Wadia 781SE,  
Naim 555, Sooloos Music Server

**Analog Source** Spiral Groove  
SG-2w/TriPlanar arm, Lyra Skala  
cartridge, TW Acoustic Raven Two  
with SME iV.Vi arm and Clearaudio  
DaVinci cartridge, SME 309 arm  
w/Dynavector XV-1s cartridge.

**Phono Preamplifier** Nagra  
VPS with VFS platform, Manley  
Steelhead, Naim Stageline with  
Supercap supply

**Preamplifier** Conrad Johnson  
ACT2/Series 2, Burmester 011

**Power Amplifier** Conrad  
Johnson Premier 350, Burmester  
911mk. 3, McIntosh MC1.2kw,  
SimAudio Moon W-7 monoblocks

**Speakers** MartinLogan CLX w/  
JL Audio Gotham Subwoofer,  
Harbeth Monitor 40.1, GamuT  
S-7, Verity Audio Sarastro II, YG  
Acoustics Anat Professional II.

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

**Accessories** Furutech DeMag,  
Manley Massive Passive Studio  
Mastering Equalizer, Shunyata  
Dark Field Cable Elevators

# A Worthy Upgrade

## The Shelter 901 II

By Jeff Dorgay

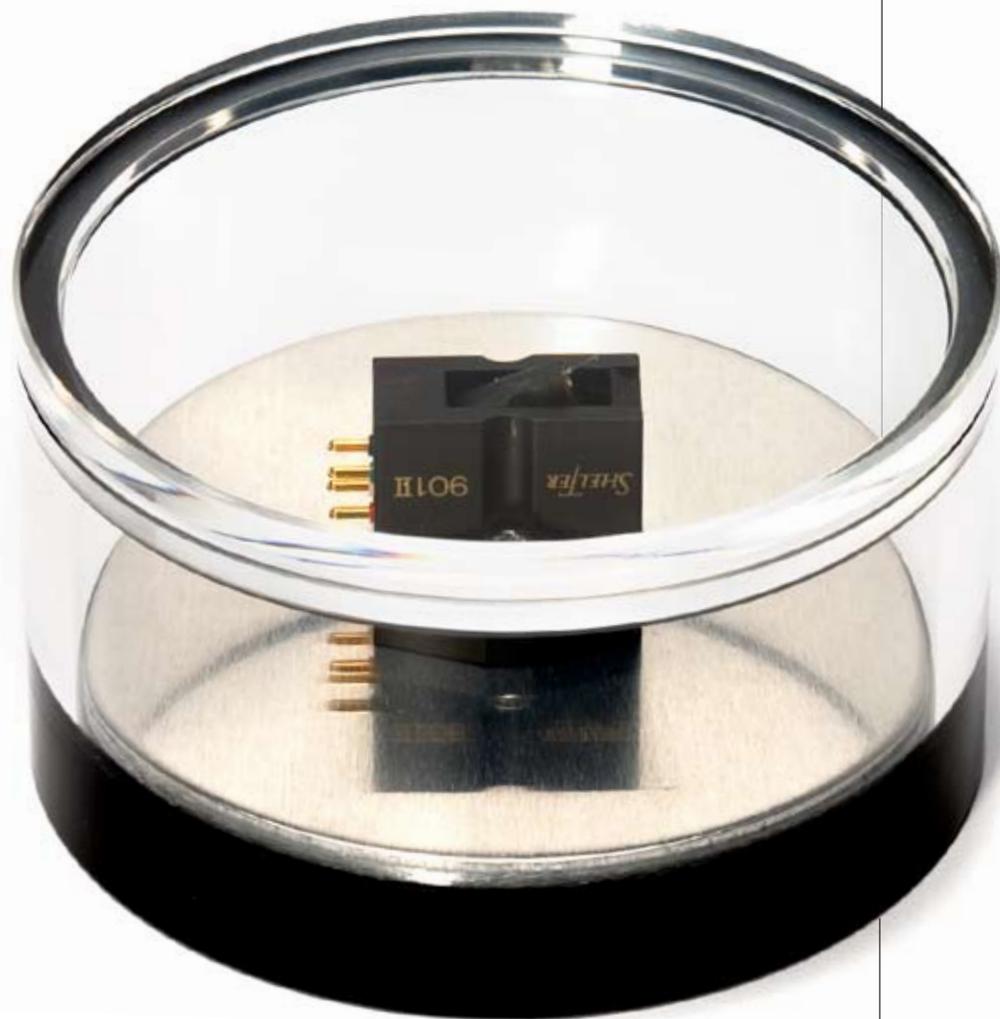
Shelter cartridges are legendary among audiophiles with their 501 being a slam dunk choice for anyone wanting a big dose of midrange magic and lack of grain in their playback system. While this cartridge always errs on the friendly/warm side of the equation, you'll never have a fatiguing musical moment spinning records on a table that features a Shelter 501. The current 501 II is more of the same, with slight refinements throughout the frequency range.

The next step up the line, the 901 has always played to mixed reviews, being somewhat thinner sounding than the 501, yet very detailed. In the right system, the 901 offered a very resolving sound, but many listeners stuck with the warm sound of the 501 or went up the ladder to the 90x, which provided the warmth of the 501 and the detail of the 901 in a more expensive package. (Just before it was discontinued, the 90x was selling for about \$3,000)

The new Shelter 901 II is a definite improvement from the past model, with the technology from the new 7000 and 9000 cartridges incorporated. It has had a healthy price increase as well, going from \$1,500 to \$2,300, which puts it in a range where there is a lot of competition.



The Raven Two with SME 309 arm had the necessary weight and control for the 901 II, and though different, the Oracle Delphi V with the same arm was excellent.



### Setup and Search for the Ultimate Combination

As this cartridge was so new, there was not even a data sheet in the box; I started with the standard Shelter suggestions from the old 901. Initial listening was done with my Rega P3-24 with Groovetracer subplatter and tracking force optimized at 1.7 grams. I got out the soldering iron and set the loading on my Audio Research PH3SE to 100 ohms per Shelter's spec, which has always proved to be a good spot with their other cartridges I've used.

If you are a Rega user, my suggestion is to forget about the Shelter 901 II. I've always found my P3 just a bit on the tight and tuneful side (some might even say a little bit lean), so the 901 is just not a good match here. Moving up to the P9/RB1000 combination provided a more fleshed out sound overall, but still too forward for my liking. Perhaps if you had a system with a slightly warm and romantic sound overall, this could be a match for the P9, offering more detail to the mix. Otherwise the 901 II would not be my first choice for a P9 or a Scout/Scoutmaster.

The Raven Two with SME 309 arm had the necessary weight and control for the 901 II, and though different, the Oracle Delphi V with the same arm was excellent; the Delphi's slightly laid back personality was a nice match. But my favorite combination was the Montana Groove Master that we reviewed back in issue 20, featuring the big wooden plinth and 12" SME arm. This fleshed out the sound of the Shelter perfectly and ended up being the table of choice for the rest of the review.

I also switched to my reference Nagra VPS/VFS to make it easier to change loading. If your phono preamplifier can go down to 75 ohms, this is worth investigating, you may appreciate the additional mellowness, but keep in mind you will sacrifice some inner detail.

It's also worth mentioning that this cartridge is not particularly finicky to adjust in terms of mechanical requirements. On the SME arms, 2.0 grams provided the best overall sound balance, but unless the tracking force was backed off to the lightest side of the suggested range (about 1.4 grams), the sound and trackability did not suffer markedly, or as much as I've seen it with some of the other cartridges I've had in for review recently. My suggestion would be to take your favorite torture track and adjust VTF accordingly. The rest of your records should be on the money from there.

---

**The 901 II was at its best when listening to fairly dense recordings; it does a great job at unraveling layers of texture.**

### **Big and Detailed**

The 901 II had a very similar tonality to the much more expensive Clearaudio DaVinci that I am now using as a reference, but with less fine detail resolution. However, at its price point it is exceptional. The 901 II was at its best when listening to fairly dense recordings; it does a great job at unraveling layers of texture. String quartets almost sound larger than life, with each player having a very distinct placement and rock recordings with multiple overdubs make it easier to dissect what's going on.

Listening to Eddie Jobson's *Theme of Secrets*, there is a great synthesizer effect at the beginning of the piece that sounds like a plastic, almost metallic ball bouncing around on a hard surface. On CD, this is incredibly dynamic and jumps right out in front of the soundstage in front of you, but on vinyl this is a tougher effect to imitate. The 901 II had a lot of wow factor, with this ping-pong effect as well as the very deep synthesizer growl that kicks in about a minute into the piece.

It also did a great job with solo vocals, that extra detail offered up that last bit of breathiness, whether I was listening to Peggy Lee (not so much) or Johnny Cash (more of that).

### **It boils down to the combination**

While I find the Shelter 901 II a huge improvement over its predecessor, this is still a cartridge that will require the right setup and good system synergy to shine. If your system is already somewhat detailed or forward, it may be too much detail for you. If you have an overall tonal balance in your system that leans towards the warmer side of the fence, this cartridge will really make you sit up and take notice, offering a lot of resolution without being harsh.

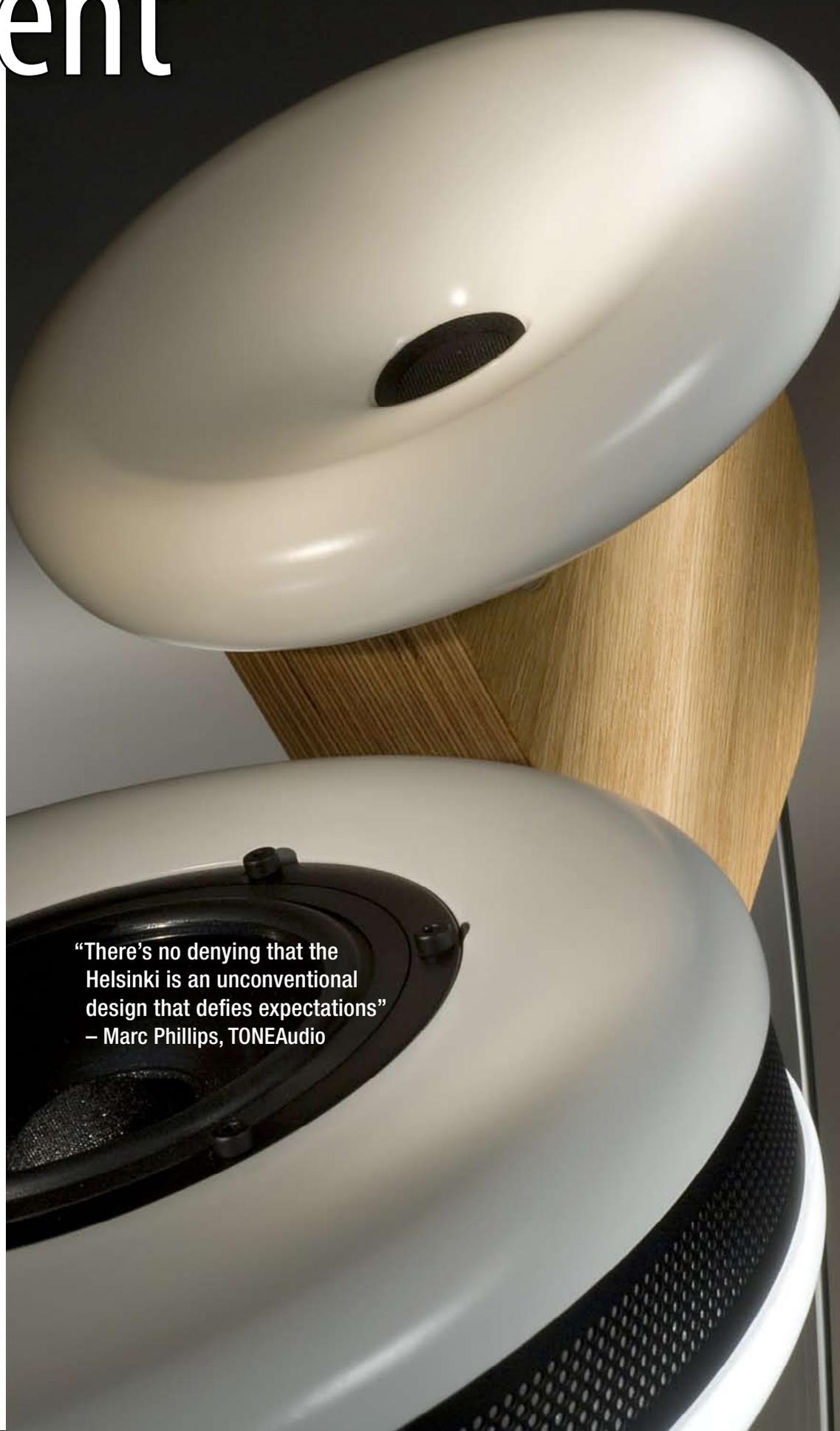
Where the 501 II is universally very musical, the 901 II will only be a perfect fit in some systems. For those of you that find happiness with this cartridge, it will offer a very good helping of what the much more expensive cartridges offer. ●

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MSRP: \$2,300

## DISTRIBUTOR

### Axiss Audio

17800 South Main St.  
Suite 109  
Gardena, CA 90248  
310-329-0187  
www.axissaudio.com

## PERIPHERALS

**Turntables** Oracle Delphi V  
w/SME 309 Arm, TW Acoustic  
Raven Two w/SME 309 and  
iV.Vi, PBN Groove Master w/  
SME 312 arm

**Phono Preamplifiers** Audio  
Research PH3SE, Nagra VPS/  
VFS, Manley Steelhead RC

**Preamplifier** Burmester 011

**Power Amplifier** Burmester  
911mk.3, McIntosh MC1.2kw,  
SimAudio Moon W-7's

**Digital Source** Naim CD555  
CD player

**Speakers** Martin Logan  
CLX w/JL Audio Gotham  
Subwoofer, Gamut S-7, YG  
Acoustics Anat II

**Cable** Shunyata Aurora  
Interconnects, Shunyata  
Stratos SP Speaker Cables,  
Furutech AG-12 tonearm  
cables

**Power** Running Springs Jaco  
and Dmitri power conditioners,  
RSA HZ and Mongoose power  
cords, Shunyata Python CX  
power cords

**Accessories** Furutech  
DeMag, Clearaudio Simple  
Matrix Record Cleaner,  
Shunyata Dark Field Cable  
Elevators.

A close-up, low-angle shot of the front panel of a silver Perreaux amplifier. The brand name 'PERREAUX' is embossed in a serif font on the lower part of the panel. Below the name is a small, circular logo. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the metallic texture and the embossed text against a dark background.

PERREAUX

## Perreaux Éloquence 150i Integrated Amplifier

---

New Zealand's Perreaux squeezes bona-fide high-end performance out of a lifestyle friendly integrated amplifier.

By Steve Guttenberg



It was close to 30 years ago, but I remember my first encounter with a Perreaux amplifier. I was a salesman at an up-and-coming high-end shop in New York City, and we didn't carry either of the two big selling solid-state lines of the time, Mark Levinson or Threshold. The Perreaux factory rep dropped off a PMF 2150 and I thought it looked the part. Then we hooked it up to a pair of Snell Type A speakers and the sound was spectacularly clean and beautifully balanced. We took on the line and did really well with it.

Over the decades, I've lost touch with Perreaux, so I was eager to get my hands on their new Éloquence 150i and was thrilled to see it wasn't just another integrated amplifier.

First, as high-end integrations go, it's downright compact, just 16.7 inches wide, 3.9 inches high and 14.3 inches deep. That makes it a bit smaller than your average A/V receiver. At 32 pounds, it's heavier than most 7 x 100-watt receivers. Most \$5,000-plus high-end integrations are huge things, but the Éloquence 150i is small enough to recommend to your non-audiophile pals. Running my fingers over its beautifully finished, 5/8-inch thick front panel and solid-metal volume control there was no doubt: the amp is the real deal.

### Elegant Éloquence

The Éloquence 150i is a Class AB design that delivers 150 watts per channel into 8 ohm loads, and 300 watts into 4 ohms; it's got what it takes to drive even inefficient speakers such as my Magnepan 3.6/Rs. The amp uses MOSFET output devices, and as I recall, so did that first Perreaux I listened to. The new amp's heat sinks never got more than mildly warm, even after I cranked it for hours on end.

Perreaux also breaks the mold by offering two rather useful options for the Éloquence 150i: a moving-magnet/moving-coil phono preamp (\$595) and a Burr Brown 24 bit/192 kHz digital-to-analog upsampling converter (\$1,000). Best of all, you can add either option *after* purchasing the amp.

The 1.25-inch by 2.5-inch front-panel display keeps you informed about input selection and volume level, and you can name each input as you like. For example, you could name Input 1 as Sirius, Input 2 as Pandora, etc. Various functions are accessible via the menu system. Navigation is so easy and straightforward, I didn't have to study the owner's manual to get the job done. You can turn the display off from the remote, which is good because even at its dimmest setting, it's too distracting during evening listening sessions. You also can program a maximum-volume level, handy if a lot of people use your system. *(continued)*



**The Éloquence 150i is multiroom/custom installation ready. It has one trigger output, one external IR input and one IR output, all with 3.5 mm jacks.**

The rear panel's connectivity quotient is fairly generous. There's one pair of balanced XLR inputs, four pair of unbalanced RCA inputs, and one pair each of balanced and unbalanced outputs. The DAC has two coax (BNC) inputs, two optical (Toslink), and one USB input. The binding posts handle fairly heavyweight speaker cables without complaint.

The Éloquence 150i is multiroom/custom installation ready. It has one trigger output, one external IR input and one IR output, all with 3.5 mm jacks. The RS232 serial port is provided for use with AMX, Control4, and Crestron home-automation systems. There's even a home-theater/pass-through loop for easy integration with home-theater systems.

If those automation doodads make you wonder about Perreux's audiophile street cred, check this out: while the amp is shipped with four supporting feet, you can reconfigure them for more-stable three-foot support. Tweaky!

Gripes: The plastic remote's little bump "buttons" broke the high-end spell every time I used it. For the kind of dough the Éloquence 150i commands, I'd want a more substantial remote. It worked well enough, though the centrally placed

source and volume control bumps were easily mixed up. I can't tell you how many times I changed inputs when attempting to change the volume.

Each Éloquence 150i is shipped with a set of measurements taken during final quality-control testing at Perreux's factory in New Zealand. The company has an outstanding reputation for reliability.

### Listen to That

There's something about the way the Éloquence 150i let me hear the spaces between instruments that immediately grabbed my attention. Some might say it focuses a soundstage better than an integrated amplifier has any right to. Or is it just this amp's superior transparency, low-level detailing or microdynamics? I'm not sure. Whatever you call it, the Éloquence 150i has it in spades. It's also a lot of fun to listen to.

Take the newly remastered Beatles *Revolver* CD. Paul McCartney's bass was extra bouncy and nimble on "Taxman," and Paul's (not George's) guitar freakout kicked butt. The new CD sounds surprisingly analog-like, so much so that I compared it with my *Revolver* LP, and the CD was a close match. *(continued)*



# "The best CD playback under \$5k... for \$1799!"

Robert Harley - The Absolute Sound - 09/07



azur

"For starters, the 840C doesn't sound like anything in its price range. It had a resolution, refinement, ease, grace, and musicality that were instantly recognizable as being different from every other product in the category. (...) Not only is the 840C easily the greatest value in digital sources in my experience, it must be considered one of the greatest bargains in all of high-end audio."

**"In fact, I could easily live with the 840C at the front end of my \$100K reference system – it's that good."**

Robert Harley - The Absolute Sound - 09/07



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Yes, the vinyl sounds a tad more three-dimensional, but tonally, CD and LP are in the same ballpark. I didn't intend to listen to all of *Sgt. Pepper*, but once I started I couldn't stop. The amp must be doing something right.

## The Éloquence 150i is a master of space and time.

Play a well-recorded jazz CD, such as a Chesky, and you hear the room in which the band was recorded in. Treble is grainless, delicate and nuanced.

Thing is, all that groovy audiophile stuff like transparency and air have to be in the recording before the Éloquence 150i can reproduce them. I was thinking about that when I played Booker T's recent *Potato Hole* CD. Booker, of Booker T and the MGs fame, still mans a mean keyboard and on his new CD he's backed up by the Drive By Truckers and Neil Young. But the sound is as dead as the proverbial doornail. Booker's funk is still kicking, but this nasty sounding recording puts a lid on it.

This soundstage is flatter than Kansas, dynamic range is MIA, and the worst kind of digital glare infects the midrange and top-end. So there's not much the Éloquence 150i can do to make *Potato Hole* go down easy. It's not a miracle worker, so if your musical tastes run to mostly contemporary production heavy rock or pop, the Éloquence 150i's innate transparency might not be what the doctor ordered.

Ah, but pop on one of Mr. Booker's juicy Stax era record workouts from the 1960s, and the Éloquence 150i will plaster a big smile across your puss. (*continued*)

Straight outta Brooklyn, Oakley Hall's *I'll Follow You* CD reminds me of X (the band that is), specifically, their early albums *Los Angeles* and *Wild Gift*. Oakley Hall's Patrick Sullivan and Rachel Cox's dueling lead vocals have a lot to do with that. They raise goose bumps at least a couple of times per song. And the way Oakley Hall's melodic tunes develop and sway, they're a throwback to an earlier time.

Listening over the Éloquence 150i, this CD's wider than average dynamic range exploded over my Magnepan 3.6/R speakers, and you know what they say about Maggies: they need a bit of juice to really come alive. The Éloquence 150i has a rock n' roll heart beating inside that compact chassis.

I played a couple of DVD videos, listening to their LPCM stereo mixes over the Éloquence 150i. Cream's *Royal Albert Hall 2005* sounded big and bold as Jack Bruce's bass and Ginger Baker's drums laid down massive grooves. Eric Clapton doesn't have the fire he did way back when, but his sound was first rate.

LP sound was good, if veering to the lean side of neutral with my van den Hul Frog moving-coil cartridge. As they say, your mileage might vary. No matter, the funk-a-licious *Tom Tom Club* LP set my toes a tappin'. Vinyl was more alive than digital, that's for sure. Bass transients were lightning fast, and considering the nature of the music, the soundstage was huge. It's been a while since I heard this 1981 recording, and it's a lot better than I remember it.

I finished up with another LP, The Cowboy Junkies' *Trinity Revisited* from 2006. The new record had a tighter, more-focused sound, but it was brighter and dimensionally flatter in the ways that many contemporary recordings are. Not that I blame the Éloquence 150i one bit for that; it was just telling it like it is. If you're looking for an amp that makes everything sound pretty, keep looking. This ain't it.

The Éloquence 150i tells the truth, no matter what. That's what I like about it. ●

**The Éloquence 150i has a rock n' roll heart beating inside that compact chassis.**



**The Perreux Éloquence 150i Integrated Amplifier**  
MSRP: \$5,495

#### MANUFACTURER

[www.perreux.com](http://www.perreux.com)

#### PERIPHERALS

**Analog Source** VPI Classic turntable with a van den Hul Frog cartridge

**Digital Sources** Ayre C-5xe, Pioneer DV-45A players, Apple Mac Mini

**Speakers** Dynaudio C-1, Mangepan MG 3.6/R

**Cable** XLO Signature-3 interconnects, speaker cable, and power cords



# Clearaudio's DaVinci

**A Work of Analog Art**

By Jeff Dorgay

**F**orget what you know about Clearaudio cartridges of old. Since they brought out the new generation Goldfinger, Clearaudio has been going towards a more-balanced sound. These days, their newfound expertise has trickled down to the \$7,500 Titanium and the \$5,500 DaVinci. And like their top two cartridges, the DaVinci also has coils wound from 24kt. gold wire.

After living with the DaVinci for a few months, I purchased the review sample to round out my own arsenal of cartridges, which includes the Lyra Scale and Dynavector XV-1s. The DaVinci is a special cartridge, offering a high level of detail retrieval without crossing the line and sounding harsh, always a tough proposition.

This review started along with the Clearaudio Innovation turntable, mated with Clearaudio's TT-2 linear track tone arm. If you haven't yet made a turntable choice, I'd highly suggest the whole system; the synergy is fantastic. The Advance worked well on my Raga, SME and Triplanar arms, too, but it was tough to beat the all-Clearaudio system.

The DaVinci is part of Clearaudio's new V2 series of MC cartridges, with improved magnet and generator assemblies as well as a new stylus profile that Clearaudio claims has one-fifth less mass than their previous design. In the real world, the DaVinci is an excellent tracker. One particular torture track that comes to mind is Joni Mitchell's "Jericho" on the album *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*. Being the last track on the side, we're already headed for trouble; about half of the cartridges I've reviewed won't get through Joni's voice without distortion. But the DaVinci handled it perfectly.

### **The Price of Admission**

Let's face it, there are a fair amount of people in the audience who haven't spent \$5,500 bucks on their whole system, so a cartridge at this price level is built for an exclusive clientele. My main requirement for a cartridge in the \$5,000 - \$10,000 range is that it has to not only have a unique personality, but it needs to take you somewhere you can't go with the lesser-priced cartridges. For five BIG ones, you shouldn't have to make any excuses, and the DaVinci doesn't ask you to.

If you have an equally high-achieving turntable and phono stage, you will be rewarded with some of the most exciting analog playback money can buy. When Musical Surroundings' Garth Leerer dropped the TT-2 Clearaudio tonearm down on that first record, I was very impressed. About a hundred hours later after some serious break in, I was blown away.

### **Opposing Views on Setup**

When used on Clearaudios' TT-2 linear track arm, you only need to dial in VTA and tracking force because there are no other adjustments. With a linear track arm, there is NO tracking error, so you don't need to argue with your buddies on the Internet about which set of null points to use. Set it and forget it. As my review of the Innovation said, "The sound is super smooth, like analog tape."

*(continued)*




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**For five BIG ones,  
you shouldn't have to  
make any excuses,  
and the DaVinci  
doesn't ask you to.**



**The DaVinci was so revealing, it made it easy to hear the differences between each of the four phono preamplifiers.**

I also had excellent luck on my other table/tonearm combinations, with the virtues of the DaVinci always coming through. At 2.8 grams, the DaVinci tracks a bit heavier than you may be accustomed to on some other cartridges. Using Clearaudio's own digital stylus force gauge, I ended up right at 2.8 grams for the best overall balance.

I also made it a point to try the DaVinci with a number of excellent phono preamplifiers, all with great results. The Naim Superline/Supercap was on hand, as well as the \$20k Montana phono stage, the Manley Steelhead RC and my reference, the Nagra VPS with VFS base. Final loading ended up between 400 and 500 ohms with all phono stages, and the DaVinci was so revealing, it made it easy to hear the differences between each of the four phono preamplifiers.

Personally, I liked the two tube phono stages the best, as the high resolution of the DaVinci mixed with a touch of tube warmth was a match made in heaven for my system. While I was never put off by matching the DaVinci with the solid-state phono preamplifiers, there were times where there was so much resolution it was tough to process, but a few of my audiophile buddies were addicted to the extra resolution on tap.

In all but the most forward sounding systems, the DaVinci should be a winner.

### **Spacious and Resolute**

Clearaudio claims that their V2 cartridges have a 100db dynamic range that is "better than CD." While I don't have any LP's with a 100db range with which to verify this, I was immediately attracted to the punchy, fast presentation. If pace and timing push your hot button, you will be amazed by the speed of the DaVinci. Unlike some so-called "audiophile" products that only shine with your best records, the DaVinci extracts every bit of information from the grooves on whatever records you are playing. Of course, the flawless first-stamper pressings are going to wow you more, but you will be pleasantly surprised at how much more music you hear on some of your old favorites that you might have thought unworthy of a mega analog setup. This alone makes the DaVinci worth its price tag.

The only drawback to having extra resolution on tap is that it will reveal the records in your collection that have not been thoroughly cleaned, but the benefit of good vinyl hygiene when using the DaVinci will be an analog presentation that is CD quiet. It takes a little while to get used to that kind of silence, but once you do, it's very exciting. *(continued)*

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**If you've been craving the perfect fusion of dynamics and fine detail, the Clearaudio DaVinci is the cartridge for you.**

And it's always fun to listen to your anti-vinyl friends claim "that *can't* be a record!" If you don't have a good record-cleaning machine, I highly suggest one of the Clearaudio Matrix models that clean in both directions. Combining clean surfaces with the incredible detail retrieval capabilities of the DaVinci, it just feels like you can hear into the record forever. Listening to "Between My Head and the Sky" on Yoko Ono's new Plastic Ono Band album, the cymbals hung in the air, while guitars popped in from all over the mix, with Yoko's signature trippy, squeaky vocals front and center, and the overdubs of her voice way beyond my speaker boundaries. When I switched to a few budget cartridges, everything lined up on the same plane.

The DaVinci really excels at front-to-back separation; it always has you wondering if you really do have a secret pair of surround speakers in your listening room. This record led me to some of my wacky favorites from Kraftwerk, Jean Michel Jarre and Mickey Hart, just to swim in the giant fishbowl of sound I was experiencing.

I always felt like I was watching a Hitchcock movie while listening with the DaVinci. Hitchcock was a master of having quite a few layers of interest in his shots, with the main action center frame, but equally important things going on way off in the distance or in the lower corners of the frame. This is the perspective my system takes on with this cartridge; there is something going on all over the soundfield. It is very engaging indeed.

Switching back to some straightforward rock, MoFi's *Santana* was another incredible experience. I've been listening to this record for about 35 years and it's never sounded better. On the last track, "Soul Sacrifice," when the bongos fade up over the drums, they sound somewhat blurry. But now they had their own distinct soundstage in the mix. I didn't even hear that while I listened to the master tape at the MoFi studio last year!

### **Perhaps a Bit Larger Than Life**

Because the Clearaudio DaVinci reveals so much information, some may perceive it as having a "slightly larger than life" kind of sound, but I found it to be very exciting and I haven't tired of it in the least. If you've been craving the perfect fusion of dynamics and fine detail, the Clearaudio DaVinci is the cartridge for you. Just be sure to get those records spotless if you want everything it can deliver. ●

**The Clearaudio DaVinci**  
MSRP: \$5,499

### **PERIPHERALS**

**Turntables** Clearaudio Innovation w/TT2 arm, Spiral Groove SG-2 w/Triplanar arm, TW Acoustic Raven Two w/SME iV.Vi arm, Rega P9 w/RB1000 arm

### **Phono Preamplifiers**

Montana Olympia PX, Manley Steelhead RC, Naim Superline/Supercap, Nagra VPS/VFS

**Preamplifier** Burmester 011

**Power Amplifier** Burmester 911mk. 3, McIntosh MC1.2KW, Moscode 402Au

**Speakers** Martin Logan CLX w/JL Audio F110 subs, Gamut S-7

**Cable** Shunyata Aurora Interconnects and Stratos SP Speaker cables

**Power** Running Springs Dmitri and Jaco power conditioners

# More Power!

**Follow Up: The SimAudio Moon LP 5.3  
with PSX 5.3**

By Jeff Dorgay

LP5.3 PHONO PREAMPLIFIER

M

PSX5.3 POWER SUPPLY

M O O N



Back in Issue 11, we were very impressed with the SimAudio Moon LP 5.3. It offered excellent sound, the quiet “set it and forget it” aspect of a solid-state phono preamplifier and great value at \$1,400, with the promise of a power-supply upgrade sometime in the future.

Two years later, we have a slight increase in price to \$1,499 and the PSX 5.3 is here. The same size as the LP 5.3 itself, the PSX has another transformer, two gigantic chokes and two large banks of filter capacitors under the hood, linked to the LP 5.3 by a one meter umbilical cord. In our disposable world, I really like the idea of a product that has an upgrade path.

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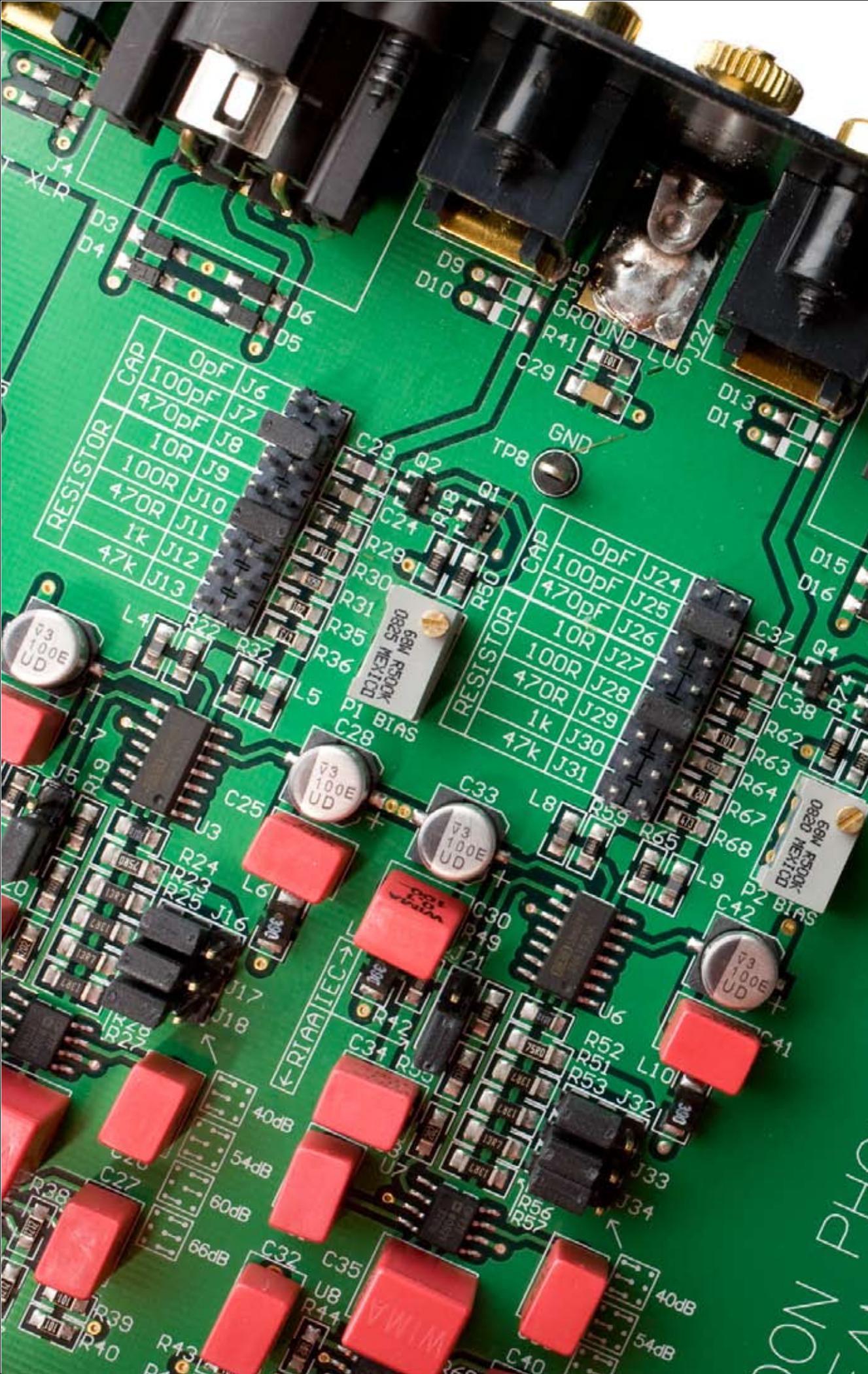
**You can buy as much performance as you need and add more as your budget and music obsession permit.**

When the PSX is added to the LP 5.3, it disables the internal supply on board and takes over completely. The PSX 5.3 has an MSRP of \$1,250.

### A Quick Refresher

For those of you that didn't read our review two years ago: in a nutshell, the LP 5.3 was extremely quiet and very neutral tonally. It features one input (RCA) and adjustable gain from 40db (MM) along with 54db and 66db (MC). Impedance loading can be set at 10, 100, 470, 1k and 47k ohms, with capacitance settings at 0, 100 and 470pf. (the latter came in handy with Soundsmith's "The Voice" cartridge, which requires a higher capacitance load to sound its best.) You will have to pop the top off the LP 5.3 to get at the jumpers, but it's a quick operation.

While the LP 5.3 has only one set of RCA input jacks, it has a pair of single-ended RCA and balanced XLR outputs, which offer flexibility in your current system and you are covered with whatever change you might make in the future. *(continued)*





**Adding the PSX delivers the dynamic swing and makes the overall preamplifier even quieter than before; exactly what the manufacturer claims.**

### **The extra power makes a big difference.**

After a few weeks of breaking in and another of serious listening, I came away excited with the performance of the LP/PSX combination. But it wasn't until I went back to the LP 5.3 *without* the extra power supply that I really heard the big difference that it made. If you already have an LP 5.3 and would like to take your analog front end to the next level, this is definitely the way to roll.

The only thing the LP 5.3 lacked by itself (as do all \$1,400 phono preamps) was that extra bit of dynamic swing that the \$3,000 phono preamps have on tap. Adding the PSX delivers the dynamic swing and makes the overall preamplifier even quieter than before; exactly what the manufacturer claims.

The minute you plug the PSX in to your LP 5.3 the difference is very apparent and the combination will take about three days of being powered up to sound its best. The power consumption with no signal is minimal, so like any solid-state preamplifier, I suggest leaving it powered at all times.

If you'd like to chart the progress, I suggest playing something very dynamic and airy a few days in a row. One of my favorites, Thomas Dolby's "My Brain is Like a Sieve" from the *Aliens Ate My Buick* LP, has a lot of spacey, synth effects with a very punch bass line.

I played the track through without the supply first to get a reference, and then when adding the PSX, all of the peripheral electronic effects had a much larger, more defined space. In the chorus, when he mentions being the victim of a "murder mystery", it goes from being on the same plane as the speakers to sounding as if he's taken about three steps forward. Impressive.

Thanks to plenty of gain on tap and the super quiet background, whatever cartridge you have in your system should be no problem for the LP 5.3/PSX combination. I had excellent luck with my reference Dynavector XV-1s, which only has a .3mv output and the rest of my cartridges all in the .5 - .9 mv range were an excellent match as well. Even using the LP 5.3/PSX combo with my (100 db sensitivity) Zu Essence speakers, which seem to be a Shell Pest Strip for background noise, I could stick my ear right up to the ribbon tweeter and not hear any noise.

### **A Worthwhile Upgrade**

Whether you've been living with an LP 5.3 for a while and need an upgrade fix, or you are considering the LP 5.3/PSX combination, the additional power supply is well worth the price. If you're upgrading, the PSX will take your system a few big clicks up the analog ladder. If you're on the fence pondering whether to spring for the extra power supply or not, I say go ahead and buy it. But then, I always have a wonderful time spending other people's money. Highly recommended. ●





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phono stage  
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**PERIPHERALS**

**Analog Sources** Spiral  
Groove SG-2 w/Triplanar arm  
and Lyra Skala cartridge,  
TW-Acoustic Raven Two w/  
SME iV.Vi and 309 arms,  
Dynavector 17D3 cartridge,  
Dynavector XV-1s cartridge,  
Soundsmith "The Voice"  
cartridge

**Preamplifier** Burmester 001

**Power Amplifier** Burmester  
911mk. 3

**Speakers** Martin Logan CLX  
w/ JL Audio F110 subs

**Cable** Furutech AG-12 and  
Silver Arrows 12 tonearm  
cables, Shunyata Aurora  
interconnects, Shunyata  
Stratos SP speaker cable

**Power** Running Springs  
Dmitri and Jaco power  
conditioners, RSA Mongoose  
power cord, Shunyata  
Anaconda and Python CX  
power cords

**Accessories** Shunyata  
Dark Field Cable Elevators,  
Furutech DeMag, Furutech  
record clamp



# The SoundSmith Voice

**Off the Beaten Path Excellence** By Jeff Dorgay

If you've ever met Peter Ledermann of SoundSmith, his passion for audio is instantly obvious. He's worked for the legendary Bozak company, designed, built and repaired more than his share of gear over the years, yet he still keeps pushing the boundaries of analog.

He is also a legend in the world of phono cartridges, able to repair, retip and rebuild just about anything on the market, from Koetsu to Shure. I've talked to many audiophiles that have had the SoundSmith treatment and the response is always extremely enthusiastic. As Peter runs a small shop and his services are in high demand, it can take a few weeks to get the exact SoundSmith item you want, but trust me, it is worth the wait.

His “Voice” cartridge you see here is a moving iron design. Combining the virtues of moving magnet and moving coil designs, with lower actual moving mass than other designs. MSRP for the Voice is \$2,195.

### Setup

The Voice is a diminutive cartridge both in size and weight, tipping the scale at just 6.7 grams. It is a medium compliance design (with a high compliance version also available) that requires a tracking force of 1.2-1.4 grams. After a bit of experimentation, precisely 1.3 grams was the ticket for the best performance with the Voice in both of my SME tonearms.

I experimented with a few different phono stages, but did most of my evaluation with the Manley Steelhead. Because the Voice has a stated output of 2.2 mv, with a suggested loading of 47k ohms, I was able to use the Steelhead at its lowest gain setting of 50db. This resulted in LP playback that was not only dynamic, but with a very low noise floor.

The Voice should work well with any decent phono preamplifier, as long as you can dial in a little bit of extra capacitance. If not, you may (erroneously) mistake The Voice to be tipped up in the high frequencies a bit. Thanks to the Steelhead’s front panel capacitance adjustments, setting the dial to 210pf was perfection in my system, running the SME i.Vi through Furutech’s new Silver Arrows phono cable.

It’s worth noting that The Voice requires more care in setup to deliver stellar performance, but the results are worth it. Much like my MartinLogan CLX’s (which also require a fair amount of care to nail the setup), when you hit the window for VTA and azimuth, the cartridge goes from pretty good to awesome quickly.

The only other moving iron cartridges I’ve heard have been the models from Bang & Olufsen and the Grados, which have been typically on the warm side of the tonal scale. Though I’ve enjoyed my Grado Statement for some time now, it is not the world’s best tracker, so it can’t be used with every record in the stack. While the touch of warmth can be welcome on relatively flat sounding recordings, it takes away some of the magic from the best records.

### A Stunning Cartridge

Forget about everything you think you know about the moving iron design with The Voice; this is completely different. Not only is The Voice a fantastic tracker, it’s tonal balance is extremely neutral. It does not embellish the presentation, yet it is not what I’d consider “overly detailed”, like say a Lyra Titan or even the Sumiko Blackbird.

I’ve spent time with Ledermann’s lower priced moving iron, the SMMC1 and though this award winning design shares a lot with The Voice, it’s like comparing an entry level BMW 3-series to an M3. There is a family resemblance, and the lower priced model gets some technology trickle down from the limited edition car, but as soon as you pull out to pass, there’s a big difference.

The Voice is built to a much tighter specification than the SMMC 1, exhibiting higher channel separation, tighter channel balance and a 40% reduction in moving mass. This results in a much bigger overall soundfield with The Voice and more precise imaging than Sound-Smith’s less expensive model.

While The Voice did not offer any epiphanies in the sense that I was hearing things on my favorite records for the first time, that I’ve never heard before, but that I was getting this level of resolution and clarity from a \$2,200 cartridge. Sure my Clearaudio DaVinci, has a skosh more inner detail, the Dynavector XV-1S more weight and the Lyra Olympos more

body, these are all \$5,000 to \$10,000 cartridges. I played a *lot* of records with this cartridge in four different systems, and it always put a smile on my face.

Because The Voice does not need an additional moving coil phono preamplifier, it can be integrated into a lot more systems with ease. When I used this cartridge in my second system that consists of the Audio Research SP-17 with onboard phono, the analog playback took a *huge* jump from where it was before, and only one part of the system was upgraded. Cartridges that cost as much as a decent used car are tons of fun, but this is an upgrade that will offer a dramatic performance upgrade to a lot of systems, and it’s worth noting that The Voice sounded fantastic even when used with the \$20k Montana phono stage we recently reviewed. *(continued)*



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## Folks We Have a Winner

Thanks to its level of performance, hand built quality and the ease that it can be incorporated into a wide range of systems, we are awarding The Voice our Product of the Year award in the analog category. I can't think of a cartridge in this price category that is more true to the music and even when comparing it to the stratospheric cartridges, The Voice still holds its own. I can't wait to hear what Ledermann's cooked up with his new Sussurro moving iron cartridge. ●

SoundSmith's  
"The Voice" cartridge  
MSRP: \$2,195

## MANUFACTURER

**The SoundSmith**  
8 John Walsh Blvd. Suite 417  
Peekskill, NY 10566 USA  
914-739-2885  
www.sound-smith.com

## PERIPHERALS

**Turntables** Spiral Groove SG-2  
w/Triplanar VII, TW Acoustic Raven  
Two w/ SME 309 and SME iV.Vi,  
Rega P9 w/RB1000, Oracle  
Delphi V w/SME 309 arm

**Phono Preamplifiers** Manley  
Steelhead, Nagra VPS/VFS,  
Montana XPS, Audio Research  
PH3SE

**Linestage** Burmester 011

**Power Amplifier**  
Burmester 911mk. 3

**Speakers** Gamut S7

**Cable** Shunyata Aurora  
(interconnects) Shunyata Stratos  
SP (speaker)

**Power** Running Springs Dmitri  
and Jaco power conditioners,  
RSA Mongoose power cords,  
Shunyata Anaconda and Python  
CX power cords



# Slummin'

By Jeff Dorgay

## The Marantz 150

\$100

**B**elieve it or not, this one just arrived at the front door. I received an email from one of our readers about a month ago that said, "I know you've been looking for a Marantz 150 tuner and I just bought a lot of Marantz gear at an estate sale. I don't need the tuner, just send me 100 dollars and it's yours."

So, I dropped a check in the mail and thought that this would probably be a real dog. And then my buddy that was going to send the tuner got a little tied up with work, etc and I thought I'd probably never see anything. Another email came, "Sorry, I've been a little busy, the tuner shipped today."

As you can see, it's gorgeous. It sounds great, the scope works and it even came with the original owners manual and wall mount template in perfect shape!

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

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ALO Audio: [www.aloaudio.co](http://www.aloaudio.co)

Anthem: [www.anthemav.com](http://www.anthemav.com)

Auravis Systems: [www.auravissystems.com](http://www.auravissystems.com)

AV123: [www.av123.com](http://www.av123.com)

B&W Music Club: [www.bowersandwilkins.com](http://www.bowersandwilkins.com)

Benchmark: [www.benchmarkmedia.com](http://www.benchmarkmedia.com)

Burmester: [www.burmester.de](http://www.burmester.de)

Cambridge Audio: [www.audioplusservices.com](http://www.audioplusservices.com)

Conrad Johnson: [www.conradjohnson.com](http://www.conradjohnson.com)

DCS: [www.dcsLtd.co.uk](http://www.dcsLtd.co.uk)

Decco labs: [www.signalpathint.com](http://www.signalpathint.com)

DeVore Fidelity: [www.devorefidelity.com](http://www.devorefidelity.com)

Echo Audio: [www.echohifi.com](http://www.echohifi.com)

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Gradient: [www.fidelisav.com](http://www.fidelisav.com)

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Immedia Sound: [www.immediasound.com](http://www.immediasound.com)

Luxman: [www.onahighernote.com](http://www.onahighernote.com)

JM Labs/Focal: [www.audioplusservices.com](http://www.audioplusservices.com)

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Red Wine Audio: [www.redwineaudio.com](http://www.redwineaudio.com)

Rega: [www.soundorg.com](http://www.soundorg.com)

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Save the Music: [www.vh1.com](http://www.vh1.com)

Shunyata: [www.shunyata.com](http://www.shunyata.com)

Upscale Audio: [www.upscaleaudio.com](http://www.upscaleaudio.com)

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