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No.30 July 2010

TOM PETTY TRIPLE SHOT

Interview, Concert Coverage
and Mojo Review

Life In The Pit:

Bob Gendron Interviews
Metal Photographer
Mark Latham

PS Audio's Perfect Wave

Digital Player

First Review!

The New Magnepan 1.7

Verity Audio's Fantastic Finn

Revisiting the JBL L-100

And, the Sex Pistols



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Rocks Summerfest



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Tom Petty & the Heartbreakers

Live in Milwaukee

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PUBLISHER'S LETTER



W

hile summer usually brings thoughts of frosty-cold adult beverages and yummy treats grilled to perfection, it also means music festivals! Photographer David Thai spent some time at the Sasquatch festival right here in the Pacific Northwest and Music Editor Bob Gendron met me in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to cover Tom Petty and Jeff Beck at Milwaukee's Summerfest. There was so much music that evening, we couldn't fit it all in! Bob caught the Petty show on the main stage while I was absorbing Jeff Beck on the Harley Davidson stage, with Public Enemy and 311 both performing elsewhere at the same time. If your travels take you near the Midwest next summer, I highly suggest spending a few days at Summerfest. The music is great and the food outstanding, not to mention the beer. Remember, that's what made Milwaukee famous.

We also have coverage via simulcast of the Big 4 Sonisphere Festival in Bulgaria. This was the first time these four bands have ever appeared live on the same stage, and photographer Mark Latham was there to cover it. Mark gave Bob Gendron a look at what it's like to get up close and personal with the metalheads on both sides of the stage.

So much for the metalheads. We have plenty of great gear for the gearheads as well: the first in-depth U.S. review of the PS Audio Perfect Wave DAC/Transport combo and the first major review of the new Magnepan 1.7 speakers, to name a few.

Keeping the festival ball rolling, Bob and I will head to New York for the ATP (All Tomorrow's Parties) Festival to cover Iggy Pop, Sonic Youth, Dungen and many more. So stay tuned.

We invite you to kick back, relax and enjoy the issue (and the summer).



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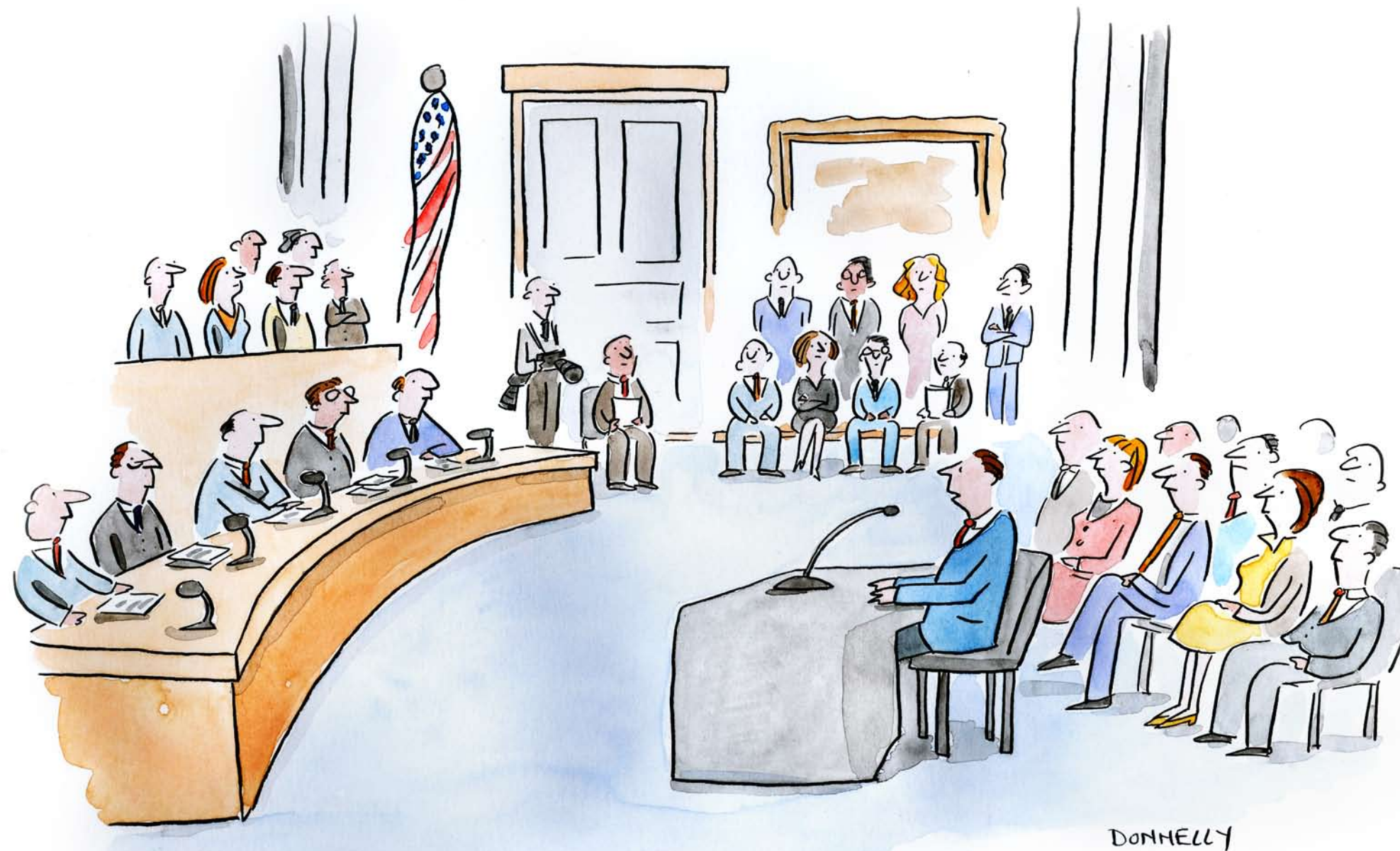
Andy Downing

Born and raised in Akron, Ohio, Andy Downing moved to Chicago in 2003 and has been a regular contributor to the *Chicago Tribune* since 2006. He's also written for **RollingStone.com**, *Spin*, and *The Absolute Sound*. In addition to an unhealthy obsession with Radiohead, Downing also enjoys the Drive-By Truckers, fantasy sports, and working obscure references to Yngwie Malmsteen into his writing. Unleash the fury!



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"I can't answer the question about your turntable, Senator. I'm not an Audiophile."

PUBLISHER Jeff Dorgay

EDITOR Bob Golfen

ART DIRECTOR Jean Dorgay

MUSIC EDITOR Bob Gendron

MUSIC VISIONARIES Terry Currier
Tom Caselli

STYLE EDITOR Scott Tetzlaff

SENIOR CONTRIBUTOR Ben Fong-Torres

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS Bailey S. Barnard
Lawrence Devoe

Kurt Doslu

Andy Downing

Anne Farnsworth

Adrian Goldsmith

Joe Golfen

Jacob Heilbrunn

Carling Hind

Rich Kent

Ken Kessler

Rick Moore

Jerold O'Brien

Michele Rundgren

Todd Sageser

Jaan Uhelszki

UBER CARTOONIST Liza Donnelly

ADVERTISING Jeff Dorgay

WEBSITE bloodymonster.com

On the Cover:

Jeff Beck

Photographed by
Jeff Dorgay

tonepublications.com

Editor Questions and
Comments:

tonepub@yahoo.com
800.432.4569

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**Summerfest—
Marcus Amphitheater**
Milwaukee, Wisconsin
June 25, 2010

Text by Bob Gendron
Photos by Jeff Dorgay

Tom Petty

Forget all the talk about Mike Campbell stepping out into the limelight in the Heartbreakers and stretching out on adventurous jams. Sure, the guitarist gets a few spotlight turns on the group's new *Mojo* album, but he's apparently not about to overshadow his peers onstage. Reliably and predictably, the workmanlike Campbell—a musician's musician that stands out as one of the finest guitarist's of the past three decades—was his trademark self at the first of a two-night headlining stand at Milwaukee's annual Summerfest celebration, lingering in the shadows while unfurling tasteful solos, leads, and chords without overplaying a single note.

For Campbell, Tom Petty, and the rest of the Heartbreakers, the late June concert amounted to another highly consistent and eminently satisfying date. Amazingly, the collective seemingly improves with age. Yes, the band should be able to play legacy tunes such as "I Won't Back Down" and "Breakdown" in its sleep. But this is a sextet that isn't content to merely coast. With Petty holding his arms outward and waving his arms, his longtime mates responded to his conductor cues, performing fundamental American rock n' roll with an enviable combination of ease, passion, spontaneity, interplay, and looseness that warhorse bands like the Eagles would do well to study. A bulk of younger contemporaries could also learn a lesson or three.

As the sun faded away and the smell of pot smoke hovered amidst the sold-out crowd, Petty and company delivered a perfect soundtrack to summer, the familiar mixture of jangling rhythms, swinging accents, and pop melodies coming on like the savory memory of a first kiss. From Petty's throwback Vox guitar to Campbell's shiny double-neck Gibson, everything about the

Heartbreakers looked and sounded vintage, their instruments and music rooted in the same liberating spirit that fueled the toughened grooves of "Runnin' Down A Dream" and calm defiance of "You Don't Know How It Feels."

Whether taking listeners down South via the sturdy stride of "Driving Down to Georgia," driven by drummer Steve Ferrone's steady timekeeping, or extending the coda to "Mary Jane's Last Dance," the Heartbreakers prized openness and patience, filling spaces with dusty harmonica accents and soulful keyboard riffs. As usual, trusty multi-instrumentalist Scott Thurston ably handled multiple roles (and harmonies) with the finesse and anonymity of a behind-the-scenes presidential speechwriter. If it wasn't for Petty's repeated interactions with the audience—walking to the front of the stage, leading anthemic sing-alongs, warmly responding to the adoration—one could've been forgiven for thinking that the band was simply all business. But this wasn't about being fancy or sexy. The group's affable chemistry and wordless communication have now reached a level that few veteran bands ever realize. *(continued)*

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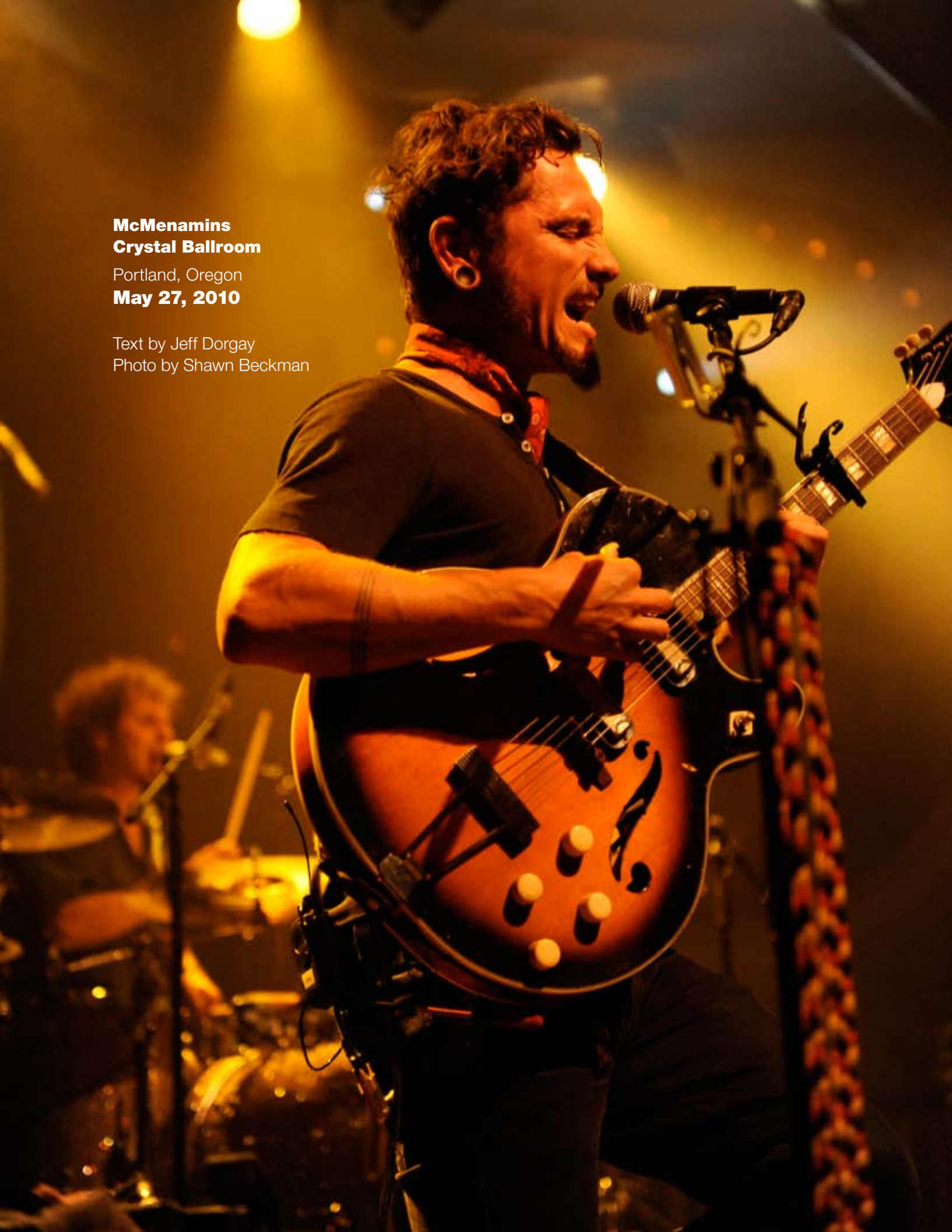
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The inconspicuous Campbell treated the recent material no differently than the jukebox staples, deftly shifting between a pick and a slide in creating psychedelic textures and bold colors.

To paraphrase Hold Steady singer Craig Finn, there's so much joy in what the Heartbreakers do, it's nigh impossible to resist. Better still, judging from the smiles and glances displayed on each member's faces, the egos remain checked at the door. The tunes tower above all else. A younger girl in the crowd was overheard telling her father that Heartbreakers "are old and ugly." Perhaps, but no one seemed to care, including her.

Recognizing the time and place (the summer and an arena, respectively), the band reserved a bulk of its 110-minute set for the hits, conveying "Free Fallin'" and "American Girl" with the sort of impeccable charm and insouciant purity that caused the timeworn classics to burn with lasting freshness. The Heartbreakers strung together four new songs, all kept to concise lengths, all radiating a shared love for bluesy shuffles. The inconspicuous Campbell treated the recent material no differently than the jukebox staples, deftly shifting between a pick and a slide in creating psychedelic textures and bold colors. Fast or slow, the Heartbreakers controlled the pace as if it were a finger-puppet, and, in the course of showing why simple arrangements and good songwriting still matter, made a convincing case for their status as the best live rock n' roll band going.



**McMenamins
Crystal Ballroom**

Portland, Oregon

May 27, 2010

Text by Jeff Dorgay

Photo by Shawn Beckman

John Butler Trio

You have to show some love for a guy that shreds on a 12-string acoustic through a Marshall stack. On the second night of playing to a sold-out crowd at Portland's spirited Crystal Ballroom, John Butler performed a wider range of material than the first night, which concentrated on his trio's current album, *April Uprising*. Opening with "Used to Get High," Butler had the crowd revved up 30 seconds into the set, the point at which he blazed into the first lead break.

Though Butler plays it relatively safe on *April Uprising*, he cuts the trio loose in concert, allowing the musicians to stretch out, especially drummer/percussionist Nicky Bomba. As he rocketed sticks across the drum kit, balancing a light touch on the skins and thrashing the cymbals, Bomba recalled an early Stuart Copeland.

Describing his sound as "eclectic funky blues rock," Butler comes across live as much electric as eclectic.

He effortlessly switched between electric guitars, acoustic guitars, and banjos, all the while maintaining his signature distortion. Where many jam-oriented bands tend to overly rely on improvisational excess, Butler and his mates kept the solos brief and the interaction tight.

On occasion, Butler ventured perilously close to Dave Matthews territory with his vocal delivery and chord patterns. But mimicry wasn't necessary; he's got soul to spare. The only time the show seemed to stumble was when Butler spent too much time discussing Australian politics with the audience; most fans seemed too stoned to care, and the bouncing came to an abrupt halt.

But the minute he hit a power chord on his twelve-string, the crowd's smiles lit back up. Perhaps Butler should rename the band the John Butler Power Trio. When the musicians follow their own path, they are certainly worthy of the title.

Describing his sound as "eclectic funky blues rock," Butler comes across live as much electric as eclectic.

Aladdin Theater
Portland, Oregon
June 4, 2010

Text and photos by
Jeff Dorgay

"Mmmmm, Fucking UPS...We've got a new CD and some great T-shirts, but the merch didn't get here." Not exactly the words to a new Crash Test Dummies song. Then again, frontman Brad Roberts could be forgiven for being miffed about what Brown could do for him this evening. Fortunately, he shook off the disappointment, and along with Ellen Reid and guitarist Murray Pulver, delivered a powerful acoustic show.

Roberts' big baritone remains in perfect shape, and against the acoustic background, seemed larger than life. He was in great humor all evening, laughing with his bandmates and joking with the crowd. The recently reunited group opened with "Afternoons & Coffeespoons," the set blending tunes from the current album *Oooh-La-La!* with various songs from the band's first four records. Reid also took a turn at the mic, singing "The Ballad of Peter Pumpkinhead" and "You're Early" from her self-titled 2001 release. The occasion allowed Roberts to take another jab at UPS. He quipped, "At least her CD has made it here, folks." Touché.

While the Crash Test Dummies have always depended on a dense, layered sound, and the recent record possesses a lot of atmosphere (similar to what Aimee Mann did with *Lost in Space*), Reid is usually buried fairly far back in the mix. It was a pleasant surprise, then, to see and hear her on equal footing with Roberts.

Yet what made the 135-minute show so interesting owed to the care with which new tunes and old favorites were re-arranged in order to maximize the stripped-down format.



The trio did such a great job, the extra instruments weren't even missed. Surprises abounded. Roberts sings in an uncharacteristic falsetto on the group's fourth album, but to change it up, he sang "Playing Dead" and "Just Shoot Me, Baby" in his normal voice. Later, he sang "What I'm Famous For" in a higher register than on the record. Having thrown everyone off, he just laughed and said, "Bet you didn't think I could sing like a girl."

Winding up the show with his sense of humor intact, Roberts told us it was "time for the money song." On cue, the Crash Test Dummies performed "MMM, MMM, MMM, MMM" before taking their leave.

The Crash Test Dummies

LIVE MUSIC

Jeff Beck

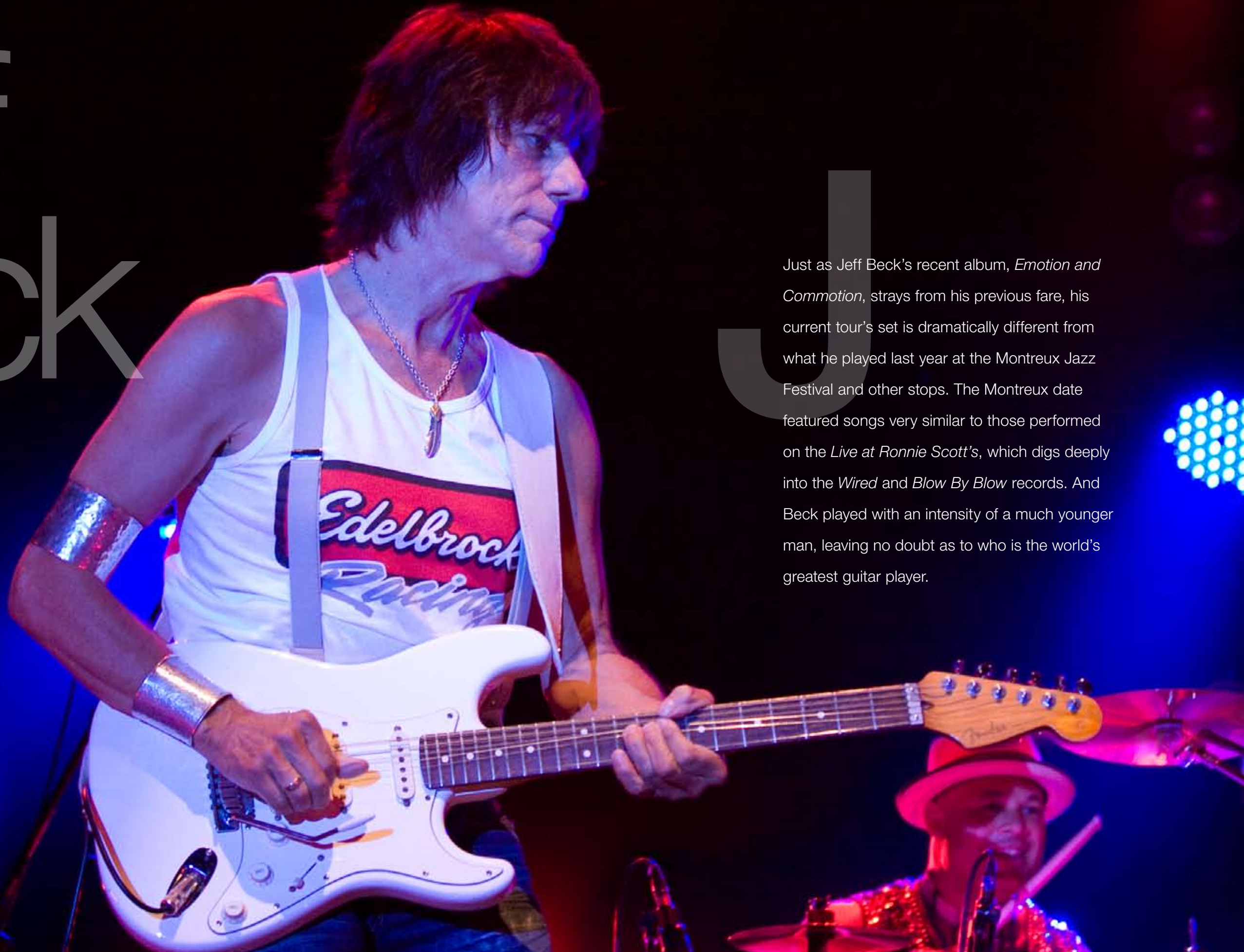
**Summerfest—
Harley Davidson Stage**

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

June 25, 2010

Text and photos by
Jeff Dorgay

Just as Jeff Beck's recent album, *Emotion and Commotion*, strays from his previous fare, his current tour's set is dramatically different from what he played last year at the Montreux Jazz Festival and other stops. The Montreux date featured songs very similar to those performed on the *Live at Ronnie Scott's*, which digs deeply into the *Wired* and *Blow By Blow* records. And Beck played with an intensity of a much younger man, leaving no doubt as to who is the world's greatest guitar player.





Refusing to rest on his laurels, Beck's Milwaukee show offered up a wider mix of material and deep cuts. He bounced around a bit, opening with "Eternity's Breath" and "Led Boots" only to slow the tempo down with "Corpus Christi Carol" before finally hitting stride with the recent "Hammerhead." As if there was any doubt, a subsequent solo let us know who was in charge. Incidentally, Beck celebrated his birthday the previous night, which might explain why he was in great spirits all evening.

In keeping with tradition, Beck has a new band as well. Though several people in the audience expressed disappointment that adorable bass player Tal Wilkenfeld is no longer in the group, her replacement, Rhonda Smith, stepped it up in the rhythm department, offering a funkier style and even greater ability to shred on the bass than Wilkenfeld. Her strong, bluesy voice is also welcome addition to the group's sound.

She took control on the vocal songs from the recent album as well as on a strong rendition of Sly and the Family Stone's "Higher." Drummer Narada Michael Walden had no problem keeping up with Beck's leads, achieving a great balance of power and finesse. Keyboardist Jason Rebello supplied competent melodic accents.

Somehow, however, Beck seemed more like a bandleader here when compared to past engagements that witnessed him come across as a tasteful shredder. Granted, an above-average performance from Jeff Beck is still more than most guitarists can muster on their best days. But this version of the Jeff Beck group lacked the ultimate cohesion that the 66-year-old and company are capable of when the iconic musician is 100% plugged in and completely becomes one with his Stratocaster.

All considered, Beck's show is still worth seeing, even for seasoned fans. The new material translates well to the stage, and you never know when Beck will change gears and blast down an alternate path. Contemporaries, take note.

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Public Enemy

Public Enemy's Flavor Flav takes charge of the stage in Vancouver BC's Commodore Ballroom on Thursday, May 27 before heading South for Oregon's Sasquatch Festival.

Photographer David Thai was there to capture the moment. You can see more photos of this event as well as some great Sasquatch Festival coverage here:

www.mrdavidthai.com/concerts2/public-enemy/



By Jeff Dorgay

Big Vintage Fun

The JBL L-100 Century



The first pair of “real” HiFi speakers I’d ever heard were JBL’s, a pair of L-26’s to be exact, with orange grille cloth and light oak cabinets. You never forget your first. At 13 years old, I was highly impressed when the salesman put a copy of Steely Dan’s *Can’t Buy a Thrill* on the Dual turntable and let it rip. “Reeling in the Years” sounded way better than it ever did on the Zenith table radio at home.

There would be no buying JBL’s that day, but I did buy a copy of *Stereo Review*. (*Stereophile* was a fringe magazine back then, and I would not encounter it and *TAS* for a few more years.) On the inside cover was a JBL ad, featuring the L-100 Century. I asked the sales guy, who by now had become pretty tired of answering questions from a kid who obviously *wasn’t going to buy anything today* how much a pair of these monsters cost. “A lot more than you’ve got, kid.” I found out later on that the MSRP for a pair of Century 100s back in 1973 was \$273 each.

And so began a life-long interest in HiFi and a disdain for HiFi salesmen.

Introduced at CES in 1970, the L-100 was built upon the strength of JBL's highly successful 4310 studio monitors. Just like the auto-racing philosophy of selling on Monday what you ran on Sunday, the audio enthusiast of 1973 saw the L-100 as something to aspire to, including yours truly. They must have stapled my picture up in the employees lounge because the next time I visited the HiFi shop, all of the salesmen were instantly busy. The grail I pursued was in the far back room, with all of the McIntosh gear and was off limits. I knew the guys inside listening would have to come out of there sooner or later, and when they did, I would dash right in.

Twenty minutes later, I got my chance. And while my first listen of these speakers would last only about 90 seconds before I was shown to the door, it was awesome. This was the way Led Zeppelin was supposed to sound, larger than life, powered by the glow of a McIntosh MC275 power amplifier. Little did I know it would be more than 30 years before I would acquire either of these treasures.

The 48 Cent Solution

After a brief listening session with the JBL L-166's that now reside at staff writer Jerold O'Brien's house, I was still jonesing for a pair of L-100's. That metal-dome tweeter and a bit of a midrange hole present in the L-166's just wasn't doing it for me, so I didn't miss sending them away, though the sculpted metal grilles were very cool. Over the recent Memorial Day weekend, my JBL dreams would come true. They had been taunting me all week, hovering at \$299, so I was wondering if I'd actually be able to steal them for that price. The owner specified local pickup and I was feeling lucky after a pep talk from Henry Rollins just the night before. "Shopping on Ebay is *war*. You have to *win* it!"

A recent article on Ebay strategy said to always add 49 cents to the dollar amount you are bidding, and in the end, that's what saved the day. As I counted down from the last 10 seconds, and pressed "confirm" with two seconds on the clock, I had bid \$410.49 and the JBL's were mine. Yeah. (*continued*)



I was feeling lucky after a pep talk from Henry Rollins just the night before. "Shopping on Ebay is *war*. You have to *win* it!"

A quick email to the seller confirmed that I could pick them up immediately. “I’ve got 10 emails already wanting these, so if you can’t make it here today, I’ll sell them to someone else.” I was off. Incidentally, I actually won them by 48 cents; the bid before mine was \$410.01.

\$350-\$500 seems to be the going price for a clean pair of L100’s, more if they have the grilles. Thanks to the guys at Foam Trends (www.foamtrends.com), not having the grilles is not a deal breaker. They can make you new foam in any of the standard JBL colors, or charcoal grey. You can purchase a pair of foam inserts for \$129 and a pair of frames for \$129 if yours aren’t perfectly spiffy. The coveted JBL badge is a little tougher to find, but usually \$25-\$50 for a clean pair. Fortunately, the badges on these were pristine.

The owner’s manual can be downloaded from the JBL website at no charge, and there are a handful of people selling copies for about \$12. Used drivers seem to be plentiful, with woofers costing about \$125 each. Midrange drivers are in the \$50-\$150 a pair range, and the tweeters slightly less.

Much like buying a vintage car, buying the best example you can afford is usually the best long-term strategy. A bargain pair might end up costing more in the long run by the time you find all the right bits.

Back to the 70’s

Walking into the seller’s house was definitely a blast to the mid ’70s. His house was full of ’70s vintage speakers and amplifiers, but primarily speakers. He had the L-100’s playing through a MCS receiver, and at that moment, I wondered if perhaps I had let fond memories get the best of me. Most of the women with whom I went to high school look pretty scary on Facebook these days, and the sound of these speakers were giving me the same reality bitch slap.

Bright, bright, bright. Now I remember why, after I became a “serious” audiophile, we used to smirk that JBL stood for “junk but loud.” But I had already paid the man and after all, there were speaker vultures waiting to grab the booty. So we loaded this almost flawless pair of L100’s into my trunk, and I was back in the studio in just over an hour.

The only thing missing was the period-correct square foam grilles that the L100’s were famous for. The original owner had them recovered in orange grille cloth some time ago. I started with a vintage Marantz 2275 receiver, but this sounded much too bright. With the trusty Marantz 8b in the shop, I ended up finding bliss with the PrimaLuna Prologue 1 that we reviewed last issue. The midrange magic and softer top end of the EL34 tubes was the perfect match for the somewhat forward L-100’s.

Source material was provided by the Sooloos music server via the dCS Paganini stack, fed directly into the ProLogue 1. Standard Radio Shack 14-gauge speaker wire was used, just like back in the ’70s.

(continued)



Much like buying a vintage car, buying the best example you can afford is usually the best long-term strategy. A bargain pair might end up costing more in the long run by the time you find all the right bits.



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FEATURE



Surprisingly Good

I queued up a late '60s/early '70s super-set on the Sooloos and eased back into the listening-room couch for a pleasant session. Granted, these speakers did not have the finesse that my GamuT S-9's possess, but they did rock.

Overall, top-to-bottom coherence was fantastic and the midrange clarity was well on par if not better than a lot of today's speakers in the \$1,000 - \$2,000 range. The soundstage presented was incredibly wide, easily extending a few feet beyond the speaker boundaries. Switching back to a

modern pair of high-quality speakers reveals what is missing; precise spatial cues and low-level resolution is not presented with the L100's. But that's not the point. Much like another one of my favorite speakers, the Vandersten 2 series, these do a nice job with what they *do* handle, and if you use them with the music of the period, you might be surprised by just how much fun these speakers can be with the right amplifier.

After spending some time with various speaker placement options, the L100's worked best well out in the room, about five feet from the walls, only about six feet apart, with the cabinets about 17 inches from the floor. This floor position ended up being similar to the perfect position for the Harbeth 40.1's.

If you enjoy a fair amount of classic rock music, there's a pretty good chance some of your favorites were mastered on the pro version of the L100, so they give you a great feel of what these classics really sounded like in the control booth. Trendy adult chemical amusement aids optional, of course.

Do you need a pair?

Listening to "I'm So Afraid" from Fleetwood Mac's *Fleetwood Mac* shook the floor with the opening bass line. Moving along to 10cc's "I'm Not in Love" from *The Original Soundtrack* offered up a huge soundstage in both the left-right and front-back dimensions. Hours later, I found myself pretty enamored with this slice of audio's history. The JBL L-100 was definitely a lot better than I remembered, especially with tube amplification.

My only curiosity was that considering how good these speakers sound at moderate levels, why did so many engineers feel the need to crank the hell out of these in the studio? ●

Tom Petty And The Heartbreakers

They Got 'Mojo' Risin'

By Ben Fong-Torres

Photos by Jeff Dorgay

Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers are on the road again, and this time around, they're playing the blues. That's because their new album—the first studio album from the Heartbreakers since *The Last DJ* in 2002, is inspired by roots music, and features the band playing more loosely than ever before.

A week or so before they began rehearsals, I visited with Petty at his beach house in Malibu. It's his second place in Malibu, along with a main residence he shares with wife Dana. He and the band also have a warehouse/rehearsal studio in the Valley known as the "Clubhouse." But the beach house also includes a separate studio, built by its previous owner, which Petty uses to record his weekly show on Sirius/XM, *Buried Treasure*. He's a man of many caves.



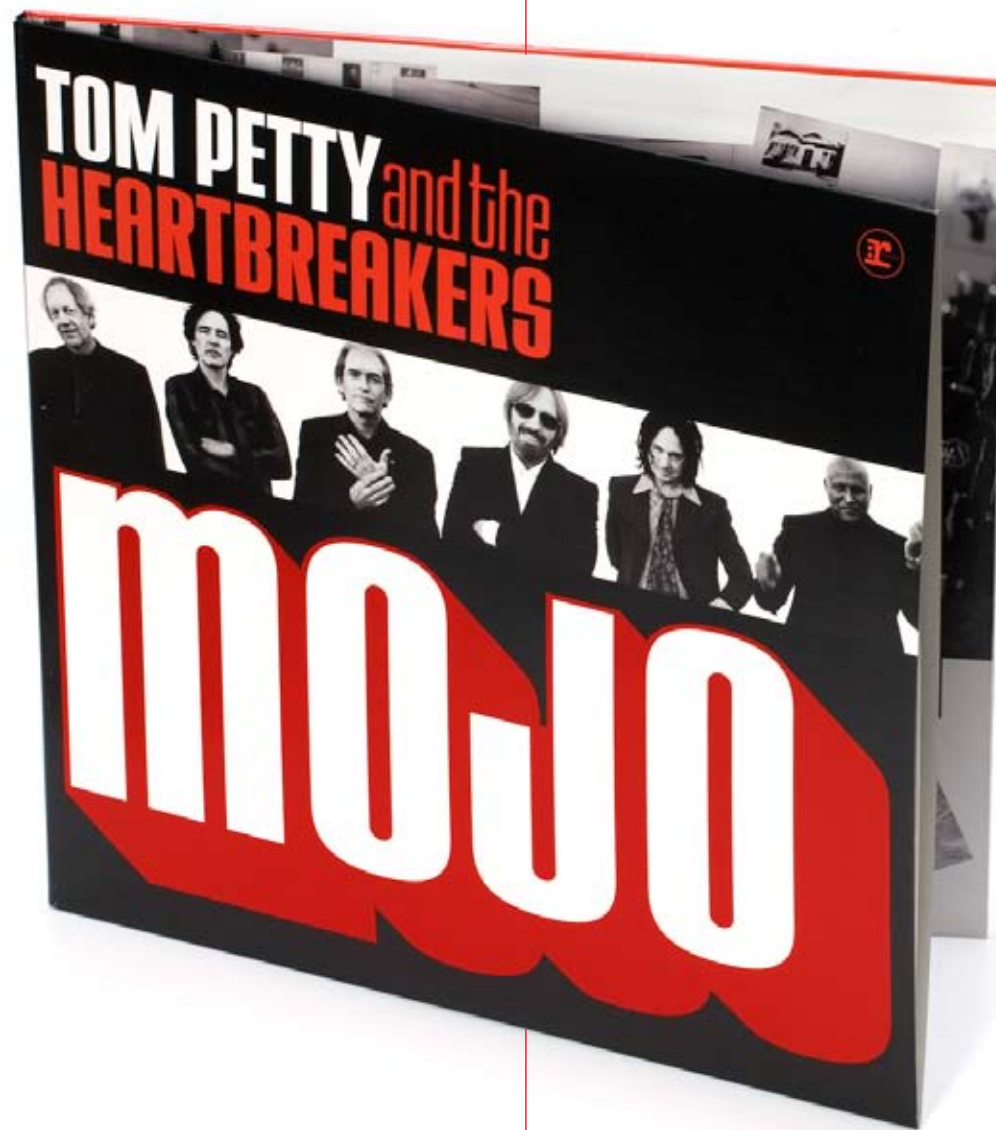
Although I conducted the interview for a cover story for *Parade* magazine (published April 25 and available at parade.com), I had far more material than the magazine could use. Here, with emphasis on the music, is most of our original conversation.

The new album is called Mojo. Is that from Muddy Waters' "Got My Mojo Working"?

It's not particularly, but it is from Muddy, Lightnin' Hopkins...I'd been wanting to do it for awhile. It was a very organic record. I gave the Heartbreakers rough sketches of the songs on the guitar, and I would let them contribute everything, so it was very much a band project. The songs were complete as far as the lyrics; I had verses and choruses; I'd play them the song, say "Okay, it goes like this, and now let's see what we can bring," and everybody would just throw in, and they contributed a great deal.

On a couple of tracks, your Dylan voice really comes out. Do you hear that yourself?

The funny thing about it is, the stuff that usually gets compared—like, say, on this album, the first track ("Jefferson Jericho Blues") sounds a bit like that. But I was trying to do Muddy Waters. It makes me think, well, Bob was trying to do Muddy Waters, and it turned out the same way.



“First Flash of Freedom” reminded me of “Crystal River,” from your Mudcrutch album – the reunion of the band you had back in Gainesville in the early ‘70s [two of its members, Mike Campbell (guitar) and Benmont Tench (keyboards) wound up in the Heartbreakers].

Mudcrutch had an impact on this record. When I did that, it was a very liberating thing for me. I saw that I could do something really fast and quick, and it would really pay off, maybe more than if I were doing a crafted, produced album. We did *Mudcrutch* (Mudcrutch’s self titled debut album) without a single overdub. It was just, bang. That was a lucky project; it was really gratifying. And once I’d done the Mudcrutch thing, well, there’s no way to do it any other way. This is too rewarding. So I did it at the same place, in our rehearsal room, where we put in a studio.

I let them jam more, let them play ...I really wanted to get something as pure as a blues or jazz album. There’s still a lot of rock and pop influences in there, but I strived for purity. And the band was really cool with it. It’s much more fun than being told, “Hey, here’s your part, and it goes like this.”

And you’ve got a reggae track in there, “Please Mr. Police Man.”

(Laughs) Yeah, it’s not pure reggae; that was an end-of-the-evening, there’s-nothing-left-to-do track. I said, “Well, I got this thing. It’s kind of different.” We did it. I thought, well, this would be a good B side or something, and every time I played it, they’d go, “No, I love that song, it’s gotta be on there,” so as the mixing went on, I came to really like the song.

Is this full circle, to the blues?

I think so. I fell in love with the blues ten or eleven years ago, but I always liked it. I probably had some reservations about whether I could sing it, or be convincing doing it, but then after the *Mudcrutch* thing I kinda thought, “Well, I can do whatever I want. I’m just gonna put my heart into it and hope it comes out OK.”

As a teenager getting into music, then, you didn’t mess with the blues?

We went straight into rock and roll. It was really the big English invasion. We’re a product of the garage bands of the 60s. We learned a lot of Stones and Animals songs, because, A, they were easy to play, and B, we dug it. They were a little grittier and rawer than a lot of other stuff going. Essentially, with the punk rock thing, they were playing blues in a white, suburban way. But that was probably where the seeds were planted. I mean, almost everyone I knew glommed onto the blues through the Rolling Stones, because we were too young to get Muddy on the first round, or even Chuck Berry. They really handed it down.

You’re such a good songwriter. In high school, did you study creative writing, poetry?

I wasn’t studying creative writing, but I know that from a really young age, before I could even read, my mom used to read children’s stories and nursery rhymes and things, and I could memorize them. She used to be taken with it. So words always stuck with me. But I’m really just a huge music fan. Writing, the first time

I tried to write was probably when I was 14 when I got an electric guitar. The writing came natural to me; I thought everybody could do it.

It was years later when I realized I got a particular talent for this; that was probably in Mudcrutch, around ‘70, ‘71. They really encouraged me to write. “You got something goin’ on; you keep churning out these songs.”

But I was just a fan of music; I took it in and it just stayed in my head. I could hear a record once or twice and know how it went. ...I used to sit in the car, I remember we wanted to play “Get Off of My Cloud”...a lot of lyrics. I would sit, wait for it to come on the radio and maybe get two verses of it. And then wait for it to come on again. Then I’d get the third verse. Would’ve been easier to buy the record, but I didn’t have access to that kind of dough. (Laughs.)

Your phrases, word twists, rhymes – does that all come from reading?

And I really enjoy people. I listen to what people say. If I’m gonna write an album, say, if I know it’s time to start gathering up some songs, I’ll make it a point to listen to what people are saying, how they’re phrasing things. A line will come by and I’ll write it down. I keep my notebook handy. Sometimes I’ve got stockpiles of lyrics or parts of lyrics, so if I get on a good piece of music, I’ll say, “Well, that line sings really good in this chorus, maybe that’s what this will be about.” Sometimes it’s as simple as you’re playing your guitar and you start to sing something, for no particular reason at all, and it grows out of that. So there’s no formula. (continued)

When did you begin to understand this was something you could do as a livelihood?

I was in bands that had gigs, but we mostly worked on weekends because we had school. But summer would come, we'd play more. The first band I was in, the Sundowners, had a regular gig on the pier of this lake. We'd play three or four times a week. And when you play dances, you do four or five sets. You learn a lot of music. I remember we were really proud of ourselves; we'd just gotten James Brown's *Live at the Apollo* album and we'd learned a whole set of that show. I was playing bass, and it was so much fun.

Speaking of James Brown, The T.A.M.I. Show is out on DVD, in case you hadn't heard.

I saw it when it was first released (in 1964), with my mom and dad at a drive-in theater. Imagine my delight. We went to see a triple bill. *Jailhouse Rock*, *T.A.M.I.* and *The Wild Ones* with Marlon Brando. My mom drew a line with *The Wild Ones*. We weren't watching that. I didn't know what the *T.A.M.I. Show* was. I was just in hog heaven, and I remember having to watch it with my parents, which wasn't the ideal way to watch it, but they were nice enough to sit through it with me, and I carried it around in my head for so many years ... It's the best James Brown I've seen on film. The Rolling Stones are really good in that. And I loved seeing them in that show because they are not buoyed by a lot of hits. They're having to make it work from the ground up. I think they had "Time Is on My Side," but not many.

The Last DJ was an indictment of the music and radio industries, and an ode to the way things used to be, or should be. Did the message get across?

It got across to some people. It was misunderstood on some levels. Now, I think it's what's called "lacking a moral center." That's what it was about. I felt really strongly about it. It's one of the only times I felt, "If I don't say anything about this, I'm not worthwhile." I used the music business because it's such an easy metaphor for everything that's going on. Some people said it's old news. It may be, but it's still relevant. The idea of any dollar that's *my* dollar is a good dollar, is not gonna work for all of us. I've always been amazed that people could get so wealthy and then think that they need so much more. You don't really see many people going, "Well, that's enough. There's no need for me to tear up this rainforest or do this or that, because my life's not really going to change." But greed is a dangerous thing. It will literally destroy the world.

Early on, in 1981, you fought MCA Records' decision to boost album prices by a dollar, starting with your third album (Damn the Torpedoes). As it turns out, it was your biggest album to date, and you posed on the cover of Rolling Stone tearing a dollar bill in half.

Well, I honestly thought, as naïve as it sounds, that, "Look, I don't need the extra dollar. I'm doing fine. But it means a big deal to the people buying the music." *(continued)*






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FEATURE



You're on a 37-city tour until just before Labor Day. You've said before that you don't want to spend all your time touring. Will you stop touring when you think it's not fun or great?

I would stop instantly. But the great thing about the Heartbreakers is that they seem to actually be getting better. I think we've refined our craft; we're constantly refining it. I'm really enjoying playing. I'm not nuts about traveling the world any more. But I love to play. But I don't want to become an oldies jukebox. This tour, I want to present some new music; I want to play this stuff. And we'll give them plenty of the old stuff, too, because I think you owe them that, with what they have to go through now to see us. I don't know that we'll always do 50-city tours, but we'll always play. And I love recording. I could spend years doing it. But you do have to come out of the cave now and then. *(Laughs.)*

But you're finding different musical paths, so you're keeping it fresh.

And we're always giving it everything we've got on stage. We don't want to be slinking by on our reputation. ●

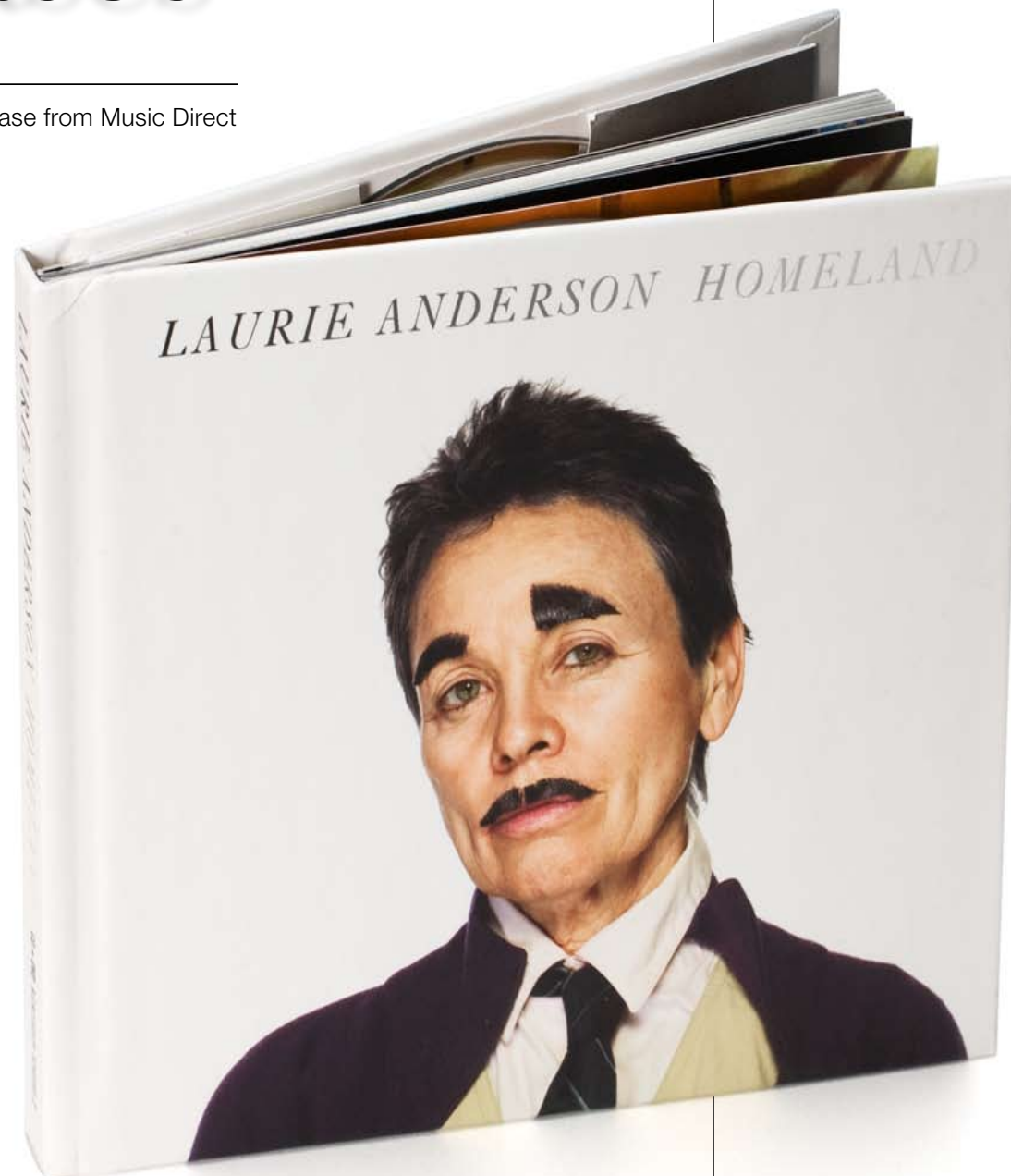
I knew they were gonna do it with everybody else. But not one single artist ever stepped forward and said, "Hey, you're doing the right thing. I'm doing it, too." It was a lonely situation.

I do remember Mick Jagger telling me at the time, "They're going to release our record for a dollar more. I went into a meeting with that magazine, with you tearing the dollar bill and said, 'This is not a good time to raise the price.'" So I know it affected them in that way.

Current Releases

By the TONE Staff

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Laurie Anderson

Homeland
Nonesuch, CD

Laurie Anderson's first album since 2001 starts out sounding somewhat like a Dead Can Dance record, with the opening tune full of world music sounds and great synth bass lines that

will tax your hi-fi system to the maximum extent.

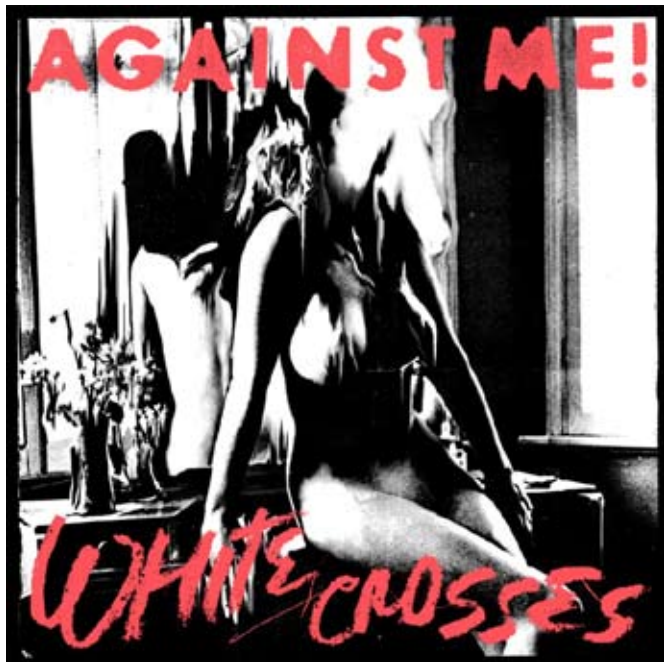
It's a great recording, but the minute Anderson starts addressing us by observing "It's a good time for bankers and winners," you know that she's been paying close attention to the human condition since we last heard from her. As Mr. Burns from "The Simpsons" might remark: "Excellent."

Homeland is not only Anderson's best work to date, it's her most diverse in terms of musical styles. She masterfully incorporates favorite "Laurie effects" (cool vocal processing and the electronic violin, to name a few) with a few new wrinkles, and wraps everything into a gigantic aural soundscape that holds your attention to the very last note. While she has always divided her material between spoken word and song, Anderson sings more here than she has in the past. Her voice is in pristine shape, and possesses wonderful tone and sustain.

For the potential "Superman" cross-over hit, look no further than be "Only an Expert," on which Anderson says: "Only an expert can deal with a problem, in America we like solutions to problems." She goes on to warn us that the country's situation is dangerously close to being out of control, her cautioning served up over driving drum-machine tracks and a serious helping of screaming guitars courtesy of husband, Lou Reed. Nice.

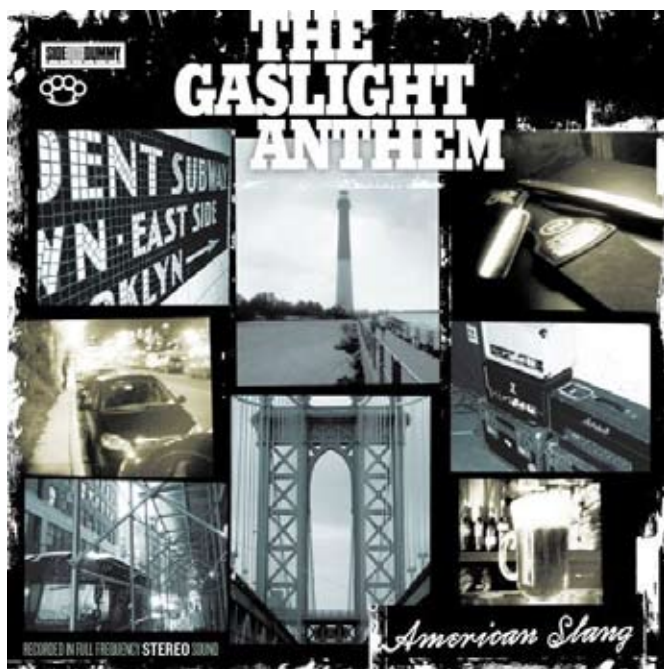
The narrative "Another Day In America" is performed by Anderson's heavily processed male alter-ego voice. Recognizable to longtime fans, the voice—and the person behind it—takes a dark look at our existence and various related quirks with the kind of clever intelligence that's defined this multimedia pioneer's work from the start. No one can accuse Anderson of getting soft and complacent in her old age.

—Jeff Dorgay



Against Me!

White Crosses
Sire, CD or LP



The Gaslight Anthem

American Slang
Side One Dummy, CD or LP

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it,” wrote Spanish-American poet and philosopher George Santayana. It’s a quote both Against Me! and the Gaslight Anthem appear to take to heart on recent, memory-driven albums.

Melodic Florida punks Against Me! explore the past both historic and personal on its fifth album, the taught, tuneful *White Crosses*. “High Pressure Low,” which dances in on a Cure-worthy bass line, name-checks Vietnam War-era Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara (“In retrospect he had to admit,” seethes singer and band founder Tom Gabel, “It was a mistake to go to war without first asking all the questions!”) before the guitars sweep through like a carefully orchestrated carpet bombing. “Ache With Me” arrives just one song later and finds Gabel haunted by something much closer to home. “Your voice echoes in the back of my mind,” he sings atop a musical backdrop loosely reminiscent of the *Zombies* (!). “I see your face when I close my eyes.”

Again teaming with producer Butch Vig, the quartet proves that its scrubbed-up, clean-shaven major label debut, 2007’s *New Wave*, was less a one-off than a full-on change-of-direction. And while the shift might have some diehards clamoring for the rough-and-tumble music of the group’s early days, Gabel sounds downright defiant on “Bamboo Bones,” singing, “Don’t let them tell them who you are!” Not exactly *Behind the Music* Metallica (“Yeah, we sell out,” noted former bassist Jason Newsted in the made-for-TV doc, pausing for effect. “Every seat in the house, every time we play”), but it’s a telling statement nonetheless.

Like a greased-up, muscled wrestler, “Suffocation” and the title-cut combine power with polish, piling gleaming guitar solos atop anthemic, fist-pumping choruses. At times, the songs lend themselves more to arena-rock mainstays like U2 and Bruce Springsteen than the punk rockers that first inspired Gabel. Indeed, the frontman attempts to distance himself from his youthful anger throughout *White Crosses*, singing: “I was a teenage anarchist, but the politics were too convenient”; “Ideals turn to resentment”; “If something I said hurt you, I swear it was not my intention.” Funny then, that the best songs here tap into some of that early rage, with the frontman singing about the evils of war-mongering (“High Pressure Low”), railing against organized religion (“White Crosses”), and lashing out at 20th-century ennui (“Suffocation”).

Brooklyn-by-way-of-Jersey transplants the Gaslight Anthem, who had a minor breakthrough with their excellent sophomore album, the much slept-on *The ‘59 Sound*, sound less concerned with external forces than internal ones on *American Slang*. “God help the man who says if you’d have known me when,” tattooed singer-guitarist Brian Fallon howls in his graveled rasp on “Old Haunts.” Yet throughout *American Slang*, Fallon can’t stop himself from looking back; it’s possible the album’s most repeated phrase is “When I was young.” Heck, even Fallon’s acknowledgements in the liner notes open with a bit of personal history, the singer writing, “When I was a kid...”

While past efforts combined healthy doses of earnestness, youthful exuberance, and hair pomade with Springsteen at his most anthemic, *Slang* finds the band further coming into its own. Sure, the crew hasn’t drifted far from the established template, and it still defiantly wears its influences on its sleeve (the Clash on the reggae-tinged and

surprisingly swinging “The Queen of Lower Chelsea,” Springsteen everywhere else). But overall there’s greater depth to the writing here, the sound more varied and most of the hooks tighter, the band curling together as naturally and powerfully as a fist. Witness “Stay Lucky,” whose opening riff hints at *The ‘59 Sound*’s title track before the band rumbles in like a souped-up muscle car. The intent is clear: *If you liked us before, you should check out this year’s model.*

Additionally, Fallon—his voice a three-dimensional, sandpaper rasp—has never sounded better, and he employs his pipes to impressive effect on street-level character studies like “The Diamond Church Street Choir,” a Motown-homage so dense with detail that listeners can practically feel the steam heat rising off the city asphalt.

Like Against Me!, the Gaslight Anthem embraces a more polished production this time around, the soaring, sculpted choruses suggesting the once-grizzled Garden Staters might house stadium aspirations of their own. More power to ‘em both for expanding on their sounds and (potentially) their fan bases without losing themselves in the process. Kings of Leon, take note.

—Andy Downing

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DEVO

Something For Everybody
WB, CD and LP



he good news is that DEVO is back, and the band's latest release is on par with its best records. *Something For Everybody* is updated for the 21st century, and addresses fast food and Twitter in a way that only DEVO can. A recent "The Colbert Report" performance also showed the boys in top form, with a high level of energy, even if perhaps more spudlike in physical form.

Whether genuine or hype, DEVO refers to this record as "Focus Group Tested," and chose the album's 12 songs according to feedback received on its Club DEVO Web site. Unfortunately, the deluxe analog LP version still only contains those dozen tracks rather than seizing the opportunity to also present the four extra songs available on a bonus EP. Musically and thematically, however, DEVO got it right.

"What We Do" sums the record's pretense and band's humor. "What we do is what we do, it's all the same, there's nothing new," sing Mark Mothersbaugh and company, who, clearly haven't lost their witty cynicism. "You wish you were a Queen, you wish you were a King, you wish you won the lottery, but wishing is for chumps," Devo clarifies on "Don't Shoot."

Indeed, *Something For Everybody* finds the boys going full throttle, firing on all cylinders, and covering all the necessary bases. This is the DEVO you know and love. Clever, quirky lyrics? Check. Great guitar playing and zany keyboard riffs? Check. They've even added Josh Freese (ex-Nine Inch Nails and Guns N' Roses) on drums for updated rhythms. Alas, no one in the focus group took the time to tell these guys that the recording quality on this CD blows.

No one loves DEVO more than me, but the band can't be given a pass for the abysmal sonics. The group's first few albums were recorded to audiophile standards, and the rest were serviceable, but this CD is horribly compressed, with a biting top end to boot. (Think Metallica's *Death Magnetic*.) You won't dig this one on a good system. The 12-inch 45RPM singles that were released on Record Store Day sound much better, so there's hope for the LP, which will be released in July.

—Jeff Dorgay

Ed. note: For a little further insight into the world of De-evolution, check out our interview with Spudboy Gerald Casale on the TONEAudio website...



Crowded House

Intriguer
Fantasy, CD

After disappearing from view for almost 15 years, Crowded House dropped back in on the scene in 2007 with *Time on Earth*, picking right back up where it had left off in the late 90s with the sound that fans knew and loved, albeit updated for the 21st century. *Intriguer* is another chapter in that book, featuring the band's lush harmonies and spotless production paired with an interesting mix of new and old sounds. Akin to many musicians before him, lead singer Neil Finn said that the record "may be the best thing they've done." But this time, the statement has merit.

Wilco producer Jim Scott has done a careful job of preserving the essence of Crowded House, yet adds a subtle dose of the randomness that makes Wilco so special. Drummer Matt Sherod and keyboardist/guitarist Mark Hart, who played on *Time on Earth*, return to round out the group's sound. Finn's wife Sharon (backing vocals on "Isolation") and son Liam (a brilliant guitar bit at the end of "Isolation" that's equal parts metal and psychedelia) make guest appearances.

Scott's impact is immediately heard on the opening "Sunday Sun," which has a similar feel to "Don't Stop Now" but with a distorted bass intro that sends the overall vibe on a different path. Every time you think you've got it figured out, the song changes tempo and texture to let you know you're in a different world. The new Crowded House journey continues throughout the record, with the band sounding as fresh here as it did on its 1986 debut. Combining traditional with updated methods is a daunting trick for any veteran artist to execute, but the approach succeeds.

Hats off to Crowded House for making an excellent 40-minute record, with 11 strong songs and zero filler to appease the CD format. Soon to be released on vinyl, the CD's sound quality—like that of most Crowded House records before it—is excellent. —**Jeff Dorgay**

Stone Temple Pilots

Stone Temple Pilots
Atlantic, CD or LP

The Stone Temple Pilots never met a classic rock song from which they didn't like to lift riffs and hooks, and the band's first studio album in nearly a decade proves no different. The only appeal of what might be the worst big-name rock effort to arrive since the last Limp Bizkit pile of crud resides in gathering with friends, drinking beer, listening to the quartet's "originals," and playing "Name That Tune"—as in, what song did these guys pilfer to come up with allegedly original music.

Of course, STP once possessed a knack for producing a few good singles per album, as innocuous guilty pleasures such as "Interstate Love Song" and "Vaseline" remain the sort of meaningless fare one cranks up on the radio while running to the grocery store or shuttling the kids to Little League practice. Yet the only track here that meets that criteria is "Between the Lines," which contains a bridge that's such a blatant knock-off of Nirvana's "Stay Away" it's a wonder that the trio's former members haven't sued over copyright infringement. Indeed, this corporate-rock platter fails to manage to even get brainless melodies right. More than ever, STP is exposed as a sham, a group of pretenders that rode the coattails of the alt-rock explosion and changed its sound and appearances to go along with the times and trends. It would seem that with all of vocalist Scott Weiland's personal controversies—ranging from drugs to divorce to his split with the underachieving Velvet Revolver—the quartet could at least luck upon something interesting. But no.



"Huckleberry Crumble" rewrites Aerosmith's "Same Old Song and Dance," down to Weiland's delivery. STP also robs from the Boston quintet on the bluesy "Hickory Dichotomy," which comes across like a bad Joe Perry B-side. The atmospheric "Dare If You Dare"—yes, it really is as stupid as the title indicates—shamelessly mimics David Bowie's *Ziggy Stardust*, albeit without any of the passion. The jangly guitars, softer voices, and dance pulse on "Cinnamon" reference New Order. No cliché goes unused. For proof, suffer through the Tom Petty wanna-be-hit "Bagman" or "Hazy Daze," a step below Creed.

Uninspired, boring, and painfully derivative, *Stone Temple Pilots* is so bad it makes Velvet Revolver's sophomore *Revolution* sound good. —**Bob Gendron**

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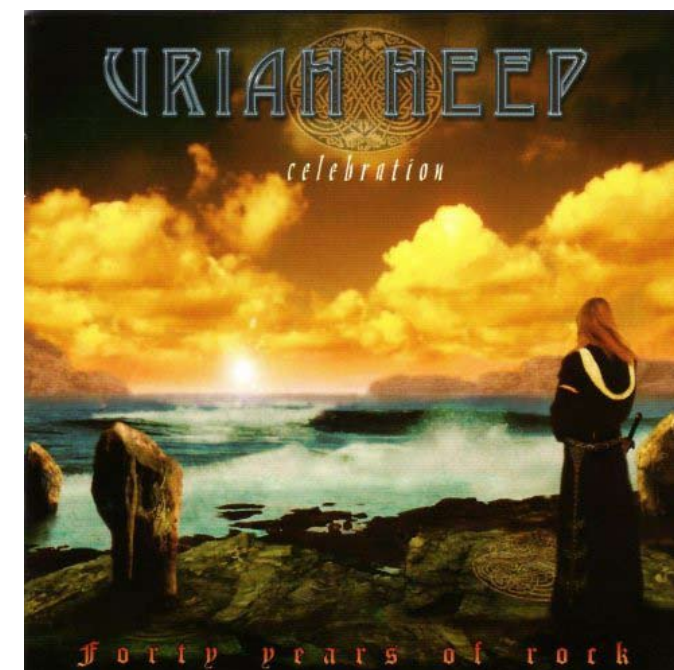
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AcousTech
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Uriah Heep
Celebration
 EARmusic, CD

Though *Celebration* features just one original member (Mick Box on lead guitar) from Uriah Heep's initial 1969 lineup, the present incantation has been together since 1986, so the situation is not as Spinal Tap as it might seem. And while the Heep started to fade from U.S. concert stages by the mid 70s, the band continued to record and tour in Europe, where its popularity remains strong. An enclosed DVD features a blistering performance from the 2009 Sweden Rock Festival. Yes, these guys still rock.

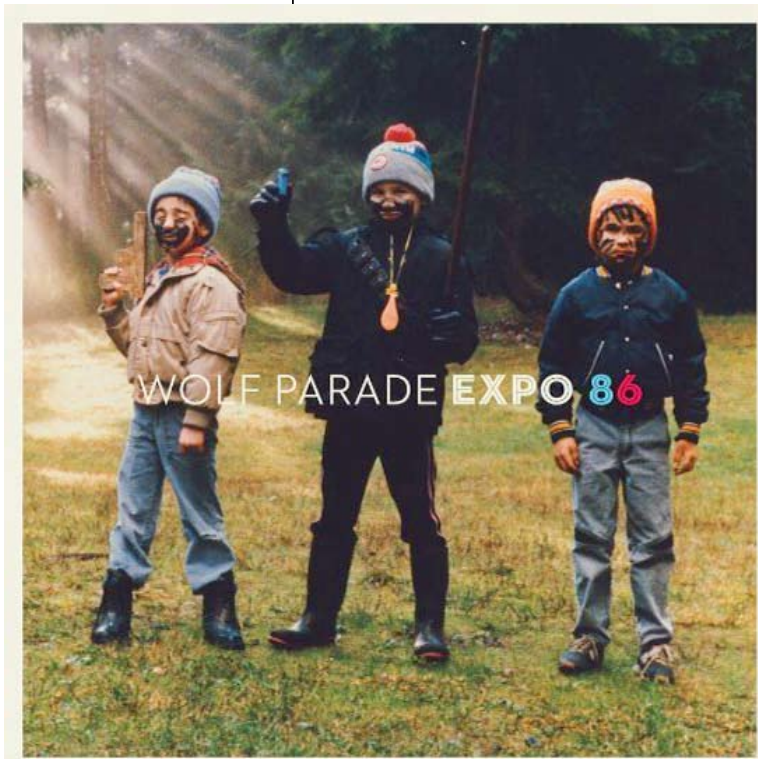
Featuring 12 classic Uriah Heep tracks performed by the current band, *Celebration* proves the group's ongoing vitality. Rest assured that the Heep is not another Geezerpalooza act wheezing its way through yet another greatest hits collection. Two new tunes— "Only Human" and "Corridors of Madness"—are sure to keep hardcore fans happy and, perhaps, make them wonder why the lads didn't add a few more.

For those that grew up with Uriah Heep, this set serves as a fresh look at the songs that we all knew and raised our fists to in many a smoke-filled arena. Filled with great guitar and organ riffs, the material epitomizes what rock is all about. If you've got a teenager grooving on Iron Maiden, hand them a copy of *Celebration* to make the history lesson complete.

—Jeff Dorgay

Wolf Parade*Expo 86*

Sub Pop. CD or LP



By night, Spencer Krug spends time in the surreal indie-rock band

Sunset Rubdown. Playing a similar role, Dan Boeckner fronts the Handsome Furs, a synth-punk outfit that also hails from Montreal. By day, both devote energies to Wolf Parade, a group that merges the best strengths of each members' side projects yet manages to sound of a whole. That's not to say that the band plays anything straightforward.

Expo 86, Wolf Parade's third studio effort in five years, continues the quartet's penchant for arrangements that twist and turn like upside-down rollercoasters and grooves that swerve like an Audi sports car driver on an obstacle-ridden test course. What sets the band apart from its pack of contemporaries is a knack for contagious melody and the ability to make catchy songs out of the seemingly tangled knot of nervous hooks, out-of-breath vocals, and bouncy beats.

The main difference on *Expo 86* is maturity in the form of a previously unheard focus that tightens the grip ever so slightly on Wolf Parade's familiar sonic detours. Rather than veering off the path, songs gather steam and come across as stadium-bound anthems for the youthful art-rock set. While not likely its intention, Wolf Parade joins a legion of modern acts borrowing from Bruce Springsteen, whose newfound cool among audiences that normally snarl at major-label legacy acts is on par with the same crowd's turnabout view on Iron Maiden several years ago.

Tunes such as the jittery "Palm Road," redemptive "Little Golden Age" (complete with an "In the bedroom singing radio songs/Sing them loud" refrain and a reference to a "dirty graduation gown" that are straight out of a Springsteen fakebook),

fist-pumping "Pobody's Nerfect," and hopping "Yulia" all literally sound like they're born to run and designed to help listeners escape a dead-end town. On the latter, Boeckner even proclaims "There's nothing out here/There's nothing out here" as if he's already piled in the Camaro and started the engine. No, the band hasn't abandoned its swimmy, retro keyboard accents that lend new-wave sensibilities to several tracks, and Krug's echo-laden nasal timbre remains in tact.

But this is indeed a different group than the one that made the everything-but-the-kitchen-sink music on 2005's excellent *Apologies to the Queen Mary*. There's a palpable spaciousness between the instrumentation, and the carefree nature has given way to a more contemplative mood that heightens the drama. All changes for the better. The only thing missing? Across-the-board lyrical cohesion that matches that of the songs. No matter. *Expo 86* lets out quite the rebel yell.

—**Bob Gendron**

Alternate Audiophile Divas

By Jeff Dorgay

After attending a number of hi-fi shows and store events over the years, I'm completely burned out on the same six female vocalists that are always used as demo material. If I have to hear Patricia Barber or Alison Krauss ever again, I might barf. But as I like to tell my mother-in-law about her award-winning applesauce, "That doesn't mean you can't still enjoy it." So, here are a few fresh female vocalists that may have slipped under your radar. Give the regulars a rest for a little while.



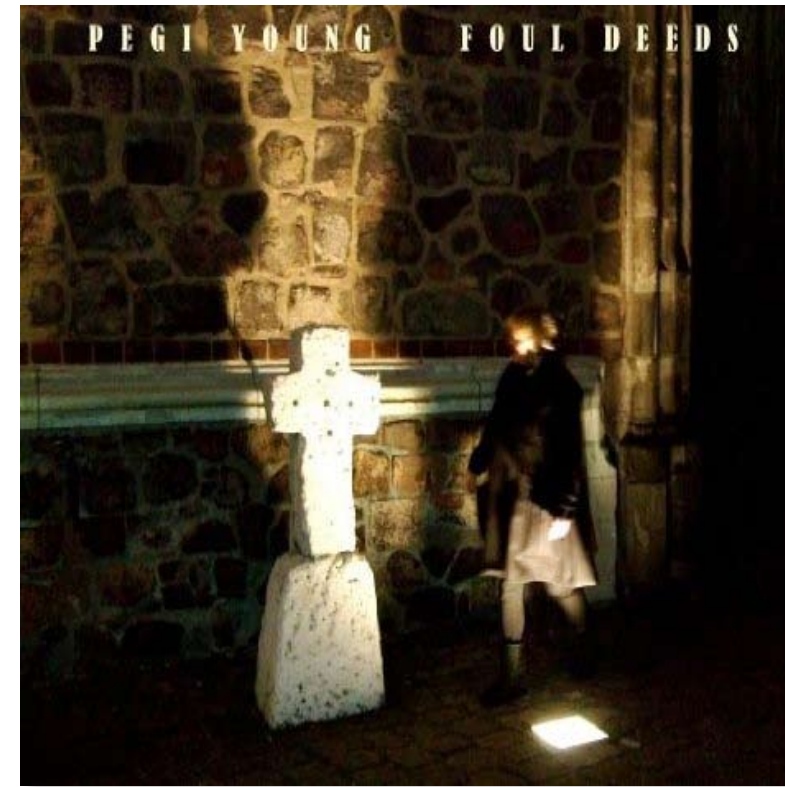
Hiromi Kanda

Hiromi in Love
Music Gate CD, Blu Ray

Hiromi Kanda is relatively unknown to American audiences, but the Japanese songstress was the victor of her native country's *Star Tanjo!* (a precursor to *American Idol*) competition at age 19. After winning, she sang professionally for more than a year before taking more of a "normal job" writing music and lyrics. When her parents passed away three years ago, she decided to start performing again.

Recorded in Hawaii with the Honolulu Symphony Orchestra, and mastered by Bernie Grundman, *Hiromi in Love* has a luscious sound not unlike your favorite Frank Sinatra/Nelson Riddle record. The smooth, smoky feeling will make you want to wear a suit with wide lapels and spend the evening drinking martinis. It's a fantastic example of what can still be accomplished with standard redbook CD, provided it's done with care. Kanda sounds as if she's standing right in your living room, between your speakers, just slightly to the left of center.

The singer is currently in Los Angeles and working on her next record with keyboardist Joe Sample and the same musicians that appear on *Hiromi in Love*. She's tackling 13 standards and three originals, and plans to release the album on vinyl as well.



Pegi Young

Foul Deeds
Vapor Records, CD

Pegi Young's latest record shares similar themes with her first. There are undercurrents of relationship issues, with longing and some regret thrown in on the side, all of which are conveyed with a smile that comes with the wisdom to know better. Yet *Foul Deeds* shows more grit and confidence than its predecessor. Young channels a bit of Patsy Cline and some Janis Joplin for good measure, but remains true to her musical vision.

Opening with Will Jennings' "Pleasing to Me," Young displays a fine ear for cover material. She also performs Lucinda Williams' "Side of the Road," Devendra Barnhart's "Body Breaks," and B. Boatman's "Blue Sunday" in addition to five original compositions. An all-star cast (Spooner Oldham on keyboards, Ben Keith on pedal steel, Rick Rosas on bass, Phil Jones on drums, and Anthony Crawford on guitar) supplies ample support. Husband Neil Young joins in to play guitar and harmonica on "Starting Over."

Recorded in analog, *Foul Deeds* sounds anything but: the album is an audiophile treat. Young's voice comes through clear and strong, with a liquid quality that fills the space between your speakers. Young mentioned that "We recorded on analog tape and to digital simultaneously, in case we needed Pro Tools to fix anything." Clearly, no fixes were required. This is the way they should all be made.

Young channels a bit of Patsy Cline and some Janis Joplin for good measure, but remains true to her musical vision.



The songs on *The Ghost Who Walks* claim a slightly alt-country accent, with varying levels of despair that hint that something wrong could happen at any time. The edginess lends to the excitement.

Karen Elson

The Ghost Who Walks

XL recordings, CD and LP

Like Pegi Young, Karen Elson is married to a rock star, and, like Young again, didn't weasel on her husband's fame to score a record deal. Elson's work would stand on its own independent of her celebrated significant other or her day job as a supermodel. Though you have to wonder whether she and Jack White are attracted to each other out of a shared love for the dark side, or if some of his dark intensity has rubbed off on her.

Far from being a musical neophyte, Elson has worked with Robert Plant and Cat Power, as well as the Citizens Band in NYC. Here, she invites fellow Citizens Band member Rachel Garniez to handle backing vocals, keyboards, and accordion.

The songs on *The Ghost Who Walks* claim a slightly alt-country accent, with varying levels of despair that hint that something wrong could happen at any time. The edginess lends to the excitement. Moods waver from dreamy and gothic to burlesque ("100 Years From Now"). The album's latter half lends to a more consistent feel, the fare full-on country with heavier doses of pedal steel and vocal twang.

Unfortunately, the great songs don't shine through because the mixing is terribly grungy and the mastering atrocious. Elson's luscious vocals are buried in the murky sound, and what remains is harshly compressed. Perhaps that's the effect White intended, but if you care about sound quality, don't bother buying this one on CD or LP; a download is all you need. Let's hope Elson's next record gets the attention to production it deserves.



Wild

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Oasis

Time Flies...1994-2009: The Complete Singles Collection

Big Brother/Columbia/Legacy

5 180g LP box set or 3CD/1DVD box set or 2CD.

Oasis crammed more controversy, drama, and primadona antics into 15 years than most feuding married couples do during an entire lifetime. Brothers Liam and Noel Gallagher played the roles of two bickering women, seemingly disagreeing on certain occasions just for the sake of causing a stink, each flexing their ego no matter what the cost. Indeed, the siblings' War of the Roses spats began to grow stale years ago, with the predictable turmoil starting to seep into their later-period albums, which progressively declined in quality.

Brash, arrogant, conceited, smart, freewheeling, haughty—Oasis encompassed the full range of rock-star attitudes and weren't shy about blowing its own horn, whether equating its songs to those of the Beatles or smugly enjoying its status as Britain's most in-demand group. The quartet's success remains indisputable. Sheer numbers don't lie: 70 million records sold worldwide; a record-setting 22 consecutive Top 10 U.K. hits (including eight Number One entries); 765 total weeks logged on the U.K. singles and album charts; and the fastest-selling concert ticket in British history, as more than 3 million people applied for the rights to buy a ticket to Oasis' pair of 1996 Knebworth shows, at which the band ended up playing before an audience of a quarter-million. Bigger than Jesus? Definitely maybe.



But beyond all of the figures and theatrics, often so dominant that they obscured the music, loomed a band that often lived up to its inflated hype by way of pop's oldest format: the single. Apart from 1994's debut *Definitely Maybe* and 1995's *(What's the Story) Morning Glory*, Oasis never again made another indisputably great album. Yet the memorable singles kept pouring in. Borrowing liberally from its English pop predecessors—Oasis' stew mixed everything from raw, blues-influenced rock n' roll to cocksure glam rock to harmonic pop to swaggering post-punk to bright psychedelia—the group spearheaded its native country's musical resurgence, leading the Britpop movement and embracing the attention that other acts intensely disliked. Moreover, the Manchester lads also claimed a longevity that contemporaries such as Suede and the Stone Roses lacked.

Surpassing the 2006 double-disc collection *Stop the Clocks*, which focuses on deep cuts and B-sides, and complementing 1998's *The Masterplan*, an assembly of B-sides, *Time Flies...1994-2009* lays out the band's 27 singles and makes a damn convincing case for Oasis' status as the finest singles band of its generation. *(continued)*

Brash, arrogant, conceited, smart, freewheeling, haughty—Oasis encompassed the full range of rock-star attitudes and weren't shy about blowing its own horn...



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MUSIC

(Important note: The standard 2CD version doesn't include "Sunday Morning Call" but features "Champagne Supernova," technically not a single but a huge radio track in America. The superior British configurations—a 4CD clamshell box and the 5 180g LP vinyl box, each complete with colorful booklets—claim all of the singles at the expense of "Champagne Supernova.") Given Oasis' propensity for coming across as assholes, the band understood the concepts of sensitivity, melancholy, and vulnerability.

Whether soaking up the swirling textures of the chiming "Live Forever" or bang-a-gong-and-get-it-on stomp of "Cigarettes and Alcohol," the winding riffs on the so-silly-it's-good "Shakermaker" or magnetic hooks of the still-phenomenal "Don't Look Back In Anger," the plaintive meditation on the Lennon-esque "Let There Be Love" or full-on electric rush of the anthemic "The Shock of the Lightning," or the folk-grounded crunch of "Little By Little," the

melodic consistency, instinctive structures, and brilliant songwriting defy expectations. (Granted, there's no saving "She Is Love," which still sounds as if it was penned by an American granola band, circa 1994.) Think of the anthology as a communal jukebox that just doesn't quit.

In addition to presenting the singles across two discs, the 4CD clamshell set also includes a DVD of all 38 of Oasis' videos. Better still, a fourth disc presents the band's last-ever recorded concert, a July 2009 date at London's Roundhouse that finds the group in fine form. For digital fans, this is the way to go. And while no remastering is involved on any of the configurations, the deluxe limited-edition vinyl box set offers terrific sound, with the songs packing more punch, dynamics, and details than they do digitally. It should also replace any want to collect all of the band's output on vinyl. Almost all of what you need (several great non-single tracks are missing) is here. —**Bob Gendron**



It all made perfect sense to me. But then again, I was obsessed with the existentialism of Zippy the Pinhead at the time.



Time Warp: The Sounds of Science

In the midst of a dreary spring afternoon in 1982, I bought my first Laurie Anderson record, *Big Science*, because I thought it had a cool cover. (Admittedly, that's the reason I've bought quite a few records over the years.) And since I was heavily into black-and-white photography at the time, *Big Science* immediately resonated with me when I saw the B&W close-up of an AC outlet on the inner sleeve. At the time, I had also been doing a photo study of electronic components. The pieces were lining up. And then more fell into place.

Little did I know then that the opening track, "From the Air," would become a theme song for the rest of my life—and even more so after 9/11. I remember hearing Anderson reflecting on an airplane captain announcing a crash landing and saying, "Uh oh, looks like it's going to be some day..." I was instantly hooked on her wacky perspective and trippy, electronic soundscapes. The rest of the songs were equally bizarre. On "Sweaters," in a voice that half screams and half whines, Anderson declares, "I no longer love your mouth, I no longer love your eyes, I no longer love the color of your sweater..." over the top of atonal violin riffs. It all made perfect sense to me. But then again, I was obsessed with the existentialism of Zippy the Pinhead at the time.

Making this treasure even better was the fact that it was a serious *audiophile quality* record. It had a soundstage a mile wide, killer dynamics, and layer upon layer of intriguing electronic sounds. Of course, I had to share this with all of my audiophile buddies, but they were not amused. "This is terrible, where did you get this?," queried my pal Jon as I played the album on the way home from an evening of serious drinking. Ah, but my revenge came a year later, when, strolling into my favorite stereo shop, I noticed Jon and his buddies all listening to *Big Science* and acting much more hip than they had a right to be. Bastards!

Big Science continues to follow me to this day. I recently purchased a test pressing of the LP for \$9 on eBay. It sounds even better than my original. If you enjoy Anderson's music, copies are floating around at a reasonable price and worth seeking out.

—Jeff Dorgay



The Essence of Balance

The EAR 834P

By Jerold O'Brien

EAR 834P

ON

POWER



I am probably the last person to review this rather innocuous-looking tube phono preamp. I'd heard about it for years, but this is my first hands-on experience with it. This one is the most basic version, being all black and lacking the volume control of more deluxe versions. Circuit-wise, it's identical to those upper models. I actually prefer this model because it maximizes the price/performance ratio in the users favor.

The 834P is available in a few different configurations: MM only for \$1,495, the MM/MC version reviewed here for \$1,695 and the 834P Deluxe, which features a chrome front panel and some connector upgrades, for \$2,295. The two basic models are only available in black. The standard MM input has 48dB of gain, while the MC section offers 70dB.

The 834P is not overrun with features; it's just the opposite. All of the performance is on the inside of the unassuming box. The rear panel features gold-plated RCA jacks, a cursory ground-wire binding post, a fuse holder and an MM/MC switch. That's it. A word of caution, though, for those who like to tweak their systems with the power cord of their choice: that ground connector is awfully close to the IEC socket.

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FEATURE

Straightforward Layout

A peek under the hood reveals some very tidy construction techniques. There's a single circuit board which is divided down the middle – half is power supply and the other is amplification circuitry. There's also a rather thick, steel divider down the middle of the chassis to shield the amplification circuitry from the power supply. On the power supply side, one finds neatly arrayed filter caps and a rather large toroidal transformer. The circuitry side reveals the two transformers for MC Cartridge step-up duties as well as three JJ manufactured ECC 83/12AX7 tubes. Tube rollers will be happy with tuning options, and we'll cover that later.

A couple of numbers to be aware of. The MM input impedance is set at 47Kohms while the

MC transformers present about a 125ohm load to your cartridge. I'm told that special-order loading for MC cartridges can be obtained from the factory. I used a Sumiko Blackbird high-output moving-coil cartridge for this review and fed it to the MM input, per Sumiko's loading suggestion of 47k.

The Sound

So how *does* it sound? Coherent is the word that kept coming to mind; everything seems to hang together as a whole wrought from the same material. There is no emphasis of any frequency spectrum. Images are presented in space in perfectly scaled left-to-right and front-to-back harmoniously. On classical music, the strings are sweet, never steely, and horns never have the strident glare that can become so off-putting.

Big-scale dynamics aren't the best I've heard but are certainly convincing. On small jazz ensembles, the resonance of acoustic bass is present and accounted for while cymbals possess the right amount of detail and shimmer without any tizziness.

On rock recordings, the dynamic swings are rendered with appropriate grunt. The thwack of bass drums lacks the impact of the best phono stages, but we're not talking about a hugely expensive piece of kit here. Compared to others in this price range, the 834P is excellent.

Vocals are the one area where this little black box truly excels. Female voices had a natural breathy quality that was very enticing. Male vocals had enough detail and presence without getting muddy in the mid-bass region. *(continued)*



Additional Listening



Playing your favorite solo female vocal records will give your system a much bigger, more natural sound than you should hope to expect, and that is the magic of the 834P.

Is this the perfect phono stage? No, but it's a very, very good one. As mentioned before, bass dynamics are not the last word in realism. It's slightly lacking in ultimate transparency and it's a bit laid back in its presentation. But these are minor caveats at the price point. You could do far worse for this money with other products.

Tweaks

Swapping power cords yielded mixed results. I finally settled on a Crystal Cable Ultra as the best performer over the stock power cord in the system as it's currently configured. Playing around with various interconnects, I settled on AudioQuest Niagara as being a perfect partner to the 834P in my system. Both gave the best balance of tonality and bass weight.

Tube rolling can be a mixed bag and it's all too easy to go too far in the wrong

direction when experimenting. I substituted some carefully matched Tung Sol 12AX7s which gave me a bit more resolution without sacrificing any warmth. I also went down the vintage path with great results using RCA 12AX7As. They yielded the most neutral presentation of the three sets. Your mileage may vary and I know a number of audiophile forum dwellers enjoy swapping Telefunks in place of the stock tubes. The EAR importer, Dan Meinwald, likes to say that "swapping the front tube gives you 90 percent of the effect switching all them does," so that's a great place to start for those on a budget yet still craving the absolute performance.

As a final bit of tweaking, I used an HRS damping plate on the top of the 834 and also tried a set of Vibrapod isolation feet. These two final tweaks combined made the amp absolutely sing in my system.

You can spend your phono dollars in a lot of places, but I can't imagine getting more bang for your buck and more musical enjoyment than spending them on the 834P.

I have to thank a number of people from various internet forums for pushing us to review this product. Having spent the better part of last year reviewing phono stages in the \$750 - \$1,200 range, I thought we'd heard them all. But the EAR kept popping up in discussion forums with a borderline maniacal following. A little research revealed that this design has been in production since 1994, so no one can accuse EAR of bowing to the latest/greatest trend of introducing a new piece of gear with minor changes, simply to say "new and improved."

Up Against the Big Boys

Giving the 834P a bit stiffer competition with the new Boulder 1008, the Naim Superline, the Nagra VPS/VFS and the Audio Research REF Phono on hand, there was a definite curiosity to see if we had a real "giant killer" (a term I personally loathe) on hand.

Five minutes of listening to the 834P will convince you that you spent \$12k wisely on the Boulder or the ARC if you have a system that can do them justice. But eight hours later, you realize that this phono preamp is *damn good*. The best comparison I can make to the 834P is the Vandersteen 2Ce Signatures. Not the last word in resolution or slam, but so good through the middle, you forget what you're missing.

I reached this conclusion after spending some time with the Lyra Skala and Clearaudio DaVinci cartridges, both having a price tag about three times that of the 834P. This is where the rubber meets the road. Making a quick switch on the Raven Two turntable, with one arm using the Blackbird and the other the pricier cartridge, there wasn't a big difference in sound, certainly not what you'd expect going that far up the chain. On the big-bucks preamplifiers, this was a "kapow" moment.

Playing in Its Neighborhood

Where the 834P excels is in its own weight class. Compared with my other favorite phono preamplifier in this price range, the Black Cube SE with outboard supply, the 834P is the one I'd roll with in a heartbeat. The Black Cube SE has slightly more bass slam, but the three dimensionality that the 834P offers at this price is truly a huge helping of the "analog magic," which I hadn't heard with the other competitors.

It's important to know that I'm always slightly biased towards a more warm, rich, musical sound. If that's something you crave as well, or if you have tried a number of the other solid-state phono preamplifiers at this level and are still wishing there was a more exciting analog experience to be had minus the huge check, the EAR 834P is the one you want. —Jeff Dorgay

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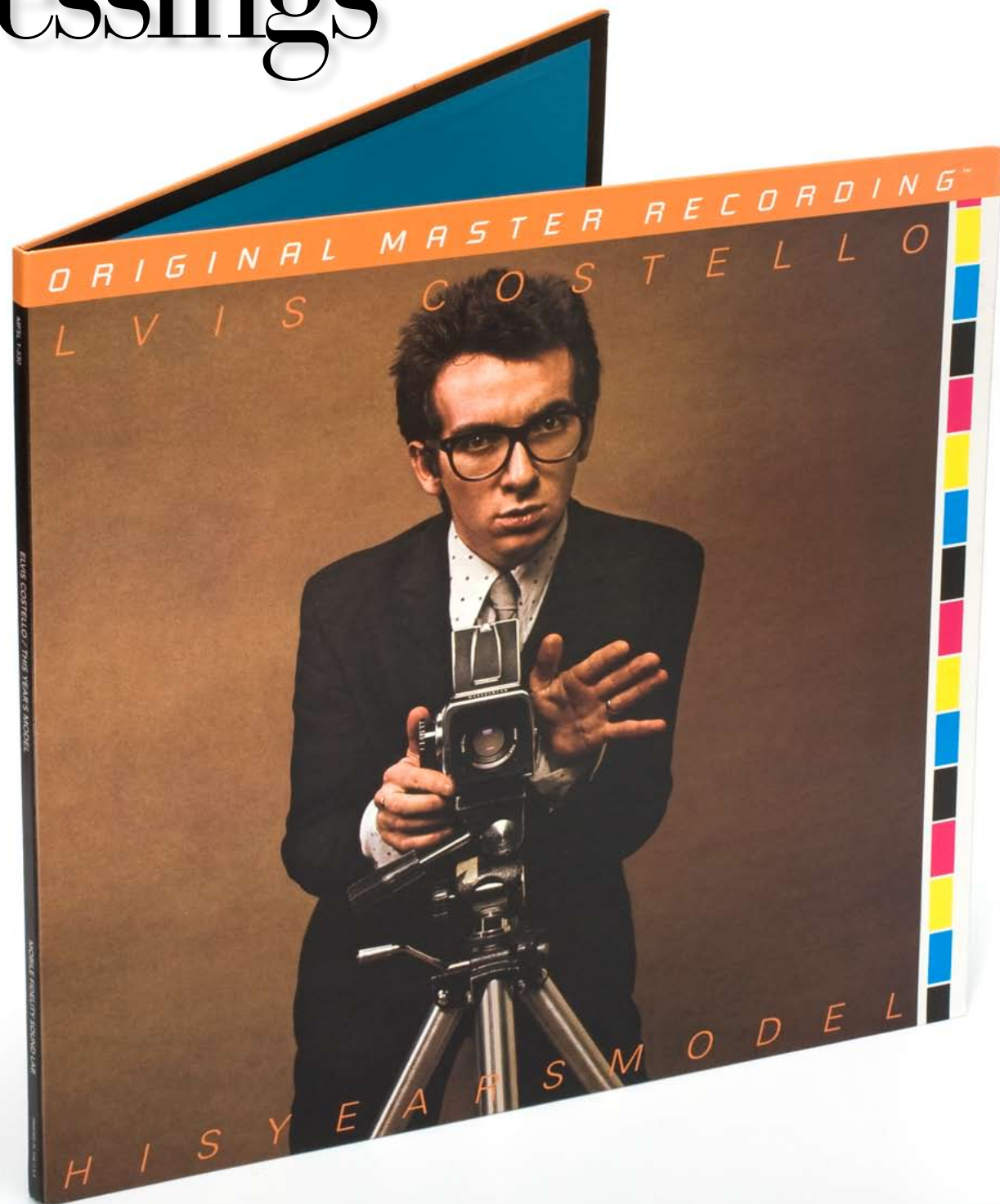
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Audiophile Pressings



Elvis Costello

This Year's Model
MoFi, 180g. LP

Here's what can be considered a deserved and welcome encore presentation. The crew at MoFi already proved its chops on Elvis Costello's first album, *My Aim is True*, released a few months ago on vinyl. While dealing with one of the worst-sounding rock records of all time (yet a perennial favorite for many of us), MoFi's Shawn Britton managed to wring every bit of analog goodness that was in that £1,000 master tape onto the pressing. He and co-engineer Rob LoVerde seem to be rapidly taking over as new-school mastering gurus.

The pair had a lot more to work with on *This Year's Model*. By the time Costello was recording this, his second album, he had more record company dollars behind him and it's easy to hear that more care was taken in the recording. Again, MoFi took a somewhat compressed, thin pressing and turned it into a jewel. Interestingly, the imprint used the original U.K. cover art, with the CMYK color bars down the right side of the jacket, but include the U.S. release's track list.

And the pressing sounds great from the very start, with more dynamics throughout, a jet-black background, and some serious bass. Finally, this record has some weight, eliminating the thin sound of the original. "Little Triggers" is particularly warm and could be the best-sounding track on the set. Though *This Year's Model* has been remastered quite a few times over the years, this is the definitive version to have in your collection. —Jeff Dorgay

The pressing sounds great from the very start, with more dynamics throughout, a jet-black background, and some serious bass. Finally, this record has some weight, eliminating the thin sound of the original.

Linda Ronstadt

GamuT
S5



Simple Dreams
MoFi, 24kt. CD and 180g. LP

Without question, one of the biggest records of Linda Ronstadt's career (and the year 1977), *Simple Dreams* was a monster, going triple platinum in its first year of sales and yielding the smash singles "Blue Bayou" and "It's So Easy."

Ronstadt had an all star cast backing her up on the album as well, with the credits featuring a Who's Who of music royalty in the late 70s: Waddy Wachtel and Danny Kortchmar on guitar, Spooner Oldham on piano, and Kenny Edwards on bass, just to name a few. Dolly Parton even contributed backing vocals to "I Never Will Marry," planting the seed for the *Trio* albums that she and Ronstadt would work on together almost ten years later.

The results were pure pop magic. Ronstadt's vocals are ethereal, and even the original record possessed well above-average sound quality. It was the top of analog's heyday, yet MoFi has taken the master tape to another level. Much like Madeline Peyroux's *Bare Bones*, also reviewed here, this record is the ultimate in analog perfection. Music lovers and audiophiles alike will love this pressing, albeit for different reasons. The instruments have a lot more breathing room and Ronstadt's voice has a fully defined space of its own that exists about five feet in front of your listening chair.

Even if you've heard *Simple Dreams* a million times, the level of clarity that this record achieves will turn up fresh details that you haven't experienced before. Surfaces are dead quiet, and the overall tonality is exquisite; there is not a hint of harshness anywhere to be found.

Digital aficionados take note: The 24kt. gold CD comes as close as humanly possible to the LP. Those of you that purchased MoFi's remaster of Beck's *Sea Change* will understand the comparison; this disc has similar sonics and tonality, so you will not be disappointed.

—Jeff Dorgay



The Cars

Shake it Up
MoFi, 180g. LP

Last year, MoFi reissued the band's original, self-titled album. The follow-up, *Candy-O* is still in the label's pipeline, but in the meantime, we get the quintet's fourth release, *Shake it Up*. Yet while having yielded five singles and double platinum sales, *Shake it Up* is not as focused as the Cars first two releases.

Much like MoFi's recent version of Rickie Lee Jones' *Pirates*, this pressing is on the forward side of the sound spectrum. Slightly more open sounding than the 24kt. MoFi CD, it just doesn't have a large dose of analog magic. Unless you are an ultimate Cars fan or collector, stick with the CD. —Jeff Dorgay

Madeleine Peyroux



Bare Bones
MoFi, 180g. LP

It's always nice to see current releases getting the audiophile treatment, and Madeleine Peyroux's latest work, *Bare Bones*, is a sonic masterpiece. Originally only available on CD, this pressing restores the full glory of the studio performance. Producer Larry Klein (Joni Mitchell) returns and co-writes a number of the tracks and also performs bass duties. In the past, Peyroux primarily stuck to other songwriters' work, but here, branches out with her own tunes that have been honed to perfection from non-stop touring over the last few years.

If you enjoyed Peyroux's other records, you know what you're in for. This is soft, slinky music that will remind you of your favorite speakeasy. On MoFi's version, the soundstage is beyond huge. And there's a level of reach-out-and-touch-it smoothness that sounds fantastic on even the most mediocre system. But on a high-resolution system, the effect transports Peyroux and company to your listening room.

Having seen Peyroux in concert on several occasions, I can assure you that this is as close as you can get to the real thing. If this record won't convince your digital friends to buy a turntable, nothing will. —Jeff Dorgay

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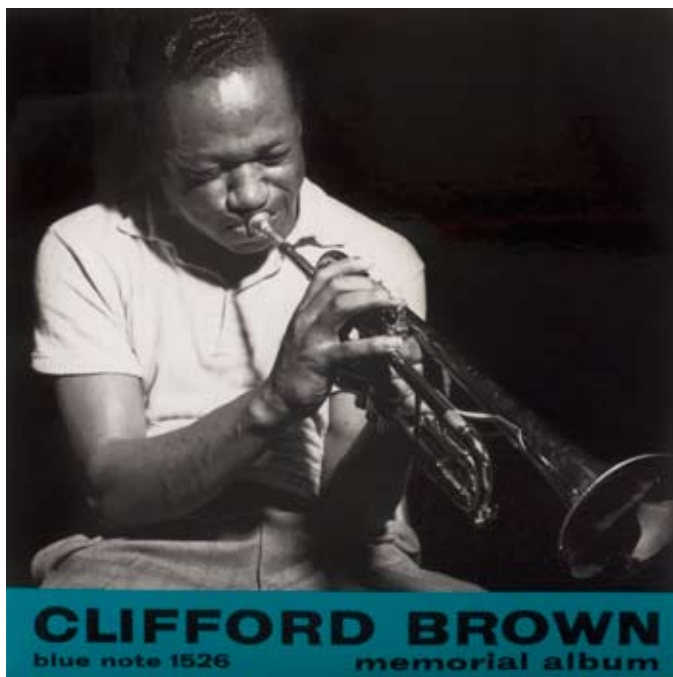
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Clifford Brown



The Clifford Brown Memorial Album
Music Matters, 2 45RPM LPs

Jazz cognoscenti certainly know Clifford Brown's name and are familiar with the legend. However, casual fans might not be so familiar with his legacy. Brown's budding career and growing reputation as a master trumpet player were cut short by an automobile accident in June 1956. *The Clifford Brown Memorial Album* showcases Brown's talent on two different occasions with two different bands. These 1953 sessions were his very first recordings.

The first session features five performances with Gigi Gryce on alto sax and flute; Charlie Rouse on tenor sax; John Lewis on piano; Percy Heath on bass; and Art Blakey on drums. One can certainly hear how the foundation of the musician's legend was laid by Brown's tone and attack on "Cherokee." However, it's the ballad "Easy Living" that sticks in the mind due to the sheer elegance of his playing.

The band on the second session is comprised of Lou Donaldson on alto sax; Elmo Hope on piano; Percy Heath on bass; and "Philly" Joe Jones on drums. The opening "Brownie Speaks" pretty much says it all, as Brown's improvisational skills are very much in evidence. "De-Dah" is an excellent bop piece, yet again, it's another ballad, "You Get To My Head," that's most memorable.

For those wanting to know more about Brown, this is both the place to start and wonder about what might have been. Since the recording is mono, having a mono cartridge is a definite plus. Sonics are quite clear but definitely show the record's age. The sound has the same flavor as the black-and-white photos on the album cover. —**Richard Colburn**

Larry Young



Unity

Music Matters, 2 45RPM LPs

Hammond B3 organ burner Larry Young is accompanied on this outstanding 1964 set by an all-star lineup that includes Joe Henderson on tenor sax, Elvin Jones on drums, and Woody Shaw on trumpet. Like many others, I first heard of Young after being blasted by the Tony Williams Lifetime's *Turn It Over*. I hadn't realized that Young had been making great records for years before this fusion bomb exploded.

Young's pure jazz chops are pronounced on all six of the compositions on *Unity*, but what is most startling is his ability to complement his bandmates' excursions. A majority of 1960s jazz organists played in the "soul jazz" idiom. Young uses his B3 in a completely different fashion. Sometimes it resembles a horn and sometimes it's reminiscent of a piano. It never overpowers the other musicians, but you always know it's there. Solos are improvised and don't follow a set formula. Standout songs include Henderson's "If" and Shaw's "Beyond All Limits," which, true to the title, really does go above and beyond.

While savoring the excellent sound on this record, I found myself wanting to pour myself a glass of Jack Daniels and light a cigarette. And I rarely do either. The sound is pristine, clear, layered and sumptuous, and will transport you back to another time. As with all of the Music Matters records, the vinyl is absolutely silent, the packaging lovingly done, the photos excellent, and the music captivating.

—**Richard Colburn**

Sony Legacy's Setlist Series:

A Great Idea Lacking in Execution

By Bob Gendron



With box set releases on the wane and scant few first-rate artist catalogs left to remaster, it's no secret that record labels are desperate to find new sources of revenue from their vaults. Seriously, just how many times and ways can Elvis Costello's studio albums be digitally remastered and presented anew?

A perennial leader in making glorious box sets and, of late, worthy vinyl reissues—its Jimi Hendrix releases are particularly inspired and a pristine example of analog done right for half the price one would pay if, say, Analogue Productions had been in charge—Sony Legacy stumbled onto what is a seemingly fail-proof idea: A series that goes beyond than a band's greatest hits by focusing on the live element. Yes, live albums have existed for decades, but why not dig deeper, and assemble volumes that draw from multiple years of concert performances? Better still, why not include deep cuts instead of ubiquitous radio singles?

These are some of the themes behind the archival imprint's *Setlist* series, which pulls from the Columbia, Epic, and RCA archives. The eleven initial volumes comprise titles from Alabama, Blue Oyster Cult, Johnny Cash, Cheap Trick, Jefferson Airplane, Judas Priest, Kansas, Willie Nelson, Ted Nugent, Quiet Riot, and REO Speedwagon. All of the packaging is environmentally friendly and plastic free. Every track is remastered, and, in a bow to portable media users, boasts mp3-ready capabilities complete with embedded pdf files containing liner notes, photos, and other bonus features. Each disc claims budget-friendly pricing. A can't-miss venture, right?



0.85

Downloads

By Jeff Dorgay



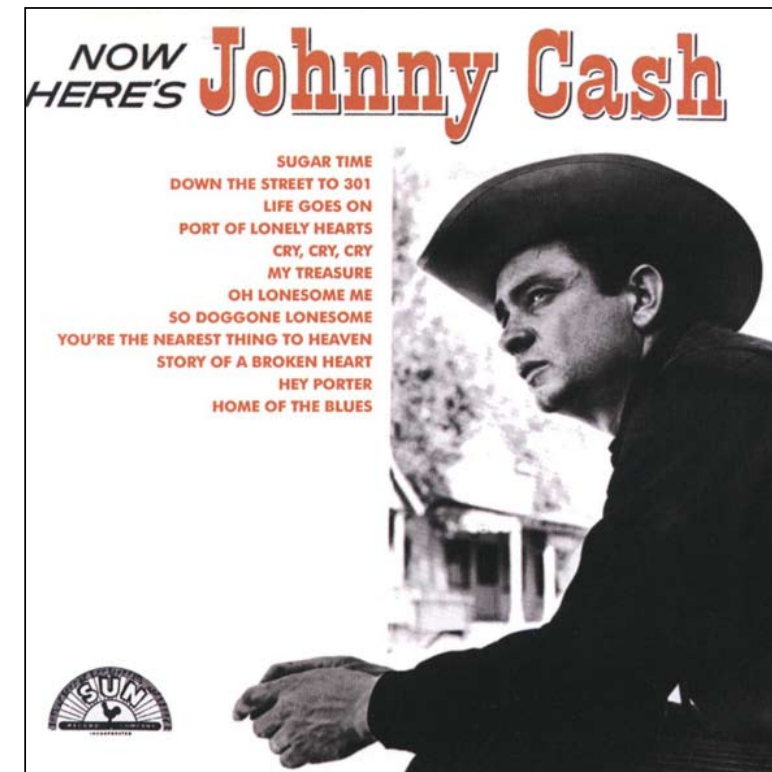
The Kinks
Misfits
HDTracks.com

Nestled in between the Kinks' *Sleepwalker* and *Low Budget*, the *Misfits* album marks the middle of the band's Arista period, and, to many, the point at which their popularity began to significantly decline. Nonetheless, *Misfits* stands as a decent album from the quarrelsome Davies brothers, recorded in their own Konk studios and originally mastered at Masterdisk in New York.

Original Arista LP pressings are fairly compressed, and the original CD is a dreadful reproduction of this record. Mobile Fidelity produced a half-speed mastered copy that, upon revisiting, features excellent sonics and dynamics.

HDTracks' version is excellent and very close to the vinyl, perhaps even surpassing it in terms of dynamics and low-level detail. The slight edge goes to the MoFi in the terms of ultimate smoothness and depth, but it's awfully close. However, the MoFi edition is long out of print, and a decent copy will set you back \$75-100 when you can find one. An extended listen of the hi-res download reveals the degree of extreme care paid to the mastering.

If you love this period of the Kinks' discography, add *Misfits* to your shopping cart the next time you visit HDTracks. And be sure to notice the other Kinks titles there as well.



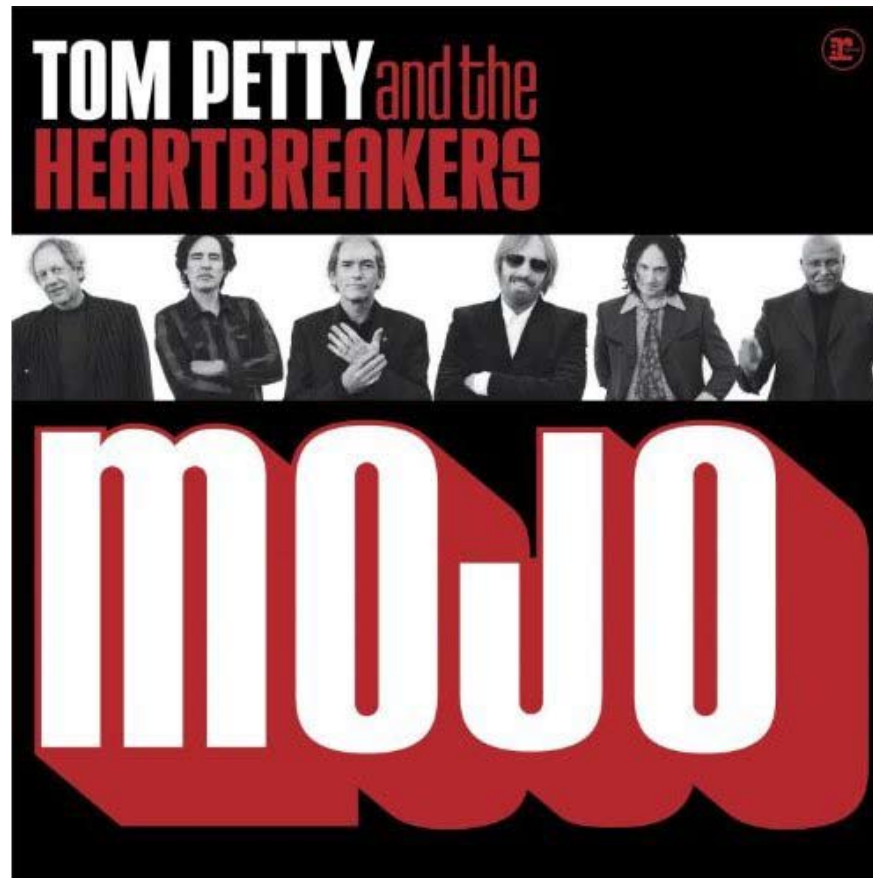
Johnny Cash
Now Here's Johnny Cash
HDTracks.com

The first of a string of Sun releases on HDTracks, this release is a goldmine for lovers of Johnny Cash's earlier works. And, as it should have, the HD Tracks staff took extra care with this recording. Because the master tape was made up of mostly individual tracks spliced in from other sessions, they made sure to adjust the heads before mastering each track, keeping to a minimum tape-induced phase distortions.

Since *Now Here's Johnny Cash* was released in 1961, there has only been one other mastering of this record (on CD) in 2003; the sound quality is terrible. The 24/96 download in mono sounds warm and full, giving us a full-bodied rendition of Cash's signature vocals. It makes for a truly amazing time warp. With no song going over 2:43, and sparse accompaniment, it's easy to trace the roots of today's alt-country sounds.

The amount of newfound depth on these recordings is unbelievable; it almost seems like the album was recorded in stereo. Currently, HDTracks also offers *All Aboard the Blue Train* as a high-resolution download. And completists, take note: HD Tracks includes the liner notes as a hi-res PDF file. Here, the liner notes say, "To pick up all of Johnny's albums and be sure to replace them when worn..." Thanks to the digital format, you won't have to do that anymore.

Tom Petty
Mojo
 Reprise



Oddly enough, you're going to have to buy an LP to get this download: Two of them, technically. Bundled with the 180g. double-LP pressing of *Mojo* is a code that allows you to download the album as a 320kb MP3, a CD quality .wav file, or a high-resolution 24/48 flac file.

Given that Tom Petty's engineer, Ryan Ulate, is a big fan of 24/96 for recording, it's slightly surprising that we are only given 24/48 files. But beggars can't be choosers. The good news is that the high-res file does sound quite a bit better than the CD, which is somewhat compressed throughout. The LP has incredible sonics, but the download gets about 90% of the way there. There's a lot more air and texture throughout (than the CD), but the LP still has that last bit of warmth and tonal glow that still keeps great analog at the top of the mountain. A perfect example of this separation comes on the track "First Flash of Freedom." Cymbals sound equally good on the 24/48 track as they do on the LP, but there's definitely more room between the guitars on the analog pressing, and the Hammond organ bits have much more of their own space, too.

It's too bad that digital lovers can't just buy the high-res file for about \$20. If more artists jump on the bandwagon, perhaps it will become a reality.

HDtracks.com

HDtracks welcomes the Verve Music Group in 96/24!

The transfer of these Verve 96K masters was done using a combination of the best new and vintage equipment available. The carefully chosen original analog masters were played back on vintage Studer 820 tape machines. These machines provide the most stable transport for handling these priceless analog tapes. The analog masters were converted to the digital domain using classic DCS 972 and Lavry analog to digital converters, recorded directly onto a SoundBlade Workstation with minimal processing, in order to allow the music to be formatted for digital distribution. The shortest signal path and highest quality cabling was used to prevent any signal loss, or additional noise to be introduced into the transfer. The entire digital process was driven by the Antelope Audio Atomic Clock, the industry leader in digital clocking technology. It enables the entire digital process to reference the same highly regulated clock master, preventing any loss in the digital signal due to jitter and clock degradation.

The Verve Music Group



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Billie Holiday
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Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong
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Quiet Nights



Oscar Peterson
Night Train



Sarah Vaughan with Clifford Brown
Sarah Vaughan with Clifford Brown

www.hdtracks.com

Mordaunt Short Aviano 6 Floorstanding Speakers

By Mark Marcantonio

I always considered myself lucky that I could spend 18 years with the same set of British speakers, the Celestion SL6si bookshelves. Typical of their country of origin, they were quite consistent across their rated frequency response. Recently, I've had the opportunity to devote time to another quality British brand, the Mordaunt Short Aviano 6 speakers. These small, budget floorstanders at \$950 a pair continue the tradition that has made Mordaunt Short speakers audiophile favorites for 43 years.

The Aviano series represents Mordaunt Short's introductory level for those buyers new to audio or dealing with a limited budget. The basic driver and crossover design parameters are the same as their upper two lines, the Mezzo and Performance series. Being the budget line does mean some visual basics. The Aviano 6 review pair came clad in a low-sheen rosewood vinyl instead of veneer. The finish is subtle enough to avoid bringing attention to the man-made nature of its finish. The towers' shape is that of the standard floorstanding rectangular design of the past 20 years. The front baffle is curved to improve frequency dispersion and improve the structural rigidity. The snap-on grills offer a tight fit yet are easily removed without undo effort.

Inside the box

At this price point, most manufacturers choose fabric dome tweeters, but Mordaunt Short has been a long-time developer/user of aluminum-dome tweeters. This trickle down of knowledge allows the Aviano 6's to avoid the overly sharp or brittle sounds that affect many of its competitors. The tweeter is an oval shape with a thin mesh grill to protect the dome itself. The smoothness of this tweeter allowed me to listen to Donald Fagan's rather hot *Kamikarand* disc without reaching for the remote, something I can't say about other similarly priced speakers that I've experienced in the past few years. Cymbals and other high-frequency sounds didn't force me to turn down the volume during specific passages. *(continued)*



FEATURE

The 6.5-inch driver cones are made of aluminum as well. Mordaunt Short engineers prefer the rigid nature of the material, claiming more-even piston movement of the speakers. Longtime speaker manufacturers like to explain in detail the engineering and value behind their driver designs, and Mordaunt Short is no different. Quality is never trumped and the Aviano line, though low in price, has the important basics of its more expensive sibling lines. The perfect bowl shape is visually pleasing and may make it easier for the grills to remain off, especially for those dealing with wife acceptance factor.

The Aviano 6's each hold a pair of the 6.5-inch mid-bass drivers. Both are located in the upper half of the speakers in the single-piece baffle. On the backside are two equal-size bass ports, one near the top and the other a few inches above the speaker terminals. Much like the tweeter, the mount for the four binding posts are in an oval shape. The posts are aligned in a single horizontal row. The grip design is original but has a nice tactile feel. My banana plugs had a very solid contact, not always the case with entry-line speakers.

Setup

Though speaker break-in can be a hotbed of conversation, Mordaunt Short faces the issue head on in the owners manual by recommending inverting one of the speakers' phases and playing the speakers for 30-50 hours before doing any listening. In my case, this meant playing them overnight for five straight days before bringing them into my main system.



For much of the review, the Aviano 6's were powered by the Simaudio i7 integrated amplifier, McIntosh MS 300 music server and Simaudio 300D DAC.

Placing the Aviano 6's in my listening space was fairly easy, just a few adjustments back and forth before I settled about 28 inches from the back wall and seven feet apart with just a hint of toe-in. After a lot of listening, I wouldn't be surprised if many owners prefer no toe-in whatsoever. I listened first without the spikes and later with them screwed into the receptacle nut. Like many other floorstanding speakers I've had in the room, bass response was only slightly tightened. When I hauled the speakers into the family room, which sits over a taller crawl space, the differences were far more noticeable.

With the setup complete, I wanted to see how well the Aviano 6's would stir my memory for other fine British speakers. The answer came rather immediately; much like B&W 600 series, the Aviano 6's focus on presenting music very evenly from top to bottom. The boosting of certain frequency points isn't a part of the Mordaunt Short sonic signature. The fatigue factor that I've come to dread with some American brands, designed to make them sound sparkly or punchy, doesn't exist with the Aviano 6's. *(continued)*

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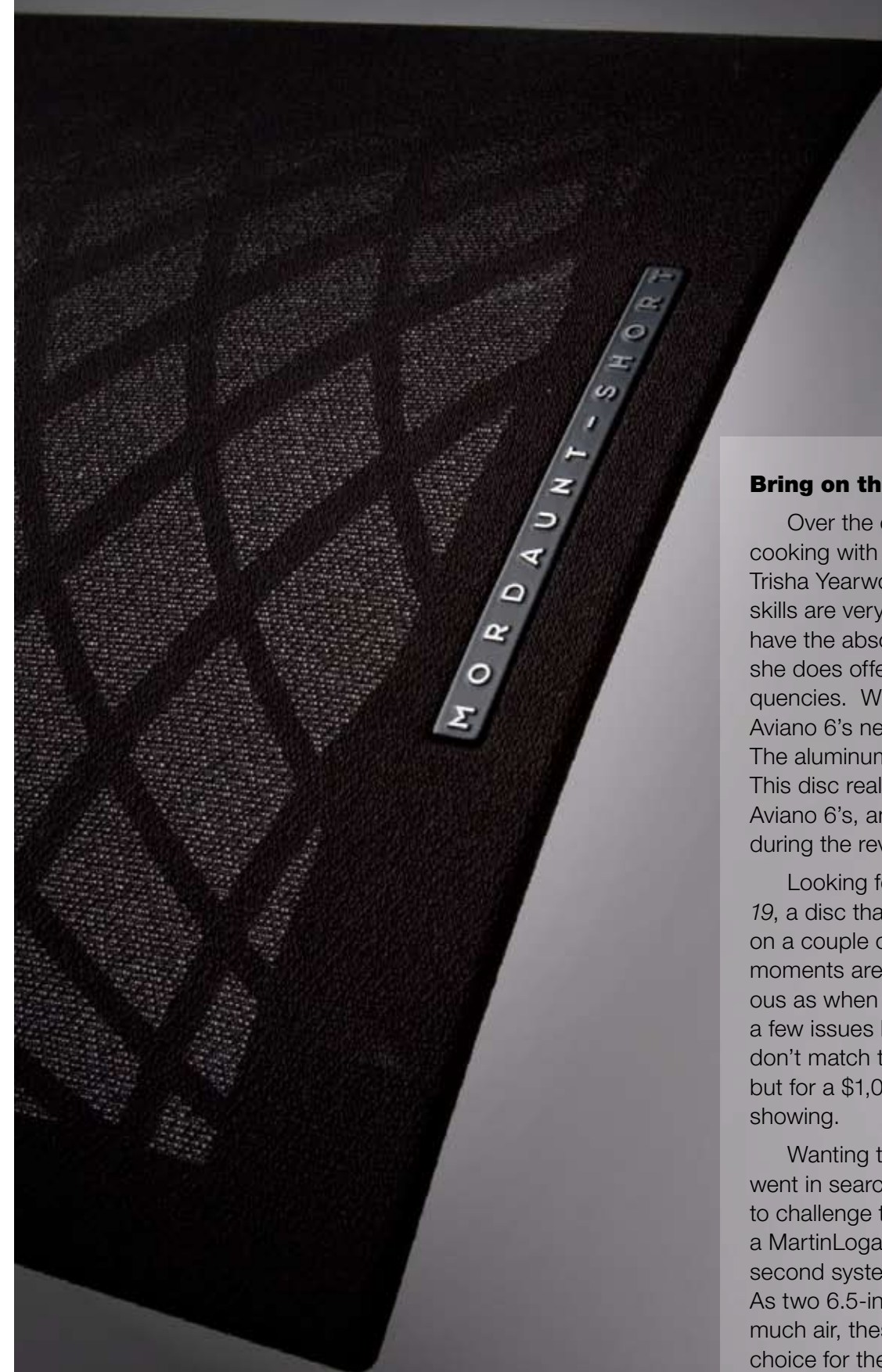
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Bring on the Music

Over the course of this past winter while cooking with the wife, I've become a fan of Trisha Yearwood's *Collection* CD. Her vocal skills are very clean and while she doesn't have the absolute top end of Alison Krauss, she does offer a richness in her middle frequencies. When she does go higher, the Aviano 6's never become in the least bit shrill. The aluminum tweeter stays smooth as glass. This disc really brought out the best in the Aviano 6's, and it was played several times during the review period.

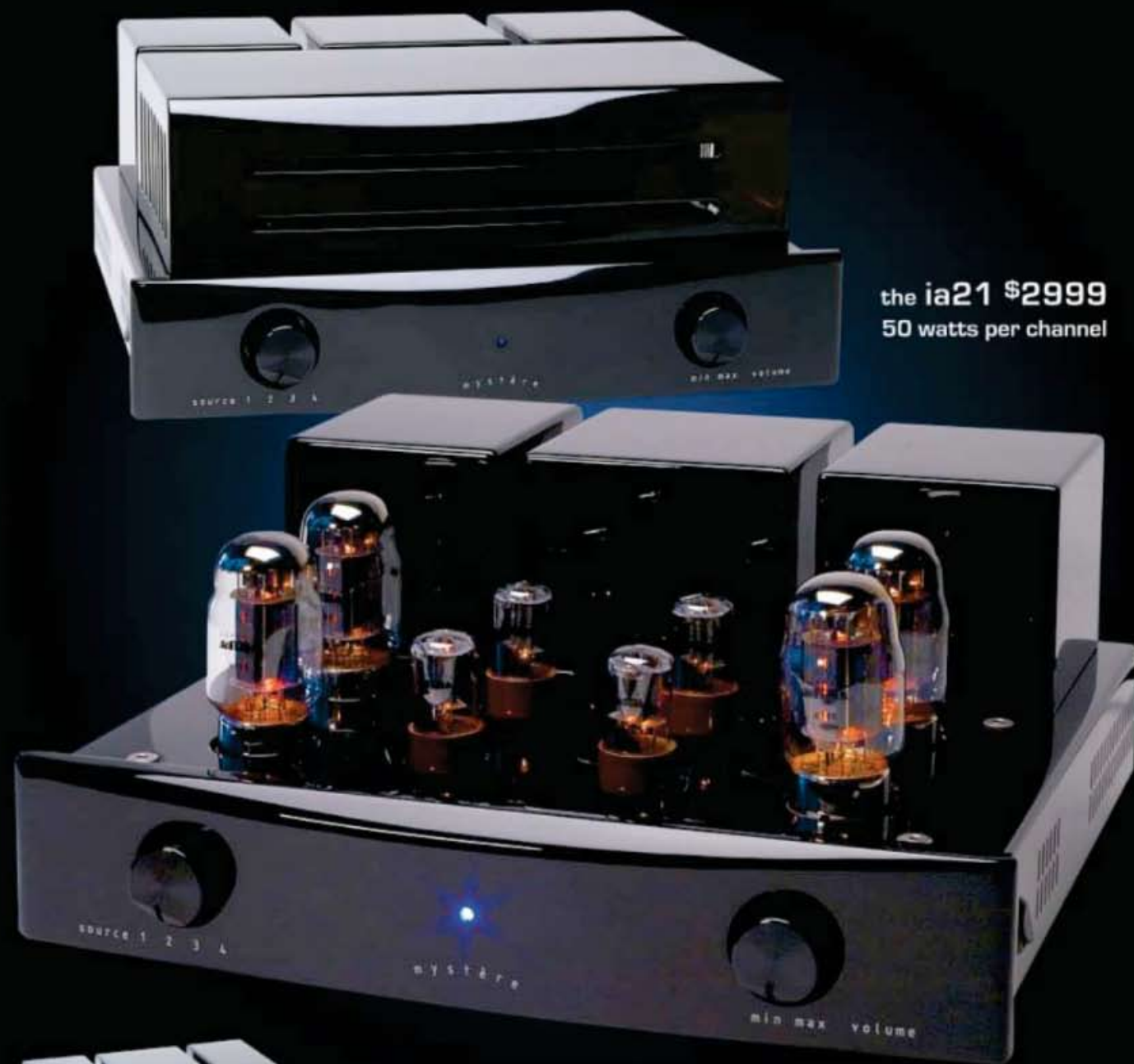
Looking for its limitations, I played Adele's *19*, a disc that suffers from some crunchiness on a couple of tracks. Those unfortunate moments are detected but are not as obvious as when I reviewed the Paradigm 60v5's a few issues back. To be fair, the Aviano 6's don't match the resolution of the Studio 60's, but for a \$1,000 less, they make a fantastic showing.

Wanting to challenge the Aviano 6's, I went in search of some heavy-duty hard rock to challenge the floorstanders. Though I have a MartinLogan Grotto i at the ready in my second system, it remained off for the test. As two 6.5-inch drivers can move only so much air, these speakers may not be the first choice for the headbangers in the audience. *(continued)*

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FEATURE



AC/DC's *Back in Black* could play loud without distortion, but it didn't have enough bottom end grunt to make this music really come alive.

A change in program material to contemporary jazz kept the Aviano 6's more in their comfort zone. Spyro Gyra's *Catching the Sun* CD, a disc that helped me survive writing many college papers, had a pleasant ease. Compared with my reference Eficion F200 monitors with a ribbon tweeter, the Aviano 6's gave up some ground in ultimate resolution, but their top-to-bottom coherence did not leave me unhappy with the presentation.

The typical Aviano customer probably won't be combining \$12,000 worth of source and amplifier to these speakers, so I brought in the Rotel 1520 integrated amplifier and matching CDP from my secondary system. Since the Aviano 6's have an 8-ohm sensitivity of 88db/1watt, the 60wpc of the Rotel amplifier was an excellent match, and on all but the most raucous material had more than enough volume and dynamic range. Switching to my Vista Audio i34 vacuum-tube integrated amplifier proved that the Aviano 6's worked equally well with tubes as with solid state.

The Final Score

For under a thousand dollars, Mordaunt Short has designed a strong performer in the Aviano 6's floorstanding speakers. The 6's cover the basics well and avoid the pitfall of trying to be everything at this price point. The consistency of the sound is what wins the day here. If you'd like a great pair of non-fatiguing, near-full-range speakers on a budget, take the time to audition the Aviano 6. Highly recommended. ●

The Big Four:

**Anthrax
Megadeth
Slayer
Metallica**

Sofia, Bulgaria

June 22, 2010

Via Satellite Broadcast

By Bob Gendron

Photos by Mark Latham

Along with Axl Rose making nice with Slash or Barry Bonds admitting steroids abuse and voluntarily expunging his baseball statistics, no one ever expected to see Megadeth leader Dave Mustaine and Metallica guitarist/vocalist James Hetfield sharing the same stage let alone embracing in a hug. But the two longtime adversaries did both in front of a worldwide audience during The Big Four's second-ever concert, held in front of more than 50,000 fans in Bulgaria and broadcast via satellite to movie theaters around the globe. The display served as a fitting cap to a truly historic occasion.

Despite coming of age in the same era, thrash metal's pioneering "Big Four"—Anthrax, Megadeth, Slayer, and Metallica—never all toured together or appeared at the same date. Before the current undertaking, limited to a few European festival dates, the closest the artists ever got to uniting happened in 1990, as three of the four groups, sans Metallica, staged the unforgettable Clash of the Titans outing.

Alas, fans in the United States may never get a chance to witness the colossal package bill in person. The decision ultimately rests with Metallica, which commands steeper ticket prices, plays to bigger crowds, and is presently wrapping up a very lengthy tour.



In an interview aired during the satellite presentation, drummer Lars Ulrich hinted that such an outing might be possible in 2011 or 2012. But that's an iffy proposition. Each band has reached the point where aging is an issue. And given the music's demanding properties—we're not talking the Eagles or Rolling Stones coasting through FM classics—time is of the essence. At least listeners will be able to savor a forthcoming DVD. If the volume level in the local movie theater is any indication, no one will gripe about not being able to hear or feel what went down.

Reunited with original vocalist Joey Belladonna (again), Anthrax awoke from the slumber it had been in for the better part of the past two decades. The New York quintet seemed reenergized and reinvigorated, not that bounding guitarist Scott Ian needs any help in getting up for a show. Skipping around like a six-week-old puppy chasing its tail, Ian ran in circles, his right arm scraping against his guitar strings and creating a whirling dervish of hyper chords. As has always been its trademark, Anthrax is the only member of The Big Four to trade in skate-punk humor and animated fun. These characteristics complemented songs such as "I Am the Law"—still the finest tune ever written about a comic-book hero cop—and "Metal Thrashing Mad," where the sole goal related to whipping the audience into a frenzied state of mind. Mission accomplished.

Wearing matching black t-shirts and black jeans, Anthrax adopted its 1990-era look even if it still misses lightning-rod guitarist Dan Spitz. Belladonna's vocal range remains largely in tact, and, as a consummate pro, he understands how to cut corners without being too obvious. The 49-year-old served as a peppy cheerleader, repeatedly demonstrating why the band suffers without his presence. Whether streaking across the stage in a colorful Indian headdress (on the sympathetic "Indians") or belting out a note-perfect rendition of Black Sabbath's "Heaven and Hell" during a tribute to recently deceased icon Ronnie James Dio, Belladonna injected long-needed vitality into a band whose contributions to metal's legacy should be legion. And yes, the quintet's version of Trust's "Antisocial" is as galvanizing now as it was in 1988. *(continued)*



One can only guess at the emotions that ran through Mustaine's mind as his band opened for Metallica, the behemoth he helped found and, famously, got booted from for drug and alcohol abuse just before the group recorded its debut album. Relations between Mustaine and, in particular, Hetfield, have doubled as metal's Cold War ever since. In the duration, Metallica became American Express Black Card huge as Megadeth settled for AMEX Platinum success.

Ironically, the precision-oriented Mustaine can still play rings around everyone in Metallica. Onstage, his virtuosic techniques and stop-on-a-dime timing lent Megadeth's music progressive qualities and steely textures that buttressed complex, melodic arrangements. Minus the pimples and plus a few extra pounds, Mustaine still looks similar to the pimply metal teenager he was in Metallica, with a thick head of hair that obscures his face and bobs like a pulsating jellyfish swimming in the ocean. His consistency and dedication to the purpose remain infallible.

Joined by original bassist David Ellefson, Megadeth ripped through a torrent of thematic staples—the political “Holy Wars...The Punishment Due,” from which notes spit like sparks off a hot-rod engine; the sci-fi conspiracy theory “Hangar 18,” whose extended bridge bowed to Led Zeppelin’s “Immigrant Song”; the paranoid schizophrenic “Sweating Bullets,” on which abrupt pauses hit like a slammed door; the disarmingly clever “Peace Sells,” a scathingly humorous anthem that’s truer today than it was during Reagan’s second term.

The only drawback? Mustaine’s voice, which mysteriously gained an octave at a time when most singers’ timbres deepen. Yes, the 48-year-old is still capable of the muddled aspirin bitterness, but too often, his singing fluttered and came off like that of an adolescent boy whose voice had yet to permanently change. The oddity stained the delivery of several songs, and prompted one to wonder how much longer Mustaine can keep it up if his pipes continue to drift. It’s an unfortunate development, especially given his obvious excitement in finally standing as an equal with his colleagues and fact that Megadeth’s new material (“Head Crusher” did just that) deserves immediate attention.

(continued)

If Megadeth's rivet-drilling speed metal represented the sound of a swaying wrecking ball colliding against an iron-frame building, Slayer's performance constituted the deafening rumble of a Panzer tank running roughshod over everything that stood in its way. For good measure, the quartet's pair of lead-sharing guitarists, Kerry King and Jeff Hannemann, burned the rest down with clusters of twisted notes, breakneck solos, and grass-wilting riffs that didn't depend on exactness as much as they did on ferocity, hostility, and motion.



FEATURE

Fresh from back surgery, vocalist/bassist Tom Araya held his own at the microphone even if he no longer banged his head in tornadic patterns. Araya's frequent smiles testified on behalf of the gathering's collective spirit; even the gristliest veterans realized its significance. And Slayer didn't take anything for granted. The band continues to openly defy limits associated with age, physics, and endurance. For those that have never witnessed the group up-close (or at all), the experience provided a glimpse into a revered sanctum where punishing severity and dark-hued smarts clash.

Musically and visually, Slayer proved an arresting combination. The extreme sights matched the sounds: King's spiked metal gauntlet, head-to-toe tattoos, and concrete-block muscled physique; the heftier Hannemann's black shin guards, responsive hand gestures, and deranged screams; drummer Dave Lombardo's insanely fast stick handling, grueling timekeeping, and double-bass beats. Slayer didn't aim for total perfection but came close, keeping its focus on controlled violence, ominous emotion, and turbulent aggression all the while making breakneck music swing and connect to catchy hooks.

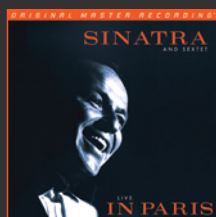
FEATURE

The war-obsessed "Mandatory Suicide" unleashed frustration in the form of walloping grooves and hypocritical lyrical tenets. "World Painted Blood" featured Araya hurdling words at a frantic pace over a storm of stomping rhythms. "South of Heaven" functioned as a death march into a black abyss. For the finale, the members knelt in front of Marshall amplifier stacks, the speakers screeching with feedback as Lombardo pounded his drum throne. Waiting for the right moment, King signaled the beginning of "Raining Blood," effectively breaking all hell loose with a now-familiar riff that rewrote metal's vocabulary. All hail the kings—even if they had to play before the sun went down.

Due to time constraints involved with the satellite broadcast, every set got shortened. Yet the edits were glaringly apparent only during Metallica's set, an understandable consequence related to the quartet's headlining status and longer appointed playing time. The only question was which Metallica would show up: The throw-back edition that renewed doubters' faith on the first leg of the Death Magnetic tour, or the commercial friendly band that's existed for the majority of the past 15 years? As it happened, a little bit of both. *(continued)*

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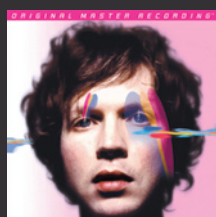
Marvin Gaye
What's Going On



The Cars *The Cars*



Santana *Abraxas*



Beck *Sea Change*



Marshall Crenshaw
Marshall Crenshaw



Pixies *Surfer Rosa*



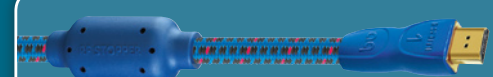
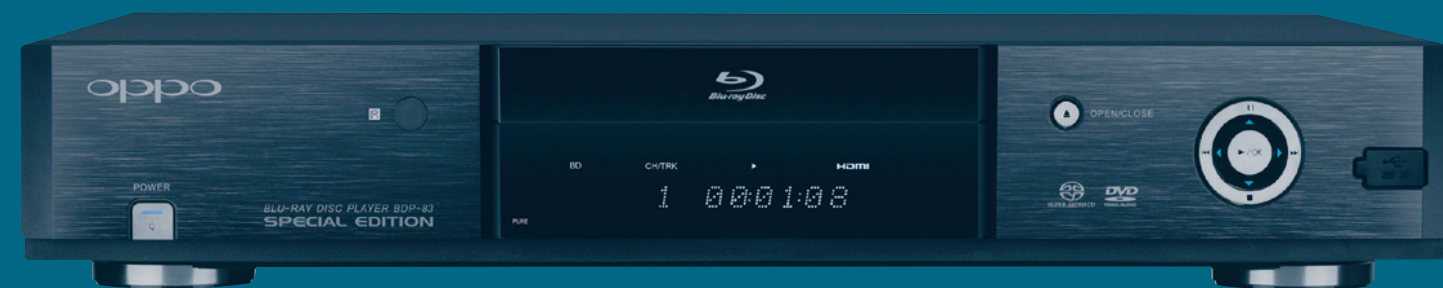
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There's no arguing Metallica's showmanship. And only the staunchest of purists would have any expectation that the group should ignore its uber-popular post-1990 material and solely focus on the menacing thrash that filled landmark albums *Kill 'Em All*, *Ride the Lightning*, *Master of Puppets*, and ...*And Justice for All*. To its credit, Metallica offered up such fare—"Creeping Death," "Seek and Destroy," "Harvester of Sorrow" among the selections—as well as the sleeker, later-era "Enter Sandman" and recent, recapture-the-old-glory stab "Cyanide." Yet, Metallica's issue wasn't with what songs it played but how the band played them.

And on this night, guitarist Kirk Hammett sounded sloppy and frontman Hetfield like a crooner. Metallica's strengths once came from anger and rebelliousness. With those traits no longer firmly in place, it's tough to believe the suicidal anguish of "Fade to Black" and cocaine-fueled downward spiral of "Master of Puppets," a majority of which Hetfield allowed the crowd to sing. Metallica didn't simply go through the motions, but, unlike the first stretch of its present (and soon culminating tour), the quartet seemed too content. Songs lacked proper attack and erred on the side of safeness. Edginess and chance were kept at bay.

The presence of vintage-style microphones—akin to the kind Frank Sinatra used in the 1940s and 1950s—also suggested how far removed Metallica is from its underground roots. Hetfield, however, merits props for providing one of the evening's definitive images. Kneeling on the ground before the start of "Enter Sandman," feedback humming, he turned toward the camera, grinned, and held up a guitar pick emblazoned with the emblems and names of The Big Four.

Nevertheless, Metallica's meanness and wrath are largely absent. His hair cropped and disposition sober, Hetfield isn't scary, and neither are his words. It all makes for a very competent albeit predictable stadium act loaded with mostly great songs that may well sound amazing to younger ears. But for those that saw the band live even as late as 1993, the changes are drastic.

To culminate the performance, Metallica invited members of the other three bands onstage to cover Diamond Head's "Am I Evil." Mustaine, Hetfield, and Belladonna took turns on vocals; all four drummers pounded away. While no one knows what may come of the encounter, the juncture at least appeared genuine, and, for those few minutes, nothing else mattered. ●

Behind the Scenes With Mark Latham

By Bob Gendron

We've all experienced concerts from an audience member's perspective. And we all have a good idea of what it's like to be a performer, as bands and artists are usually eager to describe their experiences onstage. But what is it like to be an under-pressure photographer, the person responsible for capturing the live images that thousands of people will view to get a sense of a concert's atmosphere, a group's disposition, and a stage's design?

Mark Latham regularly battles time constraints, flash restrictions, unruly fans, flying beers, and just about every other obstacle one can imagine while shooting some of the heaviest, most intense bands on the planet. The extremely talented UK photographer wouldn't have it any other way. Before he departed to shoot the Download Festival, one of the world's largest music gatherings, he took TONE down into the pit.




Tone: How did you first become interested in photographing metal bands?

ML: My full-time job is web design; I got into this by chance, really. I was going to a festival with a friend of mine, and he had a Nikon camera, which I quite liked the look of. I thought, 'What a nice excuse to spend an extraordinary amount of money on a nice camera like that.' I knew quite a few people in bands, so I thought I'd get the camera and photograph them, and it went on from there. It wasn't premeditated. I just thought I shoot photos of local bands. And it just snowballed into what it is today. I've only been doing this for four years.

Have you always been into metal?

Oh yeah. Since I was a kid. The first metal album I bought was Iron Maiden's *Piece of Mind*. I remember going to the shop and seeing the cassette tape, and seeing the cover, thinking, 'Wow, that looks really cool.' I wasn't into metal then—I didn't even know what it was. I just really liked the cover. So I bought it, on cassette, which tells you how old I am. I took it home, listened to it, and I was like 'this is a bit different.' I really got into it, started checking out other bands, and the rest is history.

(continued)



When you originally saw the Maiden album, what were you listening to at the time?

Do I really have to answer that? [Laughs] For some strange reason, I'd gone to the shop to buy a Madonna album. I can't remember why. Maybe I heard something on the radio. I was actually looking for that album when I chanced upon the Maiden album. That swung things around for me. From there, I got into British bands like Def Leppard. I had school friends into the same kind of music. A few of them said we should listen to a band called Metallica. Then it was Megadeth, and so on. But my favorite band was Pantera. Someone gave me *A Vulgar Display of Power*. That album—my word! I had never heard anything so aggressive in my life. It's still my favorite album of all time.

Metal is very visual. Do you have ideas in your head about how a band with a particular sound should be photographed before you shoot?

You never know what you are going to be faced with, whether it's how big the stage is, what the lighting will be like, to what the antics of the performers will be. Every gig is different. I never go into a gig thinking 'I want to get this kind of photo' and 'I want to get that kind of photo.' It just happens. The general rule is that you get to be down in front in front of the barrier for the first three songs and you're not allowed to use flash. The very worst scenario is that some venues in the UK will kick you out after those songs and not let you hang around for the show. Sometimes if I know the band, or am shooting for a magazine, I have access to be onstage. Some venues might have balconies. It's always different. I never have a set kind of shot in mind. Especially with the stage lighting; it might be awful, and you have to use flash. Other times, the lighting might be incredible. You have to take it as it comes. Like the Slayer photos—the lighting for that show was amazing. We weren't allowed to use flash, but we didn't need to. They had all of the strobes going, and lots of front lighting. Just fantastic. *(continued)*

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Slayer is a major artist. You started off shooting local acts. At what point did you realize you were stepping up to a higher level?

I don't think there was a specific point. I learned it all while shooting the local bands. There is a venue called Sheffield Corporation. It's quite well known, and a lot of bigger bands play there. I remember calling the owner and telling him I'd come down and do some photos for him for his Web site. He called back and said, 'Cool, come on down.' That was really good. After doing a couple gigs there, I got to start shooting bigger bands. And every time, I'd email the band my photos. From there, you develop a reputation. Bands started contacting me, and originally, I was like, 'That's really strange. Someone wants me to take photos of them.' I was like 'You want me to come to a gig for free and you're going to pay me?' And it became, 'Yeah, come backstage and have some beers with us.' That doesn't sound bad to me. After I did that for a while, I got into a few more venues in the UK that wanted me to come down and do shoots. The major gig I got was through Jagermeister. I was in Sheffield. And I met a guy there that was shooting the band for Jagermeister, which was sponsoring the group. A few days later I emailed Jagermeister and asked them if they used the same guy all of the time or if they needed someone for different places. They said to me, 'Actually, our guy is leaving, he's off to travel the world.'

(continued)

So I told them I'd do some gigs for them and see how it goes. They sent me off to photograph another one of their sponsored bands. They liked the photos. And that was it. For the last three years, I've been working as Jagermeister's UK photographer. They have a roster of bands they sponsor and support, and they also sponsor a number of festivals. I'm doing the Download Festival next week. Jagermeister has their own stage. For me, that's great, because I was trying to get access to bigger bands. So when they said they need me to shoot them, they want to make sure I get backstage shots of them. You get to meet and chat with bands. Then, it's 'Do you have a card?' Every now and then, down the line, bands will contact me when they are recording the album, and say they need some photos for a photo shoot for the record. So, maybe about two or three years ago, I realized I was getting pretty good at it and was meeting a lot of bands. Of course, sometimes I go to the festivals and gigs, and the bands know I'm with Jagermeister, so they'll say 'Have some shots with us.' So I'll have a drink. And another drink. And another. Before I know it, I'm thinking, 'Oh my god, it's going to turn into one of those nights.'

You photograph everything from black metal to death metal to thrash. Do you have a preference for what type of metal you shoot?

If a metal or rock band wants me to do photos, or even if it's an indie band and it's interesting to me, I will photograph it. I wouldn't photograph pop bands. I don't have a preference as long as it's rock. I like heavy music. I like New York hardcore. Those are really good shows to photograph as well. And it's always enjoyable going to the big festivals and photographing the big bands on the big stage. *(continued)*



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FEATURE



But for me personally, there's nothing better than a small, dirty little club. Just set up in the corner of a room. There are hundred people there, and they are all going mental and stage diving. And when I finish that gig, I'm covered in beer and sweat. Those are the kind of gigs where I walk out and say, 'Whoo, that was a good one.'

What show sticks out in your mind?

Biohazard. I actually have a Biohazard tattoo on my neck—that's how much I like them. They went on hiatus for quite a while. Then they decided to rehearse for a reunion tour in the UK. They only did two shows—one in Sheffield, the other in London. I photographed the one in Sheffield. It was hair-on-the-back-of-your-neck stuff, because here was a band that I was a fan of since I can remember. I didn't think I'd ever get a chance to photograph them. I'm down there in the front of the pit waiting for the band to come on [nervous from] anticipation. It was so difficult because I was singing along to all of the songs, jumping up and down and bouncing. I was really getting into it. But I had to get the photos. Just an amazing live band. They only played songs from the first three albums. It was intense.

(continued)



Also, one of the best experiences I've had as a photographer came with Life of Agony. A few months ago, I did three days with them across Europe. The European venues put the UK venues to shame. They aren't massive; they hold about 2000 people. But from the moment we pulled up in the tour bus, they have crew that unloads the gear for you. Someone took us into the venue and said, 'That's your dressing room. There's your fridge of beer and booze. Do you want anything else? Guinness, sure. A bottle of Jack Daniels? We'll go get one of those for you.' The hospitality is amazing. The UK venues are good, but the bands have to lug their own gear and they might have a room set aside with a couple of cheese sandwiches for everybody.

Does the crowd's intensity ever overwhelm you when you are trying to shoot?

Always. There are a lot of small venues where they don't have a crowd barrier down in front, so there is no area for the photographers to stand. And if I haven't got stage access, you have to get right down into the crowd. It is so difficult. I would never take my camera bag there; I leave it somewhere else. You just elbow people out of the way because you have to get the shots. You end up covered in beer, and sometimes stage divers land on top of you and all kinds of crazy stuff happens. I don't mind. As long as I've got the photos, I'm happy. But once, I remember taking photos of American Head Charge. I got hit in the face with a pint of beer. It drenched my camera and went all over. The camera just quit. I was like 'Fuck.' I put my gear to the side, got into the pit myself, and released a bit of anger.

What band has been the most fun to photograph?

The Black Spiders, out of the UK. They have a drummer who is insane to photograph. He's really good with his facial expressions. I moved myself in front of the drum kit, and he could see I was looking at him. So he was pulling these faces while pounding the drums.

Are there any bands you're looking forward to photographing?

Well, I've got the Download Festival next. After that I've got the Sonosphere Festival in the Czech Republic. Then I've got the Sonosphere in the UK. Usually, when I get called to do the festivals, I don't look at the lineups until I get there. A lot of the major bands I wanted to photograph I got to do last year: Machine Head, Lamb of God, Hatebreed. It's almost surreal being down there so close to the bands and photographing them. When people ask me, 'Can you go shoot these bands?,' it's just weird. It's so much fun. And there's just so much stuff on the horizon. In June and July, there's not a single weekend where I'm not out doing something. I get to go to amazing places, see amazing things, and meet stunning people. It's great stuff. ●

The Panasonic Lumix DMC-ZS7

www.amazon.com — \$299



If you don't need the red Leica dot on your compact camera, (and we all know that the only real Leicas have interchangeable lenses and a rangefinder...) you can save a huge pile of money buying the Panasonic Lumix DMC-ZS7 you see here. Though the ZS7 has a list price of about \$400, all of the major retailers are selling them for about \$299. Even a few years ago, \$300 wouldn't buy you much of a digital camera, and the Lumix has a 12x optical zoom that is expandable to 48x by digital means. It can also shoot HD Video up to 1080i resolution, which isn't a substitute for a full-fledged camcorder but more than adequate to capture a spontaneous moment you don't want to lose.

Using standard SD memory cards, the ZS7 on its highest setting will give you about 1,500 shots on an 8GB card. You should be able to cover a whole vacation with this one! A proprietary battery and charger are included, and while a big memory card will get you all the way through your vacation, you won't do it on one charge. Consider getting an additional battery (only \$35 for a genuine Panasonic battery, direct from Amazon) to take with you if you plan on being out for long photo excursions. I couldn't wring more than 300 shots out of the battery, even with the flash off, and heavy flash usage will pull you down to the 150-200 shot range. Remember, batteries are inexpensive; memories are precious.

AN IMAGE OF U



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TONE STYLE



As much as I enjoyed the super telephoto capability of this camera, the ability to pull back wider is what really came in handy.

The ZS7 does all this and more in a super-compact package that weighs just under eight ounces, managing to cram a 12.1 megapixel sensor, a three-inch LCD view screen and a Leica DC Vario-Elmar lens that is the equivalent of a 25-300 mm lens on a 35mm camera. Most compacts have nowhere near this range, and as much as I enjoyed the super telephoto capability of this camera, the ability to pull back wider is what really came in handy.

While the ZS7 is packed with features and exposure modes, if you're like most people, you probably won't use half of them. There are quite a few preset modes, so just working in the program mode should work for 98 percent of the photo situations you encounter. Seriously, how do you decide whether to use the "Portrait," "Soft Skin" or "Self-Portrait" modes? For me, the critical must-haves are the large, three-inch viewing screen, macro zoom and the highly accurate autofocus. Remember, if the picture isn't in focus, the features don't mean much. I'd love to see the camera have just a manual and an auto mode and spend the rest of the R&D time and money on a better image sensor.

Image quality

Like every one of the Leica/Panasonic compacts that I've tried, the image quality of the SZ7 is disappointing, even at low ISO settings in all but the brightest light. *(continued)*

Comparing images with the 10MP Canon G11, my reference compact, the Panasonic's are grainier with more digital artifacts and less overall sharpness across the board, and the Canon will capture in RAW mode if you need it to. As with every compact digital camera I've ever used, the poor digital-zoom picture quality makes it useless. I always wonder why they even bother.

Granted, the Canon will set you back another \$125-\$150. But if fine image quality is what you are after, the SZ7 is not the compact camera you want. The Panasonic does a relatively good job with image contrast and dynamic range, but don't let the Leica name on the lens fool you; it doesn't take any better photos than anything else in the immediate price range, in my experience. If you're a Leica enthusiast, you know how digital images captured with a German-made Leica lens just jump off the page. The Panasonic does not bring this level of picture quality to the table.

Versatility

While the image quality on the SZ7 is mid pack, the versatility this camera offers is first in class. With a 12x optical zoom and HD Video capture capabilities, combined with a very compact form factor, you should be able to take this one anywhere and capture the moment. If you are saving most of your images to the cloud and displaying mostly on screen, the SZ7 will suit you just fine.

Using the mini HDMI port to view images on my 55-inch NuVision LED/LCD monitor was actually the most fun. The SZ7's video output was not Blu Ray quality but probably a touch better than the average DVD on the

Blockbuster shelf in terms of resolution. The contrast ratio was a little flat, but again, for grab-and-go video, not bad at all. Photos looked great on the big TV as well, and this is certainly an easy way to share your vacation snaps with friends and family.

If you're looking for a very versatile compact point and shoot in the \$300 range, the ZS7 should be at the top of your list. As long as you are shooting in bright to moderate light, the picture quality is acceptable. If you spend a lot of time in low-light situations, requiring ISO 400 or higher, there are other compacts that do a better job. The Panasonic's strength is its versatility and the range of its optical zoom lens. For many, that will be the feature that seals the deal.

While the image quality on the SZ7 is mid pack, the versatility this camera offers is first in class. With a 12x optical zoom and HD Video capture capabilities, combined with a very compact form factor, you should be able to take this one anywhere and capture the moment.



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TONE STYLE

Mighty Light & Mighty Light HD

The Apple App Store — \$.99

Whether you're getting busy behind your equipment rack trying to track down a loose cable, or just plain getting busy, the Mighty Light is the ideal way to set the mood. The standard version is for your iPhone/iPod Touch and the HD version is optimized for the iPad. Both versions cost only 99 cents.

This is a relatively sophisticated app. You can change the light color and intensity as well as completely white out the screen, which gives you the most light. Though it is worth noting that when you go to full intensity, you will decrease battery life by about 40 percent, this could come in handy in tight spots. Otherwise, you can set the Mighty Light to random play mode and just go along with it.





The ZDock

www.zdocks.com — \$98

Until now, there have been no reasonable options in the iPod dock world for those of us who don't choose to go the Wadia route for grabbing the digital bitstream and sending it to the DAC of choice.

If you just want a gorgeous dock to sit on your rack that will take the analog outs (and S-VHS video outputs) from your iPod device, ZDock is the way to roll. For an unbelievably low price of \$98, it's built like a product that should cost four times as much; it has a powder-coated zinc finish and feels substantial as soon as you remove it from the box. It looks like something that you'd expect B&O or Meridan to produce.

The guys at ZDock kept it simple and made a dock for the rest of us. While the full digital setup takes iPod sound to another level, the analog outs are surprisingly good, especially when played through the ZDock. Plus, it uses standard gold-plated RCA output jacks so you can use a regular pair of interconnect cables, which helps tremendously.

It's a perfect match visually for the new silver Cambridge Audio Azur 840 integrated amplifier. I used a pair of AudioQuest Copperhead cables (\$95 for a one-meter pair) to make the connection in my living-room HT system, where the ZDock is a perfect match. We have five iPods and three iPhones in our household, so it's great to have an accessory that allows anyone to plug in an iPod over dinner or drinks.

Because the ZDock does not capture the digital bitstream, it is compatible with

all but the very first iPods that don't have a data cable connector on the bottom, making it that much more user friendly. Those wanting to integrate their iPods into a desktop-computer audio system can easily do so via the USB connection. A tasteful black remote control is included so you can play, pause, fast forward or reverse. The volume-control function has been abandoned on the ZDock in the quest for better sound, so you have to control it from your computer or amplifier.

In a head-to-head comparison, the ZDock definitely is a substantial step up in sound quality from the \$49 Apple dock, which does not include a wall wart or a USB cable, both of which come with the ZDock. This is a well-thought-out product indeed and worthy of one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2010.





Shown: LTX 500 Projector



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TONE STYLE

The Skooba Design Cable Stable DLX

www.skoobadesign.com — \$39.95

Got more than one wall wart power supply, iPod or handful of cables? Check out the Cable Stable DLX. This has to be one of the coolest things I've ever seen, and the answer to a disorganized person's prayers. Not to mention that it comes in my favorite color (at least on the inside): bright lime green. Could be the perfect accessories for Naim lovers as well... Even the friendly TSA lady asked to see it on my last flight.

The Cable Stable DLX combines Skooba's floating elastic hold downs and mesh pockets to keep all your stuff nice and tidy. The compartments are well-suited to iPods, iPhones and other small electronics. Thanks to the 10.75 x 8.25 inch size, you can even fit a netbook in the Cable Stable DLX. When not in use, it will easily fit on a bookshelf, so if necessary, you can keep your essentials packed and ready to roll.

The outside is black nylon twill that looks as if it could withstand a considerable amount of use, with heavy-duty stitching holding it all together. I might need a couple of these.





The Magna Cart™ Flatform Truck

www.welcomproducts.com — \$79.95

We are huge fans of the original Magna Cart™ here at TONEAudio. It's the ultimate fold-up, go-anywhere hand truck, but you can only carry so much with it. Evidently, the folks at Welcom Products have had enough requests that they've returned with the Flatform Truck.

Just like the Magna Cart, this baby folds up flat and is only about three inches thick, and it features massive hard-rubber casters underneath. It comes fully assembled, weighs 15 pounds and will hold up to 275 pounds when unfolded. The perfect thing for carrying around gigantic monoblock power amplifiers at your favorite HiFi show! I put it to the test here – moving the 175-pound McIntosh MC 1.2KW's was a breeze.

If you spend a lot of time boxing, shipping and going to trade shows, I can't think of anything handier than a Flatform Truck.

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dCS

ONLY THE MUSIC

www.dcsltd.co.uk

TONE STYLE



Altec Lansing IMT 320 Compact

www.alteclansing.com — \$79.99

This may not be the Voice of the Theater, but if you need something to carry along in your purse or briefcase so that you have tunes on the go, the IMT 320 is worth your consideration. It runs on four AA batteries, which you can find just about anywhere on the planet, and if you choose to use the AC adaptor, it will charge your iPod while playing. The IMT 320 is designed to be free of phone interference, so when using it with an iPhone, you will not have to switch it to Airplane Mode while traveling.

An auxiliary jack is included in case you want to plug in your laptop or iPad to get a little more grunt, and the little two-inch speakers do a better job than I expected at this price point. The ported enclosures help move a bit of air and extend the bass response, especially when on top of a substantial counter. The IMT 320's power and volume are controlled by the switches on the top panel, and the folding cover conveniently becomes a stand so you can prop it up just about anywhere.

KISS Picture Discs

www.musicdirect.com — \$24.99 ea.

KISS is better at repurposing their data than anyone, but their solo albums were a departure from the standard formula. Released in September of 1978, they took the music world by storm, with four individual albums that featured highly stylized illustrations of each band member on the cover.

Now, these records have been re-released as picture discs, with the cover art on side one and the credits on side two. The printing quality is mediocre and the sound quality is dreadful, but if you are looking for something cool to replace the Elvis plates, these are worth taking a peek at.





A Tiny Headphone Amp and Phones from Newcomer, Phiaton

By Jerold O'Brien

Decware, Decware. Aren't those the guys who make the Zen tube triode SET amplifiers? Yes, they are. But what are they doing creating something like this slick little package? According to chief designer Steve Deckert, they wanted to make a great-sounding small headphone amplifier that had the same kind of voicing as their tube amps. Sounds hard to believe that you could do that for a mere \$350 (factory-direct price) and offer a lifetime warranty to the original owner.

It may be innocuous-looking, but there's a lot lurking within the shielded and machined aluminum chassis that makes this little box sing. The latest Burr Brown op amps are employed along with polypropylene caps, precision resistors, high-quality switches and a very linear audiophile-grade precision volume pot. What's more, the amp is powered by a single nine-volt battery contained within a damped enclosure for super-quiet operation. The battery will provide up to 50 hours of listening. That's a lot of goodness packed into a pocket-size wonder.

Operation couldn't be simpler. The front-panel layout is really simple with the source input on the left and headphone output on the right flanking the volume pot, a green led power indicator and on/off switch.

There are user-adjustable switches on the circuit board, one for normal/high gain operation and one for cross-feed on/off. I left the gain setting at normal and the Cross-feed on. With Cross-feed engaged, I heard a more-stable presentation throughout my listening sessions.





Probably the most prominent feature of these phones is the rigid carbon fiber enclosures, which greatly reduces resonance.

Listening to music on headphones creates an issue: headphones are directional all the way down to the bass frequencies due to their direct coupling into the hearing canal. Therefore, the listening experience is different from what was originally intended and what the user is accustomed to hearing with loudspeakers, which become less directional as you go down in frequency. Cross-feed sends a little bit of left-channel information to the right channel and a little bit of right-channel information to the left channel.

So how did it perform? Wonderfully, to say the least. As a source, I used an iPod Classic with either lossless files or full wav files. I also used the supplied 12-inch, 3.5mm patch cord to connect the iPod to the Zen Head. In keeping with everything being compact, I first tried a pair of Shure SE310 in-ear headphones for my evaluation. Wow, for those accustomed to ear buds being directly driven by compact music devices, the quality of sound coming from the Zen will be a total revelation. There is absolutely no glare or strained quality to the sound, bass is extremely detailed and powerful, and the “image” in your head is just right, not exaggerated or out of proportion. Most importantly, the treble quality was really sweet and almost tube-like in presentation, which is not surprising if you consider the whole aim of this product.

Whether I listened to a jazz trio, a rock group or a classical orchestra, the Zen provided excellent-quality music reproduction and never missed a beat. As the basis for a compact traveling system or as the centerpiece for late-night musical entertainment, the Zen Head is all gain and no pain.

Upping the ante a bit, I next tried two different pairs of over-the-ear phones made by Phiaton. This is a relatively new name in the headphone universe, but you’ll be hearing a lot more from them in

the future. Phiaton’s parent company, Cresyn, is an OEM manufacturer of headphone parts, speaker parts and various headsets for home and commercial use.

The first model I tried was the MS-400, which is probably the coolest-looking set of headphones ever made. Probably the most prominent feature of these phones is the rigid carbon fiber enclosures, which greatly reduces resonance. Couple that with the ear cushions and head-band cushion, which are really soft and comfortable and bright red in color, and you get an impressive high-tech twist on a rather familiar form. So impressive, in fact, that these won the prestigious International Design Award last year for their category. But do these design flourishes make for a product that is all show and no go? Hardly; they sound as good as they look.

Handily, the connector is a two-piece affair that gives you the option of using either a 3.5 mm mini plug or a traditional quarter-inch phone plug. I plugged the mini into the Zen Head and fired up the iPod. Those not familiar with headphones of this quality will be immediately struck by an eerie absence – an absence of shrieking treble, an absence of midrange distortion and an absence of bass bloat. Instead, what you’ll find is a neutral and linear sonic presentation. No portion of the music is exaggerated at the expense of another.

This kind of presentation makes for extended and non-fatiguing listening sessions. Add the fact that the MS 400s weigh only 6.5 ounces, and the listener can enjoy them for hours on end without any kind of strain. In addition, the earpieces fold flat, making them more compact for storing or traveling purposes. *(continued)*



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HEADPHONE PLANET



The MS 400s enabled me to hear once again the strength of the Zen Head. And unlike using the in-ear Shures, I could hear further into the recording and pick out small details that had been slightly masked before. On acoustic bass, the roundness and resonance that one expects are present and accounted for; male vocals are accurate and non-chesty; and you can hear the recording engineer's small tricks and cues plain as day. This is probably the result of the Cross-feed circuit doing its thing.

For another \$50 (\$299), you can step up in the Phiaton line to the PS 500.

This model is part of the "Primal Series," but the only primal aspect I could find here was the covering of the enclosures, which was a mock crocodile-skin finish. The driver diaphragms are the same 40mm size as the MS 400s, but they are in a larger enclosure which gets the listener 4 dB more sensitivity (102 vs. 98) and greater power-handling (2000mW vs. 1000mW). In addition, they are coated in vaporized titanium, which makes them very light and very stiff.
(continued)

HEADPHONE PLANET



The only downside to the PS 500 might be that it weighs 2.6 ounces more than the MS 400. I honestly never noticed the additional weight during my evaluation process.

The sound of the PS 500 is at once more-detailed and more-refined than that of the MS 400. It was also more extended at both ends. The detail does not come at the expense of irritation or annoying tizziness; there's just more to hear in terms of the shimmer and decay of cymbals, the ringing of guitar strings and the overtones of a violin. The midrange was more open, which was especially noticeable on live recordings of small jazz ensembles. Finally, the bass dug deeper with more detail and punch. Low-register slap bass sounded powerful and quick, and bass drum had a more detailed impact.

On a lark, I decided to try the PS 500

with a Musical Fidelity X-Can V8 tube headphone amplifier. What I heard was a more-open soundstage and more separation of instruments. But it didn't have the clarity of the Zen Head in the bass region. Nor is it at all portable. The beauty of the Zen is that you can enjoy its attributes just about anywhere.

The Decware Zen Head and the Phiaton headphones are welcome new products for headphone lovers. The Zen Head's portability and super high-quality sound put it in some (if you'll excuse the pun) heady company, and the Phiaton products' great sound, unique cosmetics and good build quality make them another great choice for satisfying private listening. ●

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The Audio Research REF Phono 2



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While the Audio Research REF line of components carries a lot of weight in the audiophile community, they should really consider changing the name of the REF Phono 2 to the Revelation.

That's what you'll get when you plug this one in, a major revelation.

What might have been stratospheric for a phono preamplifier ten years ago, the ARC doesn't even approach the lofty price point of other offerings from Zanden, Boulder and Vitus Audio, yet offers performance on par with any of the "cost no object" phono stages.

Full review in issue 32



Magnepan 1.7

Close encounters of the audiophile kind

By Steve Guttenberg

A “full-range” driver – one that could reproduce all frequencies from the deepest bass to the highest treble – has been an impossible dream for generations of speaker designers. The new Magnepan 1.7 gets closer to that ideal than any speaker I’ve heard, but it’s a three-way design with bass, tweeter and super-tweeter elements. Even so, it speaks with one voice; maybe that’s why it sounds less like a speaker and more like real, live music than any affordable speaker on the planet. Priced at \$1,995, the 1.7 is, hands down, the greatest deal in high-end audio.

Magnepans don’t use conventional dome tweeters or cone drivers of any kind. The 1.7’s slim panel instead houses a 442-square-inch low-frequency driver and a 96-square-inch tweeter/super-tweeter. The 1.7 is a dipole design, so it projects sound from its front and rear surfaces, just as every previous Magnepan has, but the similarity ends there.

The 1.7 is the company’s first “full-range ribbon” speaker, and before we go any further, let’s try and clarify the terminology. You see, the 1.7 and most of Magnepan’s other speakers, except the MG 3.6 or MG 20.1, feature “quasi-ribbon” tweeters.

That’s Magnepan lingo for ribbons that use a conductor bonded to Mylar (or some other substrate), which makes for a more durable though somewhat less transparent-sounding transducer than Magnepan’s 3.6 and 20.1’s ribbon tweeters. Those are classified as “true” ribbon designs because the conductor is the only moving part of the tweeter. That approach lowers moving mass and greatly increases the tweeter’s speed and resolution. Alas, most speaker manufacturers using ribbon tweeters opt for quasi ribbons for their superior durability. With the 1.7, the woofer, tweeter and super-tweeter’s ribbon conductors are all bonded to the same Mylar membrane. That’s why the 1.7 is considered a full-range (quasi) ribbon design. That’s a first for Magnepan.

Magnepan also claims the upgraded crossover components for the 1.7, and new technology capacitors improve the sound.

The 1.7 replaces the 1.6, which had a more than decade-long and very successful run. The new speaker's super-tweeter provides improved lateral dispersion and greater power response compared with the two-way, woofer-tweeter 1.6. Magnepan also claims the upgraded crossover components for the 1.7, and new technology capacitors improve the sound. Sure, I'd like to know more about the exact crossover points and slopes and other info about the crossover, but Magnepan is keeping mum about such things.

Proper placement in the room is crucial for achieving the best possible sound quality. Experimentation with different placements – distances from the front and side walls, and distances from each other – can yield sizable improvements. Just be aware that the 1.7 must be directly toed-in to the listening position to get the best sound. This speaker needs a lot of space around it to do its best, so figure on placing it at least 30 inches from the front wall and 24 inches from the side walls.

Magnepan speakers take their time with break-in. My 1.7 review samples had some hours on them before arriving here in Brooklyn,

but they rapidly improved over the first week. They sounded a bit uptight at first before they loosened up and started to boogie. Figure on a solid month of use before the sound truly blooms.

The speaker is manufactured at the company's factory in White Bear Lake, Minnesota, and almost all of the 1.7's parts that aren't fabricated in-house are sourced from U.S. suppliers. Who says you can't make affordable high-end audio in the U.S. anymore? And speaking of value, Magnepan also offers a factory-direct \$599 a pair panel speaker, the MMG!

The 1.7 is 64.5 inches high, 19.25 inches wide, and just 2 inches thick; pairs are shipped in one 95-pound box. They come with sturdy, cast-metal T stands that bolt to the back panel. Instead of binding posts, there are a pair of receptacles that accept banana plugs.

The optional, extruded-aluminum side pieces make for a more contemporary look than previous Maggies, and it's available in black, aluminum or primed for custom finishing. More-traditional buyers can opt for wood trim in black, natural or dark cherry.

The metal trim adds \$100 to the cost, and wood trim bumps the price up \$150 over the \$1,995 base price. You can get the 1.7 with black, off-white or dark-gray cloth grilles.

If you're a newly minted audiophile or never heard a great panel speaker, the first thing you'll hear is the lack of box-type resonances and the associated diffraction effects, not to mention the problems associated with cone and dome drivers. No wonder the 1.7 sounds less like hi-fi and more organically alive than almost any box speaker you've ever heard priced under \$5K. The standard set of hi-fi cues are banished by the 1.7. They're gone.

It's also worth noting that what makes a well set-up pair of 1.7s so special isn't just something that only dyed-in-the-wool audiophiles would notice. Pretty much anyone with ears will immediately grasp what's going on here. That's not always the case with high-end speakers; few "civilians" hear the finer points of audiophile sound, which is generally an acquired taste. With Maggies, the sound is so different than standard fare that just about everybody is wowed by their first Magnepan audition.

I loved the way the 1.7's clarified dense recordings, such as the Moody Blues *In Search Of The Lost Chord* on LP. The entire mix is submerged in heavy reverberation, but the 1.7 easily cut through the haze. The acoustic guitars were naturally warm without sacrificing transient speed; the "analogness" of the sound was truly remarkable. The speaker's musicality is perfectly balanced with its clarity, which some might say is exactly what distinguishes the best of analog from state-of-the-art digital. The 1.7 plays well with both.

Bass? Yeah, some folks say you "need" to use a sub with Maggies, but I retired my sub when I started using MG 3.6s. They easily reach down into the low 40 Hertz range in my room, and while the 1.7 doesn't go quite as deep, their low-end is pretty impressive. Bass definition is also a marvel, capable of revealing textures and nuance like no cone woofer. The 1.7's low-end extends to the mid 40 Hertz range, but the skinny speaker doesn't have the impact of a big dynamic speaker or sub. You *hear* the bass, but you never feel it in your *gut*. (continued)

The recently released *One Night Stand: Barbra Streisand and Quartet Live at the Village Vanguard* CD is a knockout. This is the first Streisand album I've ever really listened to, and hot damn, her voice was a wonder over the 1.7. So real, so human, such a New Yorker! The 1.7's midrange is quite possibly its most defining attribute.

I changed gears with the *Muddy Waters at Newport 1960* CD, which totally kicked butt. Waters was still in his prime and he sounds like a man possessed on "I've Got My Mojo Working." The 1.7 unleashed his stinging guitar leads and left no doubt why Waters inspired legions of British and American rock and rollers.

Miles Davis once described his music as painting with sound. I wonder what he would have thought about the sound of the 1.7. Not to get all analytical on you, but if you want to hear everything in your recordings, the 1.7 is the speaker for you. But if you prefer something more romantic, a speaker that makes everything sound sweet and pretty, sorry, the 1.7 won't be a good fit.

Max Roach's *M'Boom's Live at S.O.B.'s New York* CD was another one that just about knocked me over. I recently played this one on Wilson Sasha speakers and they were pretty revealing. But the 1.7 better delineated the tone of the timpani and big bass drums. You want speed and super-quick transient response? Listen to the way the 1.7 reproduces the glockenspiel and vibes on "Epistrophy." I love it! Now sure, the Sasha was more powerful, visceral and physical in its presentation, and that's something you're not going to get with a Magnepan or most electrostatic speakers. Our publisher insists the Martin-Logan Summit X (\$13,995) and CLX (\$19,996) 'stats would rock my world, and I'm ready to be convinced. Bring 'em on!

The 1.7 clicked with both my reference Parasound JC 1/JC 2 electronics and Audio Research's new digital integrated amp, the DSi200. The Parasound duo is almost twice as expensive and twice as powerful as the DSi200 (400 vs. 200 watts). No matter, the ARC exerted tighter control over the 1.7's bass panels. The Parasounds were sweeter/fuller balanced and consistently produced a deeper soundstage.

Then I tried a set of Pass Labs XA100.5 mono amps with the 1.7, which immediately had me revising my opinions of the speakers. The amps transformed the 1.7's sound to an astonishing degree. In fact, I was surprised to note the XA100.5 sounded more powerful than the 400 watt JC 1s; bass firmed up, soundstage width and depth expanded, and treble detail and overall resolution were all markedly better. Best of all, the midrange was sweeter, which reads as more natural to me. The 1.7 was now sounding more like the two and a half times more expensive MG 3.6! The XA100.5 is a wonder. It's exceedingly transparent, tonally neutral, and it develops a soundstage you have to hear to believe. Top-end clarity was nothing short of amazing.

The 1.7 sounds great at soft, late-night volume, but it really comes to life turned up fairly loud. Sure, go too far and you'll hear them or your amp running out of juice.

The XA100.5 managed a feat I've never heard before at home: it rendered the applause on the Barbra Streisand *At The Village Gate* CD/DVD set realistically. Applause is almost impossible to reproduce, but the 1.7/XA100.5 combination positively nailed it.

Hold on, just for fun I tried Nelson Pass' First Watt J2 amp (25 watts per channel), and it sounded positively magical with the 1.7. *(continued)*

The 1.7 sounds great at soft, late-night volume, but it really comes to life turned up fairly loud.

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When everything is right, you get the feeling that you're hearing back through time, back to the original recording event.

The J2's big draw was its sweet, down-right tubey tonality with the Maggies. Please don't misunderstand; it's hardly an ideal match, though I can imagine some folks would really dig the First Watt with the 1.7, especially if they have them in a very small room or like to listen quietly.

Before I lived with the Maggies, the only time I ever heard them sounding great was in audiophiles' homes. For some reason, dealers and shows never really demonstrate the speakers' true potential. When everything is right, you get the feeling that you're hearing back through time, back to the original recording event.

I know some of you are waiting to see if Magnepan will soon revamp its entire line to full-range ribbon status, but that doesn't look too likely over the next two to three years. Besides, the 1.7 is already a smash hit, and Magnepan is putting most of its energy into keeping up with the demand. As much as I love what the 1.7 can do, I still prefer the sound of my MG 3.6 (\$4,995/pair). The MG 3.6's "true" ribbon tweeter is just a lot more transparent, and the 3.6 sounds like a bigger, ballsy speaker. That said, the 1.7's sound holds together better from bottom to top than a 3.6.

The 1.7 is an incredible achievement, but it needs the right amp to really sing; it's downright fussy about placement; and Magnepan bass won't punch you in the gut the way hefty floorstanding speakers or subs can. So it falls short of perfect, but I don't care how much money you care to invest on a set of speakers, there's no such thing as a speaker that excels in every area. That said, the 1.7 is easily the most transparent \$1,995 speaker on the planet. I'm happy to announce the Magnepan 1.7 will receive a *TONEAudio* Exceptional Value Award for 2010. ●

REVIEW

Magnepan 1.7

MSRP: \$1,995 a pair

MANUFACTURER

www.magnepan.com

PERIPHERALS

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

Digital Sources Ayre C-5xe MP Universal Player, Oppo BDP-83 Special Edition

Electronics Parasound JC 1 preamp; Whetst 2.0 phono preamp; Parasound JC 1, Pass Labs XA100.5 and First Watt J2 power amps

Speakers Dynaudio C-1, Zu Essence, Mangepan 3.6

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

The AudioQuest LeoPard Tonearm Cable

By Jeff Dorgay

As AudioQuest principal Joe Harley likes to say, “Cables suck.” Though that may sound somewhat adversarial, Harley is very passionate about music (as his work with the Music Matters Jazz reveals) and the work at Audioquest. He goes on to say, “What’s important is that the cable does as little as possible to diminish the performance of the components that you’ve paid a lot of money for.”

Reviewing cables doesn’t necessarily suck, but evaluating them in a meaningful way that will provide useful data to our readers can be tough because there are a number of variables that can’t always be controlled. A tonearm cable is particularly tough because the miniscule voltage running through the conductors is the most fragile part in the audio-signal chain.

This would prove to be an interesting review exercise for me, as I’ve always been highly biased *against* silver conductor cables. Every one I’ve heard has had an unnatural, forward and overly detailed presentation, so I cringed a bit at the thought of listening to these cables. But I must say that AudioQuest is one of the few doing silver right. While the LeoPard is highly revealing, it was never harsh.

The MSRP of the LeoPard in a 1.2 meter length is \$750 with a choice of RCA’s or XLR’s on the phono input end. It is also available in a two-meter length for \$990, and custom lengths can be built to order. Because of the nature of the phono signal, a shorter cable is always preferred, but it is nice to know that a longer cable is available should your installation require it. The LeoPard can also be configured with a straight or angled five-pin JIS plug to RCA or with RCA plugs on both ends.

The LeoPard uses Audioquest’s Perfect Surface Silver with a high-purity silver wire to make up all of the conductors encased in Teflon tubes. They claim a high degree of noise rejection; unfortunately, my office is a metal building so I have a very low level of RF coming through, so I couldn’t verify whether this worked better than the other cables in my collection.



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The Absolute Sound,
Issue 193



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Magazine,
Issue 18



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Setup

Thanks to AudioQuest's DBS (Dielectric-Bias System) that keeps a constant 72-volt charge on the cable's dielectric, it eliminates the need for cable break-in. The Leopard was ready to go the minute I took it out of the box. While that's a great time saver for the review process, it's also a great thing for the end user, especially with a tonearm cable. This is one of my favorite features of AudioQuest cable, though the main function of the DBS system is to keep the cable's dielectric fully saturated and polarized at all time, resulting in maximum performance. AQ founder Bill Low mentioned that because of the voltages involved, an AC power cable needs the DBS less, but because a phono cable has essentially Zero Voltage across the dielectric, it needs it the most.

To get a feel for the LeoPards performance, a fair amount of time was spent listening to the TW Acoustic Raven TWO turntable with an SME iV.Vi tonearm and peripherally with the SME 309 tonearm as well. A wide range of cartridges was used: the Sumiko Blackbird, the Clearaudio Maestro Wood and DaVinci, the Lyra Dorian and Skala and the Koetsu Urushi Blue.

Comparisons

The cables that ship with SME tonearms have a somewhat grainy sound. They will do in a pinch, but I urge every SME owner to toss that cable as soon as you have a few extra bucks; it's the only weak link in their line of fine tonearms.

Compared to the stock SME cable, the LeoPard is a massive improvement in every area. Dynamics are improved, and there is more clarity from the top to the bottom of the frequency range with better musical coherence. *(continued)*



REVIEW

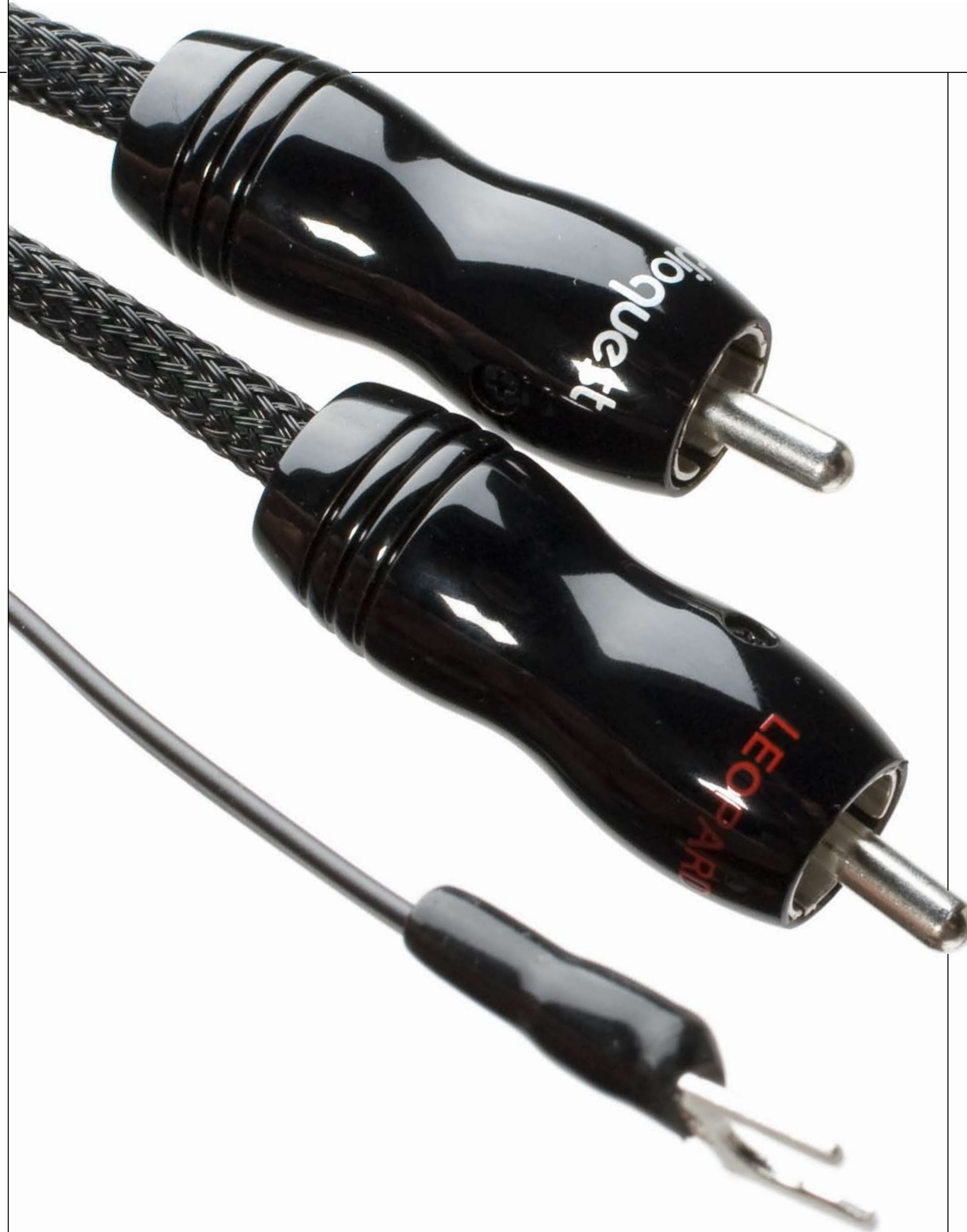
The overall sound quality of the LeoPard tonearm cable is very detailed, but in a good, high-resolution kind of way. Where the stock SME cable is dark and veiled, my Cardas tonearm cable has more resolution yet an overall warm, lush sound. The Furutech AG-12 that I use on three tonearms is very resolving, yet it is just slightly on the warm side of neutral, and the Furutech Silver Arrow tonearm cable has a more resolving and clinical sound than the AG-12. In comparison with the cables I have on hand, I would rate the LeoPard as the closest to neutral I've heard yet.

I found the AudioQuest cable to be an excellent match for all of my cartridges except for the Clearaudio DaVinci, which is right on the ragged edge, already possessing a lot of detail and sounding slightly forward. While many will argue that one should not match a "warm-sounding" this to a "cooler-sounding" that, the LeoPard matched with the DaVinci was too much of a good thing in my system.

Overall

With all but the DaVinci, the LeoPard's ability to let minute detail and spatial cues come right through was a ton of fun. Listening to "Black Light Trap" from Shriekback's *Big Night Music*, I was able to hear very far into the music and pluck tiny things from the presentation that were harder to distinguish with the AG-12 and nearly indiscernible with the stock SME cable.

I had a similar experience while listening to the live Cream LP set from Royal Albert Hall in 2005; "Sleepy Time, Time" is a great track for revealing the character of this great hall, with a large, spacious presentation. When I switched to the LeoPard from my AG-12, I was pulled further into the mix and it felt as if the hall space had increased by about a third. I must give some credit to Audio Research's new REF 2 phono stage that is in for review, as its tremendous level of resolution made it easy to clearly hear the differences between phono cables.



REVIEW

PRAT (pace, rhythm and timing) fans will be in heaven with the LeoPard. It does a fantastic job at relaying the music in a very natural fashion, not overemphasizing any spectrum of the music at the expense of another. Attack is quick and natural, and thanks to the resolution on tap, the music fades to black in an exquisite fashion.

Conclusion

If you are an analog lover looking for more sound from your turntable setup, it doesn't get any easier than plugging a LeoPard into your system. The better your table/arm/cartridge, the more you will be able to take advantage of the LeoPard's performance advantage, but even analog moderates should have a big smile on their faces after an experience with the LeoPard. Highly recommended.

The AudioQuest LeoPard Phono Cable
MSRP: \$750 (1.2 meter), \$990 (2 meter)

MANUFACTURER

www.audioquest.com

PERIPHERALS

Turntables Oracle Delphi V, TW Acoustic Raven TWO

Tonearms SME IV/Vi, SME 309

Cartridges Sumiko Blackbird, Lyra Dorian and Skala, Clearaudio Virtuoso Wood and DaVinci, Dynavector XV-1s, ZYX Omega

Preamplifier Burmester 011

Phono Preamplifier Audio Research REF Phono 2

Power Amplifier Burmester 911 MK3

Speakers GamuT S-9

In Search of the “Perfect Wave”

The New PS Audio Transport and DAC

By Lawrence Devoe

In classic surfing terms, a “perfect wave” appears out of nowhere. If you miss it, another might not return for a long, long time. Now, some new gear from PS Audio promises a perfect wave every time you surf digital sources. But is anything really perfect?

PS Audio, begun in the mid-1970’s by Paul McGowan (“P”) and Stan Warren (“S”), produced components that were reliable and great sound values. My original Digital Link DAC and Power Sonic line conditioner, bought more than 20 years ago, still work! McGowan has since reinvented PS Audio and has introduced new disc transport and digital to analog converter, optimistically called “Perfect Waves.”



The Waves Come Ashore

Two matching silver boxes with touch screens were easily hoisted onto my equipment rack. I connected them to my main system: Pass Labs XP-20 preamplifier and XA-100.5 monoblocks, Martin Logan CLXs, and Running Springs Audio Dmitri and Maxim line conditioners, all tethered and powered by Nordost Odin cables and cords.

The minimalist façades of the PWs conceal their versatility. The PerfectWave transport (PWT) can be yoked to the PerfectWave DAC (PWD) by coaxial, toslink and XLR cables. I used the preferred connection, an HDMI input (labeled I2S) and ran the PWD in balanced mode, as recommended by McGowan.

The PWT plays CDs, CD-Rs, CD layers of hybrid SACDs and DVD-Rs with UDF 2.0 formatted WAV files. The screen will display disc track names and cover art thanks to Ethernet access to the PS Audio GlobalNettm Future software updates that can be performed using the supplied SD card.

The PWD can upsample conventional digital sources (44.1 kHz/16-bit) all the way up to 192 kHz /24-bit domains. However, PS Audio contends that the PWT's data management makes CD upsampling unnecessary and sample-rate converters may actually degrade the sound. The PWD can invert polarity, which could improve some recordings. A variable volume control allows the PWD to be used directly with an amplifier, if desired. It also features a Type B USB port for direct connection to a PC, but more about that later.

There are five digital filters that differ mainly in the degree and slope of high-frequency cutoff beyond 20 kHz. Listeners are encouraged to use the "Auto" default setting that selects the minimum phase Soft Knee filter 2 for red book CDs and the linear phase Soft Knee filter 4 for higher sampling rates. I noted small but audible differences between the filters and ended up preferring filter 1 for CDs and filter 2 for higher sampling rates. The PWD stores filter and sampling rates selected for each input, a nice feature if you have multiple digital sources.

The "Wow!" moment for your friends and neighbors happens when you eject a disc that is playing. Abracadbra, the music continues for several more minutes! McGowan explains this sleight-of-hand as follows: The disc's original data are read many times with write-once detection and error correction before transfer to the 64 MB buffer memory of the PWT's "Digital lens." The reconstructed data are fed to an asynchronous clock, independent of the optical disc reader, before arriving at the DAC. This proprietary process eliminates timing errors, getting listeners one step closer to the compact disc's promise of "perfect sound forever."

Listening to the Play of the Waves

Serious listening started with Diana Krall's "Peel me a Grape" from *Love Scenes* and continued with Sonny Boy Williamson's "Keep it to Ourselves" from the disc with the same title on Analogue Productions, and Neil Young's "I am a Child" from *Live at Massey Hall 1971*. These recordings share a very warm and lifelike presentation of the human voice. All were well-served by the native sampling rate which sounded less "digital" when compared with the same tracks upsampled to 176.4 or 192 kHz. On a lark, I tossed in Vampire Weekend's *Contra*. (continued)

A proprietary process eliminates timing errors, getting listeners one step closer to the compact disc's promise of "perfect sound forever."



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REVIEW

The “Diplomat’s Son” is a new-school toe-tapper and the PerfectWaves captured the studio acoustics and the infectious pace of the music, well, perfectly. Conventional CD sessions concluded with Dick Hyman’s playing “Honeysuckle Rose” from the Reference Recordings copy of *Dick Hyman Plays Fats Waller*. The piano sounded big, sassy and three dimensional in native CD rate.

Perhaps More Waves?

If you have an internet music source, another treat is in store. My Squeezebox Classic was connected via coax SPDIF into the PWD and then upsampled from 44.1 kHz to 176.4 KHz. This was an absolute ear opener, and I often mistook my Rhapsody files for their CD versions. When I switched to Sirius and other high-quality internet radio stations, I got more musicality and less apparent compression than I had experienced with my reference system.

Bigger Waves? High-resolution download sources have landed on the beach. Internet sites such as HDtracks (www.hdtracks.com) and iTrax (www.iTrax.com) offer 88 kHz and 96kHz 24-bit downloads. 96/24 HDtracks of *Reference Recordings’ Exotic Dances from the Operas* were downloaded to compare with the actual HRx disc and CD versions used later in this review. After connecting my PC to the PWD through its USB interface, I leaned back and listened. These full-bodied orchestral tracks sounded clearly better than my original FLAC files, which had been created from the original CDs. They were bested sonically by the physical 44.1/16 bit discs played in native rate on the PWT. The USB-port music simply lacked the openness and impact inherent in these recordings.

Bigger Waves are Still Breaking

For the past couple of years, Reference Recordings has issued “HRx” discs or DVD-Rs burned with 176.4 kHz/24-bit WAV files. These were originally intended for playback on capable PCs ported into standard stereo systems. (continued)





For me, the major excitement was the Wave duo's unique ability to play high resolution discs.

Well, Nothing's Perfect

I only had some minor quibbles with the Waves. Considering the otherwise excellent build quality of these units, the disc drawer is flimsy. Since the disc mechanism serves mainly to load the disc content into buffer memory, this might not be a big deal for potential buyers. The remote control is very lightweight with small buttons. Not a show stopper, though I prefer larger units with better button spacing. If you have a typical universal remote, resolve this issue by cloning the PW controller and then store it in a safe location.

The Tide Goes Out

The PW system handles most current and some exciting newer means of how music will arrive in our listening rooms. For me, the major excitement was the Wave duo's unique ability to play high resolution discs.

But wait; there's more. Although playing computer-archived music through a USB port remains a sonic work in progress, PS Audio will be introducing later this year a plug-in component aptly named "The Bridge." The Bridge will enable access to wired or wireless networks and music collections stored on your own server, much like the Naim HDX. McGowan confides that this feature will exploit the digital-lens technology for such increasingly popular music sources. Given the already high performance of the current PerfectWaves, this should be another value added feature.

Paul McGowan's team has clearly thought outside of the box in the design and execution of these pieces. The company website states that "this is the last transport you'll ever need." Given my experience with the Waves, I would conclude that "if you can do it, it ain't braggin'." And these Waves can really do it. ●

Joel Fan's *West of the Sun* is a stunning piano recital with lifelike tonality and presence in all cuts. *Exotic Dances from the Operas* and Rachmaninoff's *Symphonic Dances*, played by the Minnesota Orchestra under Eiji Oue, convey a large acoustic space, natural sonic decay and an impressive wall of orchestral sound. Their CD cousins were no sonic slouches, but the HRx discs were better in every audible respect. In short, the PWT Combo with HRx discs came closer to delivering analog magic than anything I have heard to date, and without tape hiss or groove noise. Will HRx recordings be fruitful and multiply? Or will they enter the La Brea tar pits of such past hi-rez sources as the DVD-A? Based on my experience, I surely hope the latter is not the case.

Going Toe-to-Toe With the Reigning Champs

My reference digital system is an all Esoteric combo, D-03 DAC, P-03 transport, and G-0Rb atomic clock, which weighs in at \$42,000, compared with the \$6,000tab for the PW ensemble. On standard CDs, the PS Audio combo comes within a whisker of the Esoteric ensemble, no doubt due to its handling of digital errors and special filters. The differences in warmth and depth of image favored the Esoteric ensemble on most of my reference CDs. However, *these differences were usually all not dramatic*. HRx recordings played through the PW trumped what I was getting from the Esoteric gear even with upsampled CD or SACD sources. A cautionary note must be sounded. While these new-format high-rez discs played perfectly in my computer, I had to go through a couple of copies of each to get one that played flawlessly on the PWT without locking up the system. Fortunately, Reference Recordings made good on any defective disc, which is reassuring given their \$45 price tag.

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Simple.

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- Custom screen layouts for each activity means no hunting for the right button

Smart.

- Multi-touch gestures for common functions
- Free software upgrades delivered via iTunes
- Control different rooms from anywhere in the house



Wi-Fi to Infrared

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Phono Cartridges Clearaudio Goldfinger v.2/Clearaudio
Stradivari/Lyra Titan Mono/Benz Micro Ruby 3-H Mono

Phono Preamplifiers Pass XP-25/XP-15

Preamplifier Pass XP-20/Lexicon 12HD-B

Power Amplifier Pass XA-100.5/Pass X-3

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

Interconnects Nordost Odin/Valhalla

Speaker Cable Nordost Odin

Power Cords/Conditioning Running Springs Audio
Dmitri and Maxim /Nordost Odin/Valhalla

Vibration Control Black Diamond Racing

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

The EAT KT88 Vacuum Tubes

By Jeff Dorgay



If you are an aficionado of vacuum tubes, the chances are good that you have at least one power amplifier with 6550 power tubes or their close relative, the KT-88. If you've been seeking a set of vintage NOS (new old stock) tubes for your favorite amplifier, you know that two of the perennial favorites, the GE 6550 and the original Tung-Sol 6550, can fetch \$200-\$300 *per tube*, sometimes even more. Unless you are buying from a highly reputable source, there's a chance you might not even get a real NOS tube and there's no guarantee it won't fail after 100 hours, just as a brand-new tube could.

The EAT KT88's, distributed by Music Hall Audio and sold in the US by a few select dealers and Music Direct, aren't a cheap replacement, as are the Tung Sol reissues and the like. That's because these are the real deal.

The tubes are made in the Czech Republic by the European Audio Team (hence the name), and their manufacturing facility looks somewhat like a vintage

factory with a lot of hands-on craftsmanship – just like the way tubes were built in their heyday. Take a virtual factory tour at:

http://www.euroaudioteam.com/pdfs/eat_factory_tour.pdf

At present, EAT claims to produce only 200 KT88 Diamonds per month, and each tube's life span is approximately 10,000 hours. And are you sitting down?





Solo vocal lovers will be in heaven with these tubes; this is definitely the *tube magic* at its best.

A pair of these glorious tubes will set you back \$900 per pair, so you probably won't be springing for a matched quad to drop in your Prima Luna Prologue 1 or Dynaco Mark III's. But you could, and your budget amp would sound better than you ever expected it to.

Top Shelf Results

We made it a point to sample these tubes in a number of different amplifiers: A stock pair of Dynaco Mark III's, the Prima Luna Prologue One, a current vintage McIntosh MC275, the Octave V-40 that was currently in for review and a Conrad Johnson LP70S. While they are probably cost prohibitive for a budget amplifier, they produced a dramatic upgrade for every application in which we tried them, with consistent results in each one.

The EAT tubes seemed to draw a bit more bias current than the stock tubes, which was no problem with the Prima Luna's Adaptive Auto Bias or the MC 275's fixed bias. All of the other amplifiers needed to be re-biased, ever so slightly.

The first thing you will notice when installing a set of EAT tubes in your favorite amplifier is an increase in punch, weight and control. While EAT does not claim any increased power output with their tubes, I was immediately impressed with how much better my CJ LP70S was able to grab hold of the bass notes. It still wasn't sounding like my solid-state Premier 350, but it was less whumpy with deep, quick bass thwacks. You will also notice that your favorite acoustic bass player is coming through your system with more texture than before.

Once you get over the increased punch, pull some of your favorite discs from the stack, whether acoustic or vocal, and listen to the most delicate, low-level portions of the recordings. Solo vocal lovers will be in heaven with these tubes; this is definitely the *tube magic* at its best. *(continued)*

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REVIEW



These tubes were substantially quieter than all of the NOS and current stock tubes that I tried, with less grain to boot.

Whether you like Jennifer Warnes or Johnny Cash, you will hear more nuance and breathing in the recordings than you did before. Yes, these tubes were substantially quieter than all of the NOS and current stock tubes that I tried, with less grain to boot.

Conclusion

Overall, the effect of the EAT tubes was equivalent to making a substantial jump in your analog or digital front end. The burning question is: will these tubes actually give an extended lifespan? EAT is offering a six-month warranty, so that's a good start.

But \$1,800 is no idle purchase for a set of four vacuum tubes by any stretch of the imagination. However, if you've taken your vacuum-tube-powered audio system

as far as it can go and you're itching for *more* performance, I can't recommend the EAT tubes highly enough. They also make a 300B, as well as a replacement for the 6922/6DJ8/7025 and the 12AX7. I can't wait to give them a try. If they are as good as the KT88's, we are well on our way to having a new premium tube supplier in the world.

My only hope is that they will make some EL34's for my Marantz 8B that is currently being restored! ●

EAT KT88 Diamond Tubes
MSRP: \$900/matched pair

US Distributor: Music Hall
www.musicchallaudio.com



The Verity Finn

High Performance, Small Footprint

By Jeff Dorgay

It's no secret that I'm a big fan of Verity Audio. This 15-year-old Canadian company has combined a very stylish yet understated aesthetic approach in speaker systems that have a minimal footprint while offering extremely high performance. They are the perfect speaker for the quality-phile consumer who wants a great speaker that looks at home in a modern living room. Or maybe even a fine-art installation.

The Finn is their smallest speaker, introduced last year at the Consumer Electronics Show. A three-way design, it utilizes a six-inch woofer that crosses over to a five-inch mid-range at 150hz and again to a one-inch soft-dome tweeter (the same unit used in the larger Rienzi) at 4000hz. A first order slope is used between the woofer and midrange driver, making for an extremely smooth transition. Combined with a rear port, they offer deeper LF response than you might expect from a small pair of cabinets. The midrange crosses over to the tweeter with a third order network.

The cabinets on the Finn's are flawless, as they are with every Verity speaker I've had the chance to experience.

The cabinets on the Finn's are flawless, as they are with every Verity speaker I've had the chance to experience. The review pair came in a satin white finish, which was absolutely smashing in my living room with oak floors, black leather furniture and a Noguchi table. The other standard finishes include piano black and walnut. Alternate wood finishes are available at an additional charge. Check with your Verity dealer for charge and delivery details. Personally, I really like the white...

The Finn's have an MSRP of \$5,995 per pair in satin white. Part of the cost savings in this model is the one-piece cabinet design; by eliminating the labor necessary for separate woofer and mid/tweeter cabinets as well as the massive aluminum plate between the two allowed for substantial cost savings and a lighter speaker.

There is only one set of high-quality binding posts for connection at the bottom of the enclosure. These are the same binding posts that Verity uses with all of their speakers, with machined brass hexagonal nuts that are easy to tighten with the supplied wrench. It's a nice extra touch that Verity extends from their flagship speaker all the way down the line. Though this is their entry-level speaker system, there is never a sense that anything has been scrimped on to meet a price point. The Finn is as handsome as their top of the line Lohengrin II (with an MSRP of approximately \$90k per pair).



Setup

Thanks to their relatively small size, the Finn's are easy for one person to set up. Even in the relatively tight placement situation in my living room (11 x 17 feet), the rear-firing woofer never proved a problem to work around as do some side-firing designs. In a larger space, they were very easy to set up, especially since Verity speakers have always been in my reference room. Using the measurements from where the slightly larger Rienzi's were used two years ago, the Finn's ended up about six inches closer together and a few inches closer to the wall.

The Finn's do a fantastic job of offering "big speaker" sound in a compact package, and this is truly their strength.

Either way, this is a speaker that is quite user friendly. They benefit from attention to fine tuning and placement, but if you are off by a few inches at first, they will not suffer dramatically. Once the speakers have spent a couple hundred hours breaking in, taking the time to optimize placement from the rear wall (and final spiking) will offer up the last bit of bass slam. Optimizing each speaker's distance to the rear wall on all three axes will benefit the image depth. As with any high-performance speaker, when you take the time to finesse the setup, you will hear the speaker really lock in to the room. The better the quality of your reference gear, the easier this process will be.

Larger Than Their Size Suggests

The Finn's do a fantastic job of offering "big speaker" sound in a compact package, and this is truly their strength. When my non-audiophile friends heard the Finn's playing from the other room, they all expected a much larger speaker. The speakers' above-average sensitivity means you probably won't need a big amplifier to make them create magic in your listening room either. We made it a point to use the Finn's with a wide range of amplifiers from the two-watt-per-channel Decware SET (which worked incredibly well at low volume levels) to the mighty McIntosh MC1.2kw monoblocks. Efficient crossover design made for high performance with low power, and the Finn's were equally at home with solid-state or vacuum-tube power amplifiers, so system compatibility will not be an issue with these speakers. FYI: the 30wpc Naim UnitiQUTE was a match made in Heaven with the Finn's. *(continued)*

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REVIEW

As I had some new Blue Note LPs from Music Matters to get in rotation, a lot of the initial listening was done with some straightforward jazz, a task in which the Finn's excelled. The second I cued up Grant Green's *Solid*, I was digging the way the Finn's handled this jazz classic. Being biased heavily towards panels for so many years, I'm a stickler for coherence and will usually overlook weakness in a speaker elsewhere if it can get the mids right and top-to-bottom balance correct.

This is a definite strength with the Finn's. Acoustic instruments sound as they should, with a healthy dose of air and space around them. Not always an easy task to accomplish. Because the Finn's were so enjoyable, I stayed in the land of Blue Note for quite some time, but man cannot live on Jazz alone. (although Joe Harley and Ron Rombach would probably disagree).

The trusty tone generator confirmed that indeed, these speakers go down solidly to 35hz in the room. They don't reproduce the super-low tones with the authority of my JLAudio Gotham, but the bass response is solid and had more weight than I would have expected out of a speaker this size. That was what grabbed me when I heard the Finn's earlier this year at the Consumer Electronics Show; they have a *big* sound and that's another one of my hot buttons.

Terribly Fun Speakers

Moving right along to the rest of my music collection, there was nothing that I felt couldn't be played on the Finn's. They did a fantastic job with rock, vocals, you name it. As with any compact speaker, the only limitations are at the extremes. *(continued)*





A bit of super-deep synth bass and pipe organ wasn't as convincing as it was with Verity's \$42k/pair Sarastro II's that we reviewed last year, nor did the Finn's play as loud as their larger brothers. But at all but ear-splitting level, the family resemblance comes through clearly.

That being noted, I was surprised at how far I *could* push the Finn's with the McIntosh MC 1.2KW monoblocks. I was able to play Led Zeppelin and Slayer awfully loud without bumping those six-inch woofer cones against their stops, so for 99 percent of the situations, the Verity will play as loud as you need it to, and this is what gives this speaker its ability to reveal dynamic

contrast as well as it does for its price point. The best attribute of these speakers is they let you fall out of "analysis" mode relatively quickly and get into "music enjoyment" mode. The sooner I stop dwelling on what a speaker does or doesn't do, the better.

Verity's two top speakers utilize a ribbon tweeter while the rest of the product line use a soft-dome tweeter. As in the Rienzi, the dome works perfectly in the Finn's, giving you a near perfect balance of tonality and dynamics that I've rarely heard at this price point.

A Brief Comparison

Comparing the Verity Finn to two of my other favorite speakers in this price category, the \$5,000/

pr. B&W 805D and the \$5,000 MartinLogan Vantage, the Finn is equally enjoyable, yet it offers up a different set of pluses and minuses. The Vantage, being a hybrid electrostatic, offers slightly more top-end transparency but is much more demanding of room placement and amplification. The B&W is also slightly more transparent with the diamond tweeter but has a definite LF restriction and requires \$750 worth of stands. Neither of these speakers has the level of top-to-bottom coherency of the Finn's, and that's what carries the day for me.

So the Finn's are in solid company. I could live happily ever after with any of the three, but I have to give the Finn's the nod in overall achievement; they

have the best balance and are the easiest to integrate into a system. It may be worth noting that in the "vote with your dollar" segment of this exercise, I owned a pair of Vantages for some time, currently own the 805's, and TONEAudio is purchasing the Finn's for duty in our reference fleet of speakers.

A Solid Foundation

Though many audiophiles will argue about which component is more important in your system, speakers are the ones that you will have to work around the most. If they don't work with your amplifier or room, it doesn't matter how cool they are.

Because the Finn's are so easy to work with and are so easy to drive, these are great speakers around which to build your system and grow with later, not having to replace the speakers as you upgrade your electronics later. You could enjoy these speakers with relatively modest amplification and achieve great results. Yet knowing that these speakers can still hold their own with five-figure electronics, you can upgrade the rest of your system as your finances and interest grow. ●

The Verity Audio Finn
MSRP: \$5,995 per pair (satin white), \$7,495 for satin wood and piano black.

MANUFACTURER

Verity Audio
www.verityaudio.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source Oracle Delphi V/SME iV.Vi tonearm, Koetsu Urushi Blue

Digital Source dCS Paganini stack, Sooloos music server

Phono Preamplifier Audio Research REF Phono 2

Preamplifier Burmester 011

Power Amplifier Burmester 911 MK. 3

Cable Shunyata Aurora

Power Running Springs Dmitri and Maxim, Shunyata Hydra 2

Power Cords Running Springs HZ and Mongoose, Shunyata Python CX

The Keith Monks Ruby

Serious Analog Tradition

By Jeff Dorgay

My first exposure to record cleaning was with the Keith Monks record-cleaning machine back in the mid '70s. My favorite audiophile dealer had one on display. I don't know if they ever sold any of them, (they were about \$1,000 at the time) but they cleaned a lot of records for 50 cents each. I'm sure the return on the investment for that machine was huge, and it certainly helped them sell a *ton* of Nitty Gritty RCM's at \$159.

Serious audiophilia was in its infancy then, and the rest of us were pretty happy using the Discwasher system until this came along. The Keith Monks RCM set the bar for ultra-quiet vinyl playback. These days, Russ Andrews HiFi shop in the UK charges four pounds to clean a disk on the KM, so if you have a large LP collection, it's a good idea to buy your own machine.

Today, we talk about having records that are clean enough to offer "CD quiet" playback, but back then, we had no idea that perfect sound was still years in the distance. If you are truly serious about analog playback, a good record-cleaning regimen is a must. You can start a war on any given day on a variety of audiophile message boards, but I've always felt the keys to clean records are care and consistency. You can wade through the various bottles of goo for cleaning your records, you can even brew your own. But like developing film (another fond analog activity), I suggest finding the system that works and sticking with it. Fortunately, the folks at Keith Monks have done their homework and offer a series of products that work well with their RCM.

REVIEW

Keith Monks still makes a few versions of their famous RCM, celebrating their 40th anniversary with the Ruby model reviewed here. These fine machines are still built by hand in the UK with a team of technicians who were trained by the former production manager from Keith Monks' heyday. Current company principal Jon Monks laughed at CES this year when he said, "I had to lure our old foreman back with a fairly large sum of money, but it was worth it!"

The Ruby has an MSRP of \$6,995, and there will only be 40 of these produced, all in the signature red color. While this may be out of reach for many audiophiles, you can still get your hands on "The Classic" Keith Monks RCM for a slightly more affordable price of \$5,495. *(continued)*



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Robert Harley - The Absolute Sound - 09/07



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"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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Machine Overview

The major difference in technology that makes the Keith Monks stand out from the average vacuum machine such as a VPI or Nitty Gritty is the unique way it removes the fluid (and ultimately the embedded dirt) from the record grooves. Where many of the other machines use a flat record wand that provides suction across the entire record surface, the Keith Monks RCM uses a vacuum wand that keeps its suction gap separated from the record surface by a nylon thread, cleaning the record rotation by rotation.

Under the hood of the Ruby, the vacuum pump is massive with a duty cycle that allows you to clean records as often as you like. Because many of the Keith Monks machines first found use in the broadcast industry, they had to be designed to withstand the rigors of constant use. The string is stored on a spool underneath the top

panel and is renewed regularly, so there is always a clean surface in contact with the record.

There is also a reservoir for KM record cleaner tucked away by the motor. This is pumped by the use of the rather tasteful Mini Cooper windshield washer button on the front panel to squeeze out a helping of fluid onto the record's surface. The instruction manual stresses the need to make sure the brush is saturated with fluid *before* starting the cleaning operation so that damage is not done to the grooves. Once this has been done, the platter spins at 72 RPM (115v. versions) or 80 RPM (230v. versions) as the brush does its job. Monks said that the high rotation speed means less dust falling on the record being cleaned. He also feels that the high speed combined with their brush profile gives the record a deep scrub, "eliminating the need for a reverse-direction cycle." (*continued*)





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REVIEW



The Process

Playing it by the book, I used both of the KM solutions to clean my test records. The first step is to use their discOvery "Break the Mold" cleaner, which is meant to lift any mold release compounds or fungus from your records as a pre-cleaning. At \$50 per 500 ml. bottle, it's not cheap, but it's not as expensive as other products I've seen. The manual points out that you can just switch from this cleaner to the standard discOvery fluid (\$50 for a 1,000 ml. bottle); I used one of the enclosed brushes and spread it on manually to save time.

After spreading the fluid about and letting it set for a minute, gently scrub the disc and let it sit for another minute before vacuuming up. Finally, go for another pass with the discOvery 33/45 cleaner and vacuum. Shellac lovers can use the discOvery 78 formula on their beloved 78's, and I'm guessing you will be as floored as I was. While I only have a small collection of 78 RPM records, they sounded like new after a pass with the Keith Monks RCM. Fantastic!

The Proof is in the Groove

As you can see from the opening photo, the Keith Monks RCM does the job right. I was impressed with its ability to get deep dirt out of even the grimeiest records. Many of these were purchased from various bargain bins and I had serious doubts about their ultimate resurrection. One pass with

each solution brought them back to life, and where there was no groove damage, they sounded as good as, if not better than, new.

My current two-machine, three-fluid system does a pretty good job with all but the dirtiest records, but the Keith Monks goes the extra mile here. It also does a better job with moderately warped records, which is of major concern to me as I use the Furutech DF-2 LP flattener. The cleaner you can get a warped LP, the better it will sound when flattened because the less dirt you re-melt into the grooves the better.

In the end, the Keith Monks Ruby RCM is a fantastic machine. I'm not sure about the pricetag, but as they are only making 40 of these to celebrate their 40th anniversary, I imagine there will be 40 takers to have this bit of vinyl history. For the rest of you, the Classic will make a great machine, and with this level of build quality, I'm sure you can leave it to your children to keep your LP collection clean once you become worm food. This truly is one of the ultimate analog accessories, albeit a spendy one. ●

The Keith Monks Ruby
40th Anniversary Record Cleaning Machine

MSRP: \$6,995 (Ruby), \$5,495 (Classic)
www.keithmonks-rcm.co.uk



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Designed by Yoav Geva (Gonczarowski)

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E-mail: info@yg-acoustics.com Web: www.yg-acoustics.com

Technology

Carmel incorporates the same technologies that make YG Acoustics' Anat Reference II Professional the best loudspeaker on Earth: YG's DualCoherent™ crossovers produce the best frequency response and relative phase available today; Carmel's enclosure is milled using 4-axis technology as opposed to the competition's 3-axis milling, which avoids the parallel internal surfaces common in other so-called "complex enclosure" designs.

Detail

Carmel utilizes Scan-Speak drivers, modified to YG Acoustics specifications, with the tweeter assembled in-house. The unique enclosure design keeps mechanical losses lower than any competing speaker¹, by combining the minimized turbulence of a sealed design with the low friction otherwise associated with enclosure-free concepts. All this is made possible through extremely tight manufacturing tolerances, and vibration-free pressurized assembly of the precision-ground and hardened CNC-machined enclosure panels².

Sound

The end-result is a speaker of remarkable refinement. Carmel is ultra-transparent, and presents a huge yet precise soundstage, with the neutrality and warmth of a live performance that YG Acoustics is famous for. This is all presented in a speaker with elegant lines and a shape that invites inclusion in the finest home environments.

Reviews

Neil Gader from The Absolute Sound
reporting on CES 2010

**"Best Sound:
the new and smaller two-way YG Carmel."**

Robert Harley from The Absolute Sound,
January 2010 (issue 199)

"...the Kipod was capable of an enormously appealing and captivating sound. It disappeared in the sense that it was a transparent window on the music, with extremely low coloration. ...the Kipod Studio achieved its lifelike vitality by imposing so little of itself on the music."

"This quality was, I concluded, not just the result of the Kipod's lack of tonal colorations in the midband, but of its transient quickness and coherence. Leading edges of notes seemed to jump out of the presentation with startling speed... Transient information had a coherence that was world-class..."

"This quality is the Kipod Studio's greatest strength – the ability to sound highly resolving and alive without a trace of fatigue-inducing etch. ...its resolution was musically authentic..."

Wes Phillips from Stereophile, March 2009

"But most of all, the YGs were so adept at presenting dynamic details that, instead of simply making the music come alive, they presented living, breathing musicians making music in my living room."

"Wow – a speaker that makes me reevaluate an entire instrument's capabilities."

Adam Goldfine from Positive-Feedback, Issue 45

"...goose bump inducing realism..."



¹ See YG Acoustics' ad titled Reason #3 for measurements of mechanical losses.

² YG Acoustics is unique in the industry in having in-house CNC precision-grinding equipment in addition to CNC milling machines.

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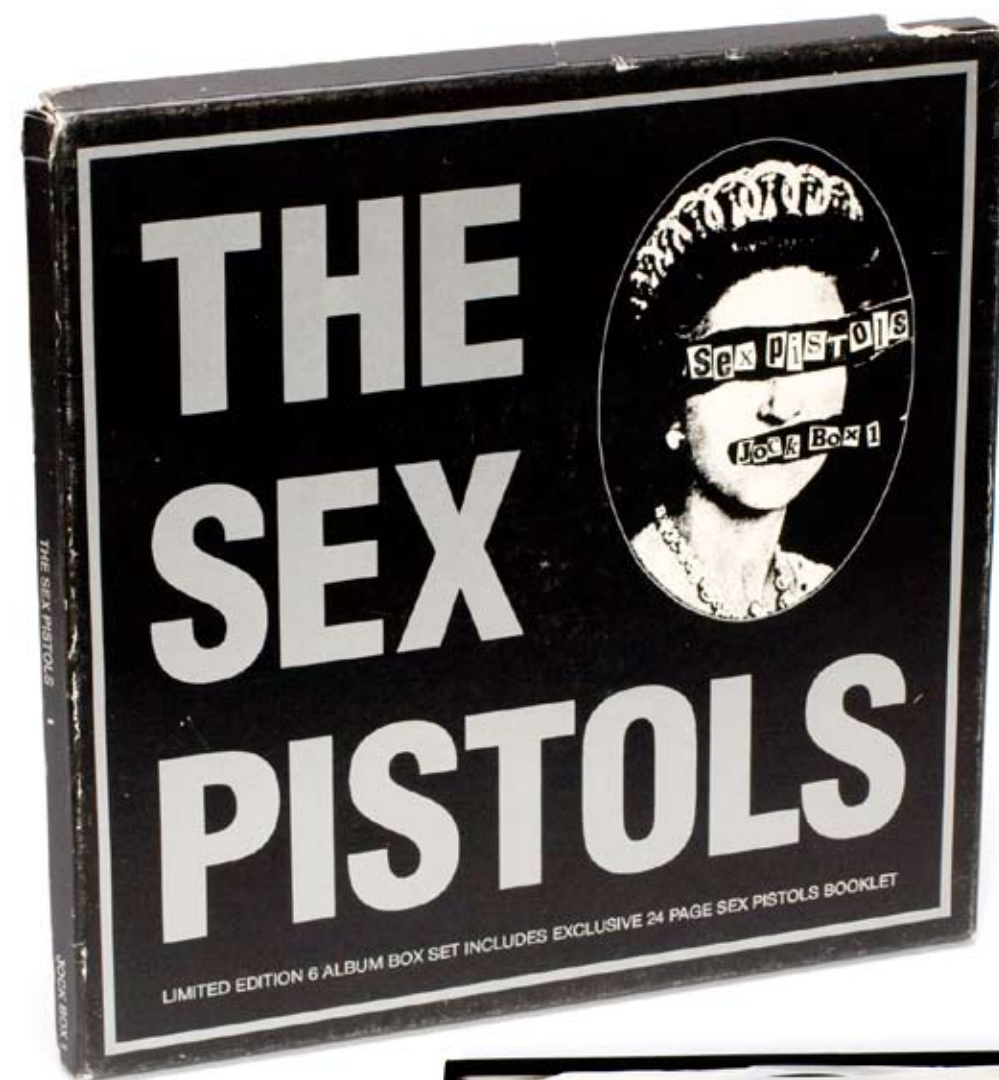
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BARGAINS

Slummin'

By Jeff Dorgay



Sex Pistols "Jock Box"
\$12, eBay

Passing on the \$200 sealed box set, I chose the \$12 copy with tattered packaging. Somehow buying a pristine Sex Pistols box set just didn't seem keeping with the punk ethos. Fortunately, the booklet was still intact and the records were actually in perfect shape, looking like they had been in about 10 moves but never actually played.

Proving once again, there are still some great deals to be had on vinyl if you dig beneath the surface.



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

ALO Audio: www.aloaudio.co

Anthem: www.anthemav.com

Auravis Systems: www.auravissystems.com

AudioQuest: www.audioquest.com

B&W Music Club: www.bowersandwilkins.com

B&W Loudspeakers: www.bowersandwilkins.com

Benchmark: www.benchmarkmedia.com

Burmester: www.burmester.de

Cambridge Audio: www.audioplusservices.com

Conrad Johnson: www.conradjohnson.com

DCS: www.dcsLtd.co.uk

Echo Audio: www.echohifi.com

GamuT: www.gamutaudio.com

HDTracks.com: www.hdtracks.com

Immedia Sound: www.immediasound.com

Luxman: www.onahighernote.com

JM Labs/Focal: www.audioplusservices.com

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McIntosh: www.mcintoshlabs.com

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