

TONEAudio

Music.Gear.Style.

No.38 June 2011



Intrépide Chanteuse Keren Ann's Subtle Suggestiveness

■ **Nothing But Budget Gear! Everything under \$2,000**

■ **20+ In-Depth Record Reviews:** Bon Iver, My Morning Jacket, Jesse Sykes, SebastiAn, Prince, William Elliott Whitmore, Elvis Costello, and More

■ **Beer Snob Quenches Summer Thirsts**

■ **We're There!** Buffalo Springfield, Twilight Singers, and Orange Goblin Live



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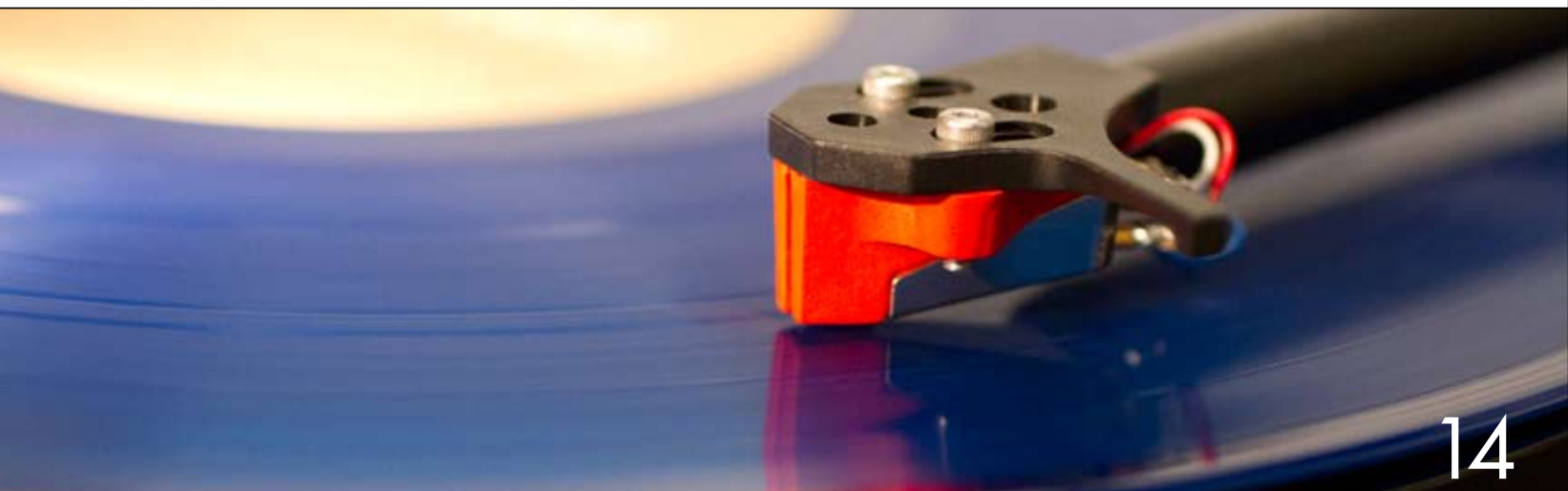
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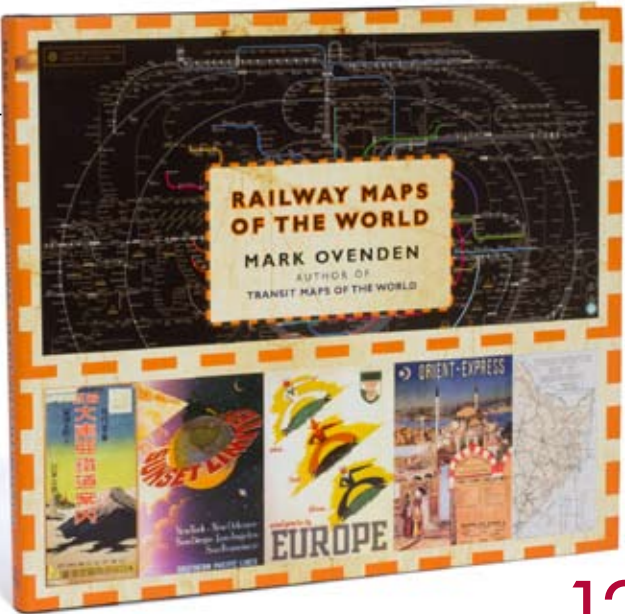


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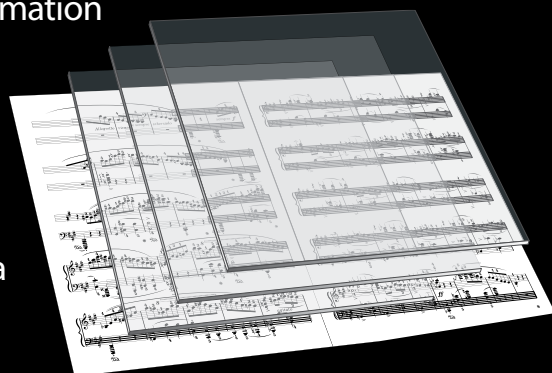
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Do No HARM!

Great sound and great pictures, music that consumes you, movies that transport you around the universe ... comes from honoring the original signal.

An unavoidable fact-of-life: Every component and cable in a system causes some amount of distortion. These aberrations add up, like layers of foggy glass between you and the image. The goal of high quality components and cables is to be like clean clear panes of glass, altering and distorting the information as little as possible.

Some of the most fundamental distortion mechanisms are honored and addressed by AudioQuest's **4-Elements**. Any improvement in these areas of design and materials results in less damage and a more effective immersive experience.



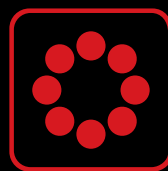
Solid Conductors

Electrical and magnetic interaction between strands is one of the greatest sources of distortion in normal cables. Separate solid conductors prevent interaction between strands.



Insulation

In addition to insulating, all conductor coatings are also a "dielectric." Signal flow is slowed down and distorted by a dielectric, making the choice of material, and AQ's Dielectric-Bias System, very important.



Geometry

The relationship between conductors, whether of the same polarity (+ & +) or opposite polarity (+ & -) affects many electrical and mechanical parameters, including capacitance, inductance, RF Interference, etc.



Metal Quality

Conductor material quality has a pronounced effect on the signal passing through. Different materials have more or less impurities, grain-boundaries, surface irregularities, etc.

PUBLISHER'S LETTER

I won't make any excuses for owning an exotic hi-fi system. But my focus has always been on music, and specifically, exploring more music. By nature, daily discussions with staff members usually deal with hardware-related issues, and I'd be lying if I said we didn't get excited about the latest amazing product. Yet

music always dominates our conversations. I've also been very fortunate to have a close circle of friends that never lost their drive to seek out new music, even though most of us are now in our late 40s and early 50s. Perhaps that's anomalous behavior. But I don't think so.



No, this isn't another rant about "whether you are a gear lover or a music lover," which is an incredibly tired argument and frankly, one I don't care about. But telling me that there is no or little good music today really gets my ire up. I couldn't disagree more. And it all comes full circle when you realize that such attitudes constitute the biggest problem facing the high-end audio industry. We can do all the finger pointing we want, but if you really want to be honest, selling anything is about excitement. Can you get me excited about something enough that I want to spend my hard-earned money on it instead of something else?

Recently, Ken Kessler made a weak argument in a newsletter in which he placed all the blame for audio's decline on hi-fi dealers, claiming that we should visit a fine watch shop or automotive dealer to see how luxury vendors—hi-fi gear falls into this category, like it or not—treat customers with respect. As someone who's owned more than their share of Mercedes and Porsche cars, I can't say that discerning auto dealerships

treated me like royalty very often, and I can't say I've been treated any better in prestigious watch stores, either.

More than ever, what our industry needs to understand is that it's all about the point of engagement. Music, enthusiasm, and inclusiveness will sell hi-fi, and it won't matter if the guy behind the counter is wearing an Armani suit or an Iron Maiden t-shirt. Knowledge and passion come always through loud and clear. Besides, the average 20- or 30-something has a more finely honed bullshit detector than their parents. Nothing turns off younger generations (or this 50-something) faster than telling them that there isn't anything new under the sun. That's just plain lazy.

All of which explains why, in this issue, I turn the Publisher's Letter over to our editor, Bob Gendron, and for excellent reason: He addresses a topic that's central to my being and to this magazine. When I started *TONE* six years ago, I envisioned a hi-fi publication that championed music—primarily because I've spent my life around people that have an unquenchable thirst for new music, live or recorded.

If this were a television show, here is where you'd see the 15-second disclaimer that says, "The opinions expressed herein does not necessarily represent the viewpoints of *TONE* or its management." However, in this case, I agree with Bob 110%, and I'm anxious to hear your thoughts on this hotly debated and absolutely critical subject.

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The Music Never Stopped

By Bob Gendron

Bob Dylan hasn't played conventional versions of his classic songs in more than two decades. Prince regularly takes license with his material onstage, weaving bold new colors, thrilling time signatures, and engaging breaks into pop standards. Elvis Costello rejects convention, constantly reworking older compositions by seeking out fresh details and unscripted devices that add to the ongoing sonic conversations and extend cultural dialogues. Even perennial grump Van Morrison switches up arrangements when performing, revealing undercurrents and melodies that previously simmered beneath the surface.

These iconic artists—and thousands of their peers—refuse to remain content rehashing the past. So why should fans and listeners? Most don't. True music lovers crave cutting-edge sounds, anticipate hearing new records, look forward to concerts by up-and-coming musicians, and often don't have enough time to soak it all up. But many members of the audiophile press continue to suffer from the stubborn, narrow-minded belief that all the great rock and pop music was made between 1950-1975. That creativity went dormant, that meaningful advances dried up, that nothing including the coming of the savior Himself will ever top rock's golden age—a period that happens to coincide with the maturation of the Baby Boomer generation, the very same group from which the audiophile press' gray beards stem. Given that such flawed thinking, buzz-killing sentiment, and unsubstantiated logic coincides with the most productive music epoch in history, is it any wonder why the mainstream turned a deaf ear to the hobby years ago?

The most recent example of curmudgeonly “there's little/nothing new that's good to hear” nonsense comes courtesy of an essay posted by a leading audio magazine and penned by a veteran equipment reviewer.

The latter maintains that the advent of digital technology stifled music's evolution and discusses why there's supposedly no longer any real invention, great composers, or cohesive movements.

This audaciously laughable piece also equates blockbuster album sales with relevancy; sums up the entire history of the 1990s and 2000s in one disparaging sentence that deems both decades “mostly unremarkable”; and laments that most people—including concertgoers—only listen to music as background fare. If I didn't know better, I'd think the sniveling editorial the product of the wonderful satirical news outfit known as The Onion.

Opinions aside, the saddest part about the screed—and others like it—is that it acts as a cowardly veil to conceal bigger unspoken issues. Namely, the fact that many audiophiles stopped paying close attention to new music decades ago and instead chose to cocoon themselves in a safety net of a relatively select few well-known records; that by repeatedly insisting that the past (and time of their youth) reigns supreme and painting everything that followed with the same broad strokes, audiophile spokespersons convince themselves they're not old and out of touch; that by conveniently ignoring context and embracing circular

justification, these “experts” skirt the actuality that they're overwhelmed by the sheer volume of vibrant music that exploded over the past 30+ years; and that by refusing to acknowledge what's happening in the music world and wearing rose-colored glasses that romanticize nostalgia, they can pontificate about how much the present fails to live up to expectation.

But the realities are different. Never has such a diverse range of music been so widely and cheaply accessible. Never has music played such a huge role in people's lives, an obvious truth evident by the ubiquitous presence of portable players, myriad digital delivery services, and need for nearly every cellular phone model to incorporate music playback features. Go to any mid-size town or big city, and concerts abound. Sold-out destination festivals such as Bonarroo and Coachella attract tens of thousands of patrons each summer. More albums are released in one month now than there were during entire calendar years during the 60s and 70s. Indeed, curiosity in and demand for new sounds remain on the upswing even if the structural mechanisms and evaluation tools changed. As far back as the turn of the century, major record labels quit using sales as a barometer

of success and measurement of whether audiences cared about a particular album. Besides, does music's fragmented nature mean it isn't relevant or innovative? No. It actually signifies the opposite.

Of course, millions of listeners from every generation already know the aforementioned to be true. So why would anyone heed what a majority of the audiophile press spouts when its rhetoric is littered with gloomy pronouncements, stale reasoning, and behind-the-times arguments—the outpouring the equivalent of an 8-track player in a 2012 model-year car, the embarrassing judgments akin to the banal desert island and demonstration-disc lists that, aside from few token albums, disregard everything made after the year 1975 and resist contemporary updates. Has music really gotten that bad? Of course not. Rather, what happened is that most audiophile critics got content and lazy, motivated by a selfish desire to stage an exclusive, age-restrictive Boy's Club that grows more pathetic with each passing year. *(continued)*

“Has music really gotten that bad? Of course not. Rather, what happened is that most audiophile critics got content and lazy, motivated by a selfish desire to stage an exclusive, age-restrictive Boy's Club that grows more pathetic with each passing year.”

“Never has such a diverse range of music been so widely and cheaply accessible. Never has music played such a huge role in people’s lives, an obvious truth evident by the ubiquitous presence of portable players, myriad digital delivery services, and need for nearly every cellular phone model to incorporate music playback features.”

For evidence of this high society, look to the dearth of 20-, 30-, and even 40-something journalists in the industry. Take a gander at the age and common repetition of the recordings cited in gear reviews. Note the self-congratulatory language that boasts about their possession of rare LP pressings, as if ownership somehow equates to critical prowess. Rather than blame music and general populace for the supposed let down, whiny audiophile scribes should point the finger where it belongs—at themselves, at their own shortcomings, and ultimately, at their transparent lack of expertise on matters they pretend to know. To paraphrase the Doors, the music isn’t over. Rather, to paraphrase the Grateful Dead, the music never stopped—the audiophile press’ interest in it did.

In addition to my role at *TONE*, I have the genuine privilege of covering dozens of concerts and several festivals every year for the *Chicago Tribune*, for which I have been a regular contributor since 2002. I’m exposed to hundreds of new albums each year, and constantly wish I had an eighth day of the week to investigate more. Informed rock criticism is a fun and rewarding pursuit, yet it’s also demanding and time-consuming. It’s one reason why I’d never pass myself off as a classical music authority

or turntable pro. Too frequently, however, equipment reviewers are guilty of reversing this very situation and weigh in on topics to which they bring minimal qualification and insight.

If you’re comfortable limiting your horizons to familiar albums and established favorites, that’s fine. Just don’t stereotype new music with unsubstantiated assessments when you don’t pay it a passing thought or bother to listen. But if you read this magazine, we’re guessing your tastes and interests go beyond what’s relentlessly championed as the proverbial End All Be All. By example and—just as importantly—by omission, our competitors have let us (and you) know where they stand when it comes to new music, open-mindedness, and concerts. By extension, *TONE* lets you know where we stand via our belief that oceans of music await further discovery, that there are no cigars awarded for insider jargon and/or demeaning attitudes, and that the music you’ll be listening to for years to come is meant to be celebrated, shared, and examined.

Yes, the landscape can be daunting. It’s why we provide an educated filter on music that’s worth your time via illuminating, in-depth coverage that goes beyond trite reviews that short-change the music and you. We realize the many options at your

disposal, which is another reason we don’t bring an agenda to the table. The notion that certain self-appointed analog-loving messiahs saved vinyl and prompted the ongoing analog resurrection is as comical as the condescending idea that people need to drop big money on a stereo to be considered serious music lovers. Whether you spend a little or a lot on a system bears no reflection on how much you love music. We understand.

In this issue, we walk our talk by exclusively featuring excellent gear priced under \$1,500. We’re also premiering a new item, Test Tracks, on our Web site, that directs listeners to superb-sounding cuts from new and recent albums—both providing an alternative to same-old fare and, we hope, exposing you to interesting music about which you may be unaware.

Indeed, for all the hand wringing over the high-end industry’s future, it’s impossible to ignore the ironic positions assumed by most of the traditional press—specifically, how it undervalues and even dissuades their audiences from hearing new music. Consider: If there really is no rock, R&B, jazz, pop, or country from the past few decades that stands on an equal plane with that from the 50s, 60s, and early 70s, why would anyone even want to invest in a stereo today?

What do such damaging messages send to entrepreneurial manufacturers and designers? Furthermore, this troglodytic stance only serves to promote an aristocracy based on false pronouncements and artificial status. Note to writers: If you’re so jaded that you shrug off entire decades of music as you pine for those glory days, hang up the pen. In other terms: “Your old road is rapidly agin’/Please get out of the new one if you can’t lend your hand.” Remember?

At *TONE*, we actually care if the industry exists five years from now. Unlike many of our colleagues, we’re not at retirement age, and even if we were, our thirst for discovery remains unquenched and our passion unabated. We are determined to turn on more people to what we believe is one of the most exciting recreations in life, and in doing so, recognize that the smoking-jacket elitism that’s turned much of the industry into a mainstream punch line is as unhealthy as the notion that all the best music is in the rear-view mirror. Not that we’re about to forget all the incredible albums from the past. To the contrary. We view music as an ongoing and universal cultural dialogue in which expressions, terms, rules, and languages constantly mutate and evolve. Music can’t be compartmentalized. (*continued*)

“If there really is no rock, R&B, jazz, pop, or country from the past few decades that stands on an equal plane with that from the 50s, 60s, and early 70s, why would anyone even want to invest in a stereo today? What do such damaging messages send to entrepreneurial manufacturers and designers?”

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DON MCLEAN & AMERICA

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**DANIEL
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Black Dub
Opening Act: Leif Vollebakk

MONDAY JULY 4
SALLE WILFRID-PELLETIER, PDA



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FEATURE

It's continually revisited and reshaped, the present building onto the past, the cycle informing the future and leading to boundless potential.

“No, the party is not over. The 1980s were far from pathetic. The 1990s and 2000s aren't unremarkable. Jazz isn't a stagnant state. Rock and its various offshoots are not in a coma. All you have to do is find a reliable guide, open your ears, sit back, and marvel.”

Beginning with the next issue, *TONE* will publish a succession of lists outlining exceptional albums that will either get you started on or continue your journey into great modern music. As much as we adore them, citing the same classic records by the Beatles, Stones, Who, John Coltrane, Dylan, Cat Stevens, Miles Davis, and the like doesn't serve anyone. Invigorating music has thrived over the past 35 years. And while looking at their published coverage and lists would cause you to conclude that most of our colleagues seem to think music effectively stopped before Elvis died, their loss is our (and your) gain. Our upcoming series will focus on great albums by artists such as the Dream Syndicate, Nick Cave, Fugazi, Fela Kuti, and Ken Vandermark while complementing our timely, diverse coverage of engrossing new releases by the likes of Bon Iver, Eleventh Dream Day, Electric Wizard, and many more.

No, the party is not over. The 1980s were far from pathetic. The 1990s and 2000s aren't unremarkable. Jazz isn't a stagnant state. Rock and its various offshoots are not in a coma.

Rest assured, countless “signs of musical life [are] out there.” In spades. All you have to do is find a reliable guide, open your ears, sit back, and marvel.

To wit: Spin or stream the latest offerings by Tune-Yards, Low, Feelies, Fleet Foxes, Josh Pearson, Le Butcherettes, Twilight Singers, Kills, Lucinda Williams, Trap Them, TV on the Radio, Drive-By Truckers, PJ Harvey, Decemberists, Fucked Up, Tombs, Okkervil River, White Mystery, Femi Kuti, Brad Mehldau, and Most Other People Do the Killing—many reviewed in these pages, and all dating from just this year.

Music in the doldrums? Please. It's never been healthier, more creative or exciting. It's the main reason we're around, and we can't wait to continue the ride. ●

Greg Dulli and the Metro share a unique relationship. The Twilight Singers frontman has been good friends with the club's owner, Joe Shanahan, for more than two decades. Their association began when the inimitable Chicago venue—the Midwest passage that all up-and-coming rock artists must journey through on their way to mainstream fame—hosted Dulli's first band, the Afghan Whigs, on a monthly basis before they were even signed by Sub Pop. Dulli has gone on record saying that if not for Shanahan, the Whigs would've split up. Indeed, the pair's connection is just one of the reasons why, save for booking a handful of shows at the smaller Double Door, the singer/guitarist has appeared at Metro on every tour he's staged since 1993.

And while the Cincinnati native has logged a number of truly unforgettable performances there since, he's rarely been in better form than at a 105-minute concert in mid-May on the Twilight Singers' first U.S. tour in five years. A natural-born entertainer, Dulli picked up on the crowd's buzz from the start and reached back for something extra, pushing himself and his band to ecstatic heights. It was the kind of show you hope is being taped by someone in the crowd—the rare conflagration of sound, sight, sensuality, and sweat that renews one's faith in music and prompts them to binge on the performer's catalog for weeks.

"Whenever you're here, you're alive," whispered Dulli at the outset to the opening "Last Night In Town," the double-edged declaration arriving over an ominously spare piano line. The atmospheric minimalism quickly gave way to a budding, finger-trigger rhythm, gradually building in scope until it mounted a charge, the electricity thundering away overhead. Responsible for giving the tune and many that followed shake-and-bake vibes, drummer Greg Wiczorek served as the quintet's secret weapon. He approached his kit by feel rather than by protocol, peppering tunes with everything from funky fills to simmering breaks to contrasting textures, bringing down tempos at a finger snap's notice or hitting with dynamic force as emotions boiled. Wiczorek wasn't alone in projecting cinematic heft.

Twilight Singers

Metro

Chicago, Illinois

May 17, 2011

Text by Bob Gendron

Photos by Jeff Dorgay





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LIVE MUSIC



Multi-instrumentalist Rick Nelson's gorgeous violin passages gave much of the *Twilight* Singers' material deeper layers of melancholic beauty and sensitive romanticism; his sweet-toned lines during "Bonnie Brae" tinted the scraping rave-up with rapturous chamber-pop melodies that underscored the inherent regret and sorrow. Dulli seized the chance to push his voice into the stratosphere here and elsewhere, his fractured-soul baritone at times breaking into a passionate shout that shoved his singing to a precipice, the impact at once persuasive, demanding, arresting, and raw. Dressed in his trademark black shirt, pants, and shoes, and bathed in dim lights, the 46-year-old bandleader operated in the same extroverted manner that first made him a cult legend years ago: Cajoling with witty one-liners, losing himself in the moment, and sharing a few key words of wisdom.

Whether confessing episodes that trigger his OCD ("I will pull over...to clean the windshield for a little piece of sap. Even if the rest is clear.

And you are the sap, sir," he told a fan that was covering his ears as he handed the offender earplugs); discussing the finest musical fare a gentlemen could put on the stereo when a lady comes over to visit ("Sir Marvin Gaye, of course. Al Green. Roxy Music *Avalon* is always a classic. But this one is underrated here," he divulged, before nailing a falsetto version of Smokey Robinson's "Cruisin'"); or expressing sincere thanks to Shanahan, who watched from the balcony ("The world would be a better place if every town had a Joe Shanahan"), Dulli remains a straight-shooting provocateur and the epitome of a smooth operator. Not surprisingly, love factored into a majority of the songs—the love frequently tainted by betrayal, loss, suffering, and/or unhealthy addictions.

Swaggering and strutting, and augmenting his delivery with the occasional hip-hop inflection, Dulli inhabited the personalities of a variety of sordid characters. He prostituted himself on the funky sleaze of "Forty Dollars," entered a deadly urban underbelly that crossed (*continued*)



film-noir darkness with blaxploitation R&B on “Fat City,” plotted in the shadows during the organ-driven “The Beginning of the End,” embraced immortality and sang Kanye West’s “All of the Lights” sans microphone in the midst of an epic “Too Tough to Die,” turned into a bloodthirsty mercenary on the New Orleans-styled “Decatur Street,” brooded during the dark communion of “On the Corner,” and foreshadowed the violence of “Gunshots” with a refrain from Prince’s “When Doves Cry.”

Renowned for an uncanny ability to mash-up classic songs into his own material, Dulli unveiled several surprises (Robert Knight’s “Everlasting Love,” Pink

Floyd’s “Another Brick in the Wall (Part I)” among them) that extended the running dialogues of tunes such as “Esta Noche” and “Never Seen No Devil.” A music aficionado whose performances are designed to get people to move—and opposite sexes to mingle—the frontman’s interpretive choices served multiple purposes. He preceded a medley of “Love” and “Annie Mae” with the Robinson cover, allowing the Twilight Singers’ thematic sequence on endearment to deftly move from cheerful to uncertainty to treachery without missing a beat, the procession mirroring the realities of countless relationships. No doubt Dulli knows the unbearable pain of having his world shattered.

As impressive as they were taking on all-comers in harder-edged arrangements, the Twilight Singers proved equally convincing when opting for restraint. “Deepest Shade,” an unreleased song played just for the second time ever, came on as the sound of longstanding hurt colliding with carnal need, Dulli’s swooning highs bringing the ballad to a shivering close. Similarly transcendent, the collective echoed conflicted desperation during the piano-based “Candy Cane Crawl,” on which Dulli, battling demons, abandonment, and realizations that accompany withdrawal, sought salvation in the form of anything he could find. Have mercy. ●

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Buffalo Springfield

Fox Theater
Oakland, California
June 1, 2011
Text and photos by
Terry Currier

Buffalo Springfield never was a commercial success during its original existence from 1966 to 1968, a brief span that yielded two records and a formative single, “For What It’s Worth,” that didn’t receive major airplay. Moreover, the collective’s third album came out after the group split. Not exactly the resume many bands would desire.

My how time changes things.

From a historical perspective, the Buffalo Springfield is now considered one of the best rock bands to come out of the 60s—as well as the roots of a great family tree of music that would come. Reunion rumors have rumbled for years. A four-disc box set appeared in 2001, yet bassist Bruce Palmer passed in 2004 and drummer Dewey Martin followed in 2009, making a full reunion

impossible. But at last October’s annual Bridge School Benefit Concert, the three remaining members—Neil Young, Stephen Stills, and Richie Furay—played for the first time together in public since May 1968. The success of the short half-hour set spawned six California dates as a precursor to a higher-profile headlining show at this year’s Bonnaroo Festival.

If the group’s tour kick-off at Oakland’s beautiful Fox Theater stands as a precursor, the Springfield might be back on the road for some time. Energy and anticipation buzzed around the room long before the band hit the stage. Gillian Welch and Co. opened with a delightful set featuring her classic work as well as a few previews of her first album in eight years, *Harrow & The Harvest*. Then the Springfield hit the stage and the crowd erupted. *(continued)*

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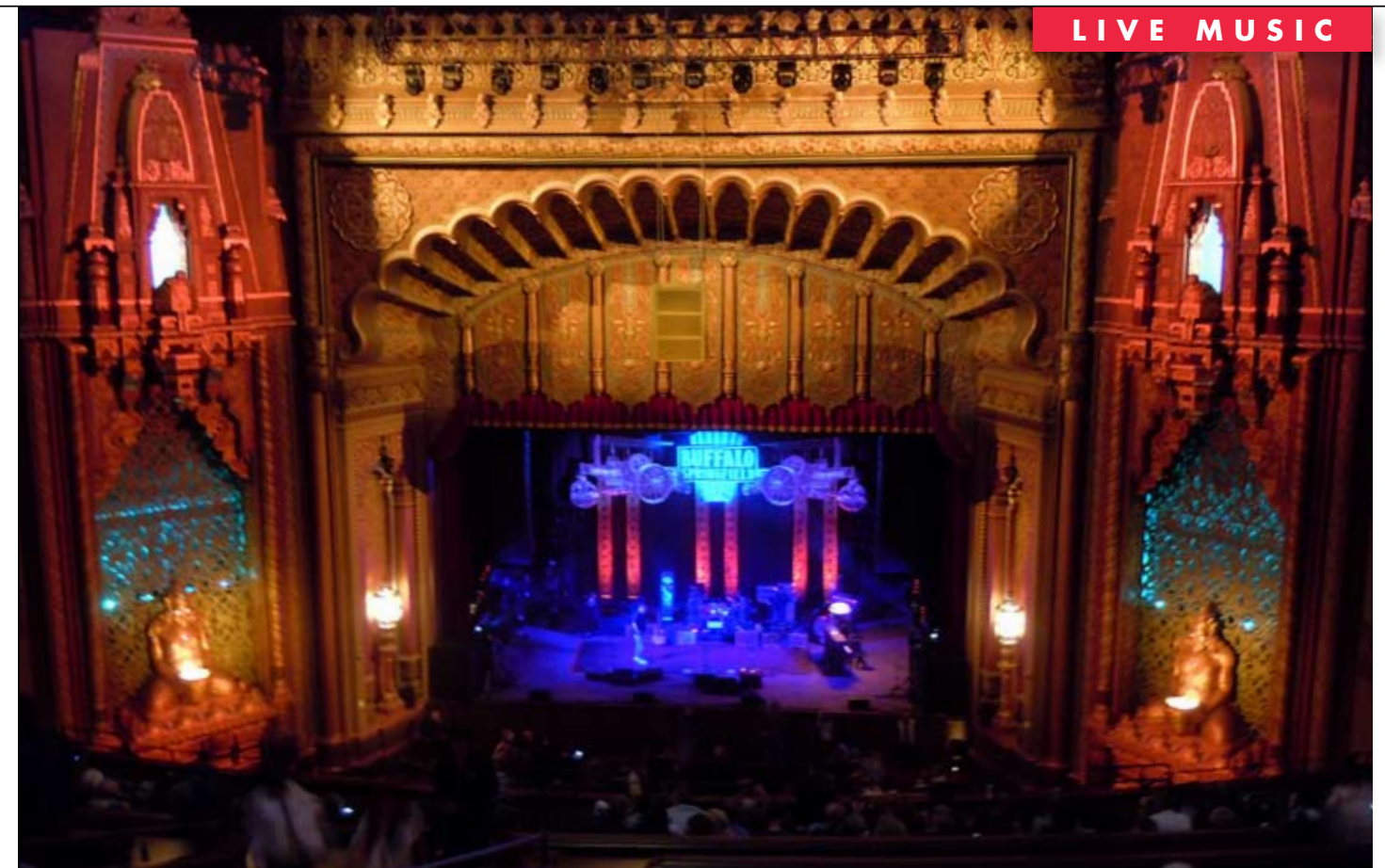


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“We are Buffalo Springfield. We are from the past,” stated a jovial Young, wearing a Panama hat and fringed leather jacket. And the past proved to be great. The band’s 90-minute set included “Rock & Roll Woman”, “Mr. Soul,” and “Bluebird,” and came across better than most diehards could have even expected. Save for an occasional one-off date, Furay has done little in the way of live performances since becoming a preacher, yet his voice sounded fantastic. Young functioned as the anchor, and seemed comfortable stepping into the role of singing background when either Furay or Stills took lead.

Onstage, Young and Furay stood close together and often interacted while Stills looked on from his post. When the trio came together in a semi-circle, clustered around a microphone or angled inward so that their faces could see what the other’s hands were doing, nirvana ensued. In addition to each strumming tasteful guitar passages, Young commanded the piano

on several numbers, and Stills took a turn at the keyboard.

A three-song encore put it all over the top. The trio invested supreme emotion in its rendition of “Broken Arrow,” which was followed by a stunning “For What It’s Worth”. Stills’ vocals have been rightly criticized in recent years, yet there were no sings of tarnishing on this night, especially on the group’s signature song. Bolstered by the fine rhythm section of longtime Young bassist Rick Rosas and drummer Joe Vitale, the concluding “Rockin’ In The Free World” found Stills wailing on a Flying V guitar as Young stomped around like a dinosaur journeying in from the past.

While it remains altogether possible that those lucky enough to witness Springfield’s seven confirmed shows will be the only ones to get the second chance of experiencing one of rock’s greatest-ever bands, the momentum generated on this extraordinary evening suggested otherwise. ●

Lincoln Hall

Chicago, Illinois

June 13, 2011

By Bob Gendron

Photos by Robert Loerzel

Keren Ann

Uncomfortable silences arose amidst Keren Ann's concert at Chicago's Lincoln Hall, an 80-minute show during which stillness and restraint made it seem as if one should be afraid to breathe for fear of making extraneous noise. Yet the pin-drop quietness and hushed mood not only complemented the chanteuse's music; they were often part of it. Steeped in suggestiveness, the deceptively delicate fare unfolded into soundscapes whose spare minimalism and subdued persuasion succeeded precisely because of what wasn't there. Left with little to lean on, and accompanied only by a trumpeter, the singer/guitarist's naked presentation overflowed with boldness, subtlety, and nerve—particularly considering the pitfalls associated with stripped-down production.

For Ann (né Keren Ann Zeidel), a bewitching Israeli-born bilingual vocalist who remains much more popular in her longtime home country of France than in the US, the decision

to undress songs of their bigger recording-studio structures also represented a slight departure from that of her current *101* album. Yet the 37-year-old has never lacked for adventure. Having debuted nearly a decade ago with a pair of French trip-hop-minded discs, she's since broadened her stylistic horizons and language capacities on each successive release, most recently venturing into more complex territories that nonetheless, on the surface, appear calm, simple, and romantic. But not all is what it seems.

Indeed, on the opening "Strange Weather," a lament performed in a broken-hearted key, slivers of optimism pierced Ann's melancholy demeanor, flipping the tune on its head and turning it into less of a mournful hymn and more of an understatedly determined declaration of independence. As they did throughout the concert, implications of emotional severity bubbled under the wispy surface, camouflaged by the low hum of an amplifier and shiver of the Parisian transplant's purring coo.





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Similarly disguised, gentle swells on the traditional-tinged chanson "For You and I" kept indignation at an arm's length, Ann's reverb-laced voice—a mystic instrument at once hovering and fading, haunting and enticing—spelling out the rules of disengagement for a terminated relationship.

Outfitted in a sleeveless black top, jeans, and black boots, Ann exuded a serene cool that paralleled the blue and purple hues of her breathy timbre. Capable of moving from dreamy to nervous to bittersweet in the same verse, her range of resigned sighs, witty sing-song rhymes, and sultry murmurs instilled soft cabaret folk and artful pop arrangements with a raw intimacy usually associated with personal, whisper-in-your-ear meditations. As she fleshed out unhurried

arrangements on both electric and acoustic guitar, trumpeter Avishai Cohen splashed muted colors onto the canvases. Filtered through a multitude of effects pedals, his horn unleashed a wellspring of sounds.

Squiggling funk patterns peppered "It Ain't No Crime," elastic melodies cocooned "Lay Your Head Down," and Dixieland-inspired flavors coursed through the prancing noir tune "Blood On My Hands," its contrast of insouciance and violence evoking the carefree exploits of legendary gangster français Jacques Mesrine. If anything, Ann should've drawn more from French culture. When an enthusiastic fan shouted out a request for "Ailleurs," she laughed and corrected the flat pronunciation, asking him to repeat it with the proper

accent. The exchange caused the initially reserved singer to drop her guard and loosen up. It may also have inspired her to close with the gorgeously sung "Le Chien d'avant Garde," replete with sass and pizzazz. Similar Euro-fashioned elegance added an exotic lilt to the catchy plea "My Name Is Trouble" and "End of May," the latter recalling the heyday of vocal jazz as it flirted with lasting affectation while peering into darker regions. It's a dichotomy that Ann appeared comfortable revisiting.

"Instead of a man/I married a ghost," Ann concluded on the fingerpicked ballad "All the Beautiful Girls," a graceful slow dance so faint that her modest raise in pitch during the hook came as a relief. Latent with surprise, less has seldom been more. ●

“GOD BLESS AMERICA!”

bellowed Orange Goblin leader Ben Ward midway through the English quartet’s rousing Chicago concert, the singer’s impromptu expression coming in reaction to his being handed a free whiskey. The complimentary shot was just one of multiple alcoholic libations the physically imposing Ward enjoyed during the hour-plus set, part of the group’s first US tour in five years and cross-Atlantic 15th anniversary trek playfully—and aptly—coined “15 Years of Beers.”


Orange Goblin

Double Door
Chicago, Illinois

June 11, 2011

By Bob Gendron

Portland photos
by Jeff Dorgay



All apologies to drinking stalwarts Guided By Voices, but few bands' music pairs better with liquor than that of the Goblin, whose catchy blue-collar metal, volume-dealing space rock, vintage punk energy, and rudimentary heaviness encourage collective tippling and celebrating of weekend pleasures. Onstage, the Goblin epitomized the elemental reasons why anyone should elect to toil in a band—and no, they aren't about image or potential money, fame, or ego. In Goblin, it's all about the fun.

Absent attitude or affectation, the quartet seemed as enthused to perform in front of a crowd of several hundred as it would've been if the audience would've numbered in the thousands. The British lads remain cult legends due to their devotion to and mastery of their classic craft—as well as for being themselves. And few front men are more authentic, entertaining, jovial, or animated than Ward.

With shoulder-length hair, 2x4s for arms, a thick beard, and tree-trunk-sized torso, Ward's massive size and lumberjack appearance matched the brute strength of his vocals. Wearing a Rainbow t-shirt, blue jeans, and wallet chain, he looked as if he stepped straight out of Scooby Doo's Mystery Machine in 1977. Yet everything about his presence remained in the now. Outstretching his tattooed arms and encouraging the audience to get wild—what's a bash without some spilled beer, after all?—the gentle giant struck air-guitar poses in between piloting gang choruses, *(continued)*



growling lyrics, and standing on the precipice of the stage, a beer belly peeking out anytime he thrust his head back to roar a verse or spew water from his mouth.

As Ward occupied the role of party host, his mates honed in on deep grooves. Orange Goblin's taut rhythms and stomping tempos plowed, romped, and mightily swung. Many tunes switched gears and hit faster tempos before concluding; such changes in pace and clenched-fist tightness underscored the group's bluesy core and cosmic leanings. Whether addressing cocaine fantasies (the momentous "Blue Snow," complete with hand-reddening percussive claps), working-class misfortunes (the ram-jam "Hard Luck"), or zombie reprisal ("They Come Back," which witnessed Ward pretend-chomping the heads of front-row fans), the ensemble maximized the potential of distorted back-to-basics chords, ringing decibel levels, pounding beats, and low-tuned bass lines.

Of course, with the band so committed to championing individual freedoms, a little taste of psychedelia was also in order. Swaddled in wah-wah effects, "Quincy the Pigboy" arrived as an intergalactic boogie; fuzz pedals and liquid-sludge leads contributed to the tractor-drive thrust behind "Cozmo Bozo." On other occasions, as on "Cities of Frost," simply dropping the hammer down served notice that the Goblin—forever miscast under the "stoner" tag—continues its reign as one of the finest hard rock bands England's ever produced. ●

New Releases

By the TONE Staff

When robed doom purveyors SunnO))) and Japanese power trio Boris invited Jesse Sykes to sing “The Sinking Belle (Blue Sheep)” on their collaborative 2006 album *Altar*, the move made little sense on paper. It simply appeared to be another left turn taken by two groups for which the unexpected acts as the norm. Yet, surprisingly, the pairing yielded a gorgeously barren free-folk ballad that stands apart out for its exploration of the sort of understated extremes often uncharted by thunderous bands. Sykes delivers a truly ethereal performance—her voice hovering over meticulously picked notes, shimmering piano passages, and a Milky Way score. It’s become one of the most prized pieces of music in the underground.



© Photo by Christine Taylor



Jesse Sykes & the Sweet Hereafter

Marble Son

Station Grey/Thirty Tigers, 2LP and CD

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Sykes since gained a footing in the art-metal community, most recently securing a spot at the Roadburn Music Festival, where she and her backing group the Sweet Hereafter mesmerized fans accustomed to loud, ferocious sounds with a wraithlike mix of earthy folk, spellbinding trance, and moody rock. Indeed, after debuting nearly a decade ago as a talented albeit primarily conventional practitioner of Appalachian and alt-country fare, Sykes’ ongoing evolution has proved fascinating. Each successive album holds fresh surprises and twists, with 2007’s *Like, Love, Lust & the Open Halls of the Soul*, replete with a horn section and bigger production, the most radical departure yet.

The Seattle-based artist eschews brass on *Marble Son*, but in embracing some of the heavier riffs, bluesy inclinations, and darker ambience associated with avant-garde metal, she’s created the kind of statement record at which her previous efforts only hinted. Flush with cavernous sonics and complex soundscapes, it’s 58 minutes of aural cinema for the ears and mind. Extending arrangements and escalating turbulent build-ups, the quartet wanders into psychedelic regions that, at times, find the collective occupying the stage of what could pass as San Francisco’s Avalon Ballroom in 1968.

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Invested with a more involved role, guitarist Phil Wandscher is crucial to the record's hypnotic appeal and songs' entrenched sense of mystery. He plays with tonalities and textures, placing them on imaginary strings that he yanks back and forth, the geometric instrumental leads conjuring objects that range from surrealist circles ("Ceiling's High") to blowing tumbleweeds ("Weight of Cancer," which marries Old West themes to surf-rock commotion). Other guitarists employ more effects pedals, but Wandscher's nose for illustrative progression on expansive tunes such as the space-bound "Pleasuring the Divine" keeps it from unraveling while pushing it forward.

Having stated that the record's title is inspired by her observation that certain artworks are more powerful when viewed in dissolved forms rather than in original states—as time-caused decay reveals their core essentials—Sykes follows through by pursuing a related technique on these compositions, leaving bare vast reduced spaces in which sun-fried atmospherics, crackling fade-outs, and patient tempos cocoon her ghostly voice. Etched with a delicate graininess and surrounded by a halo of natural reverb, Sykes'

breathy timbre is slightly reminiscent of Marianne Faithfull before cigarettes and whiskey assumed control.

Persuading, summoning, and questioning, Sykes' graceful caution and mellow gentility causes the restrained "Servant of Your Vision" to slowly blossom in the manner that winter turns to spring. Similarly, the title track's English folk harmonies express a pastoral charm that's matched by her childlike-innocence lullaby vocals. Yet the frontwoman's mystical delivery is best when providing rapturous contrast amidst grittier, unsettled sonic tempest.

Sykes' hazy, semi-conscious meditations dance amidst droning noises, swampy feedback, and crunchy chords on the epic "Hushed By Devotion," which begins as a stomp and finishes as a fever-dream dance. And on the paisley-tinted romp "Your Own Kind," the band teases with pace and linearity, managing to produce hard rock that's bereft of potentially alienating heaviness—a feat made by possible by beautiful oracle-like singing that illuminates the dark and casts shadows on the light. —**Bob Gendron**



On Bon Iver's much-romanticized 2008 debut, *For Emma, Forever Ago*, singer-songwriter (and then the band's sole member) Justin Vernon sounded trapped in his own personal Ice Age. Fresh off two painful breakups—first from a girl and then from his band—the singer retired to his father's hunting cabin in northern Wisconsin and went about setting his grief to tape. Wintry, introspective, and thin-ice fragile, the resulting album bears the scars of its creation.

In the years since, Vernon has become a much more public figure, recording with sprawling indie-rock collective Gayngs, re-releasing an album with his own side project Volcano Choir and, most notably, working alongside rapper Kanye West, who sampled the Bon Iver track "Woods" for his own *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* and even invited the scraggly-bearded Wisconsinite along for recording/brainstorming sessions in Hawaii.

But despite a notably heightened profile, Vernon still returned to his home state when it came time to record his sophomore effort, *Bon Iver*, setting up shop in a studio he built in a former veterinary clinic in Fall Creek—a Wisconsin town located just a short drive from his Eau Claire birthplace. Yet where *For Emma...* revels in isolation, setting his confessional lyrics ("Go find another lover...to string along," he sings like a broken man on its title track) against a snowy musical backdrop, *Bon Iver* comes across as a warmer, more inviting affair.

It's also cryptic as all hell, as though the idea of sharing another record as intimate as his debut became a source of some consternation. So instead of pulling more lines from his journal, Vernon pens verses that come across like fragmented remembrances (think *Memento* set to earnest art-folk) or slippery haikus. "Solar peace/Well it swirls and sweeps/You just set it," he offers amidst sparse piano on "Hinnom, TX." Despite the coded language, the singer's fragile pipes imbue songs with deep layers of meaning even when his words are at their most impenetrable.

"Holocene," for one, hints at a thaw in both name—the word is taken from a geological epoch that marked the end of the Wisconsin glaciation (fitting, no?)—



Bon Iver

Bon Iver

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and sound, layering together Vernon's multi-tracked falsetto, deliberate acoustic picking, and the slow rumble of freshly awoken-from-hibernation drums. Elsewhere, the singer flirts with psychedelic folk ("Perth"), eases into the sparse brass-haunted "Towers," and delivers a love letter to Claire (not a girl, but his birthplace) on the minimalist, string-kissed "Wash."

Then there's "Beth/Rest," an 80s throwback that sounds like Vernon soft rocking with Mr. Mister. Still, beneath the satiny, saxophone-flecked AOR surface (admittedly, a tough hurdle for many), lies a fairly gorgeous song about reclaiming some degree of happiness, highlighted by the singer's admission "I ain't living in the dark no more." It'll be interesting to see where the light leads him on his next go-round. —**Andy Downing**



© Photo by Robert Heimal

Mickey Newbury is the answer to myriad trivia questions most never think about asking.

A songwriter's songwriter, his tunes have been recorded more than 1300 times by more than 1000 performers—the impressive lot including Scott Walker, Ray Charles, Johnny Cash, Elvis Presley, Box Tops, Nick Cave, Jerry Lee Lewis, Willie Nelson, Dolly Parton, and Tammy Wynette. He's the only artist in history to enjoy number-one hits (with different songs, mind you) on the pop, country, R&B and easy listening charts in the space of one calendar year.

The native Texan is also credited for getting Kris Kristofferson's "Me & Bobby McGee" recorded by star Roger Miller, convincing Townes Van Zandt and Guy Clark to relocate to Nashville, and helping launch what became the Outlaw country movement.

If Newbury's resume isn't convincing enough—and it should be—then his peak-era solo records from 1969 through 1973 make the case for his position as one of the all-time greats that history's pages somehow overlooked. While one of the packaged media era's greatest sins is the seemingly ceaseless reissuing of yet more "lost treasures" and "forgotten gems," Newbury isn't just a good story. He's fully deserving of the treatment Chicago indie label Drag City afforded these four titles, about which no hyperbole is required.

Remastered by Grammy-winning engineer Steve Rosenthal and mastering engineer Jessica Thompson from the original analog tapes, thought for years lost to a fire but recently discovered in the Elektra Records vault, the analog reissues are on par with traditionally more expensive audiophile pressings. Everything from the immediate, spare, transparent sonics to the superbly reproduced album jackets travel back to the glory days of the early 70s and present Newbury amidst his home studio environment.

Musically, Newbury's efforts aren't the obvious yield of a commercial hitmaker. His austere, often minimalist approach is the tormented sound of a man who's had his heart shattered on multiple occasions and is no longer able to recover. Contrary to the bigger productions given many of the renditions of his songs that became famous via other artists, Newbury prefers a stripped-down approach that accents his sincere, emotionally rooted vocal deliveries and introspective arrangements. *(continued)*



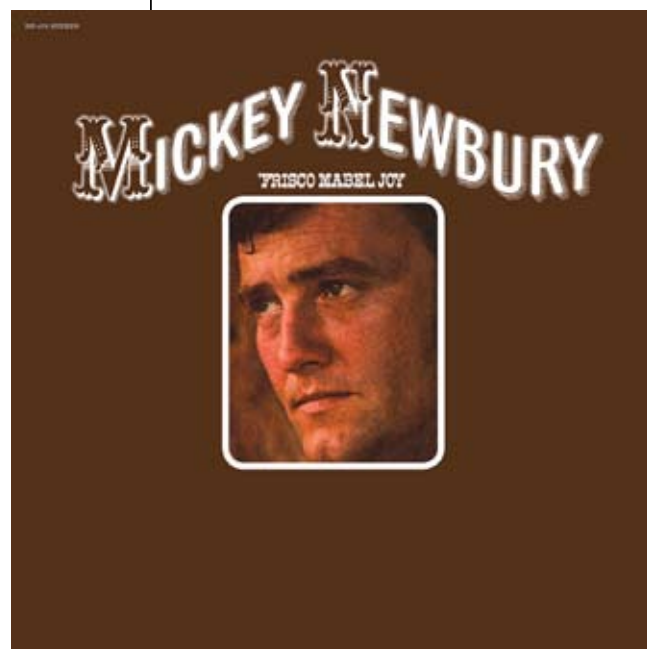
Mickey Newbury

Looks Like Rain, 'Frisco Mabel Joy, Heaven Help the Child, and Better Days

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Regret doesn't get any more real, save when found at the bottom of a whiskey bottle.



Guitars, strings, background choirs, and subtle percussive effects tuckpoint rather than provide foundation. The latter takes the form of Newbury's forthright, granite-solid singing. He lacks the wowing range, baritone depth, and distinctive tonalities of his contemporaries, but his vocals double as a wide-open chasm in which sadness and sorrow dwell. It's difficult to imagine a singer making better use of their instrument.

On 1969's aptly titled *Looks Like Rain*, Newbury raises up in pitch to meet the gospel-drenched chorus halfway on "She Even Woke Me Up to Say Goodbye," four graceful minutes of desolation ridden with hard-swallowing understanding and spiritual forgiveness. Like many of Newbury's anguished originals, it elicits pathos not just for the singer but for the protagonist. Witness the barren "I Don't Think Too Much About Her No More," a sung-spoken confessional on which Newbury isn't even fooling himself, the artisan-like acoustic folk motifs underscoring the value he invested—and still invests—in the relationship. Regret doesn't get any more real, save when found at the bottom of a whiskey bottle.

The tempos faintly pick up on 1971's *'Frisco Mabel Joy*, bolstered by "An American Trilogy," a moving three-part suite that, 40 years on, remains both dignified and inspired. Forget "Georgia on My Mind"; this is the true anthem of the South. Throughout, Newbury's tenor is again an atmospheric enigma and deceptively versatile device. *(continued)*



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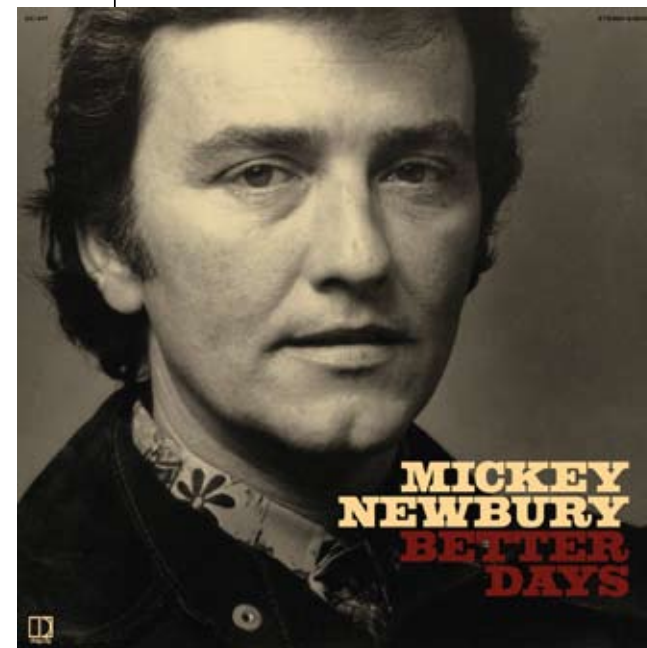
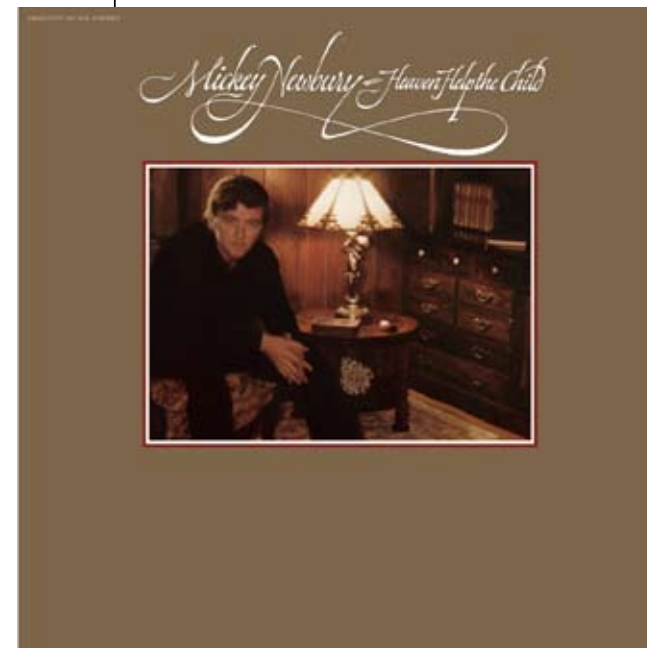
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There's never a note out of place, and yet, there are no sings of artificial sweetening or false pretense. Newbury strolls through these songs of loneliness, emptiness, estrangement, and remorse like Edward G. Robinson at the haunting finale of the bleak film noir classic *Scarlet Street*—eternally confined to a personal hell, tortured by thoughts of what once was and will never be again. Try as he might, there's no forgetting, no moving on. The drinking song "The Future's Now What It Used to Be" sums up the condition of his condition.

With two critically acclaimed albeit largely ignored albums behind him, Newbury further expands his palette on 1973's slightly more upbeat *Heaven Help the Child*, trading in everything from symphonic pop (the title track) to roots country ("Why You Been Gone So Long") to raw-timbered lullabies ("Good Morning Dear"). Have a handkerchief nearby; absent drama and manipulation, these epitomize how weepers and maverick tales should sound and feel. Replete with hard-luck characters, fateful scenarios, and tragic ending, the closing "San Francisco Mabel Joy" is a study in the art of murder ballads.

As befitting of any substantial reissue project, *Better Days* comprises demos, rarities, and previously unreleased fare. Of particular note are "Better Days" and "I Don't Want Me No Big City Woman," recorded for a Los Angeles radio broadcast and never again revisited. These exemplary reissues ensure that mistake won't be repeated. —**Bob Gendron**

Have a handkerchief nearby; absent drama and manipulation, these epitomize how weepers and maverick tales should sound and feel.


William Elliott Whitmore
Field Songs

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While he's only in his early 30s, singer-songwriter William Elliott Whitmore carries the burdens of a man twice his age.

His first three albums—*Hymns for the Hopeless*, *Ashes to Dust* and *Song of the Blackbird*—make up a gruesome trilogy, dense with banjo-driven funeral songs inspired by the deaths of both of his parents. Consumed with grief, he holed up on the family horse farm in Iowa and picked up his banjo, perhaps inspired by a quote from playwright Samuel Beckett, who famously said, “When you’re up to your neck in shit, the only thing left to do is sing.”



© Photo by David Black

And boy could he. Blessed with the gravelly pipes of a mountain man, Whitmore crooned songs about digging his own grave in a voice that might have had Ralph Stanley watching the mail for legal documents requesting a paternity test. But while *Blackbird* closed the song-cycle on a hopeful note, equating birth and death with the natural circle of life on the farm, it also left a new question hanging in the air: What next?

Whitmore responded in 2009 with *Animals in the Dark*, an album that found him stretching himself both musically (“There’s Hope For You” flirted with Southern soul, while a rowdy chorus turned “Mutiny” into a drunken free-for-all) and thematically (like a folk singer in 1960s New York City, he packed his narratives with a range of scheming politicians, charlatans, and crooked cops).

With that in mind, *Field Songs*, his fifth proper release, initially sounds like a bit of a retreat. Again limiting himself to either guitar or banjo (rudimentary percussion—Stomping feet? Hands clapping?—accompanies the singer on just two tracks), Whitmore weaves together eight simple tales that seem almost weightless when measured against his early material. Now, this observation isn’t exactly a slight; the singer can’t always be expected to wield his banjo the way a gravedigger swings a pickaxe. But place “Bury Your Burdens in the Ground” (sample lyric: “If you got burdens, don’t carry them”) against the hole he grimly carves into the earth on his debut’s “Diggin’ My Grave,” and the difference becomes immediately evident.

But if anyone deserves a degree of contentment, it’s Whitmore, and once the initial shock wears off (is that...is that...*hope?*), a rather pretty folk album begins to emerge. Littered with field recordings of singing birds and chirping crickets, it often sounds as though Whitmore set up his recorder on the back porch, strapped on his banjo, and started singing. Songs touch on immigration (“Get There From Here”), the enduring nature of the human spirit (“We’ll Carry On”) and, on “Let’s Do Something Impossible,” even love. Of course, old soul that he is, Whitmore reaches back to a 1937 prison break (“We’ll escape from Alcatraz/Just like Theodore Cole”) to illustrate his point about overcoming insurmountable odds.

Elsewhere, Whitmore touches on familiar themes (see: death), albeit from an entirely different perspective. On “Everything Got Gone,” he picks up his acoustic, surveys the landscape, and sees finality in everything from the worn-down farmhouse just “a mile down the gravel road” to the tree precariously clinging to the riverbank. Perhaps surprisingly, he sounds okay with this as he sings “I’m just here for a little while” like a man unafraid of whatever it is that comes next.

Whitmore once sang “I don’t want you to know the pain I’ve known,” but by the time he rolls into the meditative, album-closing “Not Feeling Any Pain,” it’s undeniably clear that he’s finally made hard-won, long-overdue peace with the world. —**Andy Downing**



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y Morning Jacket recorded

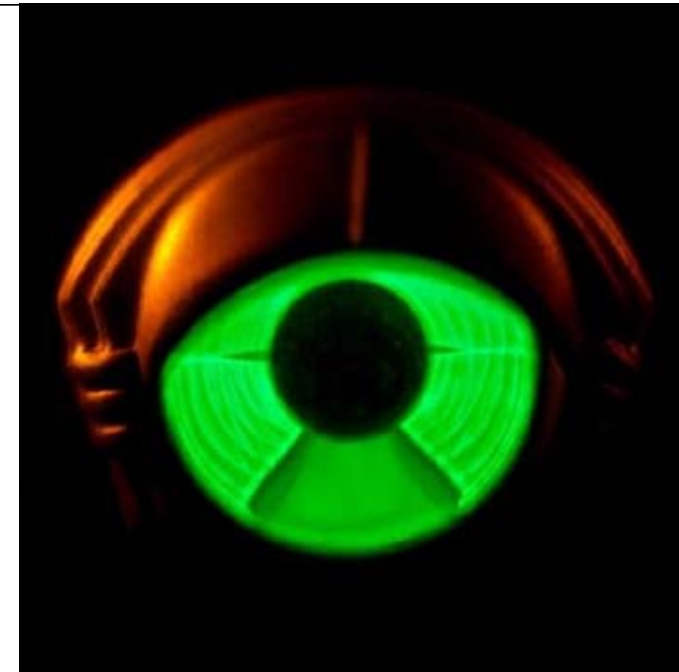
much of *Circuital* in an abandoned church in its Louisville hometown, which helps explain why the album's liner notes include the phrase "recorded in heaven." Fittingly, the band doesn't shy from the spiritual, with singer Jim James delivering odes to both heaven (the violin-laced, afterlife-referencing "Wonderful (The Way I Feel)") and hell ("Holdin' on to Black Metal," which includes a visit from Lucifer himself).

No stranger to questions of faith, James could recently be heard delivering the existential prayer "Dear God" alongside a host of indie-rock icons in *Monsters of Folk*. Several songs here tread similar ground, from the low-key meditations of "Victory Dance" ("Should I close my eyes and prophesize/Hoping someday maybe you'll come?") to the summery "The Day Is Coming," which comes across like the soundtrack to an eerily peaceful Rapture.

The album, recorded with producer Tucker Martine (the Decemberists, Sufjan Stevens), finds My Morning Jacket returning to the stripped-down sound of earlier efforts like *At Dawn*. The idea that the band has come full circle is reflected in everything from the record's round-and-back name to James' words on its title track: "Right back in the same place that we started out." There's a degree of truth to the singer's words, but *Circuital* still sounds far more polished than anything in the band's early catalog. Indeed, anyone that fell for that crew of shaggy Southerners found bashing out reverb-soaked guitar jams on *It Still Moves* will likely feel as though they just stumbled into a black-tie affair wearing nothing but a Skynyrd t-shirt and pair of cutoff jean shorts when they spin this comparatively stoic disc.



© Photo by Danny Clinch



My Morning Jacket

Circuital

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Still, don't think of *Circuital* as a step backwards. In many ways it's as though the band has returned to youth with accrued wisdom intact, like a Buddhist retaining full knowledge of past lives upon reincarnation. As James sings on the swaggering "First Light," "First I was an ancient/Then I was an infant/Now I am alive." Of course, coming on the heels of the band's last album, 2008's genre-hopping *Evil Urges*, which sounded uncomfortably like a jam band rehearsing Sly and the Family Stone covers—one wonders if James is referencing these experimentations when he sings about purging himself of youthful indiscretions on the propulsive "Outta My System"—a little bit of restraint goes a long way.

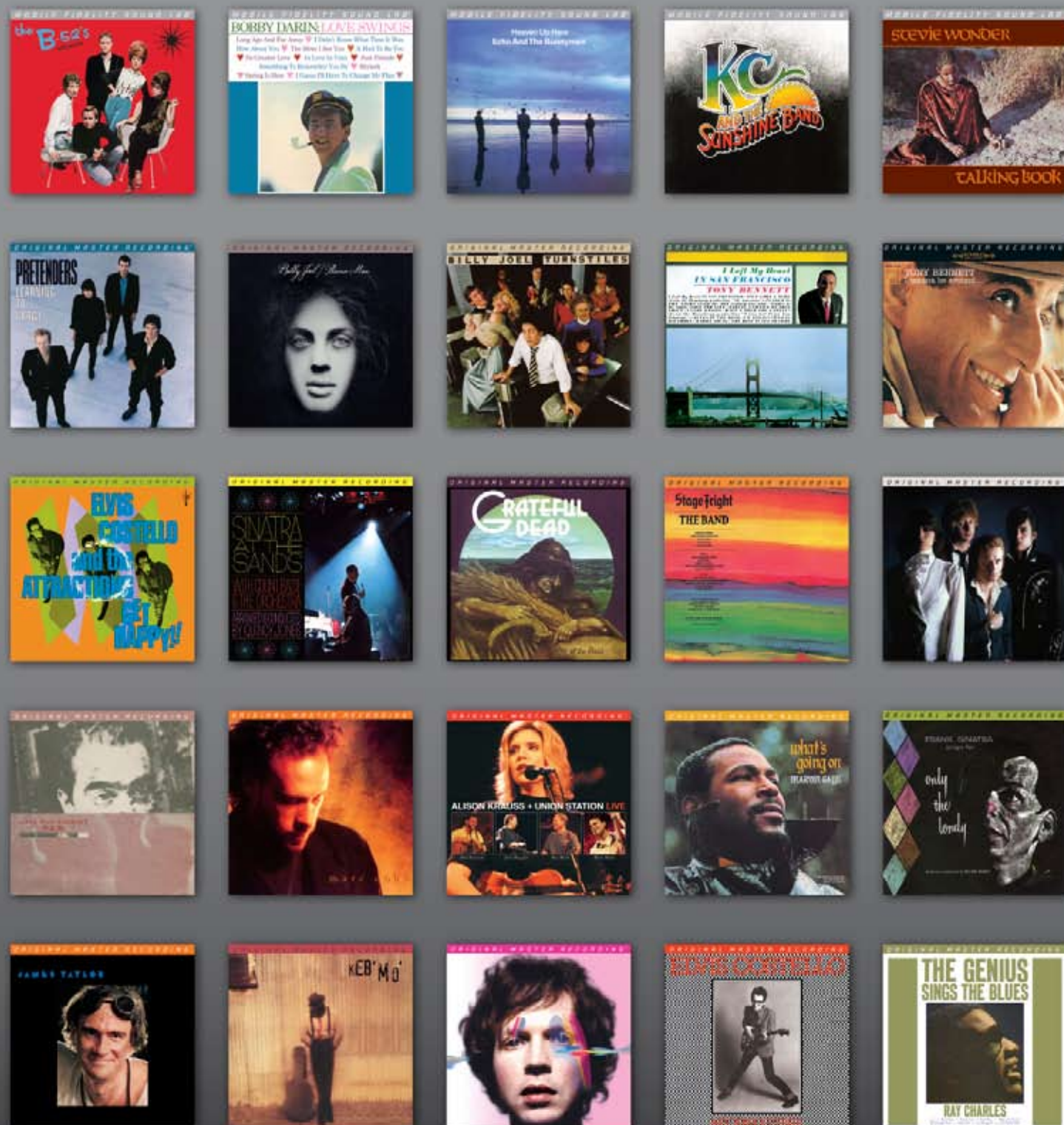
This is particularly true on the opening one-two punch of "Victory Dance" and seven-minute "Circuital," which layers on twinkling piano arpeggios and the lightly fuzzed-out, humid twang of Carl Broemel's guitar. Heck, even when the group branches out into R&B, the songs connect here in a way that they rarely did on previous albums. Witness the oddball "Black Metal," which successfully combines a children's choir, bleating horns, and James' convincing falsetto into a memorable bit of psychedelic soul. —**Andy Downing**

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MUSIC



Jason Hellmann

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M

etal is a domain to which language connoisseurs should flock—not necessarily to listen to the music, but to revel in the imaginative prose that often surrounds descriptions and/or reviews of a band. With all apologies to the countless subgenres invented to categorize indie-rock offshoots (witchhouse, mumblecore, eight-bit, and rape gaze being among the most laughable tags), no genre posits more pigeonholing terminology or outrageous hyperbole than metal. Silliness aside, such classification attempts are good for at least one reason: Proof that diversity has never been greater.



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Tombs

Path of Totality
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Variety is on parade throughout Tombs' *Path of Totality*, at its basest root a heavy record shaded in nuance, texture, and somber atmosphere. The Brooklyn trio's sophomore statement advances the progress shown on its 2009 full-length debut, *Fear is the Weapon*, upping detail, moodiness, and cohesion while sacrificing any of the surprise. Inside of 58 minutes, the band runs a proverbial gamut: black metal, crusty grindcore, revved-up doom, blackened thrash, death-metal extremism, and down-tuned sludge strains coarse throughout the cycle, which begins with a grand entrance on the level of the initial stormtrooper attack in *The Empire Strikes Back* and ends with a fade to black.

However, as is made evident by the disciplined playing and accomplished compositions, the band isn't intent on addressing every major metal style developed over the past 20 years or leapfrogging disciplines to try and appeal to any hip sensibility. By nature, *Path of Totality* is rather humorless, yet it's easy to imagine the members getting a chuckle over scribes and bloggers attempting to put their craft in a box. Tombs' art is the not the sort that's meant to be confined.

What matters here is the emotion—the senses of isolation, floundering, release, fear, suspense, and aggression evoked by shape-shifting songs and vocalist/guitarist Mike Hill's half-intelligible drones and growls. That Andrew Hernandez' drums sound like they should be breaking apart from the sheer force at which he's striking them—and that the percussive sequences conjure everything from stars falling out of the sky to giant I-beams being dropped from overhead onto pavement—rounds out a set that refuses to be ensconced in historical precedent or fancy lexicon.

"Bloodletters" and "To Cross the Land" pay homage to Nordic black metal legends, but akin to nearly every sonic journey here, dare to venture down unseen rabbit holes. Unanticipated tempo changes, gothic instrumental passages, and well-timed breaks offset bursts in intensity. Light pierces darkness on "Black Hole of Summer"; on the title track, off-kilter rhythms that mimic a deejay scratching an LP precede a shotgun-firing segue that finds each snare hit arriving like an explosive ear-deadening shot, hot shells falling to the ground around the drum stool. Indeed, it's Hernandez' mammoth performance that holds it all together, Tombs true to its name and leading the listener through the tunnel landscapes of a yet-to-be-written steampunk novel. —**Bob Gendron**



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SebastiAn

Total

Big Beat/Atlantic, CD

French producer and deejay Sebastien secured a celebrated reputation on the club scene thanks to his clever remixes of Annie, Daft Punk, Cut Copy, and more.

A longtime affiliate of label français Ed Banger, the Boulogne-born electrohouse artist's full-length debut moves beyond the dancefloor and comes across as like a stereo receiver that briefly tunes into one cutting-edge radio station before ceding to yet another in a wild spectrum.

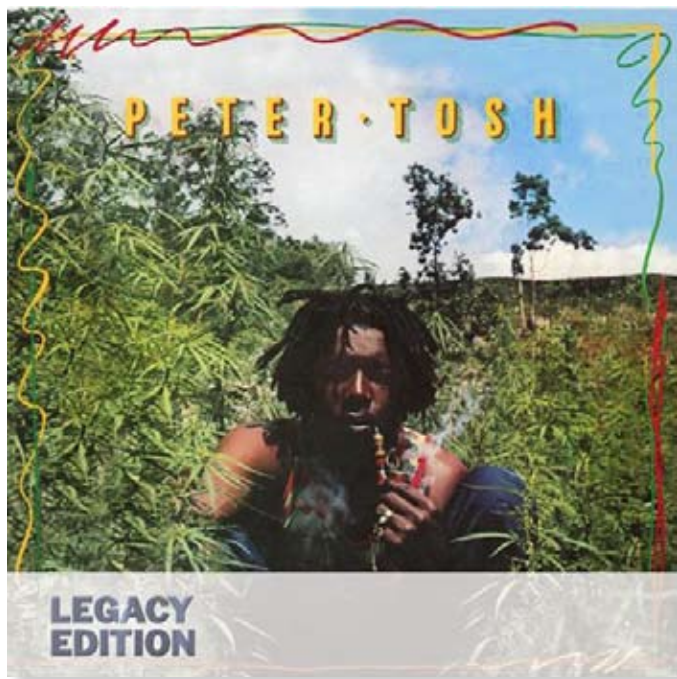
A diversely scrambled albeit united miasma of sounds, *Total* spans the expected four-on-the-floor beats and expressive noise pastiches while extending into unexpected territories such as Italian movie music and psychedelic disco. The 22-track set doesn't rewrite electronic music rules,

yet by operating as an all-in-one jukebox—an approach that holds true to the record's title—the album subverts conventions associated with dance and functions as an invitation to audiences that normally eschew the genre.

A handful of guests—Mayer Hawthorne soulfully croons on the sexy funk “Love In Motion”; M.I.A. eclipses most of what she turned in on her sloppy *MAYA* on the catchy whip-cracking electro-punk warning “C.T.F.O.”; Justice's Gaspard Augé plays the electronic harpsichord during “Tetra,” which unfolds as a mini-symphony composed via hotwired Speak & Spell machines—join Sebastien for the sonic party. Still, the creative fun and success relate to the manner in which the ear-teasing music dives and weaves, every few minutes (and in the case of several transitional interludes, seconds) opening up a window on a different landscape of possibilities.

Per bands such as Justice and Sleigh Bells, the intersection of hard rock and metal with dance continues. The pounding title track slices metallic notes onto slasher-film backgrounds, “Motor” pulses with industrial aggression, “Jack Wire” flirts with doom menace, and “Doggg” grinds to thrash-metal riffs and shock-cartoon vocals. Not that Sebastien abandons his native country's affinity for modernized, computer-manipulated funk. “Ross Ross Ross” grooves to hip-swaying samples and inverted beats; “Embody” lays down on thick beds of synthesizers and robotic Auto-Tune singing; “Kindercut” is built on the kind of hypnotic repetition and clamorous sequencing that draw hordes to late-night dance clubs the world over.

Indeed, the best dance music is that which makes one move and forget their inhibitions. *Total* accomplishes those goals and more, all the while introducing intelligent elements often ignored in a field more renowned for targeting the body than the mind. —**Bob Gendron**



Peter Tosh

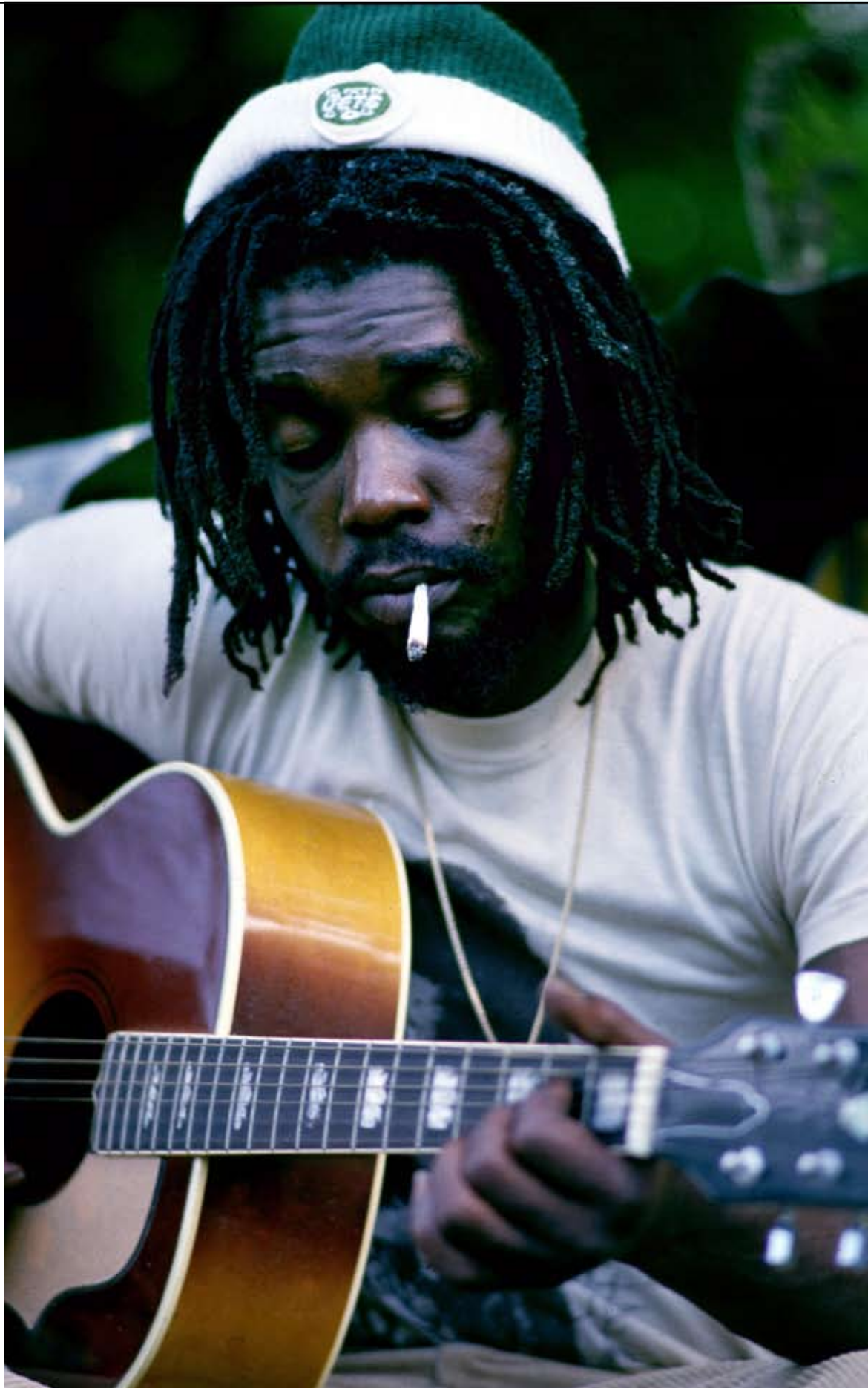
Legalize It: Legacy Edition and
Equal Rights: Legacy Edition
Sony/Legacy, 2CD (available separately)

Marijuana activists, party seekers, and high-school burnouts have forever held Peter Tosh's *Legalize It* in high esteem for related reasons. Due to its evocative cover art—Tosh smoking grass in a rural field—and deceptively simple goals, the record evolved into the equivalent of a Che Guevara image, art that's become devoid of much of its original context. It's likely that Tosh, assassinated in 1987, would welcome its role in the ongoing ganja legalization movement but despise knowing that those who champion it largely ignore the deeper messages within. Indeed, the stories and motivations behind its genesis—and the 1977 follow-up *Equal Rights*—are more involved than basic puff-puff-pass wishfulness.

Newly remastered and reissued as double-CD Legacy Edition sets, both albums belong in every music collection. While many listeners' reggae libraries don't go much deeper than a few token Bob Marley efforts, Tosh's first two solo sets are requisite examples of the music's hypnotic style, universal language, and sociopolitical reach. Recorded after Tosh quit the Wailers following his conflicts with Marley and Island Records chief Chris Blackwell—and made amidst oppressive, volatile, and dangerous circumstances that informed the revolutionary-minded lyrics and identity-driven declarations aimed at Third World societies everywhere—they teem with vibrant energy, relevant anti-authoritarianism, and progressive instrumentation.

In particular, the band on *Equal Rights* features personnel rivaled only by that of the Wailers when they had Tosh and Bunny Wailer as members. With drummer Sly Dunbar delivering one-drop snare-dominant pulses and bassist Robbie Shakespeare draping song foundations in taut albeit putty-textured bass lines, Tosh's narratives float above it all—like bubbles on a soup being slow-boiled over a fire, the simmering sounds underlying the militant themes and human-rights pronouncements. Diverse details—the fast-paced rock-cum-R&B introduction to “Stepping Razor,” light-stepping harmonizing surrounding the outstanding “Downpressor Man,” the interlocking assembly of grooves on the penitent “Jah Guide”—abound.

Legacy's reissue adds seven outtakes originally recorded for but, for brevity, omitted from the original. In his superb liner notes, Jamaica Music Museum curator Herbie Miller notes that the inclusion of the extra tracks solidifies the case for *Equal Rights* as Tosh's



magnum opus. He could've gone one step further, and stated that the bonus material makes a convincing argument for deeming the record reggae's greatest achievement. A second disc containing dub and alternative versions is a nice curiosity item.

Similar content, as well as Tosh's original mixes that were subsequently rescued from a garbage can, comprise the auxiliary disc to *Legalize It*—a debut aptly funded by a Miami drug dealer. Save for noticeably different vocal placements and a slightly stripped-down nature, the fare shines a brighter light onto Tosh's thought processes but yields no revelatory finds. No matter. The previously unreleased material serves to augment the singer/guitarist/pianist's finished studio LP, a record that taps a decidedly militant vein despite its seemingly peaceable goals of overturning marijuana laws.

Whether surveying broken romance on the country-tinted “Till Your Well Runs Dry” or balladic “Why Must I Cry,” issuing rhetorical challenges on “Whatcha Gonna Do,” or sparing no one on “No Sympathy,” Tosh emerges outspoken and uncompromising. In comparison to his former bandleader Marley, he's an outright renegade. Darkness, fear, and betrayal loom on the horizon. And yet the vocalist revels in the music's threatening culture, with the title track not just the product of a playful rebel but a determined man willing to endure physical beatings and illicit harassments to advance his beliefs.

“It's good for the flu/It's good for asthma/Good for tuberculosis/Even um-ara composis,” Tosh maintains, speaking as if he foresaw the future in which cannabis is increasingly legalized for medical use. —**Bob Gendron**

Ten of the Best Buys in Vintage Audio

By Jerold O'Brien

There's no better way to start an argument between audiophiles than to make a "best of" list. So, prepare to put up your dukes. To make the hit to everyone's ego easier to bear, we'll define the parameters that make one amplifier more worthy than another, etc. with the following guidelines.

First, we prefer products made by a major manufacturer, meaning that you can still get repairs or, at least, parts. That said, there are a few exceptions on the list. Also, we favor products that work well with other equipment and are somewhat universal in nature. And a product must be a bonafide audio component. No movie theater rejects, thank you.

One of the most enjoyable parts of building a system around vintage gear is that used pieces are often accompanied by a great story, either

from the seller or the company that ends up doing the repairs. Yes, like vintage sports cars, vintage hi-fi gear will need repairs: It's not a matter of if, it's a matter of when. No matter. Many of those \$6,000 amplifiers from the mid-80s that are only \$1,200 today represent some of the best bargains going. Most of the technology hasn't changed much in the last 30 years, so a nice pair of Mark Levinson ML-2s or an Audio Research SP-3 are still darn good investments.

Finally, in keeping with this issue's budget theme, nothing on this list costs more than \$1,500. While there are some incredibly cool amplifiers from McIntosh and Marantz that are both highly coveted and worth the quest, they are becoming as rare as a nice, unmolested Porsche 356—and their prices continue to rise. So how does one go about searching for deals?

Keep an eye on eBay and Audiogon. There's gold out there. And here's another tip from the car guys: *Always* buy the best example you can find cosmetically. Almost anything that's electronic can be rebuilt, but cosmetics are always expensive, if available at all. It's tough to find knobs, faceplates, and such for 20-40 year-old amplifiers. Some companies (ARC, CJ, and McIntosh in particular) are fully committed to refurbishing and even rebuilding their older products, realizing the value in snagging brand loyalty via the secondary market.

If possible, buy from a friend. That way you have a much better idea of the care given to a piece of gear over the years. Speaking from personal experience, never buy anything from a cat owner. If the gear isn't full of hair, chances are high that a kitty peed in the amplifier at least once, especially if it has vacuum tubes. For some reason, cats love to urinate in warm places. Also, never buy used vintage gear that has been "modified." Most modders are hacks at best and idiots at worst. Keep in mind that professional shops specialize in particular brands of gear and remain devoted to repair and refurbishment. A quick call to the manufacturer will prove telling. Who knows more about your preamp than the company that made it?

CD players are the one component that you should avoid obtaining in used condition. Earlier transports usually used some kind of transit screws to secure the mechanism, and chances are high that along the line, they were lost. This means that a used CD player will probably be destroyed when it gets shipped. If you do take the plunge, again, call the manufacturer to find out if it still stocks transport mechanisms. Don't say we didn't warn you.

And herewith, the list.



Spica TC-50 Speakers

Typical used price: \$100-\$250

The TC-50 was nothing short of a miracle when introduced at the 1983 CES convention. The small speaker, priced at about \$550 per pair, possesses a magic that well exceeds its price. Designer John Bau concentrated on phase response and time alignment to produce a model that has an open character unlike any other. Even though Spica went away around 1990, the TC-50s still boast a very loyal following.

With imaging performance that came close to the best electrostats of the day, the TC-50's only weakness is its tweeter. While of very high quality, it cannot withstand high power or the least bit of clipping. But tonal accuracy is stunning, and even while listening to a pair today, it's amazing how well the speaker handles musical fundamentals. In a small room with a great tube amplifier, the TC-50 continues to impress.

Bau still looks back fondly on the TC-50 and, in a recent conversation said, "Just replace that big electrolytic with a similar value film cap and they'll play for another 20 years. Just don't crank 'em."

FEATURE



Mark Levinson 23.5 Power Amplifier

Typical used price: \$1,200-\$1,500

One of the most expensive items on our list, this is arguably one of the last great old-school Levinson amps. Offering 200 watts of Class AB power, the 23.5 climbed to the top of the heap in 1991. I revisited this amplifier in Issue 26 and found it a gem to drive speakers that have high current requirements. At 100 pounds, the 23.5 is a “he-man” amplifier, so put it where it’s going to stay. As Portland vintage hi-fi salesman Kurt Doslu likes to say, “Don’t play catch with this one!”

All kidding aside, here’s a well-built power amplifier that can be easily serviced. The 23.5 provides a level of resolution that the new Class-D lightweights can’t match.

Conrad Johnson PV-12 Preamplifier

Typical used price: \$700-\$1,100

The PV-12 has the classic CJ sound: Slightly warm and romantic, but it goes a long way at making less-than-amazing recordings sound very pleasant. There are two versions of the PV-12—with and without phono preamplifier. Naturally, the model with phono usually runs about \$300 more, but it’s well worth the cost. You’ll never find this good of an outboard phono for such a price. Those craving a more modern CJ sound can send the PV-12 back to the factory for a C1 capacitor upgrade, which offers a wonderful balance between the midrange warmth and punch of the latest CJ components.



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FEATURE



Hafler DH-101 Preamplifier Typical used price: \$75-\$125

The biggest sleeper on the list. The DH-101 was one of Hafler's first products. Like the Dynaco amplifiers from the 60s, many were built as kits. So try to get a photo of the preamp's inside to check workmanship. The rare, factory assembled model is the one you want and will only cost about \$50 more. With great imaging and a fantastic phonostage, it's no wonder that, upon introduction, it compared favorably to preamplifiers costing ten times as much. A perfect anchor for a top-notch \$1,000 system.

Threshold 400A Power Amplifier Typical used price: \$500-\$700

Not the first class-A power amplifier from amplifier shaman Nelson Pass, but believed by many to be one of his best. One hundred watts of pure class A power with the coolest power indicators you'll ever see. Many years later, it only takes a few shots of scotch for publisher Jeff Dorgay to wax poetic about his unit.

A cursory look inside reveals a beefy power supply that will no doubt need some TLC. But spare parts are available, and there are a few people that specialize in restoring this classic. Mr. Pass is even known to crack a smile when this model is mentioned in conversation.



NAD 3020 Integrated Amplifier

Typical used price: \$50-\$200

Prices widely vary on this one, so our standard advice of getting the cleanest example for the money goes double here. While there are a few different versions of the 3020, most NAD aficionados agree that the first model, still built in the UK, is the best. An absolute mint example runs \$200 and is worth every penny, even if it's now more than 30 years old.

With a distinctively un-grainy solid-state sound and a sonic signature somewhat like that of the original Naim Nait integrated amplifiers, the 3020 is definitely a proponent of “the British sound.” But the real key is balance; the 3020 also included a great headphone amplifier and a solid phonostage. Many budget audiophiles use the 3020 as a preamplifier only. Disconnecting the pre out/main in jumpers means that the modest power supply only has to service the preamplifier section, resulting in dramatically increased sonics when paired with something like a Dynaco Stereo 70 or an Adcom amplifier.

Trivia buffs: It is rumored that the NAD 3020 is the amplifier that brought on the first use of the term “giant killer” in audio journalism. Ah, the good with the bad.

Adcom GFA-535 Amplifier

Typical used price: \$100-\$150

While most of the buzz in hi-fi magazines concentrated on the top-of-the-line 200wpc Adcom GFA-555, the 535 was the real sweetheart. For \$299, it offered 60 watts per channel with a refinement otherwise unavailable at the time. Most audiophiles passed on it simply because it wasn't expensive enough to sit in a legitimate high-end system.

Sixty clean watts will drive a wide range of speakers, and the GFA-535 still offers satisfying performance—think of it as the ying to the Stereo 70's yang. I've got one paired with an Audio Research SP-6 in my office system and the results still surprise me.



LS3/5a Speakers

Typical used price: \$1,000+

Originally designed by the BBC as a portable location monitor, the LS3/5A caught on like wildfire in the audiophile world due to its natural midrange. While not much on bass, the speakers were designed with a slight mid-bass bump that makes them sound much better than you might expect. Remember, these were on the US market at the same time as the AR3a, and cost almost as much.

Several Web sites are devoted to this speaker, the most comprehensive being www.ls35a.com. In addition to the great photos, the site gives you the speaker's proper history as well as what to look for when buying a used pair.

Early originals are getting tougher and tougher to find, but if you can, it's well worth the effort. Those wanting true BBC sound, look no further.

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FEATURE



Dynaco Stereo 70 Amplifier

Typical used price: \$500+

Much like the Porsche 914, the Dynaco Stereo 70 has almost always been criticized, with every basement engineer having his or her own way to get this amplifier “to really sing.” The truth? Almost all of them suck. Pay the money and get a clean, original model.

This modest amplifier was built by the thousands—more than 350,000, to be exact—with many constructed by hobbyists. Hence, always demand a photo on which the underside cover is removed. Some of the homebrew amps look like a pile of linguini under the hood, the unintended characteristic contributing to the amplifiers’ ill-deserved reputation for being somewhat noisy. Factory-assembled Stereo 70s are coveted by many collectors, but plan on replacing most if not all of the capacitors anyway.

If you are up to the scavenger hunt, a well-sorted Stereo 70 still provides highly musical results. And if you feel really mischievous, paint your Stereo 70 green and tell your friends that it’s a rare Shindo model.

Audio Research SP-3 Preamplifier

Typical used price: \$1,500

We saved the best for last. Selling for almost three times its original price, the ARC SP-3 is in the same league as the legendary Marantz and McIntosh preamplifiers, but at a much more reasonable price. Thanks to ARC’s commitment to legacy products, you can send it back to the factory for a full rebuild—possibly the best \$1,295 value in high-end audio today.

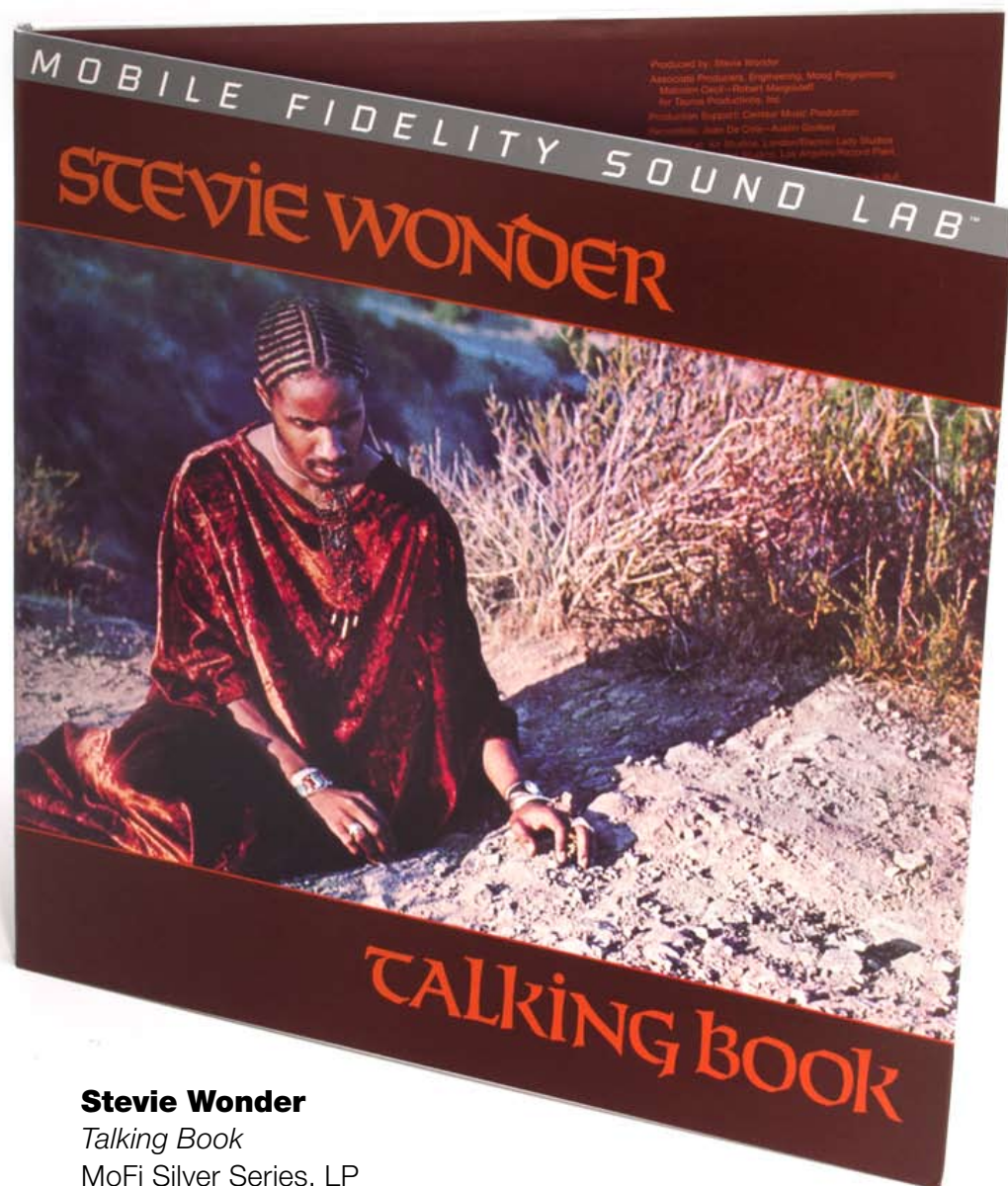
According to ARC’s service department, you get a top-to-bottom rebuild, incorporating much of the technology found in current ARC preamplifiers. Find out more here: <http://www.audioresearch.com/SP3-update.html>

Yes, there are a hundred more choices, and if you care to continue the debate on *TONEAudio*’s Facebook page, we’ll be happy to entertain you. Let us know what you think, and tell us about your favorite vintage piece. We might just use it in a future article. ●

Audiophile Pressings

By the Tone Staff

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Talking Book

MoFi Silver Series, LP

Let's face it: Most Stevie Wonder albums, and in fact, most Motown albums, sound fairly awful. But how can you *not* dig Stevie Wonder, even on a table radio? Regrettably, that's what many of his records were mixed and mastered for when originally released. On many levels, it's a crime that so much of the best R&B ever created didn't get the production respect it deserved. Which is reason to celebrate this edition of *Talking Book*, on which Mobile Fidelity's Silver Label makes great strides.

For those not familiar with the difference between Silver Label and MoFi's standard Original Master Recordings (OMR), the former records are still pressed with care at RTI in Southern California, albeit on standard-weight 140 gram vinyl, and at real time instead of the half-speed rate. And whereas Silver Label titles are cut from "the best tape they can source," OMRs are only produced from the original master tape. The good news is that Silver Label releases come close in sound quality to OMRs and carry a lower price.

Paul Stubblebine takes the helm on this release, but MoFi engineer Rob LoVerde notes: "This record was produced from an analog production master that Wonder personally EQ'ed for Tamla at the time of its original release. There's nothing digital involved on this record or any of the other three Wonder titles planned for the Silver Series."

We'll call this pressing a triple, as it's one base short of a home run. Compared to my well-worn LP purchased back in the 70s, a *huge* layer of grunge has been lifted. *Talking Book* now actually throws a soundstage—and a very wide one at that—into the room, along with myriad minute bits of funk heretofore lost in the mix. With major hits "You Are The Sunshine of My Life," "Superstition," and "I Believe (When I Fall In Love It Will Be Forever)," this record brings back great memories and, from an audiophile perspective, is much more enjoyable than ever before.

Yet the 1972 masterpiece is still slightly bright and forward, so those possessing a system with a warmer tonal balance will likely enjoy it more than those with a highly analytical system. I really loved this album played through my Koetsu Urushi cartridge, but when switching to the Clearaudio DaVinci, not as much. On the first side, "Tuesday Heartbreak" appears moderately compressed and "You've Got It Bad, Girl" doesn't sound much

better. If I didn't know, I'd swear I was listening to an SACD of fair quality. It appears that the hits were treated with more care. "Sunshine" doesn't have as much compression and EQ as the rest of the record. Again, keep in mind that I'm referring to the master mix here; I'm *not* implying that MoFi added EQ and/or compression.

If anything, this record is worth the money just for the sound of "Superstition"; it's by far the best-sounding track on the disc. Wonder's voice has plenty of body and the horns come through in larger-than-life fashion; the cymbals are also less crunchy here than elsewhere. Listeners accustomed to original copies will definitely hear a few more layers of horns and percussion than they remember.

Yes, it all makes for an odd blend. There's a larger soundfield, exceptionally quiet surfaces, and a solid helping of midrange bloom, but residual glare on the top end prevents the LP from qualifying as a truly stellar-sounding recording. A gnarly copy in a local record store will probably set you back five or six bucks, so \$22.95 isn't crazy. Since it's graduation time, we'll give the folks at MoFi a B for ultimate sound quality and an A for effort. I'd be thrilled if the label can get the rest of the key Stevie Wonder catalog to sound this good. —**Jeff Dorgay**



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Frank Sinatra
Swing Along With Me
Mobile Fidelity, 180g LP

The only album Frank Sinatra released with Billy May on the Reprise label, 1961's *Swing Along With Me* is so good, he didn't need to do another.

Comparing the recent Mobile Fidelity reissue with the original release proves startling because, immediately, it reveals how rushed Sinatra sounds on the original. This is a guy who has a cab waiting for him outside. Also, on the original pressing, Sinatra resembles the typical "Shouty Man" that blasts his lungs about incredible offers on TV advertisements; such is the LP's well-lit upper midrange effect. Mobile Fidelity's version issue calms the great man, unveiling the playful Sinatra.

Now, with Ol' Blue Eyes' delivery during "I Never Knew," you can almost hear his eyebrow raise and see his half smile appear. And on this track on the original, the orchestra overheats—an engine run so hot, it melts into a combustive blob. By contrast, the reissue offers superb instrumental separation wherein the

saxophones have texture and the trumpets a grizzled grain. Moreover, the bass never dominates, and new details emerge. For example, during the instrumental break, there's a brief piano solo wrought with lightness and delicacy that, honestly, I hardly noticed on the original. I was too busy tensing my shoulders in reaction to the rough mix.

Tensing, too, on the original, is the soundstage that, on "Have You Met Miss Jones?," gives the impression of an orchestra falling over itself before being crammed into a closet. Mobile Fidelity's 180g LP reorganizes the backing orchestra amidst a space the size of a roomy aircraft hanger; the soundstage expands, allowing each instrument to not only find its place but express itself fully enough to enhance dynamic contrast ratios.

Along with the equally superb *The Concert Sinatra*, chalk this up as another splendid entry in Mobile Fidelity's definitive Sinatra reissue catalog. —**Paul Rigby**



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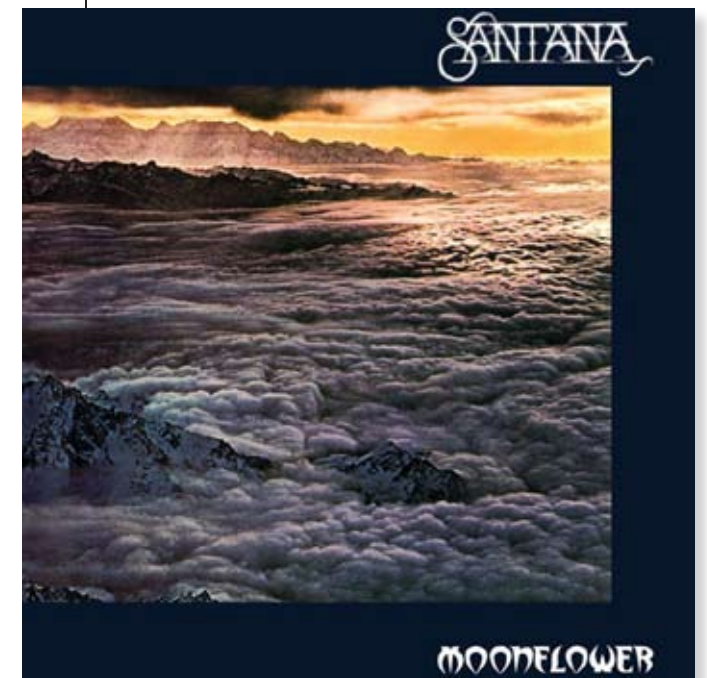
Originally released in the fall of 1977, Santana's rendition of the Zombies' "She's Not There" proved a serious crossover hit on the rock and jazz charts, propelling the man, his band, and their then-new album back into the limelight. And while it only hit #10 on the *Billboard* chart, *Moonflower* achieved double-platinum sales. Unfortunately, it represented Santana's last chart success until his Grammy-winning *Supernatural*—and it still stands as the last major success he achieved wholly on his own merit.

The two-record set combines classic Santana tracks captured live in Europe and new material recorded in San Francisco. The original Columbia LPs were mastered by Bernie Grundman, and while my early pressings suffer from a bit of cloudiness and a touch of distortion, they possess much better fidelity than most of the day's Columbia pressings, which were often aimed at AM radio play.

From the moment a needle is dropped on its surface, it becomes obvious that the Friday Music version boasts much smoother treble, with less grunge overall, allowing you to listen further into the mix than before. The difference becomes even more apparent on the live tracks, where the applause starts to sound remarkably realistic and the drums become more powerful, both in soundstage size and attack. Just listen to the last cut on side three, "Head, Hands and Feet," where the high-hat cymbals finally sound as if they are actually being played up above the drum heads. Santana's wailing lead guitar now bursts way out in front of the speakers, adding to the illusion of a live performance—provided your system is up to task.

The LP's surfaces are exceptionally quiet, contributing to increased tonal contrasts and exposing more low-level details that place more emphasis on the keyboard and percussion work. And while the quality of Friday Music's output is often sporadic, the label has made excellent choices when it comes to titles that help listeners relive classic rock's past. The imprint's treatment of *Moonflower* rates a solid "A." Well done.

—Jeff Dorgay



Santana

Moonflower

Friday Music, 180g 2LP set



Elvis Costello and the Attractions

Get Happy!!

Mobile Fidelity, 180g 45RPM 2LP

“High fidelity/Can you hear me?”

asks Elvis Costello on the hit from *Get Happy!!*, the song cleverly adopting the phrase associated with accurate sound reproduction and using it in the service of describing a fractured relationship. His intention aside, listeners can finally answer the rhetorical question with a sonorous “Yes!”

Mobile Fidelity did an admirable job resurrecting the first three Costello albums, but *Get Happy!!* arrives as the audiophile imprint’s masterpiece. Partially because the iconic singer/guitarist’s outstanding 1980 R&B- and soul-drenched studio effort has always begged for more groove space. Featuring 20 tracks crammed onto two sides of a 33RPM record, the original LP is a nightmare of compression and inner groove distortion. (Can anyone say *Something, Anything?*) No more.

Now you can enjoy *Get Happy!!* in a way most never thought possible due to the extensive extra room opened up by changing to the 45RPM format.

The new pressing begins with “Love For Tender” on side one, but follows the order of the original cover on the flipside of the jacket, showing “I Can’t Stand Up For Falling Down” as the first track. Side four benefits the least from the MoFi treatment. Songs here still lack dynamics and dimension, yet they’re not in as bad of shape as before.

Revisiting an early copy of *Get Happy!!* proved as scary as remembered. The vinyl sounds like AM radio: noisy and zero dynamic range, while the CD adds yet *another* layer of harshness. Residual compression still exists even at 45RPM, yet the MoFi version is light years ahead. Costello’s voice possesses a lot more body, and the vocal processing is easier to digest. The biggest treat comes via the clarity in which Steve Nieve’s organ parts resonate. “B Movie” and “Motel Madness” are perhaps the best examples; no longer buried in the mix, Nieve finally shines.

Car aficionados like to say “there’s no substitute for cubic inches.” The same holds true for a vinyl record—one can only fit so much musical information in those tiny grooves. Along with dynamics, bass response suffers when tracks are tightly squeezed together. And while the original *Get Happy!!* offers no real bass, this pressing has a proper foundation—as well as increased presence of guitar and keyboards.

High fidelity? Indeed. Pitch your old copy and revel in the ability to crank this one up. —**Jeff Dorgay**

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Cheap Trick

In Color

Audio Fidelity, 180g LP

If you've seen Cheap Trick live, you know that this pillar of power pop has a *big* drum sound thanks to Bun E. Carlos. Unfortunately, that key sonic characteristic has rarely translated to LP. Until now. Released at the end of 1977, the same year that Cheap Trick hit the charts with its self-titled album, *In Color* was criticized by some for having slick production that was more pop than power. Others felt the record emphasized the Rockford quartet's Beatlesque charm. Time has proven the latter camp correct; the 32-minute-long platter is now recognized as an all-time classic.

Mastering engineer extraordinaire Kevin Gray managed to transform this record into a diamond, bringing out layers of previously unheard detail that on original pressings remained buried in the mix. Multiple spins revealed major treasure, yet the booty will be delivered the second you drop the stylus down on the short intro track "Hello There," the group's trademark concert-opening song throughout much of 1977 and 1978. Lead singer Robin Zander's vocals explode center stage between the speakers as he wails "Are you ready to rock?" On this Audio Fidelity pressing, he sounds like he means it.

It's now also much easier to hear all of the backing vocals, adding to Cheap Trick's massive sound. *In Color* finally has seemingly limitless depth; guitarist Rick Nielsen's backing vocals on "Oh Caroline" almost sound as if they are coming from behind the listening chair, and he is much more discernable throughout. And, for the first time, you can actually hear bassist Tom Petersson's vocals. Both Petersson and Nielsen's guitars claim more dimension, which aids the closing "So Good To See You," a track that takes the Fab Four feel to the extreme, complete with a huge helping of Sgt. Pepper trippiness.

All of the other standard audiophile criteria are passed with flying colors (pun intended): quiet surfaces, a flat and centered pressing, and a package that features a stunning cover replete with a healthy clearcoat finish. Awesome.

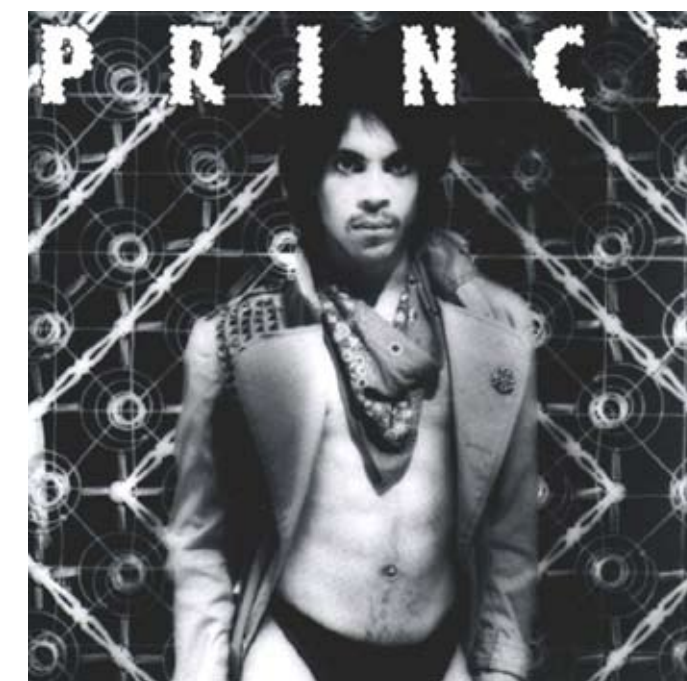
—Jeff Dorgay

Controversy, *Dirty Mind*, and 1999: Quite a threesome. Newly remastered on 180g LP by Warner Bros., these iconic albums chronicle the evolution from Prince's early sound—deeply rooted in dance and disco—to the heavily laden funk he arrived at by 1980's *Dirty Mind* and its follow-up, *Controversy*. 1999, Prince's second-best-selling record, reveals the sonic chameleon changing again, trading in a more commercial vein. No wonder many fans consider the 1982 double-LP the most accessible effort in his catalog.

Perhaps it's the heavy use of drum machines and synth drums on *Dirty Mind* and *Controversy*, but these outings still sound brittle on the extreme high end. Bernie Grundman takes the helm on all three, but upon revisiting originals, you'll see Grundman mastered them the first time around. Original LPs of these titles can be purchased for about \$5 in good condition, and the CDs don't sound half bad. The biggest differences in sound quality between the original and remastered versions? Additional midrange depth and extra warmth in the bass register. Such warmth may actually make the aforementioned drum machines stand out; it's a double-edged sword. (continued)

Prince

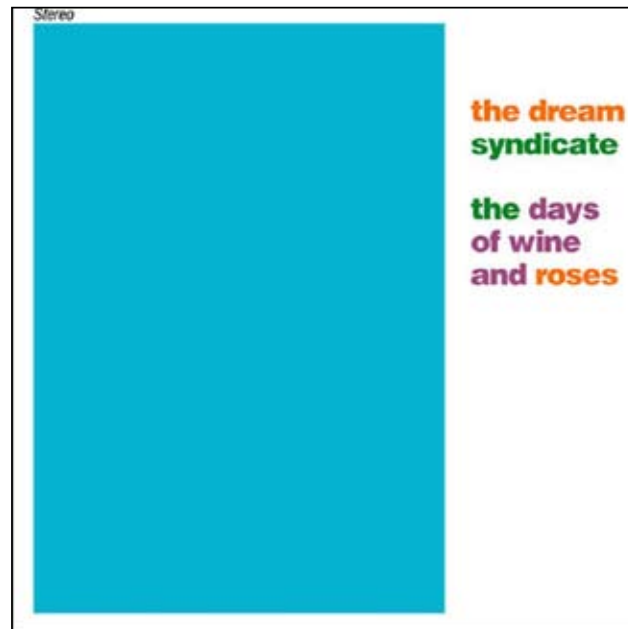
Controversy, *Dirty Mind*, and 1999
Rhino/Warner Bros., 180g LPs





If you are sitting on the fence and trying to decide on just one of these titles, 1999 is the one you want. The new version offers a big jump in low-level detail over that on the original. In addition, it's substantially smoother throughout the high-frequency spectrum, particularly compared to the original as well as *Controversy* and *Dirty Mind*. A smattering of vocal distortion sneaks through, especially during Prince's loudest screams, but again, even these parts have been substantially tamed.

Moreover, vocal harmonies are more easily discerned and the record seems to have better overall pace, with the upper bass coming through much more clearly and cleanly. These enhancements add to the enjoyment of the dense production Prince puts forward on 1999. He stacks the deck with the title track, "Little Red Corvette," and "Delirious," finishing hard with "Lady Cab Driver" (the church bell and squealing girl in the background never sounded so vivid), "All The Critics Love U in New York," and "International Lover." The 2nd LP's flip side unveils Prince plotting another moderate style change, headed towards what would soon become The New Power Generation sound. —**Jeff Dorgay**



The Dream Syndicate

The Days of Wine and Roses
4 Men With Beards Records, LP

It might be easy to dismiss *The Days of Wine and Roses* as borrowing too heavily from the Velvet Underground's playbook, but this vital Paisley Underground band's full-length debut has more than enough depth and diversity to carve out its own distinct space. Hitting the scene at the end of the punk era, the Dream Syndicate achieved a balance of raw energy with a polished level of musicianship that becomes easier to acknowledge when looking at the music that arrived after the group faded away. Then there's the guitar work of Steve Wynn and Karl Precoda that, back in 1982, had few—if any—rivals.

Sure, a well-recorded record with quiet surfaces isn't all that punk, but this pressing contains so much texture that listening to the original is now criminal. Lead singer Wynn possesses a larger space, and it's much easier to hear the key mood swings in his delivery, which reach their peak on the rousing "Then She Remembers."

It's also not very punk to go into minutiae on a vinyl reissue, audiophile pressing or not. Here, you're just going to want to get to the music, so know this: The original Sire pressing is highly compressed, as most early Sire pressings are, and this new version from 4 Men With Beards constitutes a major improvement in every way. Essential. —**Jeff Dorgay**

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Explosions in the Sky

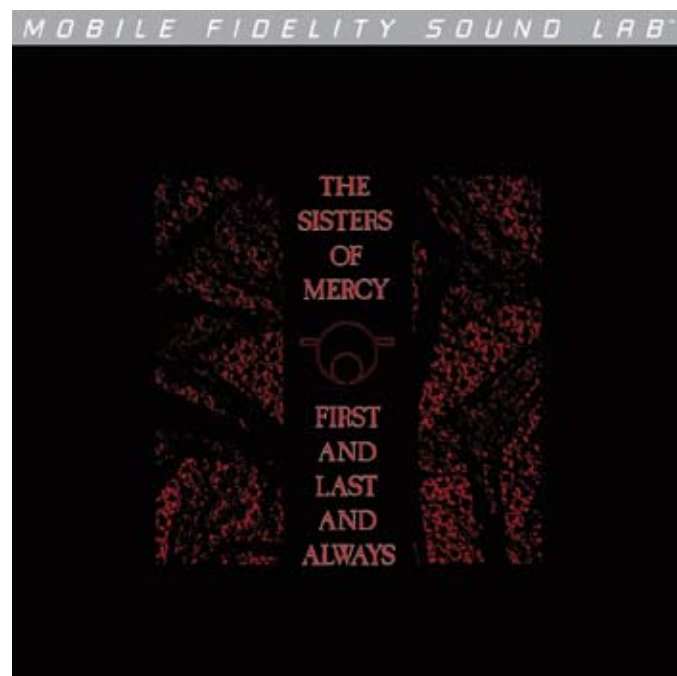
take care, take care, take care
Temporary Residence, 2LP

Rapidly shaping up as one of the premier instrumental rock bands of the past decade, Explosions in the Sky brings symphonic breadth to modern guitar-influenced electronica. The burgeoning group's new *take care, take care, take care* represents another creative step forward.

Recorded on a pecan ranch in Tornillo, Texas and mastered to three sides of vinyl by Greg Calbi in New York, this 2LP pressing epitomizes what needs to be done to get the under-50 crowd interested in hi-fi. Live, the band presents a dense wall of sound with incredible dynamic range, going from quiet interludes to metal massacres at the drop of a hat. Past CDs took some of that magic away on record. That's not the case here.

Presenting the quieter, gentler side of Explosions in the Sky, the record's opening "Last Known Surroundings" ethereally begins with a highly distorted wailing guitar located far behind a front line of guitars. It takes on a texture that feels like equal parts The Edge, a handful of power chords, and early Radiohead crossed with Neu!. The track starts and ends slow, with the band's trademark use of multiple crescendos incorporated in the arrangement. Only "Trembling Hands" and "Let Me Back In" ever hint at making a ruckus, and yet, they remain subdued.

Temporary Residence's LPs present the power and delicacy that the performance deserves. Seven tracks are spread amongst three sides, so there are dynamics to spare; the vinyl is miles better than the CD and nearly as quiet. Framed with type that you might see in a Rene Magritte painting, packaging is also stellar. The deluxe edition is exquisitely boxed as a four-part foldout complete with poster and free download of the album in the 320kb MP3 format. Audiophiles that happen to be Explosions in the Sky fans, rejoice. Your ship has come in.
—Jeff Dorgay



Sisters Of Mercy

First And Last And Always
Mobile Fidelity Silver Label, LP

Originally released on Elektra in 1985 and reissued on LP via Mobile Fidelity's Silver Label, *First And Last And Always* stands as Sisters of Mercy's debut and one of the most influential goth records ever issued.

The lead track, "Black Planet," showcases the new remastering to full effect. The song features an all-encompassing bass rhythm that, with every strike, infects the tune like mustard gas unleashed in a trench. On a poor master, the bass would threaten to suffocate the rest of the arrangement.

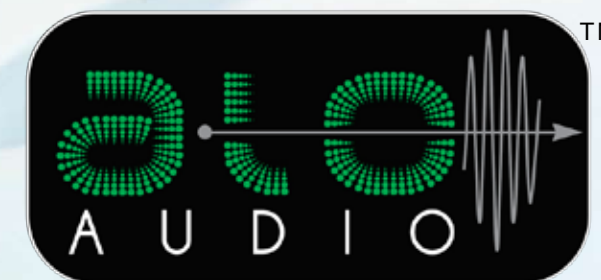
But Mobile Fidelity keeps it in check with a distinct, sparkling, upper-mid sensitive guitar; the bass merrily sits on the edge of the soundstage.

Such attention to detail is shown in more subtle terms on "Walk Away," which contains periods when singer Andrew Eldritch says too much in one breath, resulting in a slightly wavery and strained delivery. Again, on an inattentive master, the approach can sound both monotonous and monotone. Here, however, Eldritch's voice modulates with a wide array of variation.

This pressing is also notable for the space that it provides the band. Yes, the soundstage is wide but, without the measure of instrumental separation it instills, the master would fail to fulfil its promise. For example, on "Marian (Version)," the music is layered like an aural lasagne. Percussion sits underneath the rhythm guitar and bass while vocals act as a dripping sauce. In the meantime, the metallic-tinted acoustic guitar is sprinkled about like an herb topping. Yum. On "Possession," instruments are grouped between the speakers—recipe for disaster given the potential for each to stumble into another or, worse, merge into a glutinous blob. Not here. The band sounds compact, calm, well adjusted, and efficient, leaving the soundstage extremities to create an effective stereo vocal effect.

A highly entertaining reissue, *First And Last And Always* is a lesson in how to retain artistic vision while satiating the audiophile heart. —**Paul Rigby**

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KC and the Sunshine Band

KC and the Sunshine Band
MoFi Silver Label, LP

Back in July 1975, when roaming Milwaukee's Summerfest grounds, trying to sneak into Shank Hall for a beer, and searching out heavy rock while wearing the quintessential "Disco Sucks" t-shirt, it would have been unconscionable for me to own *KC and the Sunshine Band*. Even thinking about it would have been the equivalent of suicide amongst peers.

But in retrospect, it's an amusing record. With so many 70s rock platters being remastered to death, I applaud Mobile Fidelity for having the guts to step so far out of the audiophile box and produce something this much fun. And since I happened to have an early pressing on hand for comparison—Columbia House sent it as a Selection of the Month and I forgot to return it, honest—I was surprised at just how good this reissue sounds.

Of course, what really makes this record click are the three hits you know by heart: "That's the Way (I Like It)," "Boogie Shoes," and of course, "Get Down Tonight." Heavy with funk riffs and analog synth fills, *KC and the Sunshine Band* finally has some solid bass response—even if *TONE's* art director caught me goosing up the Gotham subwoofer's level control when cranking "Get Down Tonight." Given the additional bass energy, most of the murkiness from the original is gone, leaving behind some serious dynamic range. The original is so heavily compressed for radio play that it doesn't have more than a couple of dB total.

The end result moves to the top of my audiophile pressing guilty pleasure list. You know you want it too. —**Jeff Dorgay**

New Column: Macro

Devoted to Your Desktop

By Jeff Dorgay

While preparing this entry-level gear issue, it became evident that the desktop environment is the most often overlooked area in high-end audio. While *TONE* has dabbled in computer audio, and the orbit of our Headphone Planet column occasionally streaks through the magazine, the desktop has become our new frontier for a number of reasons. Chiefly, it's probably where you're spending most of your time these days. Why not have a great hi-fi system there?

The initial impetus for this new column came from a few spirited phone calls from Shane Buettner, AudioQuest's Director of Education, who spent years on the other side of the fence in both the reviewer and editor chairs while slaving away for *The Absolute Sound* and *Home Theater* magazines. As Buettner pointed out, "The desktop is a fully immersive environment, and it's where a lot of people are listening to their music."

Agreed. Taking our cue from photography—where you either put a macro lens on your SLR camera or push the macro button on your compact camera to zoom in closer on a subject—we view the desktop field as a related close-up that is only more vivid and detailed. A desktop's smaller footprint forces you to think compact. But thanks to the small size, a pair of modest speakers can offer a huge presentation even when listening from a few feet away.

Joe Harley, from Music Matters Jazz (and long time Vice President of Product Development for AudioQuest), sums it up perfectly. "It's just like the experience we've had in the recording studio," he says. "Sitting between a pair of high quality mini monitors can be just as exciting as a big system in your living room."

In issues to come, we will acquaint you with and investigate all the facets of desktop audio: DACs, amplifiers, speakers, headphones, cables, and more. You already have one of the key components to a desktop system (a computer). So whether you just want to spend a few bucks on a set of external powered speakers, or build a fully functioning Death Star, we can help. Let the excitement begin!.

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“Where’s the sub?” Those were the first words out of my mouth as I entered Danny Haikin’s office at B&W in London earlier this year. He just smiled and said, “There isn’t one. That’s just coming from the two desktop speakers.” Then we spent the better part of the next hour talking about music while I got a proper demo of B&W’s latest masterpiece, built upon the technology incorporated in its Zeppelin models.

Indeed, a few years ago, B&W wowed the desktop/iPod world with its original Zeppelin and built on that success with the Zeppelin Mini and recently, an upgraded Zeppelin model. My tour of the B&W factory (full article to follow in a future issue of *TONE*) revealed a substantial amount of brain trust devoted to the Zeppelin line. The forward-thinking mindset has paid off handsomely for B&W, which now sells the Zeppelin and MM-1s through Apple stores as well as its own dealer network.

Like the rest of the B&W range, the MM-1s possess the understated elegance for which the marquee is known. While the \$499 price might initially catch you off guard, the first listen proves reassuring. Incorporating a version of the Zeppelin’s DSP (digital signal processing) engine, the MM-1s are a two-way active speaker system that uses a tube-loaded tweeter—just like those in the company’s higher-end models—and a long-throw bass driver. The brochure claims that the MM-1 “is a true hi-fi speaker, shrunk to fit on your desktop,” and is absolutely correct.

Each of the MM-1s only takes up a 3.9 inch (100mm) x 3.9 inch square on your desktop and stands a mere 6.6 inches tall (170mm). The enclosures are wrapped in black textured grille cloth that is similar to B&W’s larger speakers, and trimmed with a brushed aluminum band and top plate. Our art director’s design sense immediately piqued during the photo shoot.

Quick Setup

The MM-1s looked like so much fun that I resisted the urge to read the instruction manual. I’m happy to report that the average computer user can be rocking in a matter of minutes.



Three essential connections need to be made: The 4-pin umbilical from the left speaker to the right, the USB port from the right speaker to your computer, and the power supply to the right speaker.

I had to sneak inside my iMac’s sound control panel to direct sound output to the MM-1s via USB, but that was about it. The only glitch in the operation came when using the Control:Mac software with my Sooloos music server. For those accessing a Sooloos, you will have to use the supplied AUX cable to go between your Mac’s headphone output and the MM-1’s AUX input. The Mac will not send audio output from the Sooloos back out via USB. iTunes and Rhapsody users will have no trouble.

Once connected, volume can be controlled via the chrome band on the right speaker, the control panel on your computer, or with the egg-shaped volume control that is standard issue for the Zeppelin series. This is incredibly handy, should you utilize the MM-1s outside of an immediate desktop region. They actually worked quite well in my kitchen, fed via a nearby Apple Airport Express.

Verifying Initial Observations

To be sure I wasn’t brainwashed at B&W’s HQ with a tarted-up prototype, I began my listening sessions with tracks containing some bass. First up, Thomas Dolby’s “Pulp Culture” from *Aliens Ate My Buick*. Then, after auditioning a few quick cuts from Tone Loc’s *Loc-Ed After Dark*, I was firmly convinced that the MM-1s had enough bass on tap. The warm sound I remembered from my London visit confirmed that these are serious desktop loudspeakers.

The B&W DSP engine works wonders, allowing the MM-1s to disappear on your desktop in an almost uncanny way. Prince’s *One Nite Alone* perfectly played to this strength, creating a soundfield that went well beyond the desktop’s borders. While not always convenient in an office environment, spend 30 minutes with the MM-1s, and you’ll never want to listen to headphones again. *(continued)*



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With rock, rap, and funk checked off, time spent with acoustic music confirmed the speakers' versatility and shared heritage with top-line B&W models. The Sooloos made it incredibly easy to switch between the desktop system with the MM-1s and my reference system built around B&W 805Ds. Both pairs of speakers had a similar, airy character, especially with piano and violin. Listening to Keith Jarrett's *Shostakovich: 24 Preludes and Fugues, Op. 87* equated to a spectacular experience on the desktop; with my eyes closed, it seemed like a piano was floating on my desk.

Serious Resolution

An uncanny level of resolution sets the MM-1s apart from many of the other powered computer speakers I've experienced. They reproduce spatial cues and create a three-dimensional soundfield in a way I've yet to experience with this type of product.

Even the most inexperienced listeners are easily able to hear the difference between low-res MP3 files and standard 16bit/44.1khz files of the Rolling Stones' *Through the Past Darkly*. Yet the variation became more stunning when playing back the HD Tracks' 24 bit/176khz versions. My friends were not only amazed by how much more information surfaced, but how effortless it was to discern such detail on a pair of \$500 desktop speakers. For example, the texture in Mick Jagger's voice on "Ruby Tuesday" proved staggering. The only way I could get my desk back was to blast Steel Dragon's "Death to All But Metal." And while this deejaying change helped me regain my personal space, the MM-1s were still clearly up to task.

No Need to Fear High-End Sound

If you've been on the sidelines or fearing the complex world of high-end sound, jump in with a pair of B&W MM-1s. You won't need any special cables or know how. And the speakers won't leave a huge dent in your wallet. Just plug them in and enjoy your music in a much more immersive way than you did before. Who knows, you might even be tempted to head to your B&W dealer for a pair of 800s one day. Good sound is contagious. This is truly a product you will wonder how you ever lived without. ●





AudioQuest Carbon USB Cable

.75m, \$119 www.audioquest.com

History tends to repeat itself in the audio industry. When digital audio hit the scene about 30 years ago, “bits are bits, it all sounds the same” became the popular catchphrase. But lo and behold, a handful of people began to deconstruct the digital audio workflow and made a series of improvements that led us from the dreadful sound of those first players to the highly refined sonics of today’s digital gear.

Predictably, when the computer became part of the audio chain, it was only matter of time before we started seeing high-performance claims from the digital cable field. So you can view the USB cable as an existential exercise or trust your ears. If you are of the mind that you can’t believe what you hear, spend the \$119 that you’d commit towards AudioQuest’s Carbon USB cable on a decent bottle of wine instead. However, if you want better audio performance, there’s good news to be had.

Visiting the Mother Ship

Several weeks ago, I went into the demo room at AudioQuest’s headquarters feeling skeptical. Still, I’ve always believed that wire does make a meaningful difference. And the AQ team always puts together thought-out, methodical demos. What did I have to lose?

The session started with a MacBook Pro feeding an Ayre DX-5 Universal A/V Engine with an integrated USB DAC—and a standard cheapo USB cord that’s packaged with every standard printer you’ve ever seen. We listened to a handful of vocal tracks and Beatles, so the music was familiar. The next step introduced the Carbon USB cable, and the results weren’t subtle. The effects were similar to swapping zip cord for a decent pair of speaker cables; the immediate differences equated to a lack of grain and digital harshness in sound across the range. As we went further up the AQ range, these effects became more pronounced. However, adding a Carbon USB cable to your system won’t break the bank, and keeping in the context of our desktop audio workspace, it’s a perfect fit.

AQ VP of Marketing Steve Silberman informed me that AudioQuest’s USB cables are also available with a USB Mini-B connector at one end that’s identical to what plugs into a USB phone or digital camera instead of the full sized, Standard Type

USB-B, which has a square end that is identical to what you see on a printer or external disc drive. I used the standard Carbon USB cable for my tests. Nonetheless, AQ is sending the Carbon Mini-USB cable model to allow us to try it with the B&W MM-1 speakers also reviewed in this space. Be on the lookout for the follow-up on our Web site.

Cooking In My Kitchen

With cooking shows, if you can’t achieve the same results you see on TV in your own kitchen, it’s easy to become disenchanted. Audio can be the same way. However, using the Carbon USB in my system, which consisted of a Mac Mini feeding a dCS Debussy, yielded even more impressive results than I experienced at AudioQuest.

I did most test listening with standard 44.1k/16 bit files and some 320kb/sec MP3s. While high-resolution digital files are the rage among audiophiles, they are by no means ubiquitous. I was most concerned if the entry-level user would be able to discern a meaningful enough difference to want to drop \$119 on a piece of wire. “Garbage in, garbage out” is a phrase often thrown around in the computer world. It’s no different with computer audio—perhaps more so with low-resolution files. You don’t have that much data to begin with, so what you have is even more precious.

As much as I noticed a substantial improvement in the music having a more natural presentation with CD-quality files, I felt that the 128kb/sec stream from Rhapsody and a few of the 320kb/sec files that accompanied recent LP purchases from Sub Pop Records and other indie labels benefited even more. The recent download from Explosions in the Sky’s *take care, take care, take care* is a classic example. While the music primarily consists of electric guitars, there was less overall confusion when listening with the Carbon USB in place. Drums sounded more like drums and less like drum machines, and possessed more overall air.

Similarly, heard in conjunction via the Carbon, Neil Young’s live “Are You Ready For The Country” from *A Treasure* offered up a much better picture of the violin and Dobro guitar. Of course, the

effect with high-resolution files is slightly more pronounced. But rest assured; the Carbon nets more than enough of an improvement with the majority of what lurks in most iTunes folders. It’s a great upgrade.

The New Frontier

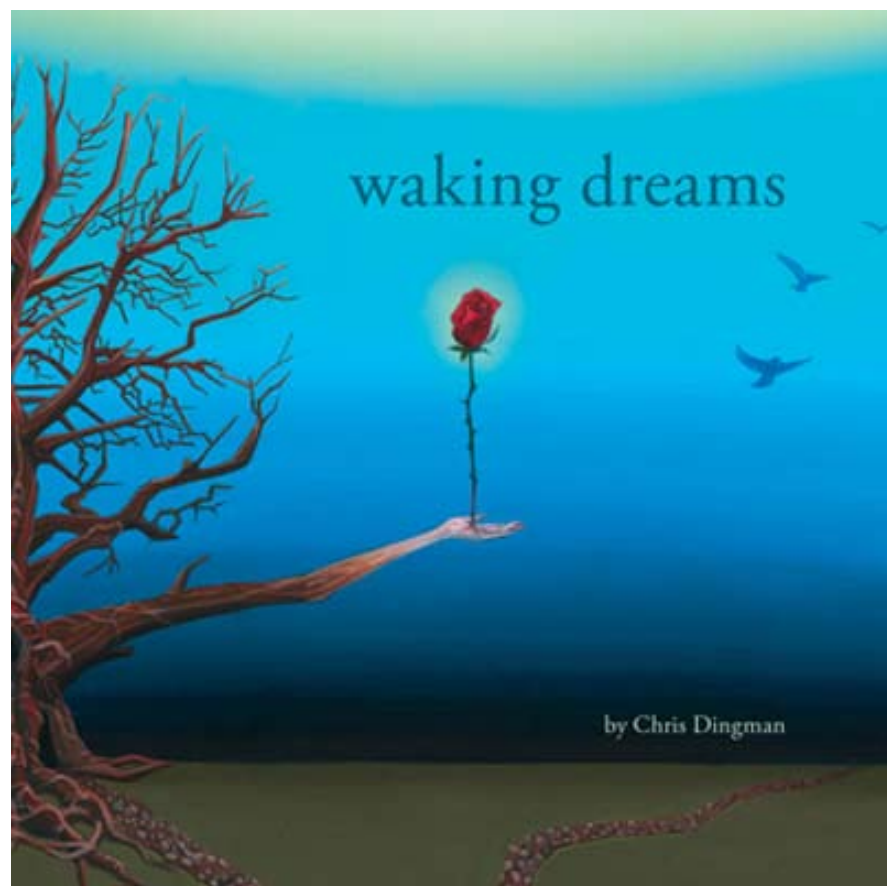
Still don’t believe me? If you live near an AudioQuest dealer, they will give you a can’t-miss demo. If you don’t, buy one from Music Direct. The latter will refund your money if you can’t hear a difference or aren’t satisfied. It doesn’t get better than that.

We’ll be investigating a lot more of these types of products going forward. Desktop audio has arrived, and *TONE* is going to help you find every possible way to optimize it. Besides, I can’t wait to hear AudioQuest’s new FireWire and Ethernet cables. Stay tuned. ●



Jazz & Blues

By Jim Macnie



Chris Dingman
Waking Dreams
Artist Data, CD

Well-designed suites aren't standard currency in jazz these days. In a market where there are more strong improvisers than gifted composers, we should be thankful to get a clutch of engaging tunes from up-and-coming artists, never mind a viable through-line that binds an extended sound narrative. This makes the inspired architecture of Chris Dingman's *Waking Dreams* quite singular.



The lush parade of songs that comprise the vibraphonist's debut has an enticing flow. From hazy reflections to jumpy squalls, the music made by his sextet (plus the occasional guest) explains itself with an unmistakable grace.

The ringing tones of Dingman's instrument constitute the program's cornerstone. While there are strong contributions by trumpeter Ambrose Akinmusire and saxophonist Loren Stillman, *Waking Dreams* is built on the rounded notes and pearly phrases generated by the leader's mallets. Like Walt Dickerson and Bobby Hutcherson before him, Dingman constructs pieces that suit his needs. The languid spill of "Indian Hill" and droning reverie of "Shift In the Wind" italicize the other-

worldly aspect of the album's title. Of course, there are agitated moments, too. "Jet Lag" finds the sextet delivering the kind of melodic jitters generated by Miles Davis on "Capricorn." Akinmusire, one of the most buzzed-about young improvisers working right now, provides a mix of aggression and aplomb, and Stillman demonstrates unique zigzag maneuvers on "Zaneta."

Uptempo pieces are in the minority, however. For the most part, this is an album that mines hazy ballad musings; gorgeous, not provocative. "For best results, listen from beginning to end without pause," writes Dingman on the CD's back cover. He's right: Submitting to the entire trip is worth it.

While there are strong contributions by trumpeter Ambrose Akinmusire and saxophonist Loren Stillman, *Waking Dreams* is built on the rounded notes and pearly phrases generated by the leader's mallets.

The jazz adventure through the rock canon continues, this time with the provocative songbook of a British prog icon being bent to fit the clever arrangements of an intrepid French tentet.

Robert Wyatt, the inventive singer-composer with the leftist stance and ghostly voice, has become one of art-rock's most fetching characters over the past four decades. (He began his career as the drummer for the groundbreaking 60s outfit the Soft Machine.) Having been applauded for past spins on Led Zeppelin tunes, the Orchestre National de Jazz is a mini big band funded by France's Ministry of Culture. Together, they present a great pop eccentric's work as a postmodern nightclub act. Released in Europe more than a year ago, and just now getting domestic notice, *Around Robert Wyatt* is flecked with brushes swirling against snares, flutes fluttering, and reeds twisting themselves into a tizzy. Like a blend of John Zorn's refraction of Ennio Morricone and Joni Mitchell's personalization of Charles Mingus, it simultaneously charms and beguiles.



© Photo by Anabelle Tiaffay



Orchestre National De Jazz

Around Robert Wyatt
Bee Jazz, CD

And it's all about arrangements. Orchestre boss and gifted conceptualist Daniel Yvinec put bassist/bandleader Vincent Artaud in charge of the redesigns, and from the minute-long prepared piano poem of "Line" to the eerie essay of "Del Mondo" (from Wyatt's overlooked *Comicoopera*), several choices amend the originals' tone without rupturing their essence. The various singers are novel. Rokia Traore's glide through "Alifib" is a forlorn nursery rhyme. Yael Naim has a good grip on the reed-soaked "Shipbuilding." And Wyatt himself shows up several times, decorating tracks with his spectral murmur. "Te Recuerdo Amanda" is a dreamy chant that sounds like a nuanced mbira interacting with a demure Mariachi horn section. Moreover, Wyatt's chanting (and whistling) on the Victor Jara ditty fits in nicely with the Lee Konitz-inspired alto sax wiggle by Atonin-Tri Hoang.

Can music go anywhere? Yes, I believe it can.



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Childhood reflections are common enough for those getting on in years, but it's not often that a youngish thirty-some-thing pines for days gone by, and probably even less often that the results of such wistfulness genuinely claim eloquence. Saxophonist Jeremy Udden, a New Englander by birth and Brooklynite by choice, finds ways to have that kind of sentiment wax persuasive, however. *If The Past Seems So Bright* is a meditation (Udden's word) on growing up in rural nowhere-ville between Providence and Boston.

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MUSIC



Jeremy Udden's Plainville

If The Past Seems So Bright
Sunnyside, CD

Placing smart interplay in the service of quaint themes, Plainville gladly walks through doors previously opened by Pat Metheny and Bill Frisell.

And quite a bucolic childhood it must have been. Using banjo, 12-string guitar, pump organ, Wurlitzer, bass, and drums—as well as his soft-spoken alto—the bandleader comes up with a fetching program that employs just as many folk music motifs as it does jazz strategies.

Placing smart interplay in the service of quaint themes, Plainville gladly walks through doors previously opened by Pat Metheny and Bill Frisell. Melodic jousting; simple, repeated patterns; lots of gliding rhythms. This is music that invests in small moments, where a demure sax trill can convey a near cinematic event. “New Dress,” marked by Brandon Seabrook’s genteel banjo picking and Pete Rende’s gurgling Rhodes, begins in a hush and only picks up the slightest momentum. Riding the placid groove is Udden’s horn, full of West Coast cool’s rounded corners, and enticing in its luminous lyricism. The minimalist “Bethel,” with Nathan Blehar singing wordlessly in unison with the boss’ soprano, is a hymn that Longfellow might find redemptive.

Happily, the band has a number of ways to explore its interests. The pensive crawl of “Sad Eyes” is designed differently than its mates, giving everyone, especially Seabrook and his momentarily squally guitar, a chance to entice. Courageous, it’s a stark opus that captivates by stressing negative space. Udden must have very vivid memories of the wind whipping through the fields in those Massachusetts nature preserves. ●

Beer Snob

Life is too short to drink mediocre beer.

By Bob Gendron

Walk into any self-respecting liquor store and you'll be confronted with the obvious: Craft beer continues to explode in popularity, resulting not only in more varieties from established breweries but more breweries springing up around the world. In the past two years alone, selections have seemingly doubled, a credit to the public's refusal to settle for inferior mainstream products, drinkers' curiosity in increasingly available options, and improved distribution networks. There's never been a better time to be a beer drinker.

Due to such demand and scope, and the need to cover the constantly expanding field on a more frequent basis, Beer Snob will now appear in every issue of *TONE*. Because life's too short to drink mediocre beer.



**Three Summer Beers
To Quench Deep Thirsts**

Bell's Oberon Ale

Bell's Brewery

Kalamazoo, Michigan

Maybe it's the welcoming sight of the dazed-and-confused sun sketched on the label. Maybe it's the vibrant orange, aqua, teal, and yellow colors involved in the packaging. Or maybe it's just the savory appearance in the glass, the persuasive hues reflective of a memorable sunrise on a distant horizon. No matter the reason, Bell's Oberon is as close to summer beer perfection as it gets. A mixture of wheat and floral notes first tempt the olfactory senses, and while the thin head quickly fades away, lingering lacing contributes to a fruit-derived sweetness that yields lemon, orange, and wheat piquancy. Moreover, Oberon epitomizes smoothness while maintaining a distinctive taste without resorting to wildness, excessive hops, or imprudent sugar content. Incredibly drinkable, the beer never gives the impression that alcohol is involved in its makeup. (For the record, Oberon is 5.80% ABV.) Moreover, this seasonal winner also achieves the magic trick of keeping a medium body while never being too thin, watery, or light. Seek this out at all costs. And fire up the barbecue.

Dog Days Dortmunder Style Lager

Two Brothers Brewing Company
Warrenville, Illinois

Two Brothers' Dog Days isn't going to win any international awards. It won't likely cause you to "ooh" and "aah," as if encountering tastes you've never before experienced. And it probably isn't going to strike you as one of the most unforgettable beers you've ever sampled. However, when it comes to refreshingly simple and pure beers to enjoy on hot and/or humid days, the aptly titled Dog Days has few peers. It pours with an ample white head and possesses refined lacing that lines the sides of any glass. A golden orange color parallels the elegant citrus aromas. The taste, too, favors orange accents. Yet the appeal lies in the balance between the lager yeast and bread malts. Hundreds of other beers claim more pronounced flavors and involving complexities. But Dog Days—akin to the image of the canine lazily dozing in the sun, bone at his side, on the label—is all about relaxation and ease. Indeed, the medium body, light carbonation, and thirst-quenching finish are tailor-made for back-porch sessions and poolside conversations. One won't be enough.



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Good Juju

Left Hand Brewing Company

Longmont, Colorado

Good Juju isn't advertised as a summer beer, but it should be. This Left Hand Brewing—the same folks responsible for the excellent Milk Stout and Fade to Black offerings—creation goes well with afternoons on which outside temperatures cause glasses to sweat and leave rings on tables within minutes. Recommended here more for its out-of-the-ordinary taste than any outright excellence, Good Juju lives up to its “Refreshing Frivolity” billing. While ginger smells and overtones are nothing new to pints, Good Juju goes a step further by using the spice as a key ingredient. Sensitive noses may first detect a hint of the ginger's prominence, but the trait doesn't become immediately evident until the first sip. If you despise ginger, you'll detest this beer. But connoisseurs that either like or can tolerate the herb are in for a treat. There's little head, faint lacing, and minimal body, but the brewmasters stumbled upon a recipe that's neither too overpowering nor underwhelming. As you'd expect from a summertime concoction, Good Juju is extremely light; hop presence is minimal and there's just a trace of bitterness. Actually, it's almost too watery, but those reservations are trumped by ginger traits that, like the copper-penny appearance, invite you back to the cooler for another. For further enjoyment, pair with sushi rolls.



verityaudio.com

***TONE's* Unofficial Beer is Brutal**

Since *TONE* is based in Portland, it only makes sense that the magazine's unofficial beer stem from the progressive Pacific Northwest city, long renowned for its craft scene. And since "brutal" remains the favorite expression traded between a few key staff members—the term is both a reference to the silly albeit smart adult cartoon series "Metalocalypse" and playfully equated to all things (related or not) heavy metal—it's impossible not to showcase Rogue Ales' Brutal IPA, formerly known as Brutal Bitter Ale and Portland State IPA. The recipient of several awards and the official beer of the Rogue Nation, Brutal IPA isn't the least harsh or ferocious. In fact, the hoppy beverage boasts terrific balance, citrusy tints, and very subtle caramel tones. Featuring light carbonation, it's more reminiscent of an Extra Strong Bitter or American Pale Ale than a traditional IPA, and straddles the lines between all three with the deftness of a gymnast navigating a balance beam. Advice: Grab a few pounds of sirloin steak, light the grill, and go crazy.

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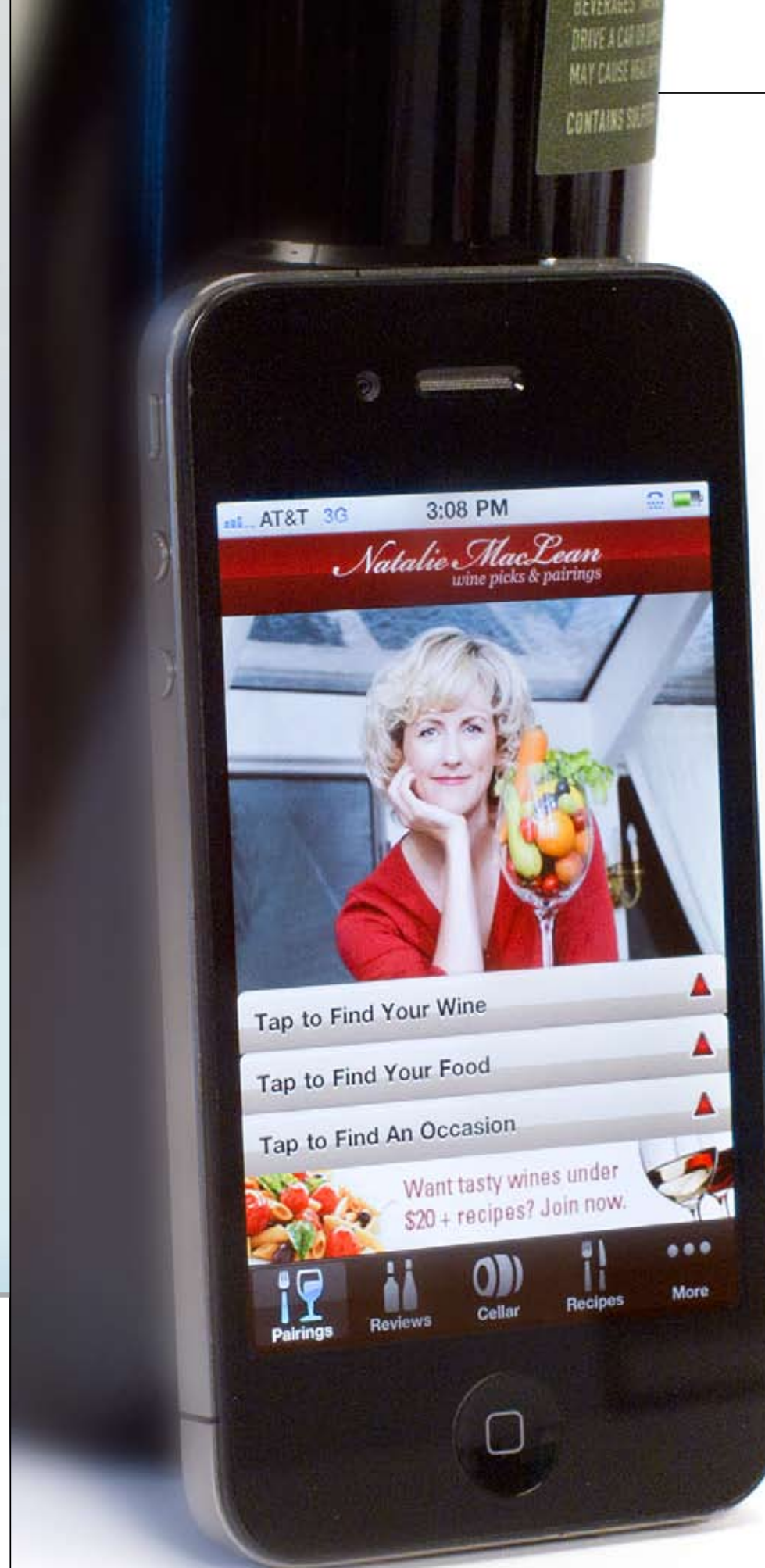
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Inarguably one of the most pioneering and useful applications of its or any kind, Natalie MacLean's Wine Picks & Pairings sets the standard for interactive mobile apps. A veteran award-winning Canadian oenophile, MacLean makes finding wine simple, fun, and exciting no matter your palette or level of expertise. The days of feeling intimidated when strolling aisles stocked with expensive Bordeaux are over. On the app, wines are grouped by type and cross-referenced with food pairings. Know what you're serving on the plate but remain uncertain of what to pour in the glass? Problem solved. But that's just the tip of the proverbial vineyard iceberg. Users can access and search tens of thousands of reviews; wines are also listed under categories such as Best Values and Top Rated. Looking for a recipe? Julia Childs would love this tool. If all that isn't enough, the truly irresistible function pertains to its ability to use your smartphone to scan a bottle's bar code and instantaneously pull up reviews. Amazing. And free. ●



DEVO Vegan Shoes

\$59.95 www.macbeth.com

Featuring the DEVO energy dome logo, these shiny silver loafers are identical to the ones your favorite spuds are wearing on their current tour. Available with red (classic DEVO) or bright blue (modern DEVO) accents, the shoes are made from 100% animal-free materials. Not that we're sure what that means, exactly, but hey, we're all for it.

Limited to 250 pairs, crazed DEVO fans have already purchased the entire production run, but watch for more opportunistic types to move them on eBay to make a quick buck. So you may still get a pair after all. —Jeff Dorgay



Shown: LTX 500 Projector



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The latest in Monster's arsenal of accessories is a must for smartphone and tablet users, especially those who are frequently on the go. Resembling a giant white Sharpie, the CleanTouch™ Pen deposits a film of alcohol- and ammonia-free cleaning fluid on your portable device's touchscreen that, when buffed clean with the attached pad, will look cleaner than new. Monster also claims that its Micro Shield technology keeps screens fingerprint-free for longer periods of time and protects you from germs, thanks to its anti-microbial formula.

The CleanTouch™ Pen also works wonders when cleaning the small display windows on hi-fi gear. I find it incredibly handy before a staging a photo shoot, since the pen makes preamplifiers and CD players look perfect. —**Jeff Dorgay**



Railway Maps of the World

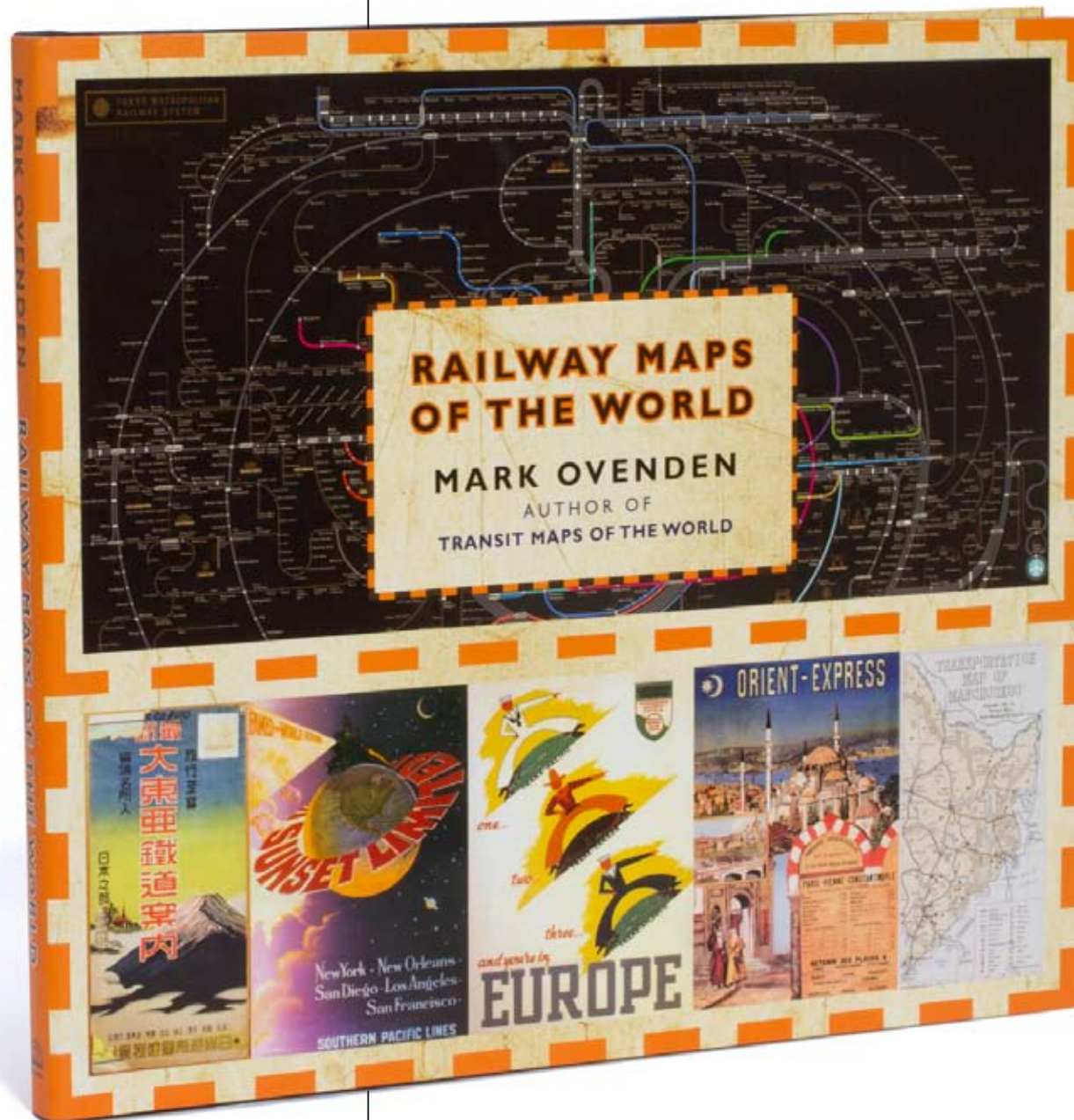
By Mark Ovenden

\$35 www.markovenden.com, book stores

Combining a historian's overview of railways, a graphic designer's eye for detail, a cartographer's appreciation for extraordinary maps, and a painter's love for brilliant color, Mark Ovenden's *Railway Maps of the World* is the latest in the author's series of incredible transit-based books. Brimming with a seemingly countless array of eye-popping images that comprise satellite photos, wall maps, city plans, advertisements, and promotional posters, the 144-page hardcover tome divides its primary subject in two halves.

Ovenden first takes readers on a chronological tour spanning nearly two decades (and involving the future). He then guides them via a globetrotting atlas of rail maps from more than one hundred countries, augmenting various pictures and cartograms with stats, facts, and anecdotes. E-books might be great, but they'll never provide what can be gleaned here. A highly recommended follow-up and companion to Ovenden's fascinating *Paris Underground: The Maps, Stations, and Design of the Metro*—an immersive, comprehensive visual and narrative chronicle of the French metropolis' extensive train system in which the London native addresses everything from construction and expansion to decisions behind signage font and appearance. Both books prove just how far behind the US has fallen in modern, rapid, smart, and environmentally friendly transportation.

—**Bob Gendron**



Estes Big Daddy Rocket

\$24.50 www.estesrockets.com



Few things bring back nerdy teen memories like Estes rockets. If you were a true hi-fi geek, chances are you were building rockets as well as amplifiers and/or speakers. And I know you tried to attach about 10 “E” engines to your Sting Ray bike to go *really* fast.

Maybe we should just forget about trying to get our kids to listen to vinyl and just launch some rockets! Nah. But this looks like a lot of fun, and you can even have Amazon deliver them right to your door. (The e-tailer does have some restrictions on what are essentially explosives being shipped to residential addresses.) When using Estes rockets, we suggest wearing eye protection and an Iron Maiden t-shirt.

—Jerold O'Brien



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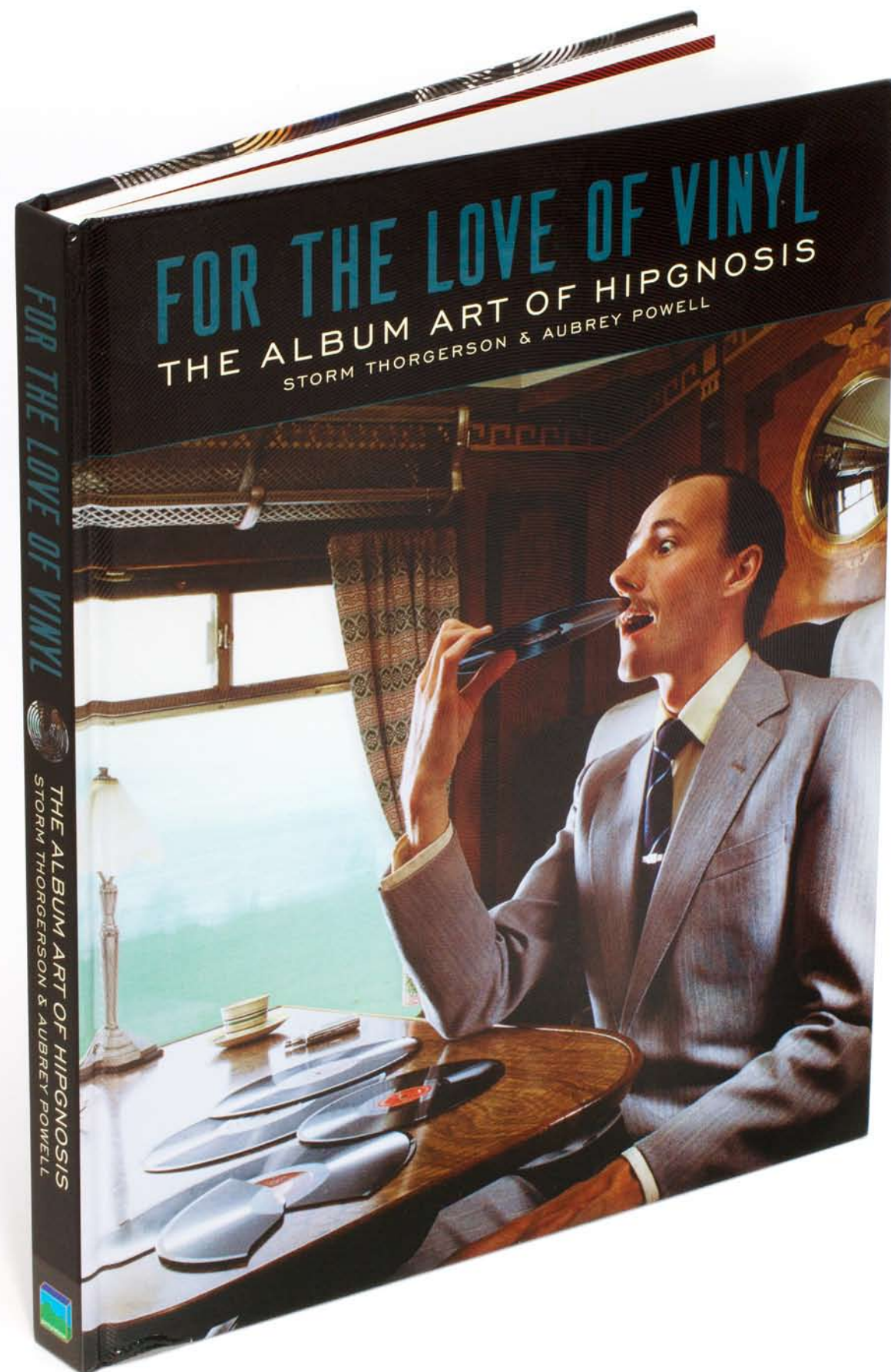
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For The Love of Vinyl: The Album Art of Hipgnosis

Storm Thorgerson and Aubrey Powell
\$45 www.amazon.com

The big, square canvas that makes up the album cover constitutes one of the main reasons many of us adore LPs. These days, most vinyl is sheathed in plain white sleeves. But in the 70s and 80s, when record company coffers were full, they spent a ton of money on making records. And part of that budget went to the production of record covers and sleeves. *For The Love of Vinyl* tells tales of how such magnificent pieces of art were created and adds interesting perspective on the musicians that made the songs that occasionally inspired the images.

In their heyday, most major record labels operated their own in-house art departments. But when it came to independent design firms, no one had higher-profile clients than London design firm Hipgnosis. Beginning with Storm Thorgerson and Aubrey Powell, Hipgnosis eventually became an entourage that ultimately got turned down to work for Mercedes because they did not have a “posh office.” Classic.

While their fortunes rested with rock royalty (Pink Floyd, Led Zeppelin, and

Genesis, just to name a few), the firm’s founders possessed a great sense of humor as well as an honest work ethic. Hipgnosis produced art for several fairly obscure bands—Remember the Edgar Broughton Band? Me neither—about which Thorgerson recalls: “The big boys’ generosity allowed us to work for those less fortunate and get simple, sexy design in return.”

Without a doubt, these guys were masters of their craft. And while they admit learning on the fly, they pushed creative boundaries in the darkroom and photo studio with multiple exposure and airbrush techniques that still evade the best Photoshop masters today. Like the records inside, it was all analog, baby.

For The Love of Vinyl is a fascinating document. Whether you just peruse the pictures or read the in-depth stories, it offers a treasure trove of musical trivia. In retrospect, it’s amazing at just how many legendary covers Hipgnosis produced, ranging from creations for AC/DC to Wishbone Ash—not to mention one of the best-selling records of all time, *Dark Side of the Moon*.

—Jeff Dorgay

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— Michael Fremer, *Stereophile* (January 2011)

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How much difference is there between AVID's two entry-level turntable models? Stay tuned to find out. We continue our newest trend of thoroughly comparing two adjacent models in a given manufacturer's range to see where advantages are located—and to discover exactly what you get for your dollar (or pound).

We rounded up identical cartridges, tonearms, and tonearm cables to stage an apples-to-apples test. And we even take it one step further, with comparisons to the AVID Volvere SP!

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The Audio Critic



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Swigging Champagne on a Beer Budget

Magnepan MMG Loudspeakers

By Jeff Dorgay



While we shy away from audiophile clichés, the Magnepan MMGs are truly one of the best values in hi-fi. These days, \$600 will buy you a pair of speakers that are more than likely built in China and resemble toys that belong in a Happy Meal rather than your living room. Not so the MMGs.

In the past, Magnepan's entry-level speaker was only available direct from the factory, keeping costs to the bone and dealer markup out of the picture, but now pairs will be on your dealer's showroom floor.



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Equally generous, Magnepan allows for a very liberal trade-in during the first year (full purchase price in most cases) should you move up the ladder to one of its larger speakers. Product manager Wendell Diller points out, “We actually don’t get many pairs back. They usually end up in a second system or passed on to a family member.”

What the MMGs offer—quite possibly better than any product (save the new Rega Brio-R integrated amplifier) we’ve reviewed with a budget price tag—is a serious helping of genuine high-end sound. Properly installed, and matched to room and amplifier with care, the MMGs give you the best swig of champagne on a beer budget that you’re likely to encounter in high-end audio.

Setup and Amplifier Matching

I initially used the MMGs in my small living room (11 x 17 feet, 8 foot ceiling) with excellent results. Their light weight and small size makes them easy to experiment with different listening positions. At only 1.25 inches thick, the 14.5 x 48-inch panels weigh about 15 pounds each, so you can move them back up against the walls when not doing critical listening and bring them back out to proper position for serious sessions. Yes, imaging suffers somewhat, but even against the walls, the MMGs can still be used for background music. They are available in off-white, grey, or black with natural, black, or oak trim. Back in black is the way I’d go.

Once the MMGs had about 200 hours of play, I broke up listening sessions into three distinct categories. The first utilized speakers with budget receivers that can be purchased used for under \$100. The

Pioneer SX-626, Marantz 2235, and a few other vintage 70s receivers I had on hand would not drive these speakers to any kind of realistic volume level without issue. At best, I kept going to Radio Shack for fuses; in one instance, I looked for my fire extinguisher. The Nakamichi TA-2A, featuring an amplifier section designed by Nelson Pass, proved the exception.

The next group featured the recently reviewed Croft Micro 35 preamplifier and a vintage Nakamichi PA-7 power amplifier. The latter is a solid-state design, again with Nelson Pass’ STASIS topology, and can be procured for about \$700 on the used market. A number of other great power amplifiers that can be had for under \$1,000 will also mate well with the MMGs, which respond as well to quality as quantity of watts. While only 50 watts per channel, the robustly constructed Rega Brio-R integrated did a splendid job driving these speakers. I did not have such luck with any of my lower-powered tube amps. This has always been my experience with Magnepan. Tubes yes; low power, no.

Finally, to probe what the MMGs were capable of delivering, I tried the Simaudio 600i and 750D CD player/DAC. The combination is 20 times the cost of the MMGs yet truly showed what the little speakers could do given superior source components. If you have electronics at this level and always wanted to sample the Magnepan sound, the MMGs will make for a good show; they certainly have enough resolution.

In my smaller room, the speakers ended up about six feet apart with very slight toe-in, and located about three feet from the rear wall for the best sound. *(continued)*



“We actually don’t get many pairs back. They usually end up in a second system or passed on to a family member.”



If you are working with a room this size and can accommodate them, add a pair of 2 x 4 foot GLK 242 panels about two feet in front of the speakers. They absorb the first reflection from the sidewall and help expand the left-to-right stereo image beyond the speaker boundaries.

Room gain was my friend, offering slightly more bass in the smaller room. Still, I preferred the MMGs in my main listening room (16 x 24 feet) on the long wall. This kept the speakers well away from sidewall boundaries. The small amount of lower bass I lost in transition was well worth the expanded stereo image.

Prepare to Settle In

Foghat's "Take It or Leave It," from Mobile Fidelity's edition of *Fool for the City*, painted a wide aural canvas. The rock classic spread out well beyond the speaker boundaries and revealed solid echo traits. Because they have enough mid-bass energy, the MMGs do a surprisingly good job with this type of music—provided there is enough power and you keep the volume reasonable. Another great example of the wide-stereo effect came courtesy of Chicago's "Prelude to Aire" from *Chicago VIII*. Most percussive elements were again floating well beyond the speaker boundaries and possessed substantial depth. I also highly recommend Explosions in the Sky's recent *Take Care, Take Care, Take Care*. (continued)

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Its ethereal soundscapes are full of minute details and reverberated guitars that will bounce all over your listening room.

The MMGs really shine on music that has a slightly limited dynamic scale. Queue up your favorite minimally accompanied vocalist and hear the MMGs strut their stuff. The Bad Plus' "Nirvana" (from *For All I Care*) had an ideal balance of airy vocals and instrumental richness, with a slight touch of compression—a *good* thing in this case since it didn't push the speakers beyond their capabilities. "Long Distance Runaround" from said album proved equally enjoyable, with great plucky acoustic bass riffs that played to the major strength of all Magnepan speakers: the ability to resolve mid-bass texture. Vocalist Wendy Lewis' voice hung between the speakers as the piano remained off to the right, with excellent decay. By not asking the MMGs to go terribly deep or play incredibly loud, I fooled a number of non-audiophile listeners that thought we were auditioning more expensive speakers. Of course, music lovers locked into traditional audiophile female vocal fare will not believe their ears, either. The MMGs amaze in the manner in which they disappear.

Switching to Genesis' *Lamb Lies Down on Broadway* quickly revealed the shortcomings of the MMGs. When the first big synth bass riff kicks in on the title track, it simply wasn't there. Whether you are listening to Pink Floyd or Eminem, you aren't going to get deep bass. But the bass that you do get is very high quality.

And that's what makes the MMGs the most musically involving speakers I've heard for the money. To wit: Their performance with the Beastie Boys' *Hot Sauce Committee Part Two*, on which they magnified many cool tidbits buried in the mix.

All types of panel speakers have been justifiably accused of providing a "one person" sweet spot. The MMGs are guilty as charged. However, the real limitation is that the sweet spot is more restricted in the vertical axis than in the horizontal. Much of this is due to the fact that the MMGs don't have the sheer panel area of larger Magnepan models. I've experienced the same effect with smaller speakers from MartinLogan, so this is not endemic to Magnepan. But again, keeping the MMGs within their comfort zone provides stellar results.

Yes, your favorite box speaker may offer better off-axis performance, but it will not give you the gigantic soundstage and natural midrange offered by the MMG when you sit up straight in your listening chair. It's a trade-off, but one I'd happily make for this level of resolution—and certainly, price. And the MMGs' resolution impressed me the most. While it's unlikely they would ever be used in this category, the speakers easily resolved differences between the \$6,000 Simaudio i-7, \$8,000 600i, and \$12,000 700i integrated amplifiers during last issue's comparison test—



an impressive feat for any speakers, much less a \$600 pair.

An Auspicious Start to Any High-End Audio Journey

If you crave a high-quality music system on a tight budget, the anchor is no further away than Magnepan's Web site. Played within their limits, the MMGs provide a rich musical experience that will hook you in your quest for better sound—just as the company's products have done for many other audio enthusiasts.

With only minor limitations, the MMGs communicate musical fundamentals like nothing else in their price category. The only downside? They require careful attention during setup to sound their best, and their high resolution will reveal shortcomings in the rest of your system. However, on many levels, that's what high-end sound is about. And the rewards far outweigh the minimal effort required to get the MMGs sounding their best. To put it another way: The MMGs deliver the goods better than any other speaker I've experienced at this price. ●

Magnepan MMGs
MSRP: \$599

MANUFACTURER
www.magnepan.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source Rega P9, Denon DL-103R, Avid Pulsare phonostage

Digital Source Simaudio Moon 750D

Amplification Simaudio Moon 600i

Cable Audioquest Columbia

DAC Pack

Arcam rDAC

By Paul Rigby

The concept behind a DAC is simple. It follows the same logic related to separating the pre and power stages of an amplifier to improve the latter's overall sound quality. Isolating a DAC from its sister CD transport and connecting the two via a single cable should, in theory, enable each piece to work at its best as independent units. Such an arrangement eliminates the need of worrying about single-box downsides like electrical cross contamination and other associated distortions.

The technique also yields benefits in that a DAC can serve as a useful upgrade to a trusted CD player. In this setup, the user retains the original CD chassis, utilizes the transport, and plugs in the new DAC, effectively overriding the built-in DAC. In addition, a DAC can also plug into your computer, allowing you to take your PC as a serious digital source—possibly for the very first time. Great multi-taskers, DACs can enhance your audio-visual experience as well. Just attach a DAC to your DVD player or even a set-top box.



Arcam's new rDAC is one such multi-purpose unit that, in this particular case, is the result of a unique partnership—and one in which a high-quality technological pedigree is instilled within.

"We've always had a strong partnership with dCS. Ten or 12 years ago, we built an integrated CD player with dCS, using the company's Ring DAC technology, blown onto a single chip. We talked to them again about an USB-sourced DAC that dCS had developed. As a result, the rDAC has an asynchronous USB input which allows us to take control of the timing of the USB output of any PC device."

So says Arcam Senior Engineer Andy Moore, who was tasked to tackle the horror source that is your basic computer. The problem is, your average PC system isn't optimized for actual digital audio transfer.

"The PC tends to render audio over to the USB input," confirms Moore, "goes off and does something else, realizes that the memory buffer is starting to run low, and then chucks another load of audio at the USB output—which results in all manner of jitter and timing errors. An asynchronous DAC takes control of it. Like a metronome, the asynchronous DAC says, 'Give me data: now...now...now...now...' You're retiming the output of the PC, thus reducing the jitter errors to a factor of 50 to 100. The goal is to clean the data up before you turn the ones and zeroes into audio."

Coaxial and optical inputs are also included on the rDAC, but the company recommends that, while fine for CD players and other external fittings, you do not plug your PC into the optical port, as doing so will trigger the return to audio chaos.



Internally, the rDAC features a Wolfson WMA741, multiple staged regulation to provide a clean power supply, and a tidy layout for reduced cross-board interference.

Internally, the rDAC features a Wolfson WMA741 (the same as the Arcam's top-of-the-line CD player), multiple staged regulation to provide a clean power supply, and a tidy layout for reduced cross-board interference. The front of the small cast-aluminium and largely inert chassis—spanning just 6.3 x 4 x 1.6 inches and weighing only 1.5 pounds—features a row of source lights: USB, Optical, Coax, and Wireless (not actually available on this particular model). A rubberized, non-slip neoprene plate forms the chassis floor and acts as a deadening facility, reducing microphony.

The power supply, a “mere” wall-wart, has a “noise-rejection” supply, designed to reduce distortion. At first glance, this aspect could have been seen to be an obvious weakness to the overall design. But Moore is both reassuring and slightly dismissive. “As it is, it wouldn’t have improved sound quality with the supply pushed back in the chassis and hooked up to a top quality power cable.”

Lend An Ear

My tests included a range of WAV lossless files ripped using the audiophile-friendly Exact Audio Copy software (www.exactaudiocopy.de). I listened via a Dual Core PC, running Windows Vista, with a trusted pair of Boss MA-12 active speakers. I inserted the rDAC between the MA-12s and the PC, with a USB plugged into the rDAC and the PC.

Playing Steve Jansen & Richard Barbieri’s “Ringing the Bell Backwards” from *Stone To Flesh* via the Arcam resulted in a dramatic widening of frequency bandwidth. Featured synthesizers, especially those with string emulations, came into true focus while the bass exhibited a newly rounded personality with accompanying power. The soundstage was wider and higher, augmented by a greater degree of instrumental separation that allowed the ear to concentrate on the detail rendered by each instrument.

When auditioning Carol Kidd’s “A Nightingale Sang In
(continued)

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Berkeley Square" from *Dreamsville*, the PC's midrange sans the rDAC was positively one-dimensional, claustrophobic, and restricted. Turning to the rDAC afforded the vocal performances a more emotional presentation, as acoustic guitar solos became more precise and incisive; cymbal-induced treble traits were now light as a feather. Moreover, the bass had room to move, allowing space to act as a melodic foundation.

Moving to my reference hi-fi and hooking up the well-received budget Cambridge Azur 650C CD player via the coaxial socket made immediately evident the Arcam's fight against distortion. Although the Azur is a great value performer, the rDAC removed more distortion from the chain, resulting in a relaxed presentation that was easier on the ear—even on overly peak-limited CDs such as the Sugababes' R&B-oriented *Angels With Dirty Faces*. Such greater degrees of focus allowed the performances additional chances to showcase their mettle. Bass sounded more natural, and upper mid and treble frequencies proved foot-tappingly musical.

Again and again, the rDAC found the heart and soul of jazz, as on the disc version of the Kidd album. Previously, pianos sounded relatively lifeless. Now, they skipped along like a smooth tap dancer. In addition, acoustic guitar solos had a real metallic edge and vocals served as a reminder that the human voice is made up of multiple parts and tones.

The More the Merrier

As a computer-related DAC, the Arcam box is a no-brainer. Utilizing dCS technology, it transforms USB-sourced data into a quality signal, providing computer users with a whole new sonic perspective. The rDAC also proves worthy in a hi-fi system. Hell, this little box would do wonders for your satellite box and DVD player, too. At this price, it's a steal. The only question you need to ask is: "How many should I buy?" ●



REVIEW

Arcam rDAC
\$479, €343

MANUFACTURER
www.arcam.co.uk

PERIPHERALS

Digital Source
Cambridge Azure 650C

Preamplifier
Aesthetix Calypso

Power
Icon MB845 Monoblocks

Speakers
Boss MA-12
Quad ESL-57
(Slightly Modified)

Cables
Avid SCT, Avid ASC

Incredible Balance

The Klipsch Heresy III Loudspeaker

By Jeff Dorgay

While the original design of the Magnepan MMGs (reviewed on p.136) harkens back to 1969, Klipsch goes back even further, to 1946, when it took a unique path for high-performance speaker design: the loaded horn. Beginning with the legendary Klipschorn—inspired by large horn speakers used in theaters—Klipsch utilized horn-loaded compression drivers for the midrange and tweeters, along with a folded horn for the woofer.

Originally introduced in 1957 to be used as a third channel for the era's three-channel recordings, the speaker was initially deemed "heresy" by critics that viewed it as a violation of designer Paul Klipsch's fully horn-loaded design. Legend has it that such reactions led to the speaker's name.



Unlike the gigantic Klipschorn, the Heresy III uses a more traditional direct-radiating 12-inch woofer and a much more compact box. At only 24 inches tall, 15 inches wide, and 13 inches deep, the Heresy III packs a wallop. It's intended to be placed close to the rear wall, as to not intrude on your listening space.

Note: When I began this review, the Heresy IIIs were \$749 each, just falling within the cost parameters of our all-budget issue. But now that every speaker is custom produced to order in Cherry, Walnut, or Black Ash veneer (all requiring a 3-4 week waiting period), the price has risen to \$799 each. So, yes, we are making a slight exception. But where else can you get a custom-produced, hand-built, US-made pair of speakers for such dough? By such criteria alone, the Heresy III qualifies as one of the best values in speakers today.

Rocking in Five Minutes

The Heresy IIIs are ready to roll the minute you unpack them. After investigating numerous placement options, I advise sticking with the factory's suggestion of placing the speakers close to the rear wall (a foot or less is great). However, I felt that corner loading was a bit much, as it made for whumpy bass. The spec sheet claims a frequency response of +/-3db from 58Hz-20kHz, yet a cursory listen to test tones revealed solid bass output between 45 and 50Hz. Thanks to a 99db sensitivity rating, you can use the Heresys with any amplifier.

Just like I did with all of the other speakers reviewed in this budget issue, I started my listening with a stack of 70s receivers. The Heresy IIIs proved an amazing match with them all, offering much better sound than you would expect from such minimal investment. The best pairing came with a mint NAD 3020A that just received a full refurbishment at NAD.



How apt: Many an audiophile started their journey with the 3020A. Its high-current design offered a level of resolution that the other receivers couldn't match, and yet it can be obtained for under \$200.

Audiophiles might not expect a pair of box speakers placed low and close to the wall to offer up any kind of substantial imaging, but the Heresy IIIs defy convention. The soundstage extended well beyond the speaker boundaries, while a generous helping of vertical dispersion added to the experience.

Mmmmm...Tubes

While the Heresy IIIs use a horn midrange and tweeter, they don't have the "honk" that accompanies most horn-loaded speakers. The mids and high ends are smooth, with drivers blending in a seamless, coherent manner. They will make your favorite vintage solid-state receiver sound much better than you ever thought it could while your choice low-powered tube amplifier (current or vintage) will redefine budget audio fun.

In the end, my choices centered on the Woo Audio WA6 and the Conrad Johnson MV 50A1 recently rebuilt at the CJ factory. The SET amplifier yielded a slightly larger three-dimensional presentation, but the CJ had both more extension at the frequency extremes and a more palpable midrange. Both models drove the Heresy IIIs louder than I needed. Time spent with the Dynaco Stereo 70 and PAS 3 preamplifier also made for highly enjoyable encounters.

Dynamics Make the Difference

The Heresy IIIs offer up a very natural sound. Still, the one aspect that's usually missing from a low-budget system is the ability to play loud *and* clean. As the

polar opposites of the Magnepan MMGs—which possess a seamless midrange presentation but can't really rock—the Heresy IIIs give up a little bit of coherence yet have the capacity to play heavy duty rock and roll at reasonable levels. I couldn't even think about spinning SunnO))) at anything above a whisper on the Magnepan. And the small woofers in the otherwise excellent Paradigm Millenia Ones can't move enough air to get the job done. But on the Heresy IIIs, I wasn't three minutes into "Etna" and my neighbors were already throwing things over the fence. Next time, I better close the door.

Subsequent metal explorations left me with the same conclusion: These speakers can really rock without experiencing any of the compression that occurs with a less-efficient speaker that's mated to a modest power amplifier. Playing 99db speakers with a 40-watt-per-channel tube amplifier (and its warm distortion characteristics) is like having 1000 watts per channel on tap for 89db speakers. Because the Heresy IIIs play so loud and cleanly, they actually pose a slight threat to your hearing. After an hour of Ozzy and Dio classics, I noticed a slight buzz in my ears. So proceed with caution if you buy a pair.

Just as a high-powered amplifier can make moderately efficient speakers light up, the same holds for high-efficiency speakers. They take the burden away from your amplifier and no matter what music you enjoy, deliver an ease that you just can't get from a pair of mini monitors. Another side benefit? The Heresy IIIs can play at low volume levels and retain their resolution. Even if you aren't a metalhead, you'll be surprised at how lifelike acoustic and vocal records sound, even at soft volumes. *(continued)*

REVIEW

Plus, the Heresy IIIs are as linear as they are dynamic. When listening to complex music, the speakers did not lose their poise; they transmitted fine details at every volume level.

A Solid Choice

The Klipsch Heresy IIIs constitute a consummate blend of vintage and modern sound in a package that's easy to drive and effortless to integrate into your listening room. No matter where you are on your hi-fi journey, these speakers provide a constantly engaging and truly thrilling musical experience. And, considering they are built with care by one of hi-fi's true pioneers, you can't go wrong.

After living with the Heresy IIIs for several months and listening to a wide range of music, I found no blatant shortcomings—especially considering the price. Sure, I'd love to see them made out of solid wood like they were in the 50s, and some better binding posts would be nice. But these accoutrements would add to the cost and don't affect the sound.

One of the secrets to any good loudspeaker at any price is its ability to convey natural reproduction of the critical mid frequencies. The Heresy IIIs handle this job better than most competitors, and by adding huge dynamics at well under \$2,000/pair, they're an unqualified success. I know this much: I need a pair. ●

Klipsch Heresy III
\$1,598 per pair, any finish

MANUFACTURER <http://www.klipsch.com/na-en/products/heresy-iii-overview/>

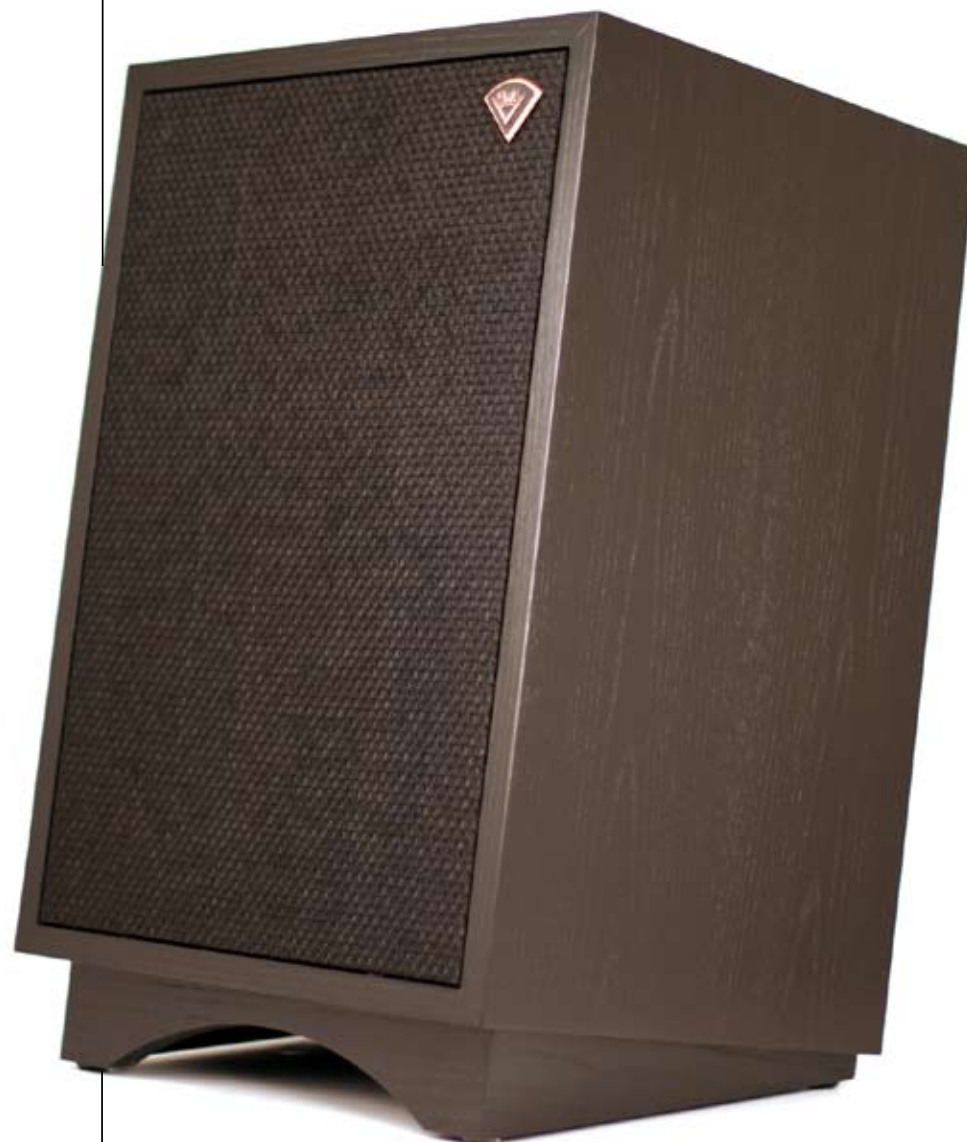
PERIPHERALS

Analog Source Rega P3-24 w/Rega Exact 2 cartridge

Digital Source Simaudio Moon 750D, Sooloos Music Server

Amplification Woo Audio WA6, Rega Brio R

Cable Audioquest Rocket and Columbia



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Redefining the Genre

Rega Brio-R Integrated Amplifier

By Jeff Dorgay

Too bad the folks at Rega aren't in charge of balancing the trade deficit. While a substantial amount of modestly priced hi-fi is now produced in China, Rega continues to make solid designs built by hand by skilled craftspeople in its UK factory. That the company produces a 50wpc integrated amplifier with an excellent phonostage is quite admirable; that the firm does it at this level without going to the Far East is nothing less than incredible. Rega's main man, Roy Gandy, is fond of saying that Rega likes to build products that offer top performance in their respective class. But this time, Rega hit the ball way out of the park.



Make sure to use both hands when unpacking the Brio-*R*. The compact box is fairly heavy, weighing in at about 20 pounds. Peeking inside shows that Rega didn't allow a square millimeter of space to go to waste. The Brio-*R* features the same enclosure as the Rega DAC we reviewed earlier this year, the shared approach keeping costs low and quality high. No detail is left to chance; the remote-control circuitry is even given its own separate power supply to ensure signal purity. Poking around inside reveals one pair of output transistors per channel, high-quality film caps, and a very short signal path.

Small Yet Strong

Despite its smaller box, the new Brio packs a bigger wallop than its predecessor. And there's never been a more perfect example of specs not telling the whole story. While the previous Brio 3 is rated at 49 watts per channel and the new model at only 50 watts per channel (73 watts per channel into 4 ohms), Rega claims the new output stage can reasonably drive outputs "as low as 1.7 ohms."

Indeed, while the last Brio struggled with low-impedance speakers, the Brio-*R* effortlessly sailed through. Driving a pair of Magnepans usually translates into the kiss of death for most small integrated amplifiers (and a few larger ones, as well), but the Brio-*R* did a very respectable job of powering the notoriously power-hungry MMGs reviewed in this issue. It's also worth noting that my Cambridge



Audio 740C (rated at 100 watts per channel) was not up to this task. Moreover, the Rega had no problems driving my vintage MartinLogan Aeries. A reasonably priced integrated that can tackle Magnepans and MartinLogans without problem? High marks are in order.

Like the prior Brio, the Brio-*R* features an onboard MM phonostage, also improved in sound quality and sensitivity. In the past, users that didn't utilize a Rega phono cartridge complained about a lack of gain in the phonostage, an issue that required serious twisting of the volume control to achieve reasonable listening levels. With a sensitivity of 2.1mv, the Brio-*R* had no troubles reaching full volume at the 12:00 level when outfitted with a Sumiko Blackbird cartridge, which boasts an output of 2.5mv. Thanks to its quietness, I was even able to use a Grado Master1, which has an output of only .5mv (47k loading). Doing so necessitated setting the volume at almost 2:00 for the maximum level, but the Brio-*R* remained up to the task.

Setup and Controls

The Brio-*R* will have you listening to music in a jiff. The spartan front panel shares the same design brief as the Rega DAC, with a power button on the left, volume control on the right, and a button that requires a touch to toggle between inputs. The mute control is only accessed via the remote, which also allows for volume level and input switching. And the Brio-*R* can only be turned on and off from the front panel.

(continued)



Around back, five inputs and a fixed level output made for an excellent match with my recently restored Nakamichi 550 cassette deck, which incidentally is almost the same size as the Brio-R. For the tapeheads, the output has a level of 210mv.

The only caveat? Input one is the phono input and not marked as such. Plugging in a line-level source here will cause a hateful noise at best and blown tweeter at worst, so proceed with caution. If you're not a vinyl enthusiast, get a pair of Cardas RCA caps, if for no other reason than to prevent a mishap. Rega turntables do not have ground wires. But if you're using a 'table that has one, the ground screw is underneath the amplifier's rear face.

The Brio-R uses a standard IEC AC socket, so those that enjoy swapping power cords can geek out all they want. However, the RCA jacks and speaker binding posts are so close together that some cables will not be

compatible. And while the average consumer that purchases a Brio-R may not step too far into the world of premium cables, the amplifier is good enough to warrant doing so. Given the restricted space, speaker cables with spades are almost out of the question; grab bananas or banana adaptors.

Sounds Like Separates

Resolution often sets separate components apart from integrated amplifiers. The Brio-R has an overall clarity that I have never experienced at this price—and I've heard my share of much more expensive pieces that struggle to sound this good. After all, only a handful of sub-\$3k amplifiers provide true high-end sound; the Brio-R belongs at the top of that short list. It truly sounds like separate components.

At the beginning of John Mellencamp's "Sweet Evening Breeze" from *Human Wheels*,

a Hammond organ faintly enters from the far back of the soundstage, barely registering a whisper. Other inexpensive integrations I've sampled (except for the PrimaLuna ProLogue1) don't resolve this. Or, what does come through is flat and on the same plane as the rest of the music—a blurry rendition. Oingo Boingo's "Nothing Bad Ever Happens" from *Good For Your Soul* has similar textures, with multiple layers of guitars and keyboards that, via substandard gear, blend together and smear. By yielding genuine dimensionality, the Brio-R is a budget component that you can listen to for hours on end, fully engaged in the presentation.

The amp claims a fair share of headroom as well. Whether listening to KISS, with or without a symphony orchestra, the Rega didn't run out of steam until played at very high volumes. Switching to the 99db sensitivity Klipsch Heresy IIIs (also reviewed this issue)

resulted in a completely different situation. This combination achieved near rave-level SPLs with Nine Inch Nails' *The Downward Spiral*. The opening drumbeats to "Big Man With a Gun" were big and powerful, yet the little Rega didn't seem to break a sweat.

Your favorite speaker with a sensitivity rating of between 87–91db should prove a more than acceptable match for the Brio-R's power amplifier section.

Vinyl Adventure

The phonostage in the Brio-R should prove a perfect match for anything in the \$100–\$600 range and when used with the Rega RP1 and its Performance Pack, an upgrade that includes the Bias 2 MM cartridge. The latter features a tonal balance slightly tipped toward the warm side of neutral, helping less-than-stellar LP pressings sound their best.

For example, a friend that brought over budget treasures

purchased for fewer than \$3/each couldn't believe the performance wrought by the RP1/Brio-R combination. Again, the Brio-R's phonostage provided excellent resolution and a very smooth upper register. And while the RP1/Bias combination turned in a great show, switching to the P3-24 and Blackbird offered a substantial helping of "what the analog fuss is all about."

Good Things Do Come in Small Packages

The Rega Brio-R sets the benchmark for an \$1000 integrated amplifier and then some. While it's easy for those that regularly hear the world's best (and often most expensive) gear to get excited about great sound, it's truly thrilling to hear this level of sound quality from an amplifier with an \$895 price tag. Music lovers on a budget no longer have to sacrifice quality. This one could make a crazed audiophile out of you where you least expect it. ●

The Rega Brio-R
MSRP: \$895

MANUFACTURER

www.soundorg.com (US)
www.rega.co.uk (UK)

PERIPHERALS

Digital Source Simaudio 750D, Cambridge 650BD

Analog Source Rega RP1 w/Bias 2, Rega P3-24 w/Sumiko Blackbird

Speakers Magnepan MMG, Klipsch Heresy III, Vienna Acoustics Hayden Grand, Spica TC 50

Cable Audioquest Columbia

Power IsoTek EVO3 Sirius

True to Its Name?

Pro-Ject Essential Turntable

By Paul Rigby

Pick up a TV guide these days in the UK, look in the back, and you'll almost assuredly be hit by advertisements for USB-outfitted "miracle turntables" that promise to transfer your vinyl to data for iPod, car, or computer use. Plus, you get an independent platform to play treasured wax. Oy vey. These toys give vinyl a bad name by arousing the suspicion that vinyl really is a dinosaur and all these weird types that bang on about sacred grooves must be in the pay of the hi-fi industry. And yet, the jump from poorly constructed rubbish to audiophile fare isn't far. Witness the \$250 Pro-Ject Essential, the cheapest audiophile deck on the market.





Structurally, the plinth is constructed of MDF with semi-isolating rubber feet. The platter is also created from MDF and sits on a reasonably performing, toughly built bearing. And the single tube-pressed unipivot-to-earm is superior to the glued-on headshell type. For such a low-cost turntable, manufacturing has been closely monitored.

Be careful during setup, however. Approach the 'table gently to avoid pulling on the delicate signal leads connected to the unipivot housing. In order to provide a low center of gravity (which should help with LPs suffering from a touch of warping), the counterweight is low slung. An Ortofon OM 3E cartridge completes the main portion of the deck; not surprisingly, an Ortofon

2M Red reportedly transforms the Essential's performance. It is also possible to swap another OM stylus to upgrade the cartridge at minimal cost; the bodies are identical.

Laurence Armstrong, managing director of Henley Designs, which acts as the UK distributor for Pro-Ject and design partner for the Essential, confirms that "Everything bar the belt, which is bought in, has been machined in the Pro-Ject factory, even the screws that hold it together. The deck has a far eastern economy of scale with European build quality." In the US, John Paul Lizars, from Sumiko Audio, has jumped on the Essential's bandwagon. By the time you read this, the 'table will be available there.

A Curate's Egg

After unpacking, all you have to do is attach the belt, add the anti-skate weight and the arm weight, place the mat on the deck, plug in everything, and you're away. You'll be finished in 15 minutes. The Essential also comes with a dustcover, which I left off to improve overall sound quality during tests.

Because of the low cost, the Essential is a curate's egg: Design shortcuts yielded a few foibles. First, the belt sits on the outside of the platter and is a bugger to fit. You need full 3D handling to stretch the belt over each pulley and the outer platter. Also, accidental knocks can twang the belt off the platter. Not vastly important, but potentially irritating. Second, the unipivot

arm—by its very nature and because of its inherent design—requires gentle handling. If you're too rough, it will leap out of its housing. Not a big deal during use and again, at most, irritating.

My third criticism is more a window of opportunity than a drawback. The platter mat should, at your earliest convenience, be consigned to the dustbin and replaced. Better feet isolation should also be considered, as should disposing of the lid and associated hinges to reduce distortion. Suffice it to say that the Essential is a tweaker's dream and will reward low-cost albeit ingenious sonic improvements. Armstrong agrees.

"We've found that swapping the platter mat for a leather mat increases the platter mass, im-

proving speed stability," he says. "Squash balls under the feet on a solid shelf works well as does a trampoline effect under the deck to create a suspended sub-chassis—unipivots really like that."

An Easy Listen

What you certainly don't get with the Essential is any great bass—although this may have more to do with the low-cost cartridge. When playing the Human League's early electronica masterpiece "Being Boiled" from *Travelogue*, bass control was minimal and bass weight non-existent. But, you do get detail. Pro-Ject certainly made the best trade-off here. Indeed, details, partly the result of using a unipivot arm, are available in spades; vocals oozed personality.

Midrange and treble fared best via organic instruments. Tripping through Neil Young's *On The Beach*, cymbals had a surprising amount of lightness and fragility while an acoustic guitar brimmed with texture and a vivid energy that kept the ear involved. What little bass existed tended to live in the crossover between lower midrange and upper bass frequencies. On more rocking tracks, bass guitar possessed a tremendous grip (considering the unit's price), while lead electric guitar also tracked well. All the instruments were easily delineated, and instrumental separation proved remarkable given the 'table's price point.

Spinning "Lush Life" from John Coltrane And Johnny Hartman's self-titled album, the basic *(continued)*

REVIEW



Ortofon cartridge impressively tackled the rigors of the saxophone and notably maintained control of potentially chaotic frequencies all the while portraying the instrument's requisite energy. Imaging was only decent, yet the soundstage possessed greater body and depth than that of some \$500 CD players.

When playing Stevie Wonder's "I'd Cry" from the original Tamla LP *I Was Made To Love Her*, I couldn't believe how much music came forward. Any ingrained pops and clicks were placed in the background, speaking volumes about the deck's information retrieval—more expensive budget turntables could learn from it.

A Real Steal

Whether you're looking to get back into vinyl or are approaching the medium for the first time and have a restricted budget, the Pro-Ject Essential is highly recommended. For the price, the turntable screams value: It boasts all of the required basic features and, more importantly, provides an arresting and involving playback—a solid foundation for a top-quality budget hi-fi system. ●

Pro-Ject Essential
€172 (Black)
€195 (Various colours)
\$299 US, both finishes

MANUFACTURER

www.henleydesigns.co.uk
www.sumikoaudio.net

PERIPHERALS

Preamplifier

Aesthetix Calypso

Phono

Icon PS

Power

Icon MB845 Monoblocks

Speakers

Quad ESL-57 (Slightly Modified)

Cables

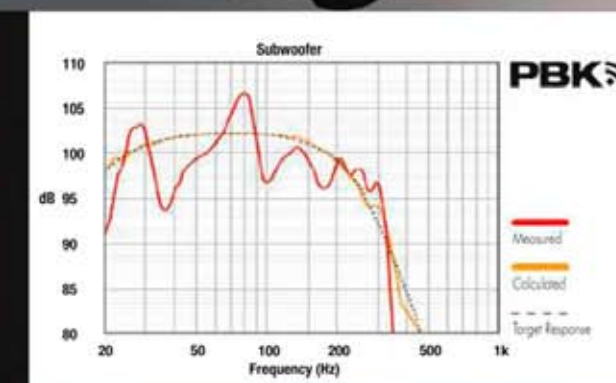
Avid SCT, Avid ASC

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Rock You Like a Hurricane

Vienna Acoustics Haydn Grand Symphony Loudspeaker

By Jeff Dorgay

Known for naming its speakers after famous German composers, Vienna's latest model should be rechristened the Schenker or the Jabs—as they were the two German guitarists whose music I blasted at the beginning of the review process. Small speakers often struggle to play rock music, so, to gauge potential, the Scorpions' *Blackout* and *Love at First Sting* were first on my agenda. Powered by the mighty McIntosh MC1.2kw monoblocks and capable of delivering 1200 watts each, what better way to start a listening session?

Pondering KISS' *Alive!* as my next choice, I instead stayed with Schenker, this time Michael Schenker from UFO, while turning the volume control perilously higher for a majority of *Lights Out*, the band's powerful double live set. As I completely ignored the 180-watt maximum power rating on the spec sheet, the thought of reaching for my checkbook to buy the Vienna review samples crossed my mind. But not for the usual reasons; the meters on the MC1.2kws were moving way up the scale. You probably won't hook your Haydns up to a pair of 1200-watt behemoths, but if you do, rest assured that their robust construction is up to snuff.

High Tech, Easy Setup

These elegant \$1,800 mini-monitors have a small footprint. They are only 6.85 inches wide, 10.4 inches deep, and just over 14 inches tall. With the appropriate stands, perfect for a small-to-medium-size room. My review pair arrived in an optional piano white finish that was simply beautiful. No part of these understated speakers is done by chance. Featuring a 6-inch woofer made from the company's clear X3P material and latest-generation 1-inch soft dome tweeter, the Haydn also takes advantage of enhanced technology gleaned from Vienna's top-of-the-line speakers.

The Haydn's unique wedge bass port places the tweeter directly in the front of the angled port. Successfully eliminating port noise, which can be a problem with small monitors featuring a high excursion woofer, the Haydn delivers the goods when called upon to reproduce lower bass frequencies. Kraftwerk's "Boing Boom Tschak" is an excellent test for such a task. Many small, ported speakers make a muffled groan when asked to handle

the deep bass on this record, but the Haydns sailed through without issue. The MC1.2kws were reading about 600 watts on the power output meters before the woofers hit their stops—indicating an end to the madness.

Bass fun aside, paying careful attention to speaker rake is key to extracting the maximum performance from the Haydns. Tilting them back slightly, about a degree at a time, reveals a spot where they just disappear from the listening position. As a result, the soundstage dramatically increases. If you have DualLevelPro on your iPhone, you can quickly get the speakers within a half-degree of one another. You'll know when you have it right: the stereo image will extend well beyond the speaker boundaries. If it's not perfect, the image just hovers between the speakers. Take 30 minutes, and grab a friend to help, and you will be in heaven.

After getting read on the speakers, I replaced the MC1.2kws with the Conrad Johnson MV-50C1. This EL-34 powered amplifier produces 45 watts per channel, more than enough for all but the most ambitious listening. It proved an excellent match for the Haydns' 89dB sensitivity. Similarly, the Rega Brio-R (also reviewed in this issue) made for an excellent solid-state choice and logged a fair amount of listening time as well.

Fatigue Free

While I preferred the scrumptious match of the CJ amp with the Haydns—I really enjoy the hyperrealism of listening nearfield with a pair of high-performance monitors driven by a great vacuum tube amplifier—the Haydns' smooth albeit resolving soft dome tweeter was never harsh. So those with solid-state amplification need not fear. Audiophiles that love solo vocalists will be very pleased with these speakers. *(continued)*



No part of these understated speakers is done by chance. Featuring a 6-inch woofer made from the company's clear X3P material and latest-generation 1-inch soft dome tweeter, the Haydn also takes advantage of enhanced technology gleaned from Vienna's top-of-the-line speakers.

To wit, play Keren Ann's recent *101*. The breathy, expansive vocals will melt even the most diehard Patricia Barber fan and really show off the midrange clarity offered up by the Haydns.

When moving to electronica from Deadmaus, Kruder & Dorfmeister, and Tosca, the music underscored the small speakers' ability to produce a substantial amount of bass, even in my main listening room (16 x 24 feet). "*Bug Powder Dust*" from The K&D Sessions goes very deep. Yet the Haydns captured most of the fundamental tone, with a bit of sub-harmonics as well. The single 6-inch driver performed impressively, yielding solid bass reproduction and quite a bit of texture. Of all the speakers we auditioned for this issue, the Haydns were the only pair that went toe to toe with my Magenpan 1.6s in terms of upper bass detail—no small feat. I was consistently surprised at the amount of low-frequency oomph they mustered.

Great small monitor speakers also excel at pinpoint imaging, and the Haydns didn't shirk in this area, either. Listening to the soundtrack to the 1981 animated classic *Heavy Metal*, the main vocals of "All of You" hovered out in front of my face, with the guitars far behind the imaginary line between the speakers. Moreover, the spacey electronic effects were distinctly placed from left to right, without ever losing the bass line.

As much as I punished these speakers at the beginning of the review, they did an equally excellent job playing music at very low levels—a great example of their linearity. Should you happen to be an apartment dweller that lacks both space and the luxury to really wind up your system, these speakers can keep you very happy until you don't have neighbors behind your adjoining walls.

While I wouldn't generally pair 89dB speakers with an SET, the Haydns were so easy to drive, my 9-watt-per-channel Woo Audio amplifier proved a delicious partner. *(continued)*





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REVIEW

Vienna Acoustics Haydn Grand Symphony Edition

MSRP: \$1,850/pair
(standard finish)
\$2,000/pair
(piano white and rosewood)

MANUFACTURER

www.vienna-acoustics.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source Rega P9 turntable/
Sumiko Palo Santos cartridge

Digital Source Sooloos Control
15/dCS Paganini

Preamplifier McIntosh C500,
Croft Micro 25

Power Amplifier McIntosh MC1.2kw,
Conrad Johnson MV-50C1, Croft
Series 7, Rega Brio-R (integrated)

Cable Audioquest Columbia

Listening to Tomita's *Live at Linz, 1984–The Mind of the Universe* at low-level in the nearfield made me feel like I was sitting in a gigantic pair of headphones, with synthesizer effects sounding as if they were coming right from the middle of my head.

Please Please Me

If you have a modest-sized room and won't miss that last octave of bass, the Vienna Acoustics Haydns practically have no faults, especially at this price. There are a handful of small monitors that offer more bass and resolution, but they cost three-to-five times as much. Kept in the context of the components with which they will probably be paired, these speakers should be able to satisfy the fussiest of budget audiophiles. And, considering their small size, multiple finish options, and fact that they present a load that is easy to drive, the Haydns' versatility seems to know no bounds. ●





High-Performance Power Conditioning That Won't Break The Bank

IsoTek EVO 3 Sirius

By Jeff Dorgay

Clean power is one of the most essential parts to any hi-fi system's success. Many audiophiles claim that they already have clean power because they are either close to a generating facility, far away from it, or have dedicated lines; I've heard all the reasons. And I've also heard the most common argument—that a well-designed power supply in an audio component doesn't need additional help.

Unfortunately, if you subscribe to any of these beliefs, you are just plain wrong. I've had the opportunity to audition hundreds of components during the last six years and have yet to hear a single one that hasn't benefited from proper power-line conditioning. Ah, but there's a catch.



At \$995, the IsoTek EVO 3 Sirius is a great place to start tapping clean power. It won't break the bank, and as your system goes, you can add a second EVO 3 or one of IsoTek's larger units.

I've also had the chance to try countless power products and only found one that follows the Hippocratic oath of "doing no harm" to the signal. Often, it's easy to mistake a lowered noise floor for transient edges being shaved off, or tonality slightly altered, thus accentuating a particular frequency range and making the conditioned sound different—but not better—overall. It's no wonder that after a certain period of time, the system happens to sound better when plugged straight into the wall again, and the honeymoon is over.

But it doesn't have to be that way. A good power-conditioning product should remove distortion artifacts from the AC power line, lower the noise floor, and keep its collective hands off of instrument tonality. And that's precisely what the EVO 3 Sirius does. Following

a brief listen when visiting the US importer, The Sound Organisation, I asked for a review sample. And after a few weeks of listening with various combinations, I am highly pleased with the results.

The Dilemma

Power supply sections are some of the most obvious places where budget hi-fi components cut costs. If you lift the cover on your favorite megabucks amplifier, you will usually find a massive power transformer and banks of filter capacitors that help turn AC power into DC. But these components cost big money and large, high-quality capacitors can fetch hundreds of dollars—each. Ironically, due to their power supply limitations, least-expensive components often best respond to power conditioning. However, more often than not, a person with

a \$4,000 system isn't going to invest in a \$5,000 line conditioner as their next upgrade. (Actually, it wouldn't be a bad idea.)

At \$995, the IsoTek EVO 3 Sirius is a great place to start tapping clean power. It won't break the bank, and as your system goes, you can add a second EVO 3 or one of IsoTek's larger units. The company also carries a complete line of power cords, which provide additional gain. Yet the EVO 3 is where you want to begin. Sound Organisation president Steve Daniels encouraged me to try the power cords I had on hand and commented, "You'll see a marked improvement no matter what mains cable you use."

The EVO 3 uses a standard 15A IEC power cord, but IsoTek's products are also available for 220/240-volt applications with UK and EU plugs. The model reviewed

here offers six standard 110-volt outlets, all isolated from each other. Maximum current draw is rated at 10 amps, so the unit operates well with all but the largest power amplifiers.

Try This At Home, Kids

Most audiophiles like results that they can quantify and process. Here is an easy test to see if you need power conditioning (you do) and if said conditioning is actually doing anything (it should); the tools and methodology are inexpensive and simple. Procure a 50-foot extension cord and run it well away from your system into another room of your house, plugging one end into your system and the other into a common AC-powered hand drill.

First, listen to your favorite piece of music, preferably a selection with acoustic instruments and a fair amount of "air." Now, turn the drill

on and observe the effect that this has on your system's presentation. You should hear the soundstage compress a bit and a layer of haze materialize as a result of the noisy drill motor. Finally, repeat the process with everything (including the drill) plugged into the EVO 3. Problem solved.

The Lack of Sound

Eliminating noise from the line is the easy part, but the most critical aspects of power-line conditioning concern the preservation of dynamics and keeping complex tonality in check. Listening to a wide range of components, tube and solid state, it became obvious that the EVO 3 did no harm to the signal. Music sounded livelier when the components were plugged in to it rather than directly to the wall. *(continued)*

sound choices

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vpi

It's also worth noting that the EVO 3's effect was such that it passed muster with my non-audiophile friends. All detected the same enhancements and described them in relatively the same way. No, this isn't a mere tweak that you'll struggle to hear.

Jesse Sykes' *Oh, My Girl* provided a great workout for the EVO 3. The delicacy of Sykes' complex and somewhat gravelly voice is easy to dilute if the system is not up to speed, and with the EVO 3 removed from the system, her lead vocals (and accompanying twangy guitars) lost substantial dimensionality. While the EVO 3 worked incredibly well with the PrimaLuna Prologue Premium vacuum tube amplifier, it brought higher levels of musicality to the solid-state Emotiva combination (also reviewed in this issue) as well.

The biggest surprise occurred when plugging my dCS Paganini stack into the EVO 3, currently on a dedicated 15-amp line.

Immediately, the sound became "less digital." This characteristic was most apparent and dramatic during the playback of 128kb/sec Rhapsody files. Again, the overall presentation became more liquid and analogesque. Granted, a 128kb/sec bitstream will never sound like an LP. But with the EVO 3 in place, it was much more pleasant and far less grainy.

Plug One In

The IsoTek EVO 3 Sirius provided consistent results, regardless of the equipment used. It will lower the noise floor of your system, and improve dynamics and low-level resolution. Exactly what a power line conditioner is supposed to do. Here's one of the best upgrades you can make. Plus, knowing that you are plugged into clean power simplifies the other aspects associated with fine-tuning. Highly recommended. ●

REVIEW

IsoTek EVO 3 Sirius
MSRP: \$995 US, £399 UK

MANUFACTURER CONTACT

US: www.soundorg.com
UK: www.isoteksystems.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source Rega P9
w/Sumiko Palo Santos cartridge

Digital Source Denon 3910,
Simaudio 750D, Naim DAC, dCS
Paganini

Preamplifier McIntosh C500,
Emotiva USP-1

Power Amplifier Conrad Johnson
MV-50C1, Emotiva UVA-1, PrimaLuna
ProLogue Premium (integrated),
Simaudio 600i (integrated)

Speakers B&W 805D,
Magnepan 1.6, Klipsch Heresy III



REVIEW

Gemme Audio Tonic G5 Loudspeaker

By Jerold O'Brien

Tonic

The name of Gemme Audio's Tonic G5 loudspeaker is perfect. In jazz, the phrase "minor tonic" refers to the home chord containing a minor third along with a major sixth and seventh for compositions in a minor key. And seeing that the model is more modest than the Canadian company's Katana and TantoKarbon offerings—yet shares the same high-gloss black finish and cabinet construction—the compact speaker riffs on the musical concept of making the most out of minor scales.

Sharing technology from Gemme's highly successful Vflex line, the \$699 G5 sports a smaller 5.5-inch doped paper woofer crossed over to a 1-inch soft dome tweeter at about 3.2kHz, all via a single-order network. While it claims a somewhat low sensitivity of 86db, the G5 is easy to drive with relatively low output. Gemme states the in-room LF response goes down to 45hz, a mark that I had no trouble verifying when playing test tones. It yields impressive performance for such a diminutive box, helped in part by Gemme's "Pressure Reflex" design, which restricts the airflow in the port and creates a venturi effect. Designer Robert Gaboury mentions that doing so "makes for a nice, fast bass boost."

Painless Break-In and Setup

The G5s proved extremely room friendly. After running them for 50 hours and experimenting with positioning in my 15x20-foot room, I placed them three feet from the sidewalls and about 2.5 feet from the back walls, each 7 feet apart from one another. A matching black plinth on the bottom of the speaker makes it easy to use the supplied black chrome spikes. I achieved optimum imaging balance between both axis with the speakers toed in at about 5 degrees. This isn't a tough speaker to set up and, much like my Vandersteen 1Cs (also a 2-way, single-order speaker), provided engaging sound when not aligned just so.

I experienced no problems with a variety of amplifiers—tube and solid-state, large and small—but the G5s really grooved with the PrimaLuna DiaLogue 7 monoblocks, especially in triode mode. While the latter generates less power than pentode mode (40 watts per channel vs. 70), it played to the G5s' strength and added to their large presentation, especially when they were moved to a smaller room, where the extra 30 watts weren't a big deal. *(continued)*



REVIEW



Listening

I couldn't resist starting my serious listening with Medeski, Martin & Wood's *Tonic*. The primarily acoustic live album challenges most speakers in terms of resolving a sense of the live space. Thanks to their excellent soundstaging abilities, the G5s were up to the task, especially on "Buster Rides Again." On the song, Medeski's piano is front and center, Wood's acoustic bass is off to the left, and Martin's drums figure prominently to the right of center stage. At least, that's how everything should be.

Moreover, this recording sounds artificially big; many comparably priced small speakers lose the recording's spaciousness, making the trio sound like they are in a closet. Not so the G5s. Their speed and dynamics captured the occasional rap of the drum sticks against the drum kit, nailed the cowbell, and offered a lifelike reproduction of audience participation, adding to the illusion of reality.

To determine whether the G5 could deliver with rock, I cued up Porcupine Tree's "The Start Of Something Beautiful" from *DeadWing*, listening for bass compression at high level. Again, I came away impressed with how much air the little woofers could move before breaking up. A similar effect happened when playing "Immune" from Godsmack's self-titled album; I just ran these little speakers out of gas. Turning the volume down slightly on the disc's "Voodoo" yielded better results, as vocalist Sully Erna was placed dead center in a haunting manner that suited the album's mood. Less bone crushing than a large pair of floorstanders, these speakers possessed quite a bit more punch than the Magnepan MMGs reviewed in this issue.

The G5s won't win any awards when it comes to reproducing a full classical orchestra, but what small speaker does?
(continued)



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- Robert Harley,
The Absolute Sound,
Issue 193



"The Dmitri represents the state of the art in power line conditioning."
- Jeff Dorgay,
TONEAudio
Magazine,
Issue 18



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However, on small-scale recordings like Telemann's "Sonata #2" from Jerry McCoy's *Dialogues With Double Bass*, the musicians were spread across the soundstage in proper scale with generous room ambiance. Kudos to the Gemme's superb tweeter; the higher-register string sounds came across naturally, with no indication of breakup or edginess. Such smoothness was evident regardless of music type and represented one of the speakers' greatest strengths. Whether it was the bite of slide guitar or the crash of a cymbal, the G5's tweeter always stayed on the path of musical accuracy rather than veering off and artificially ringing.

A Gem

The G5's compact stature may require an adjustment to your listening position, as the tweeter is only about 30 inches off the floor. The sweet spot in a first-order system is usually more critical than those in speakers that use more traditional crossovers. It's easy to get too much HF bleed through in the woofer, which leaves the speaker sounding muddy and muffled. So choose your listening chair accordingly. I ended up liking the sound presented when sitting on my floor.

A compact floorstander always presents challenges to speaker designers, and at \$699, there are always tradeoffs to be made. In the case of the G5, all of the important boxes on the build list were confidently checked. These speakers offer a top-notch finish and faithful musical qualities as well as a beautifully rendered midband with a smooth upper treble and sense of space—and enough bass extension for most small-to mid-sized rooms. Combine such positives with above-average dynamics and a speaker that works well with modest-power solid-state or tube amplification, and you can see why Gemme Audio's latest creation should be on your short list—this is a lot of speaker for \$699. ●

Gemme Audio Tonic G5 Loudspeaker
MSRP: \$699

MANUFACTURER

www.gemmeaudio.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source Rega P5 with Sumiko Blackbird

Digital Source Mac Mini with Rega DAC

Preamplifier Audio Research LS3

Power Amplifier PrimaLuna DiaLogue 7 monoblocks

Cable Audience Au24 (speaker and IC)

Power Conditioning Running Springs Elgar



From The Website

In case you haven't been perusing the *TONEAudio* Web site on a regular basis, we are constantly adding gear reviews between issues. The following are links to the two most recent reviews.



Emotiva USP-1 Preamplifier and UPA-1 Monoblock Power Amplifiers

\$449 and \$349 each, respectively
www.emotiva.com

Here's a set of triplets that you'll need help lifting. The Emotiva amplifier and preamplifier are beefy beyond their price tags and arrive factory direct to your door with great features and plenty of power. Best of all, the sound quality soars above what you would expect given the modest cost.

Read the full review here:

Where Have all the Good Stereos Gone?



We know. Sorting through the jungle that is pre-owned hi-fi gear can be tough. Myriad Internet forums and online shopping sites just don't offer the expertise required to make sound decisions.

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—Art Dudley, Stereophile

"Rega has given us a digital player that offers **breakthrough performance** at a bargain price."

—Chris Martens, The Absolute Sound

"There seems to be unanimity among critics about this: the Rega Apollo is a \$1000 **category-killer**."

—Sam Tellig, Stereophile

"The Saturn **surpassed just about every digital playback system I've heard before**...on a purely musical level it would be hard to beat this machine."


—Mike Quinn, Jazz Times

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Spin Clean MK.II Record Cleaner

\$129.99 complete system (\$79.99, machine only)
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While we are probably the last hi-fi magazine on earth to review the Spin Clean, we are just as impressed as the others that have used it. Cleanliness is the key to records that sound CD-quiet, and the Spin Clean gets you there without draining your wallet. Handmade in the US since 1975, it's the perfect accessory for any vinyl enthusiast.

Read the full review here:

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