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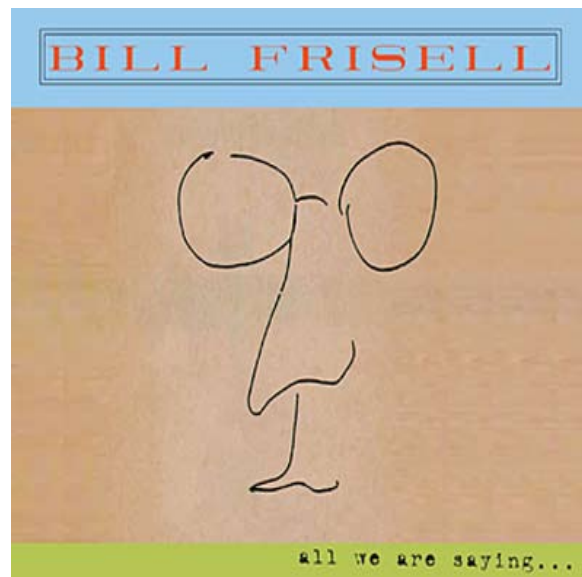
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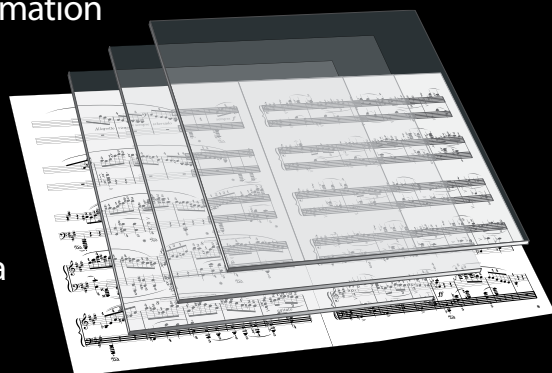
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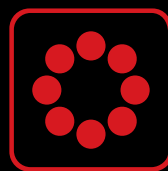
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PUBLISHER'S LETTER

S

tereophile writer Michael Fremer made a great point relating to technology blog Endgadget's chiding about questionable audio gear, but it got me thinking: While it is entertaining to be dismissive of those not in the know about high-end audio (which comprises a very small piece of the music/audio pie), we must remember that until most mainstream consumers stop believing that the high end essentially amounts to overpriced snake oil, *all* of us can stand to do a better job.

Currently, approximately 330 million people have an iTunes account. I know, those of us that built an altar to cool hi-fi gear wouldn't dream of playing MP3s on our systems. But we're outnumbered. A meeting of the minds needs to occur, and as I look back on six years of publishing *TONE Audio*, I'd like to think we've helped foster such a discussion.

As we begin our seventh year, I tip my hat to my friend Chris Connaker at *Computer Audiophile* and the folks at Source Interlink (the publishers of *Stereophile*) for launching *Inner Fidelity* and *Audio Stream*, outlets devoted to headphones and computer audio, respectively. They are definitely the kind of things we need—and need more of. As we all work to reach the younger demographics, I'm certain that a certain percentage—albeit small—will become obsessive audiophiles. Let's face it: Even two percent of 330 million readers is a heckuva lot more than the few hundred thousand that read hi-fi magazines. Which brings up a related topic.

Back in 2004, when I had the privilege to meet seven-time world champion Formula One driver Michael Schumacher, I asked him if he went to bed worried about his competitors. He flashed his trademark grin and said, "All I am concerned about at the end of the day is, 'Did I deliver the maximum? And, how can I deliver even more the next time I am on the track?'" The words of a true champion, indeed.

So, here's to seeing us all step up our game in the next few years. The majority of the world doesn't even know we exist, and I'll bet they all would have a pretty good time playing in our sandbox.





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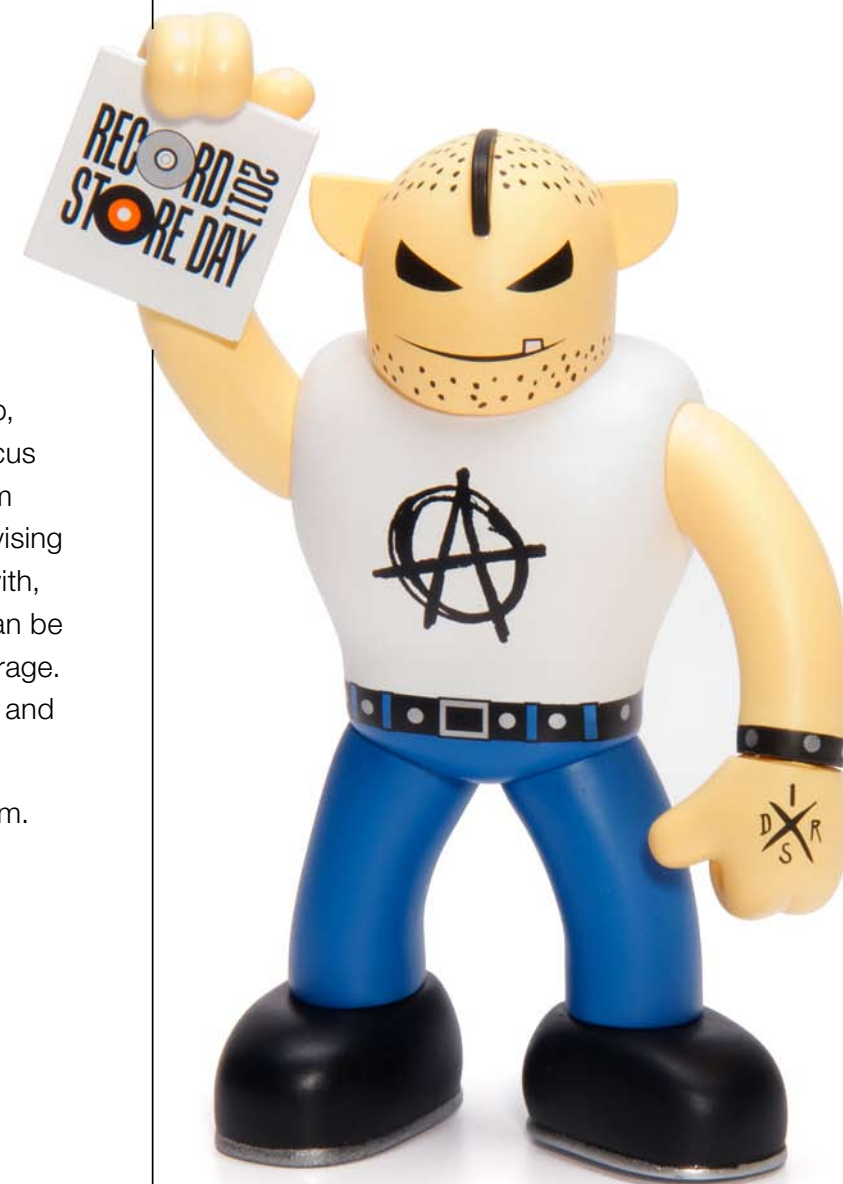
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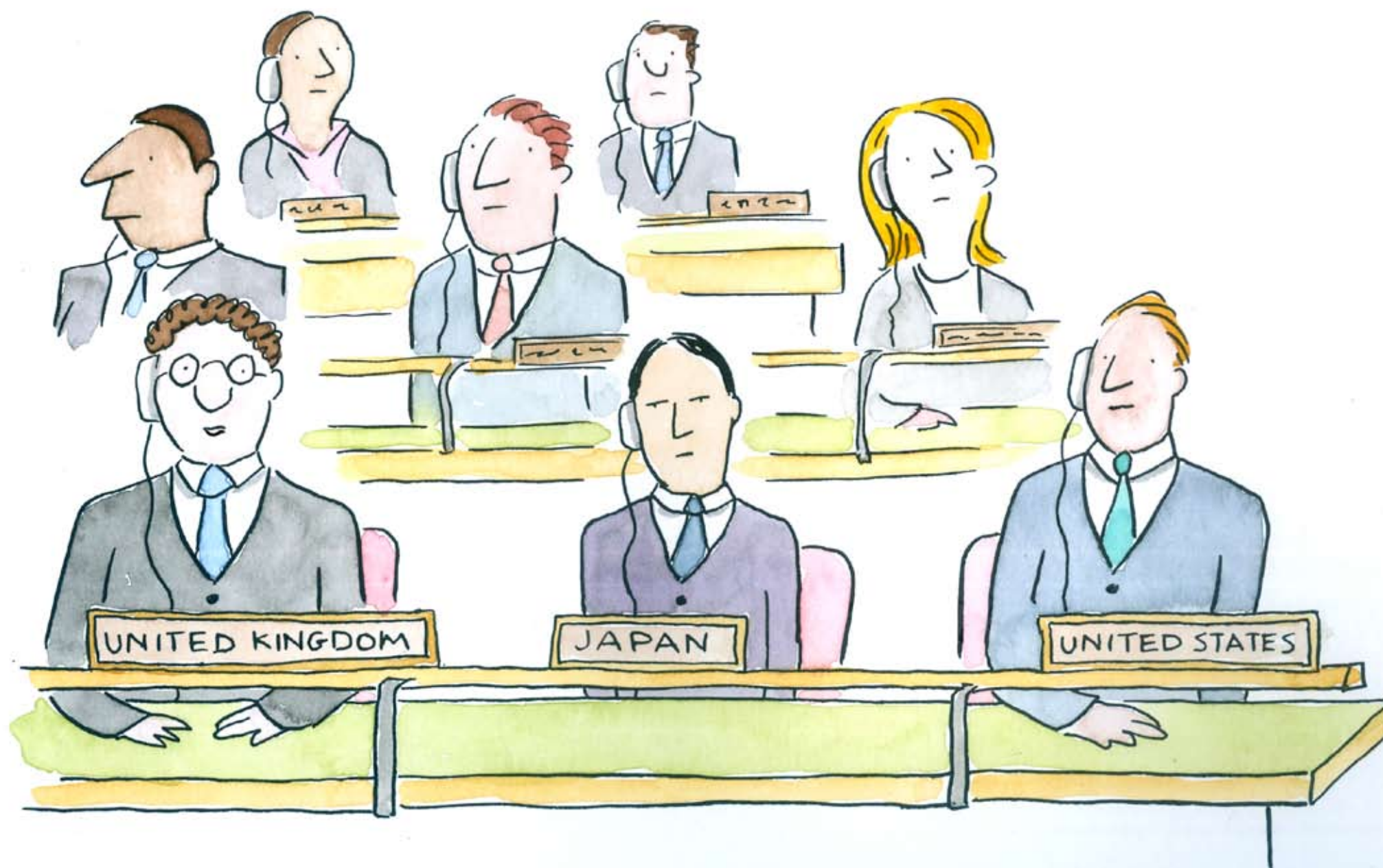
Wayne Garcia is the owner of San Francisco's DIG wine shop, a boutique operation with a focus on small-production wines from France and Italy. When not advising his clientele on what to drink with, say, tripe or lamb's neck, he can be found sipping his favorite beverage. Garcia also writes about audio and music for *The Absolute Sound*.

Visit him at www.digwinesf.com.



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DONNELLY

“Mr. Chairman, the UN members have reached a decision on the Pink Floyd remasters.”

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Alpine Valley
West Allis, Wisconsin
September 3, 2011

By Bob Gendron

Sincere accolades and trivial tidbits came from nearly everyone involved in the first day of Pearl Jam's birthday fete. With howler Mark Arm doing the honors, a still-relevant Mudhoney offered up a heat-blistered cover of Black Flag's "Fix Me" in tribute. Queens of the Stone Age leader Josh Homme divulged that Pearl Jam guitarist Stone Gossard released the band's first record. In the midst of his group's concise set, Strokes vocalist Julian Casablancas confessed that the Seattle band was the first with whose music he sang along while entertaining serious fantasies of becoming a front man. Arm, Homme, and Casablancas—as well as several other opening artists that performed on a small side stage—were later invited to play with the bash's hosts.



Pearl Jam 20

For a band that nearly broke up due to the avalanche of attention it received in the early 90s, how apt that for its 20th anniversary (dubbed PJ20) Pearl Jam presided over a two-day gathering that amounted to less a self-celebration and more a love letter to longtime admirers and friends. While some might find it odd that the quintet selected Alpine Valley over a hometown venue, the 40,000-seat outdoor arena made sense from its middle-of-the-nation locale, all the better for fans traveling from multiple states to witness what was expected to yield rare pairings and songs. The latter occurred in spades, as did steady, pre-autumnal, slate-grey rain showers that evoked the Emerald City's oft-soggy environs. To complete the Pacific Northwest vibe, Pearl Jam singer Eddie Vedder even wore a flannel shirt for the occasion.

Confirming that before-show audience chatter regarding guesses over the set list's potential to delve deep into the band's healthy history wasn't simply the fever dreaming of hopeful devotees, Pearl Jam quickly demonstrated that those wishing to hear hits or favorites such as "Alive," "Daughter," and "Yellow Ledbetter" picked the wrong event. An opening one-two-three-four sequence of "Release," "Arms Aloft" (a Joe Strummer cover), "Do the Evolution," and "Got Some" signaled an unconventional, surprising, and daring approach at hand. Vedder even brought a binder of lyrics onstage to place at his feet, insurance for referencing words to obscure tunes.

However unfairly, Pearl Jam has been criticized for taking a more mainstream angle when compared to peers credited for skirting tradition. Such charges seemed laughable during a 150-minute spectacle that, if anything, erred too heavily on the side of risk. In any live event, balance and pacing are key. An overabundance of nearly unrecognizable choices combined with a paucity of the familiar can frustrate, alienate and, worse, even bore patrons. Pearl Jam treaded these lines with precarious nerve during the first hour. Then, likely reading the sagging energy level and desire for cathartic bluster, the group laid into a series that refused to let up until the final note sounded after midnight. For the encore, Arm assisted the ensemble in weeding out pretenders via a snarly rendition of the MC5's "Kick Out the Jams." *(continued)*

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Photo by Anna Knowlden

Most of the other collaborations proved intriguing, if not always successful. Liam Finn served as a willfully excitable foil for “Education” and Homme lent his psychedelic-leaning timbral gauze to “In the Moonlight.” Dhani Harrison added an extra guitar and muscle to a smashmouth “State of Love and Trust.” By contrast, Casablancas looked intimidated during his cameo on “Not For You,” a song whose self-righteous anger and despondent attitude should be tailor-made for the leather-jacket-clad, sunglasses-at-night New Yorker. Instead, Casablancas possessed the awkward poise of an adolescent boy that freezes up when they meet their lifelong celebrity hero in person, unable to relax and silently counting down the seconds until they can vacate the room.

Chris Cornell, exuding a CEO's confidence and sporting a European soccer star's enviably thick mane of hair, encountered no such problems. “This is the part of the show that we've been most looking forward to,” declared Vedder before introducing his lanky colleague, who proceeded to deliver on the promises consuming so many fans' minds. Namely, the resurrection of Temple of the Dog, the remarkable Seattle-based collective spawned following the death of Mother Love Bone singer Andrew Wood.

As Cornell's wailing pipes hit skyscraping highs, Vedder occasionally swooped in with supportive baritone harmonies, creating a dynamic vortex akin to witnessing high- and low-pressure weather fronts merge and give rise to an overhead lightning storm. The airy “Hunger Strike,” spiritual “Say Hello To Heaven,” and sludge-enrusted “Reach Down” retain the same weighty emotional pull now that they did more than two decades ago. Ditto Mother Love Bone's “Star-dog Champion,” a welcomingly strange melodic anthem embraced by Cornell with instrumental backing from Pearl Jam.

Enjoying his role as ringleader, and having peaked on a galloping “Betterman” that found him toe-to-toe with hyperactive guitarist Mike McCready—both their heads hanging as they sent tempos into overdrive—Vedder couldn't resist waxing sentimental. His reflection included a short speech about transcending odds and ignoring the advice of well-intentioned family figures that believed he and his mates couldn't make a living as musicians. In its 20-year swim against the tides, a marathon that includes a valiant but nearly self-destructive battle against Ticketmaster, diving into a 28-song slate primarily comprised of seldom-played fare to an adoring crowd might stand as Pearl Jam's healthiest revenge yet.

A photograph of the band Thievery Corporation performing on stage. The lead singer, Rob Garza, is in the center, wearing a white fedora with a red band, sunglasses, and a black military-style jacket with gold buttons and red-and-white striped epaulettes. He is holding a microphone and singing. To his left, another band member, Eric Hilton, is partially visible, wearing a light-colored jacket and a similar hat. In the background, other band members are playing instruments, including a saxophone and a trumpet. The stage is lit with warm, orange and yellow lights, creating a vibrant atmosphere.

LIVE MUSIC

Thievery Corporation

Arlene Schnitzer Hall

Portland, Oregon

September 14, 2011

Photos and Text by Jeff Dorgay

As they illuminated and revealed the group's large entourage, Thievery Corporation's gigantic chandeliers perfectly matched the Arlene Schnitzer Hall's décor. It was the first of many signs that the sold-out show would make for a special night at a venue normally reserved for the Portland Symphony. Leaders Rob Garza and Eric Hilton had 2,700 attendees dancing from start to finish, the facility's floor flexing as much from the bass frequencies as the weight of the audience.

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LIVE MUSIC



Steeped in auxiliary vocal power, the electronica band welcomed assistance from no fewer than seven guest vocalists that took turns contributing to the multicultural and multilingual celebration. “We’re like a little United Nations, without the guns,” proffered singer Natalia Claver, whose statement was spot-on.

Jamaican brothers Archie and Arthur Steel assumed prominent roles, jumping out interface with the crowd on a number of tunes from Thievery Corporation’s recent *Culture of Fear* and earlier *Richest Man in Babylon* album. A show-stopping cover of Sly Stone’s “Thank you (Fallettine Be Mice Elf Agin)” preceded rapper Mr. Lif’s sole turn at the mic for “Culture of Fear.” Adorned in a bright red dress shirt, vest, and fedora, he didn’t squander his opportunity.

The collective’s superb musicianship aside, its non-stop attack accounted for a majority of the momentum. There was never even as much as a slight gap in the delivery from track to track, no clichéd bantering or setting up for the next tune—a tribute to Garza and Hilton’s DJ skills. Grooves frequently changed shape and style, ranging from house to rap to straight-ahead R&B, and accumulating plenty of soul along the way. The only head-scratching moment occurred when percussionist Frank Orral anchored a bouncy version of the Talking Heads’ “Life During Wartime,” even lapping the stage as front man David Byrne does in the film *Stop Making Sense*.

New Releases

By the TONE Staff

Wilco's *The Whole Love* begins with a crush of digital thunder. It's the sound, perhaps, of computer-hard drives malfunctioning. Or maybe it's the band imagining some sort of electronic warfare. The specifics aren't quite discernable, but it's gripping nonetheless. Don't look to leader Jeff Tweedy for guidance, either. "I can be so far away from my wasteland...Ambulance," he sings, an artist tortured by his own mind. Hi-tech warbles lead to a funky, effects-drenched bass, and plaintive vocals give way to an eruption of scorching guitars, instruments trailed by a rhythm so rushed it nearly runs itself over. Wilco calls this song—this exercise in computer-enhanced rock n' roll carnage—"Art of Almost," and it sounds unlike anything the band has ever recorded.

Well done, Wilco, well done.



Photo by Autumn de Wilde

Not since the extended melodic deconstruction of "I Am Trying to Break Your Heart," which heralds the beginning of 2001's *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*, has Wilco launched an album with an opening track this far out of the realm of listener expectations. Wilco, now in its 17th year, long ago trained fans to anticipate the unexpected. Yet something happened on 2009's *Wilco (The Album)*. While there was no shortage of finely crafted songs, rock n' roll comfort seemed to outnumber the surprises.

Rare was it that such sharp musicianship, such a competent knack

for a melody, would feel so *normal*. Ever since the Chicago band unleashed 1996's sophomore *Being There*, which jettisoned the backyard country of feel of the debut *AM*, for spacious roots-rock atmospheres, it felt as if a gauntlet was being thrown at the feet of its fans. No two albums, the Tweedy-led outfit seemed to be saying, would ever sound the same. And thus it was so.

Lineups changed, sometimes drastically, but the mission didn't. There was gallantly harmonious orchestral pop (1999's *Summer-*

teeth), exquisitely detailed art-rock minimalism (*Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*), aggressively claustrophobic guitars (2004's *A Ghost Is Born*), and soul-enhanced folk-rock (*Sky Blue Sky*). On *Wilco (The Album)*, the band neatly, and confidently, touches on all of the above, with the sole exception being the panic-stricken "Bull Black Nova."

The Whole Love, however, is full of the exceptions. Some, of course, are stronger than others. Sadly, the entire album doesn't have the cut-and-paste intensity of "Art of Almost." (continued)

gr...ve
thysel

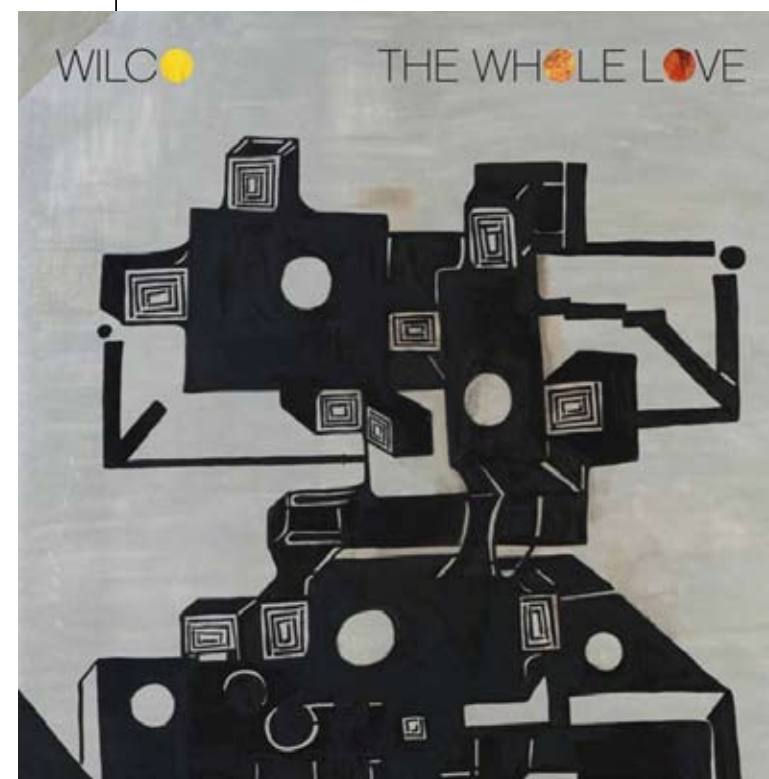


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Wilco

The Whole Love
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to put on an expansive, blistering rock n' roll show packed with highs and lows. *The Whole Love* seems to recognize such a feat, as often here, Tweedy is not the focal point. He's brash and energized on "I Might," sure, but that song belongs to bassist John Stirratt and keyboardist Mikael Jorgensen. Never has Wilco sounded this groovy, as Stirratt's fuzzy bass leads the song with an R&B shimmy. Jorgensen, meanwhile, channels 60s rockers the Zombies and plays give-and-take with Tweedy.

Ace guitarist Nels Cline gets plenty of moments to roam, and turns the solitary sentiment of "Born Alone" into a statement of defiance. He also contrasts giant bar-band riffs with sleek, artsy fills on the delightfully reckless "Standing O." "I mope and I cry and attack," Tweedy sings on the latter, a moment that captures the emotional schizophrenia of much of the lyrics. "Capitol City," for instance, seems like a giant mind-game. Musically, the old-fashioned jaunty pop stroll is Wilco at its silliest, while lyrically, it's an embrace that tries to keep its distance. As Tweedy sings later on the album, "As intimate as a kiss over the phone."

"Art of Almost" creates nearly impossible expectations for Wilco's eighth album, yet *The Whole Love* comes close to delivering on them. "Dawned on Me" may be a tad slight, and "Rising Red Lung" is all darkness amidst an album that's spry and bright. Yet the record is a daring statement, even coming to a close with 12 minutes of acoustic exploration. "One Sunday Morning (Song for Jane Smiley's Boyfriend)" unfolds with slight melodic tweaks and shading throughout, underscoring once again that Wilco, nearly 20 years into its career, still has plenty left to investigate. —**Todd Martens**

Yet there's a studio-driven sheen that makes this, from start to finish, the freshest Wilco work since *A Ghost is Born*. Much credit must be given to multi-instrumentalist Pat Sansone, who Tweedy enlisted for a greater production role.

Sansone adorns many tracks with a symphonic lushness, and helps liven up even Wilco's more traditional moments. See-sawing violins and drummer Glenn Kotche's constantly in-motion clickity-clack rhythm add a softness to the starkness of "Black Moon," while "Sunloath" tiptoes to a finale drenched in 60s psychedelics. "I don't want to lose this fight," Tweedy sings with his comforting rasp, and the chorus-less song rescues its lyricist in the final moments with swooning harmonies and crystallizing guitars, finishing with a kaleidoscope of instrumental colors.

Those who have seen Wilco live in recent years know that the current six-piece incarnation—the only Wilco lineup to have lasted for three full albums—has the ability



Photo by Sandy Kim



Girls

Father, Son, Holy Ghost

True Panther Sounds, 2LP or CD

There's a moment near the close of "Vomit," the lead single off Girls' excellent new sophomore album *Father, Son, Holy Ghost*, where waifish frontman Christopher Owens, buoyed by a gospel choir and coffee-rich strains of soul organ, repeats the starry-eyed phrase "come into my heart." Ostensibly the singer is delivering the message to a would-be lover—after all, the band's 2009 debut hinged on Owens' ability to spin heartache into lo-fi, psych-pop gold—but this time around his words come across as a universal invitation.

In interviews, the frontman never shies from his complex past (Owens was born into the Children of God cult, escaping to Amarillo, Texas, when he was 16). But the subject surfaces here in surprisingly direct ways. The weary "My Ma," for one, sounds like it could have been written after the singer stumbled alone into the hot Texas sun for the first time. "I'm so lost out here," he laments atop bluesy organ and spectral rays of guitar, "I'm looking for meaning in my life, and you, my ma."

Elsewhere, he equates his search for love with a desire to reclaim the sense of comfort he once felt in his mother's arms (the galloping surf-rock of "Honey Bunny"), struggles with drug addiction (the Renaissance Faire pluck of "Just a Song," a tune whose "keep me up/keep me down" refrain explicitly references self-medicating to maintain emotional balance), and blasts through a deceptively upbeat love song ("Magic") that's as heartwarming as the Hall & Oates number that enlivens the otherwise forgettable *500 Days of Summer*.

Of course, this being Owens, heartache remains something of a constant. On the shuffling garage-rock bruiser "Alex," the singer pledges his unrequited love to another in a series of verses that turn the song into a musical version of that scene in *Louie* where comedian Louis C.K.

unburdens his soul to a longtime crush, knowing full well she'll never feel the same about him. "Love, Like a River," a retro slice of Stax-worthy soul, finds Owens trying to hold tight to a girl who's no easier to grasp onto than smoke ("No man can ever keep that girl from moving on," he croons wearily). Even "Saying I Love You," which opens like a straightforward 1960s romancer, quickly pivots toward depression.

Things grow even darker on "Die," a riff-heavy monster that pairs a drugged-out, thundering guitar squall with Owens' most hopelessly despondent lyrics to date ("We're all going straight to hell tonight," he howls). But even a quick glimpse at the album title serves as a reminder that redemption is near at hand, and eventually arrives in the form of the winding, eight-minute "Forgiveness." The latter is a sprawling, Pink Floyd-like epic the singer penned after coming down from a particularly memorable acid trip. While jarringly simple in concept—the song suggests that forgiveness is key to living a fulfilled life—Owens' words touch on a range of universal themes: sin, redemption, enlightenment, religion, self-discovery, and even death.

"Nobody's gonna find any answers if you're looking in the dark," he sings as cautious acoustic guitars encircle him like smoke rings. This is what illumination sounds like. —**Andy Downing**

While jarringly simple in concept, Owens' words touch on a range of universal themes: sin, redemption, enlightenment, religion, self-discovery, and even death.


Mastodon
The Hunter

Warner Bros., LP and CD

After making involved concept records about earth, fire, water, and the universe, respectively, where does a band go? As it headed into sessions for its fifth studio album, the question loomed for Mastodon, which took imaginative themes about as far as any group can without invoking parody. Little surprise, then, that *The Hunter* is a transitional effort and the most stripped-back release since the Atlanta quartet's 2002 debut. Unencumbered by narratives, the collective seems at times to exhale sighs of relief as well as recognize the sense of freedom gleaned from a back-to-basics approach.

Not that the band abandons creative growth and challenging experimentation. However, the will to push boundaries and demand to explore ambitious territory assume a lower priority. Liberated from a high-pressure atmosphere, Mastodon relaxes and lets fly—occasionally channeling pent-up energy or emitting aggression simply for the sake of doing so. The strategy owes less to letting down one's guard and more to rediscovering skill sets and fundamental reasons to play music. Of course, the danger with such tactics lies with recycling the past and/or settling for what comes easy.

Coming from an ensemble that's made mind-melting concoctions in the form of "Circle of Cysquatch" and "The Last Baron," new fare like "Curl of the Burl" and "Thickening" register as repeat activities, the type of exercises expected from ersatz artists that mimic Mastodon's moves. It's hard not to think that the underwhelming fare is a rushed consequence of a tireless band that should've taken more time to reenergize after issuing its previous album and staging subsequent tours. And on a

13-song set that logs in at 53 minutes, a bit of trimming wouldn't hurt.

Thankfully, throwaway tracks are an exception on *The Hunter*, the strengths of which are (again) Brann Dailor's battery of dynamic drumming as well as concise, get-in-get-out episodes that last just long enough to allow listeners to picture how pieces fall into place, ala a to a rapid-paced Tetris game, before the music either explodes or slugs you in the craw. Psychedelic elements abound, whether on "Stargasm," an into-the-void hypnosis that practically demands incense be lit and gongs struck, or during "The Sparrow," a hefty tune influenced by early Pink Floyd.

Resembling the agitated commotion of bumblebees shaken in a Mason jar, "All the Heavy Lifting" references traditional Mastodon lyrical touchstones of mountains and oceans, the song's hook-and-ladder construction and pent-up suspense ceding ground before getting trampled underfoot. Few bands manage to shape viscous heaviness into fluid, airy, and breathable patterns. Quick arpeggios, wah-wah guitar solos, and jazz-infected per-

cussive fills open up valleys bathed in light and shade. "Bedzazzled Fingernails" capitalizes on such detours, the song scampering through craggy sonic jungles that conjure the grand hedge maze—and the characters' sense of desperation—in *The Shining*.

Films also come to mind in "Creature Lives," which plays as an indirect tribute to 60s-era drive-in monster flicks. Beginning with mad-cap laughter and manipulated frequency effects, the song represents yet another change for Mastodon, as its glam-rock accents and choral chant vocals confirm the group's capacity to surprise, refresh, and invent remains unabated. —**Bob Gendron**



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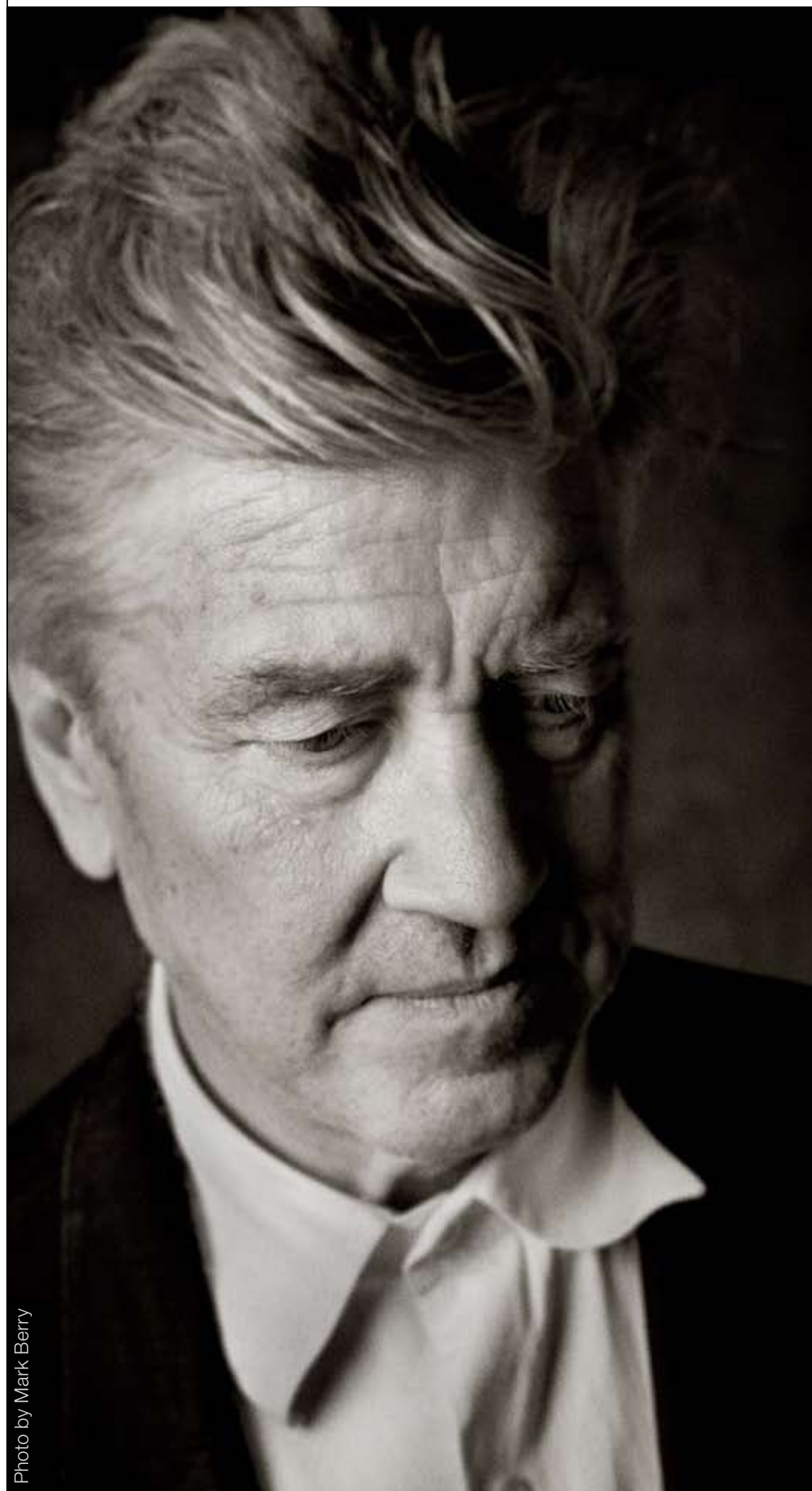
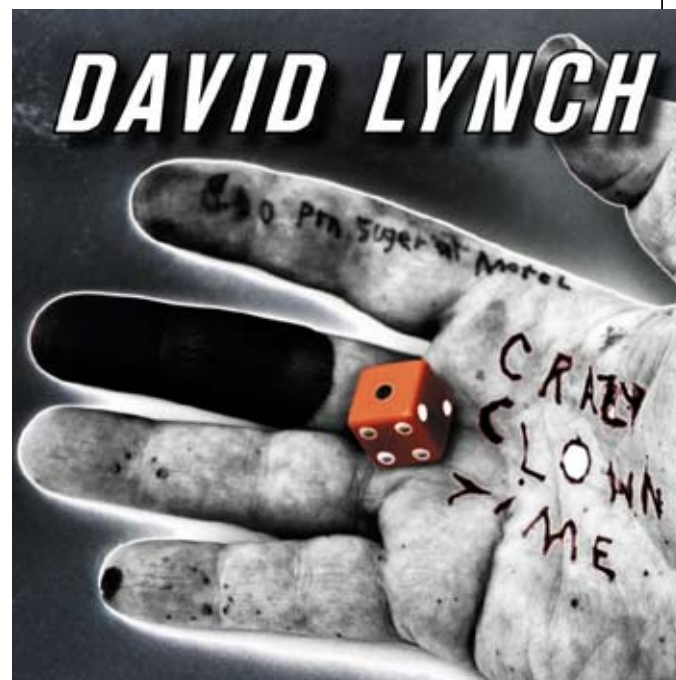


Photo by Mark Berry

In his movies, director David Lynch explores the darkest, weirdest, and most twisted corners of the human experience.

Witness the opening shot of *Blue Velvet*, where a camera pans through an idyllic suburban setting before diving beneath one of the bright green, perfectly manicured lawns to reveal the beetles eating away at them from below.

A similar feel pervades Lynch's first solo album, *Crazy Clown Time*, which time and again takes a seemingly innocent scene—children running through the backyard, nighttime treks to football games—and twists it into something vaguely menacing. In interviews, Lynch, whose interest in music traces back to a song he co-wrote for *Eraserhead* in 1977, describes his sound as “modern blues,” which is a bit like describing his film *Mulholland Drive* as a “modern noir” (supposing that film noirs typically dispose of conventions like plot, continuity, and clarity in lieu of extended masturbation scenes featuring Naomi Watts). Dark and disjointed, the music on *Clown Time* more closely resembles Tom Waits' most out-there experimentations than other, more easily recognizable forms of the blues. *(continued)*



David Lynch

Crazy Clown Time

Sunday Best, 2LP and CD

The consistently unsettling album arrives awash in queasy tremolo-heavy guitar, programmed drums, and clipped bursts of noise (gunshots, howling electronics). Save for a guest appearance from Yeah Yeah Yeahs singer Karen O, who brings a sense of desperation to the surrealist nightmare of "Pinky's Dream," Lynch provides vocals throughout, sometimes singing through a vocoder—the willfully odd "Strange and Unproductive Thinking," which includes more references to dental hygiene than the typical Rick Reilly column and comes across like a cyborg making its shaky debut at an open-mic poetry slam—and other times adopting a reedy twang that sounds something akin to Jimmy Fallon fighting off a head cold to bang out his impression of Neil Young.

Removed from the musical backdrop, a majority of Lynch's lyrics sound relatively tame. When he repeatedly intones, "So glad you're gone/Ball and chain gone" on "So Glad," it initially sounds like the plainspoken talk of a new divorcee. But delivered in cryptic tones and paired with shadowy instrumental accompaniment, a more nefarious picture of wrongdoing emerges. Ball and chain gone? *Why, what have you done with her, David?* Similar feelings pervade the weary "Speed Roadster," a tale of obsession on which Lynch sings, "I might be stalking you" like a man who's already invested in his share of wiretaps. Then there's the innocuously named "Football Game," which gradually evolves into a bleary menacer. "You better run, baby," Lynch drawls as guitar chords melt and stretch like glass put against an open flame. "I hope you can."

Occasionally, Lynch adopts the same weird-for-weirdness-sake approach that can submarine his films. This is particularly true of the title track, a ponderous, seven-minute-plus tune where the director—speaking in a nasal, high-pitched voice—provides a weirdly detailed description of a child's party ("And Timmy jumped so high!") atop a droning musical backdrop replete with over-sexualized moaning. "Strange and Unproductive Thinking," which might be the most apt title on the album, sounds similarly unmoored, a drug-induced experiment better left on the studio's cutting-room floor.

Indeed, while the famed director makes a somewhat convincing turn as a musician, he could have used a good editor to help shape and refine his disconcerting soundscapes. —**Andy Downing**



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Photo by Cory Smith

**Still Corners**

Creatures of an Hour
Sub Pop, LP and CD

Something of a litmus test happens early on in Still Corners' debut. It comes in the form of the word "cuckoo," and it's repeated often throughout the song of the same name. It's a ridiculous word, especially in a grown-up song with twilight atmospheres and a feeling of romantic confusion. Yet Still Corners has a secret weapon: vocalist Tessa Murray.

She doesn't sing so much as quietly exhale, with words appearing like mystical creatures that slowly dissolve into warmly minimal and foggy atmospheres. Still Corners invites such English Lit 101 descriptions, as their music lives in the shadows without being Gothic. Indeed, the London quartet is adept at conjuring a mix of synths and reverb that touches on melodies as often as it obscures them.

Those who stick with this 10-song, 32-minute effort will find plenty that's rewarding. "Endless Summer" places one foot in Girl Group classicism but stretches out with a dizzying organ, ripped either from a haunted house or an old Broadcast song, and a chorus that's all rhythm and bewitching croons. "Circulars" goes so far as to largely do without vocals. Listeners hear Murray's teasing whisper in the back, but as Leon Dufficy's guitar vibrates like a metal scythe, one doesn't know if she's seducing or running.

Creatures of an Hour is primarily about creating mood, and its relatively brisk run-time ensures it doesn't overstay its welcome. It's a familiar sound—a more spooked Stereolab or a less-aggressive Electrelane—but it's done well and hints that the best is still to come. "I Wrote in Blood," for instance, sees Murray acting femme-fatale cool, singing over a guitar riff anxiously tip-tapping away. "Wrote a little book where I put your name," she sings, and it's a music/lyric combo that says just enough to let one's mind run wild. —**Todd Martens**

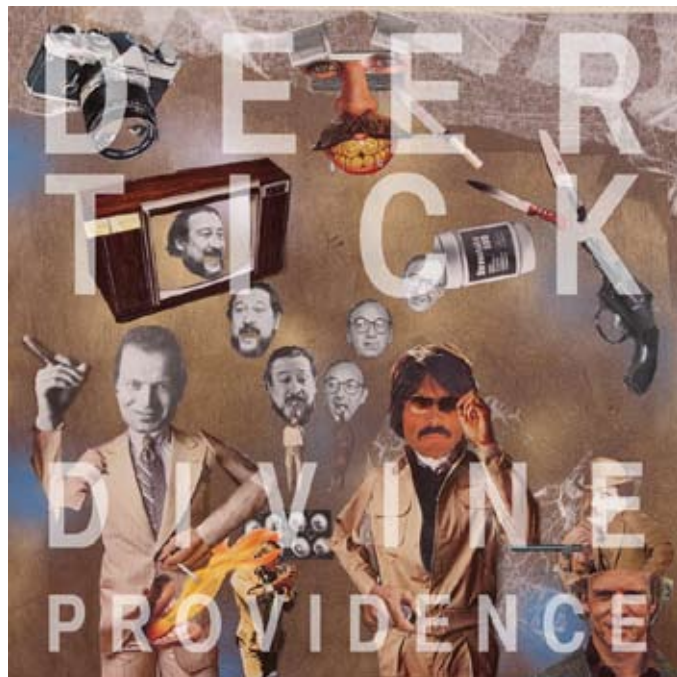
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Deer Tick

Divine Providence
Partisan Records, LP and CD

“I need electric to play it loud,”

sings frontman John McCauley near the close of Deer Tick’s fourth album. Fittingly, the best moments on *Divine Providence* find the Rhode Island quintet doing just that, bashing through an assortment of drunken rockers with the same sloppy, manic energy as *Sorry Ma, Forgot to Take Out the Trash*—era Replacements.

As the album opens, McCauley swaggers like a villain on loan from a Sergio Leone western, delivering lines like “I’m a drunken devil” through tightly clenched teeth. The tough-guy facade melts away by “Funny Word,” however, replaced with casual indifference. “I don’t have to be a hero,” he sings on the grungy bar rocker, exuding an effortless slacker charm. “I can just walk the streets.” Elsewhere, the vocalist ignores an encroaching hurricane to knock back drinks with friends (the raucous sing-along “Let’s All Go to the Bar”), talks dirty with an older woman (*The Graduate*-esque affairs of “Miss K”), and struggles with insomnia that gradually robs him of all his senses (“Main Street”).

The record is quite an evolution for the crew, whose staid early albums never reflected the anything-goes feel of its rowdy live shows—though it’s not without considerable flaws. While McCauley remains a consistently engaging frontman, delivering his words in a graveled voice that makes it sound like he’s always in the midst of a weeklong bender, his mates don’t fare as well during their turns on the microphone. Indeed, “Clownin Around,” a restrained number that directly comes on the heels of “Let’s All Go the Bar,” nearly grinds the proceedings to a halt. Ditto “Walkin Out the Door” (side note: what’s the band’s issue with the letter g?), a generic, organ-tinged tune that plays as by-the-numbers folk rock.

And while the album’s killer first half calls to mind a whiskey-fueled, sure-to-be-regret-laden night—capped by the chaotic, Link Wray rumbler “Something to Brag About”—the sleepier second half sounds like a band repeatedly and unsuccessfully trying to shake off the resulting hangover. Of the mellower fare, only “It’s Your Turn,” a bleary piano ballad that finds McCauley laying his cards out on the table (“Here’s my heart,” he rasps, “now it’s your turn”), has any lasting impact.

It’s a shame, too, since McCauley displays a knack for such bruised, barroom balladry on an eclectic album he released earlier this year with his side-project Middle Brother (check the I’m-in-love-with-a-bartender flirtations of “Daydreaming”). But time and again, *Divine Providence* fares best when the musicians ratchet up both the guitars and recklessness, sending a fresh stream of empty beer bottles whizzing across the room. —**Andy Downing**

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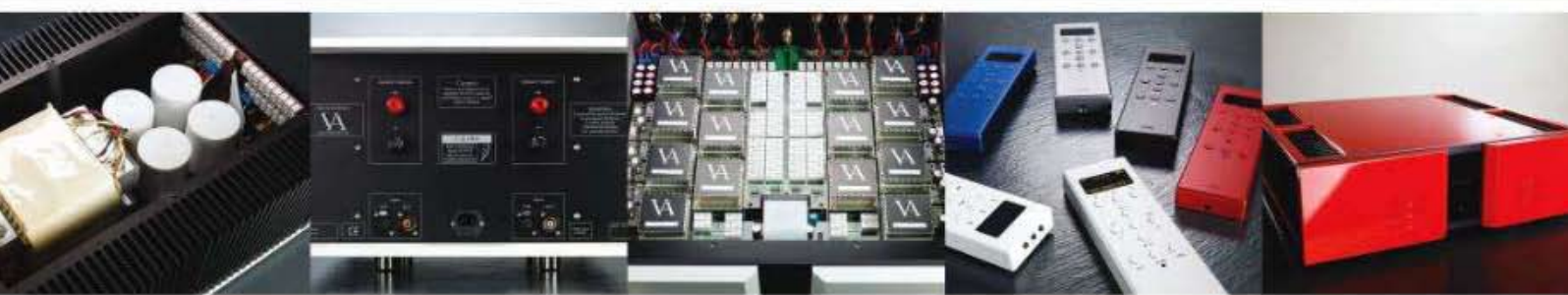


Photo by Randee St. Nicholas

Dear Miranda Lambert: You will likely never read this review, but if you do, please take away just one thing: More showing, less telling.

Few artists possess a voice with as much fire and personality. Yours is a sweetly scorned thing that seems to saying, “Just shut the heck up and listen to me” on even the lamest of ballads (ahem, “Better in the Long Run”). And no one else today can wield a Southern drawl as if it’s a weapon, stretching even the word “bangs,” as you do on the downright volatile “Mama’s Broken Heart,” into something that makes a man shiver.

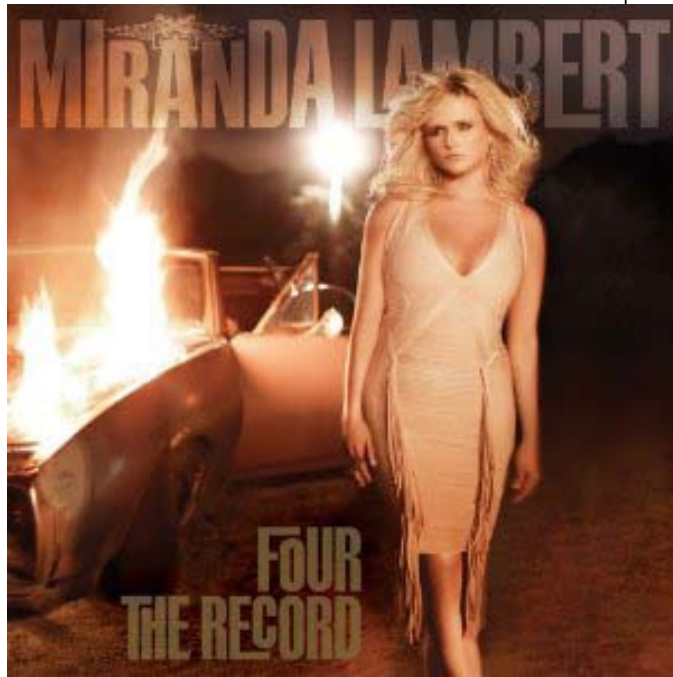
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Miranda Lambert

Four the Record
Sony Nashville, CD

Also, when it comes to songwriting, you do fine – the best, actually – when you’re on your own. Heck, your side project, Pistol Annies’ “Hell on Heels,” is one of the year’s strongest country records because it’s full of recession-inspired grit, which *Four the Record* desperately needs. So once and for all, let this be the last album on which there is so much as one song in which you brag about how much you like guns and whiskey. Sorry, but the whole “Fastest Girl in Town” shtick? We get it. Thanks.

Like much that comes out of mainstream Nashville, Lambert can be frustrating. On each of her four albums there are moments of brilliance, songs where her mix of glossy slow dances and finely tuned rock n’ roll serve to simply let the querulous artist tee-off and burn away any conventions. Then there are songs like “Fine Tune,” which come off like boardroom-constructed attempts to capture Sheryl Crow’s Kid Rock period.

On *Four the Record*, however, the first knock-down-wow instance comes with “Dear Diamond,” a Lambert-spun tune (of course) that also happens to be the slowest on the album. Here, she crafts a domesticated, murder-free version of “Tell-Tale Heart.” It’s a wedding ring that haunts the narrator, and every move of Lambert’s hand is a reminder of the singer’s betrayal. More fun—and devilish—is “All Kinds of Kinds,” which takes Southern charm and sticks a knife in it. Male congressmen wear women’s clothes, and no-good mothers slip their bratty kids prescription drugs. Yet rather than pander or pledge allegiance to small-town values, Lambert urges the listener to “look in the mirror” and shush it.

In commercial Nashville, such a sentiment is downright revolutionary. So once again—for the fourth album in a row—it’s a shame that such nerviness accounts for only half of *Four the Record*. —**Todd Martens**

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The Beach Boys

The SMiLE Sessions

Capitol/EMI, 2CD or 5CD box set

You want what he's having? Why, of course. Upon listening to the bizarre, eccentric, neurotic, enigmatic, imaginative, acid-drenched, peerless *SMiLE Sessions*, it's easy to understand why anyone might desire the spiritual nutrition and drug diet that fed Beach Boys leader Brian Wilson during the ensemble's 1966-67 recording period. While previous efforts contain snippets of the fabled material—and Wilson finished *SMiLE* in 2004 with a different cast—collectors, fans, and folks curious about the most mythological album (n)ever issued have clamored for its release for decades. Everyone finally gets his or her wish—mostly.

Available in multiple configurations, *The SMiLE Sessions* 2CD version boasts an estimation of the abandoned *SMiLE* album as well as a disc of session highlights; the extravagant 5CD box features the aforementioned and three additional discs of session material. (A 2LP edition contains only the album and five bonus cuts.) Again: The 19-track *SMiLE* included here is not considered a technical album as Wilson and company never completed audio's equivalent of the Loch Ness Monster. Hence, what's presented equates to a semblance agreed upon by group members Wilson, Mike Love, and Al Jardine. All were involved in a painstaking project that demanded producers Mark Linett and Alan Boyd consult upwards of 70 master reels of tape while tackling the mind-numbing tasks of putting the group's sonic "modules" in a sensible order as well as piecing together fragments into coherent songs. In that simply hearing the constant fits and starts occasionally feels infuriating, it's relatively impossible to imagine the patience Linett and Boyd employed to bring *The SMiLE Sessions* to light.

Indeed, one of the more illuminating aspects of the 5CD collection has little to do with the music. Rather, enlightenment stems from spying on Wilson's studio banter and recognizing the ad-infinity degree to which the obsessive-compulsive tunesmith forced his mates and Los Angeles' finest studio hands to stop/repeat/stop/repeat/stop in a quest for "perfect" takes and sounds he envisioned in his mind. Gorgeous baroque melodies, heavenly harmonies, psychedelic freedom, experimental techniques, humanist spirituality, and sophisticated concoctions of pop, choral, jazz, cabaret, and R&B on *SMiLE* aside, insight into both Wilson's methods and madness in the recording studios proves most compelling.

While certain camps maintain that label politics and contract disputes accounted for the collapse of *SMiLE*, *The SMiLE Sessions* confirms otherwise. Consider: The fifth disc contains nothing but renditions of the 1966 stand-alone single "Good Vibrations," two dozen in all, the labors ultimately yielding an indisputable slice of modular-constructed pop genius and, unfortunately, triggering within the tormented Wilson an insatiable thirst to make every subsequent Beach Boys song as glorious, symphonic, and grand.

And so there are vocal coaching lessons, trials of members crooning while lying on their back, playful moans, microphones dropped into water. There are fades, preludes to fades, verse remakes, alternate introductions, barbershop vocal sections, chorus vocal sections, overdub mixes, and acapella takes devoted to one tune—each separate track lasting between 25 seconds and several minutes. Wilson's mind keeps changing. So too, then, do his instructions and inclinations. *(continued)*



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MUSIC

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How nobody managed to sock him out of frustration remains a marvel on par with the composer's finest arrangements. It all leads one to believe that Wilson, particularly in his compromised mental state, never would've arrived at a point he would've deemed satisfying. *SMiLE* was destined to be incomplete.

Moreover, the set's tremendously informative essays expounds upon the notion that, recalling the era's technological limitations associated with tape splicing, executing the countless sequencing and re-sequencing duties in the face of tireless re-recording and editing burdens would have likely taken years—especially given Wilson's propensity for fixes and alterations, which generally required having to again start a mix from scratch. To wit: "Good Vibrations" required almost six months to finalize. In his notes, Boyd, a veteran

documentary filmmaker, calls the from-the-vaults reissue "the hardest project I've ever worked on" and observes "many of the songs were like little Frankenstein monsters, musical beings built from the spare parts in Dr. Linett's audio laboratory."

To that extent, the presence of a definitively researched *SMiLE Sessions* Sessionography guides listeners through the creative practices and vast sources. Undoubtedly, it also stands to rankle those who believe their bootleg versions to reflect the correct details. Sonically, the main album is presented in mono and the session contents in stereo. In preparation for HDCD, the original analog 4-track and 8-track session tapes were transferred to high-resolution digital, with the final masters created at 88.2kHz. What a trip.

—**Bob Gendron**



All Shook Up

How NAD Went Up Against
Electronics Giants of the 1970s
—And Won!

By Steve Guttenberg

FEATURE



The sound is what really differentiated NAD from the majors. With NAD, you could feel like the engineers were running the show.

I recently bought an original NAD 3020 integrated stereo amplifier for \$66 on eBay. As soon as I hooked it up to my Dynaudio Contour 1.1 speakers, I remembered why the little amp took the audio world by storm in the late 1970s.

My first encounter with NAD came when I worked as a high-end audio salesman at New York's Sound By Singer. We started selling NAD receivers in 1978, a year before the 3020 was introduced. Japanese-designed and -manufactured brands of the time were gorgeous, and NAD's gray plastic faceplates weren't winning any beauty contests. That didn't bother my customers one bit; they loved NAD's simplicity and glitz-free appearance. In fact, young, hip audiophiles perceived NAD as the higher-quality alternative. But the sound is what really differentiated NAD from the majors. With NAD, you could feel like the engineers were running the show.

What paired with the 3020? Snell Acoustics' model J and K speakers, and to a lesser extent, Boston Acoustic A40s, were all popular with NAD customers. Rogers LS3/5A fan boys also scooped up 3020s. And since the little amp was launched a couple of years before the compact disc arrived, the Rega Planar 2 served as the go-to turntable.

The 3020 may have been rated at a mere 20 watts per channel, but it had 3dB of headroom. Hence, it could deliver 40 watts into 8 ohm loads, 58 watts in 4 ohms, and 72 watts into 2 ohms for brief periods of time. I doubt you can find a receiver today that safely drives 2-ohm loads. *(continued)*

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Peter Tribeman, NAD's US president at the time of the 3020's introduction, recalls the original demo at the Consumer Electronics Show. He hooked the 3020 up to four pairs of floor-standing AR speakers in parallel. The latter presented an absolutely brutal load (1.1 ohms) for the 3020, but the little amp experienced no problems. Crowds were amazed, and the feat was duplicated at many other 3020 demos, which established the brand as a serious player in a field dominated by giant Japanese electronics companies like Denon, Onkyo, Pioneer, Sony, and Yamaha. A few months later, the CES demo was repeated at the New York Hi-Fi Show. I wound up with a bunch of newly hatched audiophile customers sold on NAD.

Tribeman, who currently runs Atlantic Technology and Outlaw Audio, also delights in revealing what he calls the "Benign Error," which played a large role in the 3020's allure. Strangely enough, it was a mistake in the layout of the original circuit board. According to Tribeman, the "Benign Error" produced unintended "L-R crosstalk," which somehow generated more low-level detail and ambience.

The "Benign Error" was eliminated in the second-generation 3020A model, and with it, some of the original's appeal. More 3020As sold than 3020s. By the time Tribeman left the company, NAD had sold more than a half-million 3020s around the world.

The Sound by Singer staff had high hopes for the 7020, the receiver version of the 3020. But that model had serious reliability problems—as did many NAD products that followed in its wake. Early CD players sounded exceptional for the money, yet they kept crapping out. NAD became plagued with quality-control issues through the 1980s and into the 1990s. However, some of its products escaped such a fate, which is probably why the company maintained a very positive reputation.

Indeed, the biggest surprise of listening to my "new" 3020 came via the phono preamp. The sheer scale of the sound and dynamics were far beyond what I expected. It's not the most neutral-sounding pre you're going to find, and it's not all that quiet.

But the music's weight and solidity make up for any transparency deficiencies. Or maybe it's the midrange's grainless ease that I find so beguiling—even tube-like. Tom Jones' *Praise & Blame* studio LP is recorded live to analog tape, and the 3020 brings it all home. Jones may be in his 70s, but he isn't taking any prisoners on the session. While the amp sounds sweet with CD, it really comes into its own with vinyl.

Sure, a lot of my early NAD customers eventually moved up to higher-end gear and became card-carrying audiophiles. But the 3020 was the gateway drug that fueled their addiction. I can still hear why. ●

The biggest surprise of listening to my "new" 3020 came via the phono preamp. The sheer scale of the sound and dynamics were far beyond what I expected.

Eclipse

EMI'S EXHAUSTIVE PINK FLOYD REISSUE SERIES

By Bob Gendron and Jeff Dorgay



Photo by Storm Thorgerson

Why Pink Floyd? So asks the clever tagline given to EMI's exhaustive overhaul of the British legends' catalog. The statement also doubles as a straightforward query that begets two easy answers. While the group's records have seen myriad reissues, the band has never unlocked its vaults and allowed for the release of sought-after oddities. And, from a commercial standpoint, Pink Floyd and its record label realize that the open window on marketing physical media to the mainstream is quickly closing. A more apt slogan for the archival project might be "If not now, when?"

Spread across several phases and categories, the campaign is designed to please casual fans, newcomers, and diehards. The 16-disc *Discovery* box collects the band's studio records (also available individually) in newly remastered form, while Experience versions of *The Dark Side of the Moon*, *Wish You Were Here*, and *The Wall* add a bonus disc of previously unreleased related content to the classic album. Yet the greater temptations come courtesy of multi-disc Immersion box sets of the aforementioned titles, Pink Floyd's three most celebrated efforts. Loaded with extras, collectables, and options, they seemingly respond to one of the only criticisms of EMI's Beatles reissues—specifically, a paucity of bonus material.

Of course, sharp redesigns and lavish booklets mean little if the James Guthrie-remastered sound and assorted rarities fail to live up to expectation. Beginning with the first stage of releases, *TONE* takes you through the sonic merits of each studio-album remaster via tireless comparisons to myriad original LP pressings as well as previous digital editions. In addition, we interview Pink Floyd drummer Nick Mason and get lost inside *The Dark Side of the Moon* Immersion box set, emerging with fresh perspectives on content, sound, packaging, and value. (Similar explorations of the *Wish You Were Here* and *The Wall* Immersion sets will occur closer to their respective November and February 2012 release dates.) And yes, we spin and compare the new LP pressing of *The Dark Side of the Moon*.

Set the controls for the heart of the sun and prepare for interstellar overdrive. —**BG**



Discovering the New Pink Floyd Box Set

By Jeff Dorgay

Five years ago, Pink Floyd released *Oh, By the Way*, a catalog-encompassing European-made box set limited to 10,000 copies. Issued internationally in mass quantities, the new *Discovery* box set contains the same lineup of studio albums. Yet it's also worth mentioning that the *Oh, By the Way* retails for close to \$300, making *Discovery* a better value at \$199.

After spending several days listening to as many variations on the Pink Floyd catalog as imaginable, to me it's evident that the big jump in performance stems from *Oh, By the Way* as compared to the original CDs, which sound flat. Think of the contrast between the early Beatles CDs (also produced by EMI) and the recent remasters; the prior Floyd set represents a similar leap in quality. While the generic, late 80s Floyd releases are not overly harsh, they claim a smaller soundstage than either of the remastered versions.

James Guthrie gets the mastering credit on *Discovery* and a "remastering production" credit on *Oh, By the Way*, on which Doug Sax is listed as mastering engineer. But here's where the mystery thickens. Extensive A-B listening between the 2007 box and the new one reveals the slightest distinction between the two—and one that this writer strained to hear on a \$60,000 dCS stack. At times, it feels as if the new box has a few more molecules of dynamic range, but overall, the sound is basically identical. There is absolutely no difference between the two sets as experienced on a \$2,500 CD player, meaning, that for the mainstream listener, the box sets might as well be the same product.

That said, while the 2007 and 2011 remasters are essentially twins, enormous differences exist between the new discs and original CDs, even when played on a budget transport. Whereas the original CDs keep the sound distinctly between the speakers, the new discs provide a more expansive left-to-right presentation, along with more depth. The high frequencies are free of grain and distortion, and the slight bit of tape hiss, especially on the oldest discs, suggests that the analog masters were procured. All the remasters boast a level of warmth and openness not always associated with digital.

On the band's debut, *Piper at the Gates of Dawn*, the psychedelic classic "Interstellar Overdrive" offers more defined bass lines. And while the re-

channeled stereo effect on CD might not appeal to purists that love the original mono release, it adds a welcome hallucinogenic element. Moving up to 1971, *Meddle* reveals a much more elaborate and dense mix. The remastered CD again gets the nod over the original, revealing a wealth of cool electronic effects as well as a heavy bass line.

Such factors helped make Pink Floyd a favorite in hi-fi-store demos for years to come. Unless you have a pristine UK version, the new *Meddle* sounds considerably more dynamic than the US LP, especially on Side Two, on which "Echoes" (at 23:29) takes up the entire side. The howling dog at the beginning of "Seamus" is more convincing on the CD, too. (*continued*)



Photo by C Jill Furmanovsky-rockarchive.com

(For coverage of the biggest-selling Floyd albums—*Dark Side of the Moon*, *Wish You Were Here*, and *The Wall*—please see our reports on the Immersion box sets.)

On *Momentary Lapse of Reason* and *The Division Bell*, the two albums created after bassist/vocalist Roger Waters' departure, the gap between the original CD and the remastered discs converges—probably because the pair was recorded digitally, whereas the rest of the catalog was recorded on analog equipment. Again, the remasters get the nod, but just slightly, as they show subtle traces of extra depth and clarity.

How does *Discovery* (and the set's individually available CDs) fare against vinyl? In an exhaustive comparison of the *Discovery* discs and various LP releases, the former are equal to and, on the whole, more enjoyable than garden-

variety US vinyl pressings—particularly worn copies. And, be honest: you probably spun these records to death in the 70s. While the US LPs get a slight nod in regards to analog warmth, they are fairly murky, lack in midrange clarity, and, in some cases, fall short in dynamics. The first thing you notice with the CD remasters is their extra punch and sparkle.

Those fortunate enough to have early-stamper UK, German, or Japanese vinyl pressings own the motherlode. The aforementioned match the detail of the digital discs and claim peerless tonal purity. However, the new CDs are good enough to please even collectors by functioning as daily drivers that will minimize wear on the more valuable vinyl. Listeners with excellent digital front ends should come away extremely impressed. I did.

Like its predecessor, *Discovery* offers mini-LP packaging. However, the printing lacks the intricate nature of the 2007 box, which features heavier cardboard sleeves and disc artwork that mirrors that of the original LPs. The discs in *Discovery* claim stylized artwork unique to the set. Similarly, an exquisitely rendered 40-page book contains unpublished artwork from Storm Thorgerson, yet the printing quality doesn't carry over to the CD covers. Stylistically, the Japanese Mini LP versions remain the benchmark for the Floyd CD catalog. In terms of reproduction quality, they are the equivalent of the recent Beatles discs.

Yes, completists will want everything. But if you already own *Oh, By the Way*, you will gain no new ground with *Discovery*. However, if you still just clutch the original CDs or worn vinyl copies, these new remasters provide a highly satisfying upgrade.

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The Dark Side of the Moon Immersion Box Set

By Bob Gendron

Three prism-stamped black marbles that likely will never see much daylight outside of their pouch. An 100% viscose printed scarf that wouldn't be out of place around an opera patron's neck. A facsimile concert ticket tucked into a professional envelope. Four collector's cards meant to mimic the cigarette cards of yesteryear. Nine thematic coasters on which no self-respecting human will dare set a drink. An art print suitable for framing. These tokens represent much of the memorabilia stuffed inside the six-disc *The Dark Side of the Moon* Immersion box, a tricked-out set that aims to be the end-all-be-all version of the iconic 1973 album.

Immersion volumes for *Wish You Were Here* and *The Wall* will follow, and the rest of the British group's catalog has been remastered in the newly minted and illustratively appointed *Discovery* set. It's all part of a capacious reissue project that could very well be the last of its kind in an era turning away from physical digital media. (Note: Obsessive types will probably detest one aspect of the Immersion packaging. While placed on lock-down mechanisms, discs can come loose in transit and slide around the inside of the box.)

Featuring new graphic designs by the band's resident artist, Storm Thorgerson, and the iconic record in every conceivable digital fashion, as well as two 26x26-cm booklets, the heaviest of all *The Dark Side of the Moon* reissues is in many aspects true to its name. Visually and aurally, it immerses fans into its contents and presents no less than ten ways to experience the studio LP. Audiophiles strictly bent on sound—forwards, sideways, and reverse—get their holy grail. Yet, ironically,

in a year in which opulent and expensive box sets that honor single albums are the norm, the ostensibly stuffed package unintentionally begs the question: Is it enough?

On the surface, raising such an issue seems greedy and grumpy. Short of containing replica vinyl seven-inch singles or any vinyl itself, the Immersion entry covers the bases on how *The Dark Side of the Moon* can be experienced. In addition to a traditional CD, diehards get a DVD-A that boasts 2003's 5.1 surround mix in both 448kbps and 640kbps; 1973's 4.0 Quad mix in 448kbps and 640kbps; and 1973's LPCM stereo mix (newly remastered). Toss in a Blu-ray disc that presents the 5.1 surround, 4.0 Quad, and original stereo mix in 86kHz/24-bit audio—and another CD that makes available the original 1972 mix supervised by Alan Parsons for the first time—and repeat listeners stand to gain a better understanding of instrument placement than the artists that created the album. (continued)



Photo by Hipgnosis © Pink Floyd Music Ltd

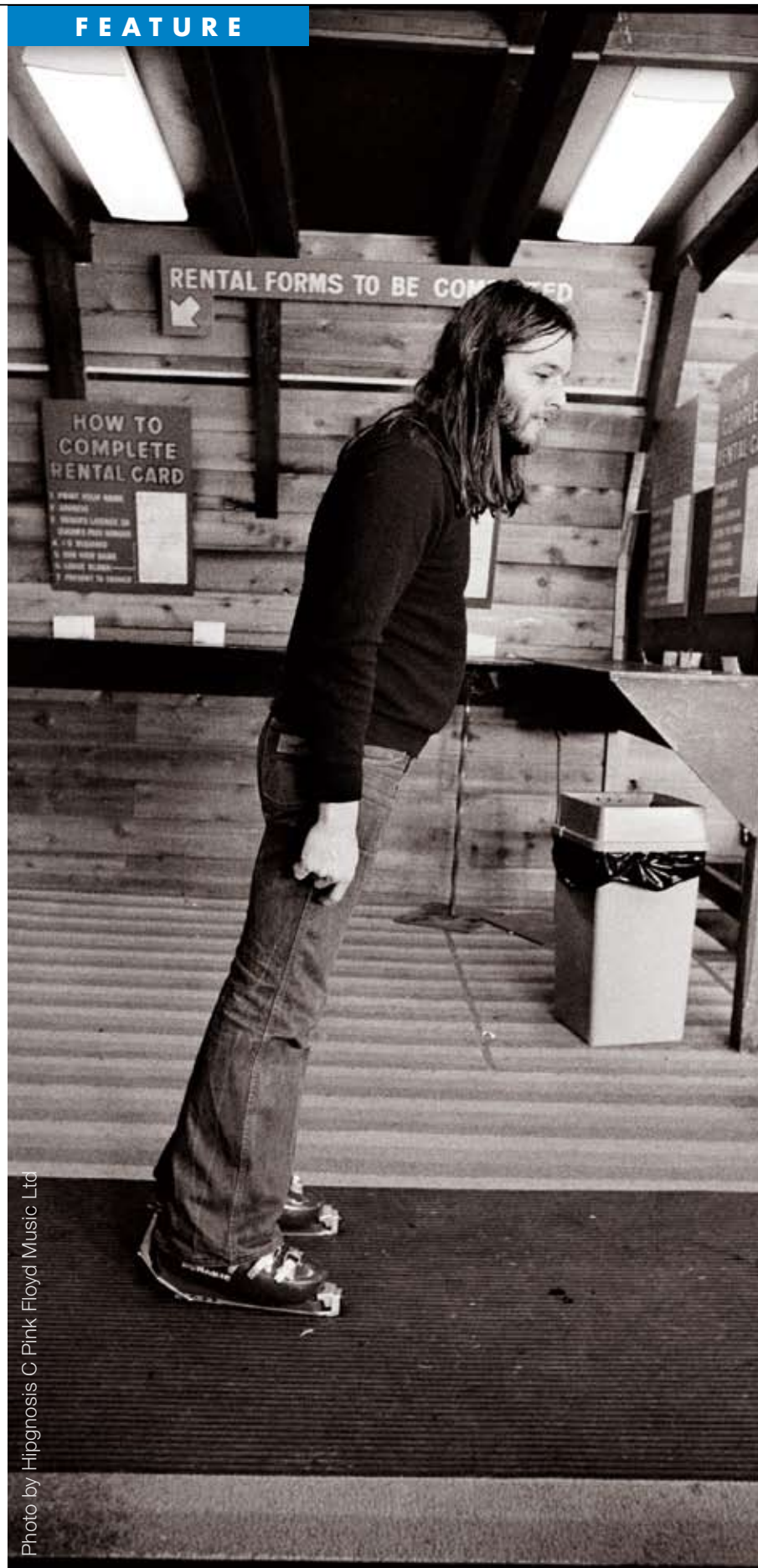


Photo by Hipgnosis © Pink Floyd Music Ltd



Photo by C Jill Furmanovsky-rockarchive.com

If it isn't expected in these situations, overkill is at least welcome. Yet while multichannel aficionados should have a feast dissecting and comparing different sonic choices, a more important quandary rests with the fact that more than half of the material here has already been released. The reservation as to whether this particular Immersion probes deeply enough isn't related to the recycling of the surround mix or Quad program but, rather, concerns what's absent. Namely, rarities in the form of demos, outtakes, and live cuts. The few intriguing tidbits that appear leave one wanting more.

Flashing a lascivious smile that would make the Mona Lisa proud, and bathed in dizzying red light, Roger Waters looks as if he's just swallowed a tab of LSD and entered a parallel universe. The blissed-out

scene marks the beginning of "Careful With That Axe, Eugene," captured live in Brighton 1972 in all its hazy full-color glory. With a smoking cigarette tethered to the end of his bass, Waters whispers wordless calls into the microphone and Pink Floyd ascends into psychedelic nirvana. Related visuals inform a spooked "Set the Controls for the Heart of the Sun," from the same concert. Nick Mason wallops the drums, mystical Indian melodies coarse across the slow-building arrangement, and, at fever peak, a gong's outer edges burst into flames. Inhale, and you might still be able to get a whiff of the scent of hallucinogenic drugs perfuming the air.

Such vignettes are exactly why super-deluxe box sets exist. However, they're the only live audio-video examples afforded.

They're teasers, brief hints of a bigger payoff that never arrives. Instead, three Concert Screen films constitute a bulk of the visual elements. These concise films were used as background projections while Pink Floyd played in Britain, France, and the United States, respectively. As historical relics, they're passably interesting. Computer-generated graphics of heartbeat monitors, images of landing strips, cartoon-sketched natural landscapes, animated clocks, pictures of working-class office dwellers, montages of exploding refrigerators, interiors of clinically white hospitals, and surrealist collages complement the album's lyrical topics and moods. But do even the most dyed-in-the-wool Pink Floyd zealots need to see and hear the cumulative hour-long footage in DVD stereo and 5.1 as well as Blu-ray LPCM stereo and multichannel? *(continued)*

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FEATURE



Photo by Storm Thorgerson

A 2003 documentary on *The Dark Side of the Moon*, shot to coincide with the SACD release, does nothing to ease the disappointment over the dearth of revelatory material.

Granted, the high-resolution stereo and surround mixes sound exceptional (see the “Immersed in the Dark Side” sidebar). And the live performance of *The Dark Side of the Moon* at Wembley from 1974 (the same disc that accompanies the Experience version) demands frequent listening. Onstage, the music takes on a more impacting geometry, with knifing guitars and aggressive percussion driving the rhythms forward. An extended rendition of “Money,” especially, transcends its studio counterpart, courtesy of funk washes and David Gilmour’s sharply penetrating treble-based guitar fills. Here, the group sticks to an exactness demanded by omnipresent pre-recorded voices and effects yet manages to transcend potentially sterile limitations.

Further insight is gleaned from a pair of demos on the set’s final CD. Richard Wright’s solo piano interpretation of an early “Us and Them” enchants with simplicity, beauty, and austerity. Waters’ acoustic framework for “Money” foreshadows the blockbuster that would soon be adorned with ringing cash registers. Alas, the original mix for the album contains few surprises, and the live instrumental tracks from 1972 that served as foundations for several *The Dark Side of the Moon* songs cry out for context. The latter should’ve been provided by the kind of encompassing essay that usually graces normal-scale box sets. However, apart from a Thorgerson-dominated art booklet and an adjoining tour-related photo-essay booklet, perspective is left to the listener. None of the band members contribute reflective prose, an unthinkable shortcoming given the record’s stature and myth. Is that really all there is? In this case, yes.



Photo by © Jill Furmanovsky-rockarchive.com

Immersion Sonics

Becoming Immersed in the Dark Side

By Jeff Dorgay

No version of *The Dark Side of the Moon* has ever invited more sonic comparison opportunities than those contained in the Immersion box.

Rustling up a -2 German pressing, -5 late 70s UK pressing, Japanese ProUse pressing, and MoFi's UHQR for stereo evaluation, it became clear that as good as the current CD mastering is, it still falls short of the best available vinyl, even if it's easily on par with (and occasionally better than) an average US pressing you can find in used bins for about \$10. The German and MoFi editions boast the best overall balance and offer monstrous dynamics, an abundance of subtle details, and the largest soundstage. Alas, the UK and Japanese pressings lag, and claim a slightly depressed midrange.

Better news is delivered via the DVDA disc with multiple sound options. It possesses a level of resolution that none of the CDs match and an overall clarity that rivals that of the finest LP versions. For those without access to the absolute best vinyl editions, the DVDA easily suffices as the go-to copy of the record. The Quad mix is another treat. While I've never been a multichannel fan, the Quad configuration gives off a trippier feel than the 5.1 mix and keeps with the period better than the more modern multichannel version.

The arms race between the SACD and DVDA gives an edge to the latter. Now eight years old, the fabled hybrid SACD owns more resolution in the higher frequencies, which some might accuse as being slightly thin, whereas the DVDA enjoys a more analog-like feel—definitely more robust and weighty on the bottom end, with more overall texture. The alarm clocks in "Time" are more distinctly defined and the acoustic instruments, particularly the saxophone on "Us and Them," feel more three-dimensional on DVDA.

As our staff collector likes to say, "There isn't a bad copy of *The Dark Side of the Moon*, but they are all different." And so, Pink Floyd fans have yet another version to add to their collection, with all of its idiosyncrasies.



The Final Cut

The Latest Vinyl Pressing of *The Dark Side of the Moon*

By Jeff Dorgay

Just when it seemed that there couldn't be any more variations on Pink Floyd's classic *The Dark Side of the Moon*, especially given the new Immersion box set, out comes another vinyl edition. This EMI pressing claims to be sourced from the analog master and remastered by James Guthrie, the same engineer that handled remastering duties on the 0 and *Discovery* box sets.

With the valves in my phono preamplifier still warm from my other Floyd comparisons, and prime pressings of *The Dark Side of the Moon* on hand from Germany, Britain, and Japan, it was time to give everything one final spin. Critics tend to rate the Japanese Pro Art and early UK Harvest pressings at the top. Both sound excellent. Yet the Japanese pressing has a slightly forward edge and the UK's mids are consistently pushed back by an equally miniscule amount.

While the -2 German pressing (our staff collector's favorite edition) possesses excellent tonal balance, Mobile Fidelity's UHQR version reigns in my system—especially with the AVID Acutus Reference SP 'table, SME V tonearm, and Koetsu Urushi Blue cartridge. (Note: This conclusion came via extra-credit listening after I made initial comparisons on identical AVID Volvere SP turntables.)

While some listeners claim to enjoy the 30th Anniversary edition of *The Dark Side of the Moon* pressed in the Netherlands several years ago, apart from the rumored-to-be-excellent test pressings, the product that made it into consumers' hands falls short. As our collector, Tom Caselli, says: "It sounds as if when they were cutting the lacquer, someone forgot to turn the Dolby on." I couldn't agree more. The highs sound off-kilter. The new EMI LP looks identical to the latter reissue, with the blue triangle on a purplish black background. Of course, the numbers in the dead wax indicate that this is, indeed, *another* pressing.

Fortunately, the sonic difference is night and day, and for the better. While the new pressing lacks the ultimate ease of the finest vinyl, it is reasonably good and,

if anything, closest to the Japanese Pro Art disc. Cymbals are vaguely forward and a tad crunchy. I would not be surprised if someone confirms at a later date that this LP is actually sourced from a high-resolution digital file, albeit an excellent transfer.

In terms of texture, the LP greatly exceeds all the other US pressings—even if it falls short of the best European and Japanese pressings. When auditioning any superior *The Dark Side of the Moon* LP, you can hear breathing during the saxophone part in "Us and Them." Moreover, the voiceover at the end of "Eclipse" effortlessly blends into the mix and offers an all-encompassing presence. Here's where the current remaster falls short. It's as if the notes are well played but not felt.

If you already own one of the aforementioned excellent examples, there's no reason to spend another \$30 unless Floyd madness ensues and you just have to have it. However, the reissue will do wonders for fans only in possession of a worn or US pressing. The same can be said for the standard MoFi version that, sonically, isn't far removed from the UHQR edition and can be had used for about \$15-\$25.

Setup Notes

How I Figured Out Which One is Pink

In contrasting myriad versions of Pink Floyd's *The Dark Side of the Moon*, I tried to make comparing one version to another version as easy and straightforward as possible. First, an identical pair of AVID Volvere SP turntables, with identical SME 309 tonearms, Sumiko Pearwood Celebration II cartridges, and Furutech AG-12 tonearm cables assured we were comparing discs on a synonymous platform. The latest Feickert protractor and the Feickert Analog software suite guaranteed both 'tables were perfectly matched in every way. Finally, the Audio Research Phono REF 2 phono preamplifier assured equal inputs *and* the ability to cue up two copies *The Dark Side of the Moon*, sit back, and compare A to B without having to guess, even for a brief duration, how one or the other sounded. ●



Photo by C Jill Furmanovsky-rockarchive.com



Photo by C. Jill Furmanovsky-rockarchive.com

“Who Is Interested? Well, I Am”

A Conversation With Pink Floyd Drummer Nick Mason

By Bob Gendron

Pink Floyd’s reissue series may represent the final time that a major artist’s full catalog receives the deluxe treatment in the manner of enhanced CDs, multiple box sets, redesigned packaging, and auxiliary analog reissues. Drummer Nick Mason—the band’s only contiguous member—recently talked with editor Bob Gendron about various details, memories, and procedures related to the massive campaign. In clarifying truths and recalling history, his insightful comments will likely surprise even the most diehard Floyd fans and committed audiophiles.

B: *You’ve heard Pink Floyd’s studio records countless times. What jumps out at you when you listen to the new remasters?*

N: The thing that strikes me is not so much the quality, although that is interesting and improved. But [the pleasure] really comes from listening to things that I’ve forgotten about. For all of our career, we never really ever revisited old demos or leftover material. The tendency has always been to put that to one side when the record is finished or when we’ve moved on and started doing other shows. Sometimes, you come across ideas that are still quite fresh or interesting, and while they were superceded by some new idea, they still have validity in their own right.

Is there anything specific you heard that you feel the band should have revisited?

The one that astonishes me that we didn’t pick up on is a version of “Wish You Were Here” that has [violinist] Stephane Grappelli playing on it. First of all, it was just a delight to hear because I always understood that it had been recorded over and we had no record of it. But also, when I did hear it, I was astonished. And I haven’t done so yet, but I must ask Roger and David if they can remember why on earth we didn’t use it. It’s still incredibly powerful.

Having had the chance to survey the catalog again, what is the single piece of music closest to your heart?

A version of “On the Run,” recorded long before we actually put it together on the record with the VCS3 tape loop, where it’s played as sort of a jazz piece. It has a rather

uptempo drum thing. I listened to it and thought, ‘Good lord, is that me playing?’ I hardly recognize the band, the style, or anything else. That sort of surprise is terrific.

Take me through some memories conjured up by the bonus material.

It conjures memories of touring in the early to mid 1970s, and putting on those shows. If you looked at the concerts now, you’d just think they were quaint—that’s the word for it. They are so small compared to not what we later did, but to what everyone does now. Virtually every artist today would expect to do quite a lot of staging and music production wherever they are playing. It’s that thing of remembering—the very early cherry pickers, for instance. Hydraulic towers with mounted lights. They are tiny now, but at the time, it was a really groundbreaking idea that you actually carried all of this stage lighting with you and made it part of the show.

Would you deem The Wall production “quaint” as well?

Quaint is the right word. *The Wall* came later, but if you look at, for instance, the *Ummagumma* sleeve: There is a picture of our touring crew and all of our equipment laid out. Well, most people have that in their back room now. It all fits into a small van. But at the time, it seemed like a gigantic amount of stuff. *The Wall* is interesting because the version that Roger is doing now is a fantastic leap—not so much musically because he’s adhered very rigorously to the original parts played on the record—in terms of the movie parts that have been added to the show. It’s fantastic, and absolutely 30 years further down the line. *(continued)*



Photo by Hipgnosis © Pink Floyd Music Ltd

Speaking of visuals, do you recall being associated with the visual content that's now included on the box sets?

The visuals divide into different periods. There are three major periods: The stuff we originally did for *Dark Side of the Moon*, which was done by various people. There was an animator named Ian Eames who did a particular series of clocks that have stood the test of time. And then there was a second wave of film done by Hungarian film director Peter Medak. And then, finally, the Gerald Scarfe film that was done for *Wish You Were Here*. The interesting thing with his stuff is that some of it moved on; it was the forerunner of what got used in *The Wall*. I'm so used to computer animation now. The actual technology is quite clunky, but the visuals are stunning.

To what extent was the band involved in the visual design of the album artwork?

There's no easy answer to that. Not unlike the way the music was put together, it was very different from image to image. The most famous one, the prism, by Storm [Thorgerson], arrived at the studio as five different rough ideas. Within an instant, all of us agreed that the prism was absolutely the right thing, and to go with Storm's idea. We just rubber-stamped it immediately. There are other visuals where we went backwards and forwards, and in a few cases, there were ideas that initially came from the band and then, Storm developed them. Generally those ideas were less successful—I think Storm would back me up on that. [Laughs]

What's your take on the reissue redesigns?

Terrific, because I'm of an age where I really do see physical records disappearing and regret that [trend]—and regret all of the artwork that goes with them. This is maybe not the very last chance, but very late on for Storm to really have another look at things, decide which is best, and add some new bits and pieces. For me, that's one of the great attractions of the reissue project. We can make sure that every piece of visual art we've done, plus a bit more, is made available and there for the record, so to speak.

How long has the reissue project been in progress?

It's been in the works for a couple of years. Of course, what happened is that the idea was mentioned two years ago and a lot of the push came from the record company, EMI, which said, 'You know, you really ought to do this.' We were initially very lukewarm. We felt that we'd done virtually every version of the catalog that we possibly could. But as the first year went by, we started unearthing more product that could go into it. And then we found ourselves becoming interested in it. It began to make more and more sense. For me, it was the realization that I actually [explore] with other artists. Like with jazz albums; I'll go out and buy an eight-album John Coltrane box set, which is full of outtakes. And you think, well, 'Who is interested?' Well, I am. So if I'm interested in it with an artist, it makes sense to let our fans have access to such material.

Is the rare footage coming from personal or record label archives?

Most of it has come from EMI's archives rather than our own. The only things that I've turned out have been some very early demos that we made before we were even signed, which contains some very nice Syd

Barrett songs. But for the most part, it's been EMI. The company has very extensive vaults and pretty good cataloging. But what happened this time is that there was a much more concerted effort to look through the archives. The trouble is that, like most archives, there are always a few things that have been miscataloged or haven't been properly checked. This time, quite a lot of stuff was brought up from the vaults, listened to, and checked. That is how, for instance, the Grappelli version of "Wish You Were Here" got discovered.

The multichannel options seemingly parallel the unreleased material in that they represent new horizons for the listener. Do you think surround makes for a better experience?

I'm fond of the 5.1 and so on. I think it gives an extra depth to the music. But we're all coming to terms with the fact that the embracing of the digital revolution wasn't entirely satisfactory. It's really interesting how many people are talking about going back to vinyl. You know, when I say 'a lot of people,' I mean a tiny percentage. I don't think it's really going to catch on. But there is still enormous enthusiasm for that warm, particularly odd sound you get from vinyl. And it's not the cleanest, most accurate sound. But it does have this quality that people really like. To some extent, it will be really interesting to see the feedback. I'm not sure in this day and age how many people still have stereo sets capable of giving them the full effect. I was just talking with some people at breakfast this morning about the technical side of the reissues, and I said, 'Maybe we should put a sort of health warning and say it is not advised to buy this record unless you have speakers that require at least two men to carry them into the room.' [Laughs] *(continued)*

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INTERVIEW



Photo by Hipgnosis © Pink Floyd Music Ltd

Regarding sonics, were you conscious when you were recording albums—especially Dark Side of the Moon, Wish You Were Here, and The Wall—that they would be, more than 30 years on, be used as references by producers, engineers, and audiophiles?

No. It's astonishing in some ways. I think anyone who went into rock and roll in the 60s or early 70s entered into it with the belief that it was rock and roll and it was ephemeral and that it would be all over. Anything that you produced would last around a year, and in your working life, you'd be lucky to get five years. Of course, it changed. It became a completely different thing. The point I would like to get across is that if the quality of some of this stuff is so good—and I believe it is—it's a testament to Abbey Road and the people

that worked there and the systems they had in place in the 60s, where the kids joined as apprentices and really learned the trade of making records and miking things up and going for the highest standards of loading the tape.

It's shocking to hear you admit that, even in the wake of The Piper at the Gates of Dawn, Pink Floyd believed it would disappear without a trace within a few years.

[Laughs] We're all very privileged and lucky to have had a 40-odd-year career out of it. Obviously, after the first 10 or 15 years, you realize it's not likely going to go away. But initially, in the late 60s, when we kicked off and had no idea where this would lead or end up, it's what we thought. ●

An Updated Classic

NAD C316 BEE Integrated Amplifier

By Jeff Dorgay

The NAD 3020 integrated amplifier was a marvel in its day. While rated at only 20 watts per channel, it boasted a beefy power supply and fair amount of headroom, giving it the ability to drive a wide range of speakers. It also included a bevy of features, not the least of which was a high-quality MM phono preamplifier and “soft clipping” circuit that prevented more than a few tweeters from ruin. All this audio goodness came wrapped in a stark, olive green-tinted black case for just \$219.





The C316 BEE power is rated at twice that of the 3020 and claims NAD's latest PowerDrive circuitry from the company's flagship amplifiers.

The C316 BEE power is rated at twice that of the 3020 and claims NAD's latest PowerDrive circuitry from the company's flagship amplifiers. Tone controls can now be entirely switched out of the circuit, and an 1/8" jack on the front panel accommodates the high-level output of a portable music player.

As one of many audiophiles with fond memories of the NAD 3020 (an original, not the later A or B version), I had tons of fun bringing one back into the studio for a serious listening session. Mark Stone and the folks at NAD North America gave the 3020 seen in this issue's Old School section a complete checkup, verifying that it still more than meets its original design specs. Our test sample exceeded the stated 20wpc at 8 ohms rating by a healthy margin, producing 29wpc at rated distortion. (Steve Guttenberg lends further insights on page 48.)

Still, while the 3020 is a stout amplifier on the bench and in the listening room, time has come to move on to the latest entry-level NAD integrated. The new model's form factor remains similar, albeit slightly slimmer. The LEDs follow modern fashion and are blue instead of the red popular in the late 70s. A remote is included in the box. And, adjusted for inflation, the \$329 C316 BEE makes for an even monetary better value than the 3020 in the early 80s.

Better Than I Remember

It's always easy to wax poetic about the past, deluding oneself into thinking that things were better back in the old days. While the 3020's power meter was constantly pegged driving my Acoustat 2+2s during the early 80s, it barely broke a sweat powering my current Verity Audio Rienzes, which present a much more benign load.

At modest listening levels, neither amplifier caved, but the difference in sound between the two units proved dramatic—and in favor of the old.

Teamed with the Rienze floorstanding speakers and a dCS Paganini stack, and cabled with a full complement of Cardas Clear, the demonstration epitomized what I'll call audio-foolery. Who in their right mind would mate a couple of \$300 integrated amplifiers with \$100k worth of ancillaries? Guilty as charged, but the results were telling.

Differences between old and new models are unmistakable. The current amplifier possesses more extension at the upper end of the spectrum, but the vintage unit wins in every other category. The 3020 enjoys a more vivid, almost tube-like midrange, and takes control of the Rienze's woofers with more authority. *(continued)*



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FEATURE

While the C316 BEE is a great little amplifier, the 3020 is a serious piece of audiophile kit. When listening to Thomas Dolby's "My Brain is Like a Sieve" from *Aliens Ate My Buick*, the electronic effects have an almost buoyant feel, wafting back and forth across the soundstage. Yet they stay in a single plain when experienced via the C316 BEE. The wet and expansive echo in Tim Curry's voice on the title track of *Simplicity* has depth on the 3020, but none on the new amplifier. The most explicit revelation occurred during the intro of Keith Emerson's "Ignition" from his recent *Keith Emerson Band*. Where the 3020 reproduces the low organ notes, all is silence when played through the C316 BEE.

A similar verdict is reached listening to Tone Loc's "Funky Cold Medina." The C316 BEE just doesn't have the grunt. The final nail in the coffin came courtesy of the acoustic guitar intro to Tracy Chapman's "Fast Car." A tonal richness exists with the 3020 that fools you into thinking a much more expensive amplifier is behind the scenes. No wonder the audiophile press labeled this amplifier a "giant killer." At modest volume, it more than held its own with the industry's best when introduced in the early 80s.

When swapping my aforementioned setup for an iPad, Aperion Intimus 5 bookshelf speakers (\$599/pair), and Radio Shack cable, the differences between the two amps practically disappeared. But that's what makes the 3020 so cool: You can hook it up to a pair of \$11,000 speakers and be impressed. While the C316 BEE may not ultimately appeal to audiophile sensibilities (and let's face it, what \$329 integrated amplifier does today?), it makes for a great graduation present for a music-loving teenager about to head off to college. *(continued)*



Progress Worth the Price

Don't get me wrong: The NAD C316 BEE represents very good value and performance for the price. Like its predecessor, it serves as a great cornerstone for a budget hi-fi system. If mated with a decent pair of \$250-\$600 speakers, it's sure to impress the uninitiated. And if you've never experienced a 3020 in great shape, you'll probably be bowled over by the C316 BEE.

The idea of a brand-spanking new amplifier with no scratches or fingerprints, as well as a warranty, will likely appeal to 99.9% of listeners that would rather not take the chance of getting an abused relic. 3020s usually got passed on from friend to friend, creating a lot of audiophile goodwill. But more often than not, they gathered numerous abrasions in the process. However, if you do happen to stumble across a mint 3020, buy it.

Removing the cover of the C316 BEE reveals a tidy layout that's a model of simplicity, with a large toroidal transformer and beefy heat sink for the power amplifier's output stage. By comparison, the 3020 looks like someone emptied a colander of pasta on the circuit board. And the C316 BEE does have a remote, so progress isn't all bad.

Besides, the NAD C316 BEE offers everything you need around which to build a great budget hi-fi system. It sounds good, fits nearly anywhere, and offers much better sound than what local big-box bandits sell for the same amount of money. Will it shift millions of units like its predecessor, and end up in dorm rooms everywhere? We can only hope. ●

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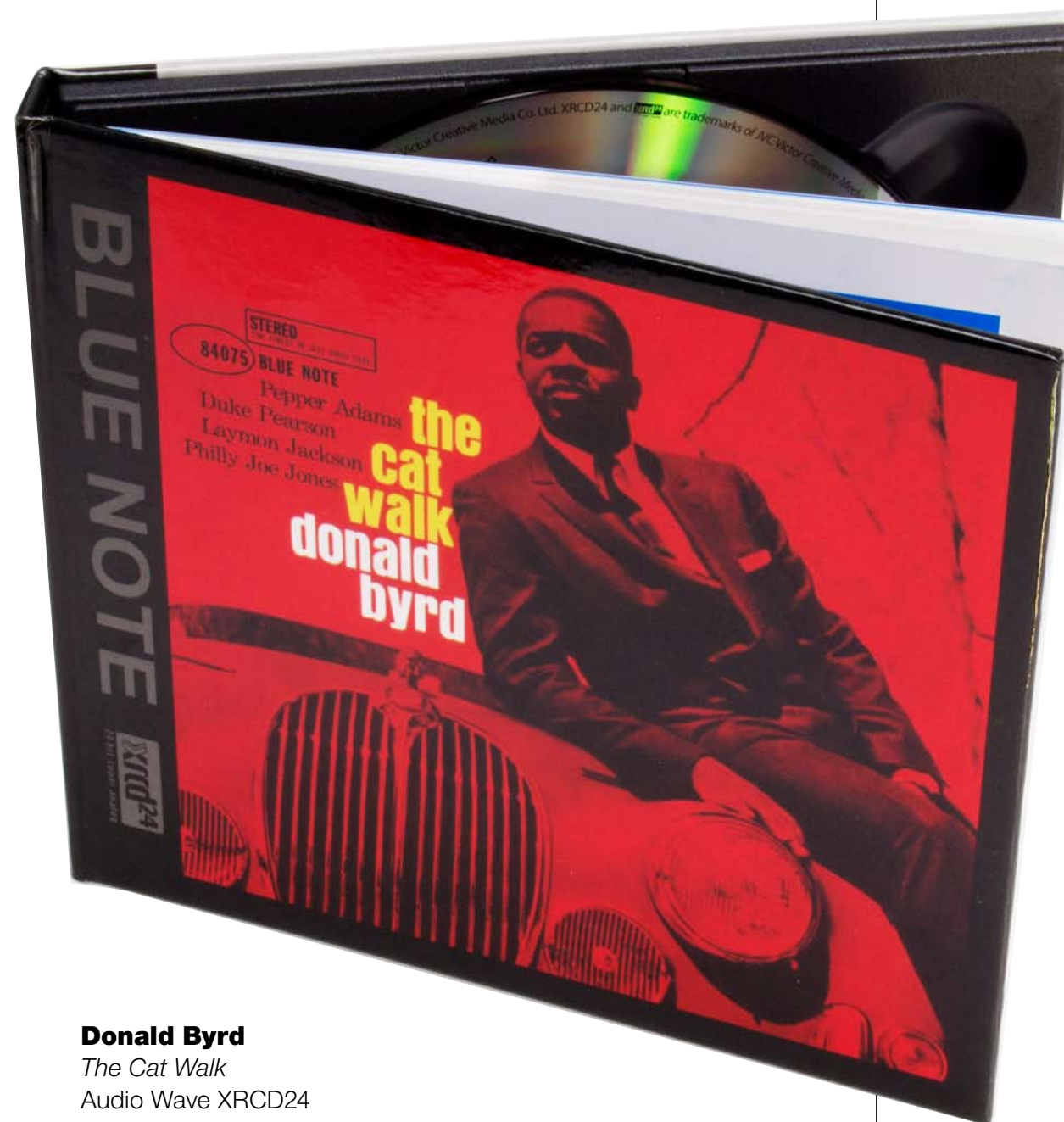
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Audiophile Pressings

By Paul Rigby and Jeff Dorgay

Click on Album Title to purchase from Music Direct

A stalwart 1961 Blue Note recording, Donald Byrd's *The Cat Walk* features pianist Duke Pearson, bassist Laymon Jackson, energetic drummer Philly Joe Jones, and baritone saxophonist Pepper Adams. Pearson does more than hit a few blacks and whites. He adds a selection of his own arrangements and contributes three originals, including "Say Your Mine," which highlights the reissue's cosy sonics. Unlike poor masters, Audio Wave's disc presents Byrd's trumpet in an intimate fashion. The headliner lazily skims over the hills and troughs of his first solo. The passage is an early test for detail, and the XRCD24 passes with flying colors, also lending a carefully controlled bass support structure.



Donald Byrd
The Cat Walk
Audio Wave XRCD24

Indeed, the XRCD reveals a change in basic philosophy. This is not a straight remastering. Compared to the admirable Rudy Van Gelder CD edition, the XRCD is much quieter. I upped my amp gain by five notches to reach the same volume pushed out by the Gelder CD. On "Say You're Mine," the XRCD presents a wider soundstage on which Byrd is pushed way to the left instead of just left of center. Adams' baritone sax is nothing short of a revelation, and Jones sounds like he's been woken from a slumber. His animated percussion is now rife with clipped, sudden strikes and generous attack missing from the Gelder edition.

The title track is a perfect example of the two different approaches. The Gelder version begins the song with a wallop as Byrd's trumpet dominates and, if anything, is forward and a little bright in the upper mids. XRCD's take is cooler, more mature, civilized, and calmer, taking the music in stride. The introduction no longer punches between your eyes. Instead, you're treated to a multi-toned percussive entree and reminded that Byrd actually duets with Adams. Here, the sax has time to flow, providing a superior ensemble feel.

Moreover, on "Duke's Mixture," Pearson's piano is centrally placed, acting as a sort of fulcrum around which Byrd's trumpet and Adams' sax spin. The XRCD helps keep the entire track afloat with a sense of purpose and a level of transparency that gives the upper-midrange frequencies time under the sonic spotlight. Those that value tonal richness will be in heaven. —**Paul Rigby**



Horace Silver

Cape Verdean Blues
Audio Wave XRCD24

Created in 1965 after the seminal *Song For My Father*, this Horace Silver classic counts Joe Henderson on tenor saxophone, Woody Shaw on trumpet, J.J. Johnson on trombone, Bob Cranshaw on bass, and Roger Humphries on percussion.

After the tropical-themed title track reaches back into Silver's Portuguese roots, serious work kicks in with "The African Queen." It's also where the XRCD24 mastering plays a key role. Humphries' drumming establishes a dramatic tone and gives the upper-bass regions pause for thought, at which point a walking rhythm increases tension.

This music is all about shadows, meaning that the mastering must tread a careful yet subtle tightrope to maintain instrumental balance. On the standard Rudy Van Gelder CD, the track is bright and unfocused, with sonic smudges occupying spaces where grammatical intonation should be. The XRCD is the opposite, constantly stimulating the senses by offering startling textures instead of blaring noises and ribald tension in place of flatness.

While the Gelder CD is awash in almost-chaotic upper midrange frequencies that, on the title track, dance around with an exotic beat, the supremely balanced XRCD permits the ear to discern more personality within the percussion. Silver's rhythmic piano work is also enhanced with natural musicality. More importantly, his intricate keyboard work stands tall and finds room amidst Henderson's towering tenor sax.

The differences between the discs are never more apparent than on "Nutsville," during which the XRCD's pinpoint brass maintains drum momentum, driving the rhythm as whole. Moreover, Silver's piano is prevented from drowning within the heightened activity, affording it a Fred Astaire position where Silver hotfoots around each of his mates. Scintillating.

—Paul Rigby

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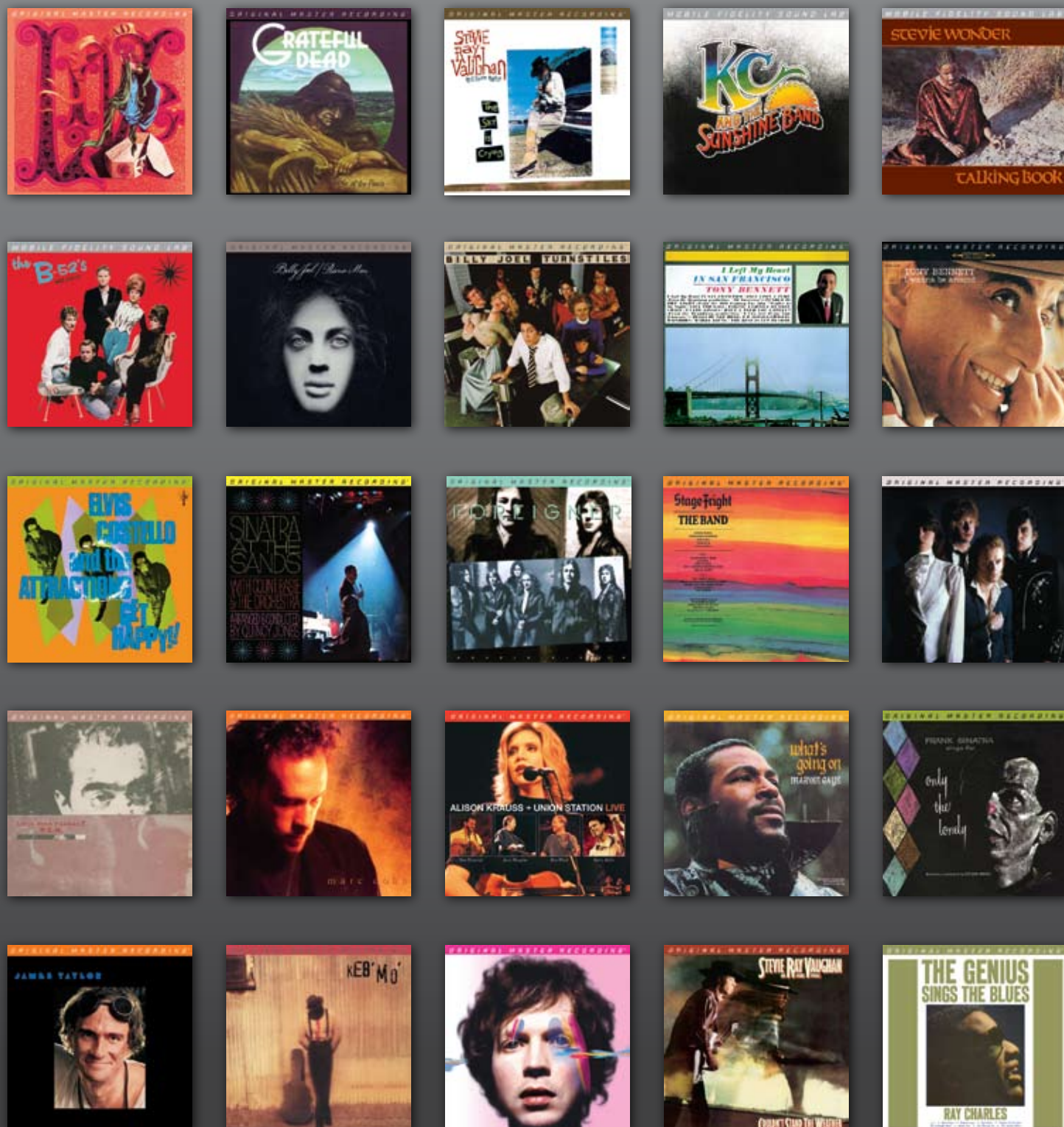
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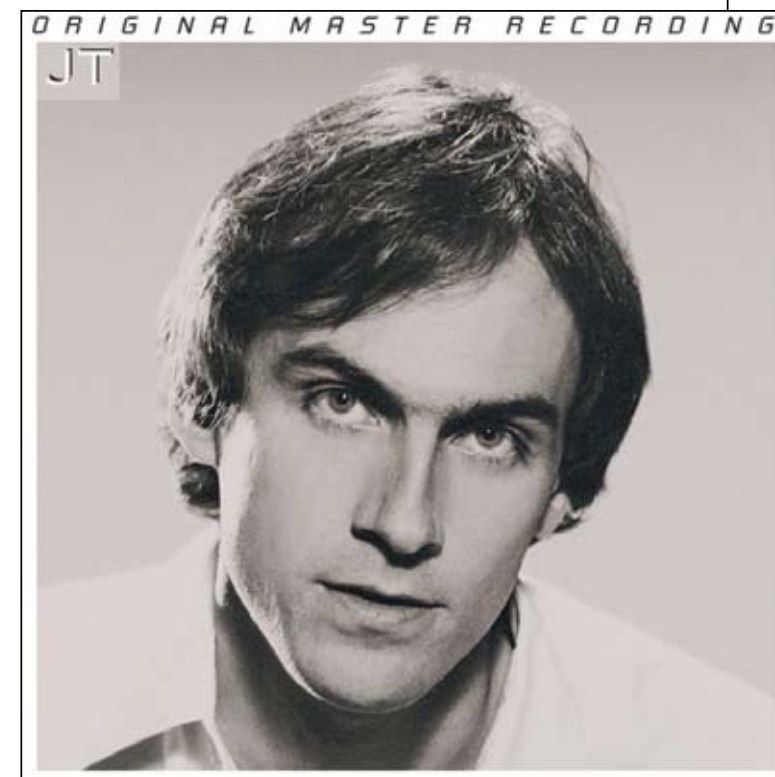


MUSIC

James Taylor

JT

Mobile Fidelity, 180g LP

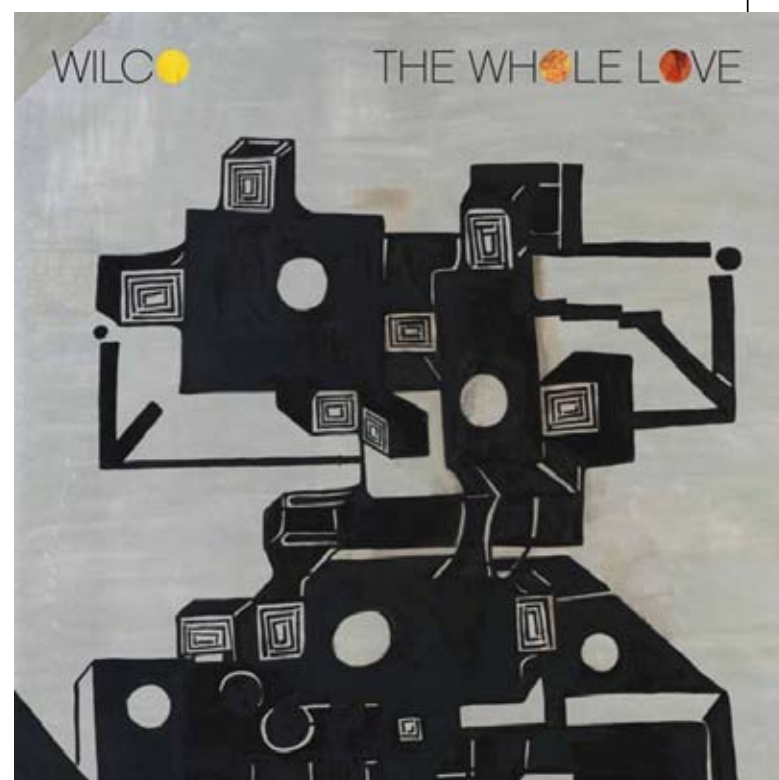


A side-by-side comparison with a 1A Columbia pressing reveals that while the original possesses a smidge of compression, it has more punch on the bottom end, serving as a perfect example of how judicious use of a compressor can make a rock record rock. Everywhere else, the MoFi gains the upper hand. Considering that a majority of songs on *JT* are of the slower variety, the audiophile label LP's sumptuous presentation is a treat. Taylor's voice is large and breathy, and surrounded by great guitar attack.

In addition, the MoFi edition boasts higher quality in two critical areas, the first being surface noise. Many 70s and 80s Columbia pressings are plagued with noise; this record is no different. Thanks to better vinyl and half-speed mastering, the new *JT* is extremely silent. My pressing lacks any clicks, ticks, or pops. MoFi's lower overall level eliminates the original's compression, which benefits all tracks save for the opening numbers on each side.

Moreover, the remainder of the album yields more low-level detail as well as extra space between notes. Taylor's acoustic guitar playing offers added resonance and decay, drum fills are better defined, and it's much easier to pick out Carly Simon's backing vocals. —**Jeff Dorgay**

Part of its ongoing James Taylor series, Mobile Fidelity's remaster of the singer/songwriter's eighth album is a smash. Each side of the 1977 effort begins with big, radio friendly hits—"Your Smiling Face" and "Handy Man," respectively. Indeed, *JT* stands as Taylor's last great record from both creative and sales standpoints. Only his earlier *Sweet Baby James* equaled this set's 3x-platinum status; none of his other studio records, however consistent, generated these numbers. (His 1976 *Greatest Hits* did sell 11 million copies.)


Wilco

The Whole Love
dBPM/Anti, 180g 2LP

Wilco has always championed a dense aural dynamic. On recordings such as *Sky Blue Sky* and *Summerteeth*, LP versions unscrambled the band's mix better than their CD counterparts. In keeping with tradition, Wilco again includes a full-length CD with the vinyl edition of *The Whole Love*.

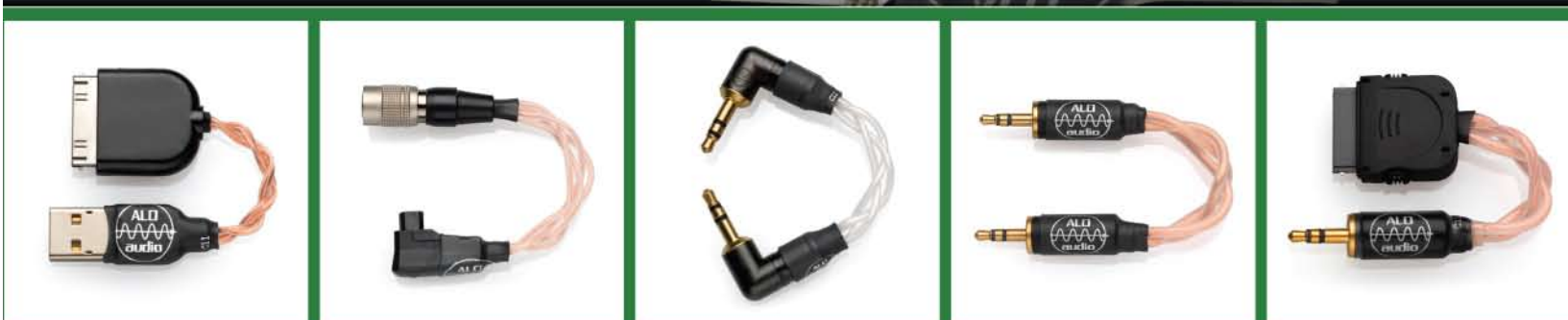
But this time, it's different. Once you hear the disc, you may never go back to the vinyl. Mastered by Bob Ludwig, the latter is compressed and rolled-off—and not by a small margin. The CD is tipped a shade to the bright side, but at least has air and dynamics.

From the first track, “The Art of Almost,” the soundstage on the CD extends well beyond the speaker boundaries, exuding life, whereas the LP just presents the song as a little ball of sound between the speakers. If you didn't know better, you'd swear the vinyl was the CD and vice versa. Unfortunately, it doesn't get any better. Blasé sound infects the entire LP.

It's unfortunate that, for the first release on its new label, Wilco lets the analog quality control slide. Get the deluxe version of the CD that comes with four bonus tracks. This is one instance where the vinyl doesn't guarantee better sound.

(For a feature-length review of *The Whole Love*, please see Todd Martens' piece in this issue.)

—Jeff Dorgay



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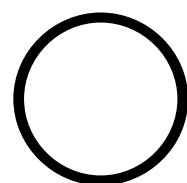
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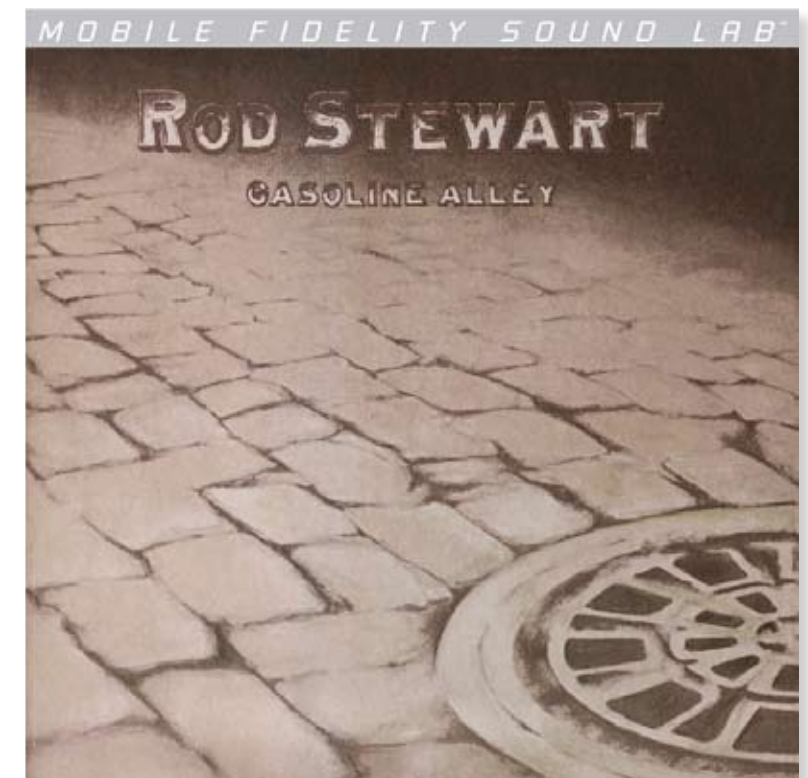
In this 1960 release, tenor saxophonist Tina Brooks, pianist McCoy Tyner, bassist Sam Jones, and drummer Clifford Jarvis join trumpeter extraordinaire Freddie Hubbard. It's Hubbard's first outing as the main man, and his promise is there for all to hear on the title track. This reissue grabs hold of Hubbard's playing and has it cut right through the mix, providing a dynamic upper midrange that imposes itself with force. Audio Wave lifts the bass, supplying form and roots with additional rhythmic support.

One of the most visible aspects of this title is how XRCD treats the upper midrange, a critical area in any jazz recording. On the Rudy Van Gelder CD, the title track is almost unlistenable—and this via a warming valve system complete with a valve-stage Icon Audio CD player. During Hubbard's solo, the upper mids feel uncomfortable at reasonably high volumes. The XRCD totally removes this forward aspect, allowing you to increase the volume and hunt for more detail. The latter duly arrives with the relatively subtle albeit insistent bass line which, on the Gelder edition, stays buried underneath Hubbard's blare. On the XRCD, Jones' bass functions a road—a guiding pathway upon which the other musicians frolic. Similarly, Brooks' tenor sax sounds far more relaxed, opening up to provide a more nuanced presentation.

My lone beef with most Blue Note recordings is how they treat supporting piano. Tyner seems like he's positioned 100 yards away, trussed up in a sack. The XRCD doesn't wholly correct the problem but manages to open up the piano, giving it a more rhythmic presentation.

More benefits occur during "All Or Nothing At All," on which Hubbard's complex solo work stumbles and sways like a gin-soaked drunk on the Gelder edition. The XRCD version restores order and stability, and Brooks' sax better blends in with Jarvis' drums, allowing successful interplay that defines this classic.

—Paul Rigby



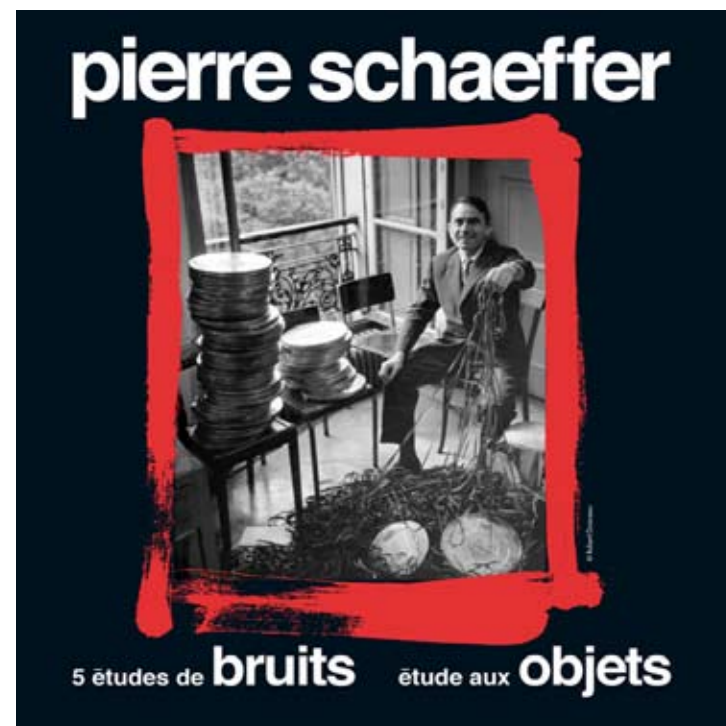
Rod Stewart
Gasoline Alley
 Mobile Fidelity Silver Label, LP

With early-stamper US Mercury pressings of this Rod Stewart classic only fetching \$10-\$12 and early British Vertigo pressings going for as high as \$100, Mobile Fidelity Silver Label's recent edition gets the good value award.

Comparing the Silver Label LP to the somewhat naff Mercury copy at my disposal proved interesting, even as the Mercury gave a good showing. While not as quiet as the new version, drums on the Mercury claim more texture. Cymbals are also more natural, but the Silver Label LP reveals warmer bass response. Stewart's voice is solid and clean on both pressings, so the burning question becomes: Do you want a quiet record and squeaky clean jacket, or do you prefer a little more soul in the mix? I'll take the Silver Label pressing, thanks. —Jeff Dorgay

Jean Michel Jarre*Rarities, Oxygene, Equinoxe, and Magnetic Fields***Pierre Schaeffer***5 études de bruits/étude aux objets*

For all: Dreyfus 180g LPs



If you want to understand Jean Michel Jarre, then you cannot ignore his teacher of three critical years, Pierre Schaeffer. A French musician and giant of the avant-garde scene, the *musique concrète* pioneer is largely responsible for the musical structures of modern electronica and hip-hop. *Musique concrète* takes an acousmatic sound approach—that is, you hear the sound but you might not necessarily know its source. Schaeffer lived to play with sounds, and *5 études de bruits/étude aux objets* serves as a superb demonstration of his practice. Indeed, Schaeffer loves to see how sonics interact and react with each other, and how listeners respond to this sequence of noises. As for melody? What melody?

Effectively two works on a single LP, Side A's *5 études de bruits* stems from 1948 and sounds it. The master is clear and content concise, but you get the obvious impression that it's an archival piece and demands to be listened to as such. The master's quality far exceeds the capability of the original recording, which is sometimes deficient and distorted, especially in the upper-mid regions.

The flip side finds material captured in 1959. Now that tape enters the equation (as well as improved studio facilities), the quality dramatically improves, making the subtle and startling effects of *étude aux objets* more immediate and engaging. The purpose seems to force bystanders to ask, "What comes next?" A playful and often witty recording, the LP teases the senses. Once it finishes, you might feel like a lab rat in a scientific experiment.

Enter Jarre and his new compilation, *Rarities*. Presented in an attractive gatefold package, the archival LP takes the listener from Jarre's leaving of Schaeffer's classroom to the verge of his breakthrough composition, *Oxygene*. There's never any doubt that he's a Schaeffer disciple. The technology might be more advanced, but the *musique concrète* style drenches the opening "Happiness Is A Sad Song." While unusual for Jarre, it's complete with a vocal track, albeit with unintelligible gibberish. An increasingly nightmarish composition, it gives way to the more melodic "Hypnose," which follows a krautrock arrangement.



Organic instruments add a completely unexpected pastoral vibe. The quality of both the mastering and pressing retains a 60s-style analog warmth.

Jarre's experimental melange continues as the LP progresses. Dabbling with aural flavors as diverse as the technology of the time allowed, he mixes the organic with early electronica. Tempos and mood vary, and it's not until 1970's "Windswept Canyon," the first track on Side B, that Jarre stumbles upon a settled form. Sweeping synth effects play around the bass percussion and arrive at a soft melodic center; the bones of his now-familiar style coming together. Despite various creative hiccups, Jarre is once again drawn back to this newfound approach on 1972's "Black Bird" and 1973's "The Burnt Barns." As the music moves through the 70s, the vinyl mastering maintains reproductive quality that, over such diverse sources, is equally consistent and appealing.

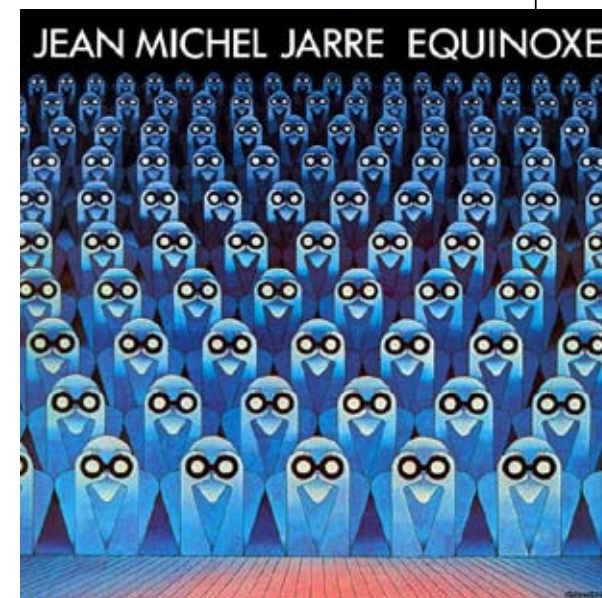
Oxygene, the first of three popular Jarre LPs remastered on vinyl for the first time since their original release, and mastered by the man himself, stands as the artist's commercial breakthrough. The 1977 release is deservedly viewed as a classic, but the reissue initially doesn't hit you between the ears. On the contrary, it sneaks up on you, and takes a few seconds to notice that the new mastering introduces a rich, silky smooth, deep chocolate flavor. Two minutes in, a deep bass sequence provides a more rounded low-frequency response than the original. It soon becomes obvious that the original recording is pregnant with silent distortion—the most insidious of varieties, and the type you only know is there only once it has been removed. (continued)

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Dynamics are also enhanced, and the upper-midrange far superior, particularly given the newly uncovered synth elements. Sure, you could demand more—clarity, bass structure, pizzazz. But doing so would be a tad churlish. This LP takes its place as the best version of *Oxygene* on the market, leagues better than the original.

One year removed from *Oxygene*, *Equinoxe* continues the former's bubbling synth washes and complex electronic multi-layering. The original pressing doesn't sound right, especially in the upper mids and treble areas that, again, seem drenched in distortion—the same sort that hampers *Oxygene*. However, bass is solid, and for an early electronic piece, the soundstage commendable. On the reissue, bass plumbs new depths, and while the introductory synth work doesn't extend the soundstage, it certainly makes better use of it. Upper mids offer greater transparency, allowing for a greater flow of information. Attention is drawn to different areas of the mix, making the melodic aspects surprising, fresh, and rebalanced.

1981's *Magnetic Fields*, provides many magical moments. The recording is quite aggressive in its upper mids and treble attack, with a steady and persistent undulation that doesn't offer respite. The original suffers from a forwardness and stumbles due to blundering, bloomy-ridden bass levels.

The new pressing brings a sense of calm—not unlike a mother arriving home to a house full of chaotic children, taking over from a flailing father, to not only control wayward energy but direct and put it to good use. Here, the upper mids and treble are steered to provide often-startling high-frequency effects. Bass is largely mellow and structured. Still, like the other LPs, more work could have been done to tighten here and push the envelope there. Nitpicking aside, the reissued *Magnetic Fields* is a joy to hear, offering a highly immersive experience, especially at high volumes.

—Paul Rigby

Macro

Music for Your Desktop

By Jeff Dorgay



One of the greatest virtues of the desktop audio environment stems from the fact that it doesn't require much power to yield great sound, making it a perfect place to experiment with SET amplifiers and/or wireless speakers in ways that don't jibe with a living-room setting. Next issue, we'll explore amplifier options. For now, we're concentrating on speakers.

Three of our choices are powered, and three are not, so mix and match to your heart's content. Our smallest and least-expensive selection, the UCube, is tiny and self-contained. The speakers can be utilized anywhere you can plug in a laptop. Meridian's DSP3200 requires connection to a Meridian system and constitutes the ideal additional zone for systems built around a Sooloos music server.

We also have four speakers that are traditional only in the sense that they require a power amplifier. And yet, they all differ, from the high style of the Audio Pro LV2 to Harbeth's new P3ESR mini monitor as well as a few almost-micro monitors from Polk Audio and Paradigm.

Whether you have \$150 or \$6,000 to spend, options abound. Be forewarned: Once you put a great pair of small speakers on your desktop, your headphones might collect some dust!

(Please note: This article is an overview. Follow the supplied links to the full reviews on our Web site.)

UltraLink UCube

\$149/pr.
www.ufiproducts.com

Brought to you by a company famous for offering good value and solid engineering in cable, UCubes could very well be the gateway high-end drug for the uninitiated. They've got everything you need to get hooked on better sound. High performance, cool cables, and stunningly handsome looks. And, there's no wall-wart power supply to lose or clutter up the stylish presentation. UCubes are easy to use and come with a well-written manual. If you need further direction, the Tech Zone section of the company's Web site will ease your mind.

Since UltraLink produces the UCube, a high-quality cable to connects the left and right speakers together via an RCA jack. A decent USB cable is included as well.

Available in white, black, silver, and red, the 3.25 x 3.25-inch UCubes are powered by your computer's USB bus and have built-in 15-watt-per-channel DSP amplifiers. The only bad news? They draw too much power to be run from an iPad, but work great with a MacBook Air.

Sound quality offers a substantial step up from iMac internal speakers and a huge jump from transducers in the MacBook Air. While they do not provide much in the way of bass response, midrange and treble clarity are significantly improved. Whereas with internal speakers, everything sounds like midrange mud, with the UCube, results sound more like music. Vocals are smoother, and an ample stereo soundstage floats between the computer. For example, while grooving to Can, I noticed the vocals to "Pinch" (off *Ege Bamyasi*) distinctly hovering right above my keyboard. The percussion effects, barely legible through the internal speakers, went from well beyond the speaker boundaries to right in front of my face. As it should be.



Audio Pro LV2

\$1,000/pr.
www.audiopro.com

Imagine a pair of small speakers that fit just about anywhere, sound great, look drop-dead gorgeous, and are free of wires. Well, almost wire-free: They still need a pair of power cables. But once powered, the Audio Pro LV2s can be operated by any wireless device. You can use the speakers in two ways—directly via the supplied dongle or through an AirPort Express. If you have multiple portable devices (iPhone, iPad, iPodTouch), mating the Audio Pro dongle to your wireless network is the way to go. Take advantage of Apple's latest AirPlay, merely select the wireless speakers option, and voila!

Photos do not do the LV2s justice. Covered in leather, the outsides are finished by a well-known company that produces very expensive handbags. It shows: These are very posh-looking units. It's wonderful to see such quality in a consumer-audio product, as the strategy bridges the technology gap with high style. These would not look out of place in rooms at a five-star hotel.

Featuring a 4.5-inch woofer and 1-inch soft-dome tweeter, each LV2 is powered by a pair of 25-watt Class D amplifiers and DSP crossover. Claimed frequency response is 45–22,000hz, which may be a bit optimistic on the low end. Nevertheless, the speakers showed solid bass response on both music and movies.

As much fun as the LV2s are on my desktop, they come into their own as bedside speakers. The iPad movie experience is greatly enhanced when combined with the LV2's expansive capability. Whether watching *South Park* or *Transformers*, they represent personal luxury at its best. And, the speakers have a subwoofer that wirelessly mates to the network.



Polk Audio TL3

\$149.95/ea.
www.polkaudio.com

Earlier this year, we gave the Polk Audio TL2s a glowing review. The latter are remarkable for their \$200/pair price, and the slightly more expensive TL3s are even better. A quick look at the spec sheet reveals remarkably similar details, but the big difference lies in the sound quality. Whereas the TL2 uses a silk-dome tweeter, the TL3 uses a ring radiator. This is the only speaker I've ever seen at this price point that employs such a sophisticated tweeter.

Available in a premium gloss-black finish, the TL3s easily sit on desktops or attach to a wall. They also work well on a pair of small stands and with a modest subwoofer, which is how I saw them demoed at the Polk factory, and with impressive results. With a LF point of 115hz, the TL3s need a subwoofer—even on the desktop. Yet they throw an amazingly deep three-dimensional image when used in the nearfield, where they feel like far more expensive speakers.

Since the TL3s are rated at 88db sensitivity, it doesn't take a ton of power to rock out on the desktop. I achieved killer results with Woo Audio's WA5 SET headphone amplifier that offers speaker outputs as well as headphone outputs. Nine watts-per-channel of 300B triode power proved a fine match, and yet, all of the other small amplifiers I used had no problems driving these speakers, either.



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Paradigm MilleniaOne

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Paradigm's MilleniaOnes pack a lot of performance in a tiny area. The dapper enclosures come in gloss black or gloss white, and can also be purchased as part of a full 5.1 system. For now, we're just concerned with the desktop. (That said, the Millenia Subwoofer boasts a low profile and should fit just about anywhere. Expect a follow-up very soon.)

A two-way design, the MilleniaOnes utilize a 4-inch woofer and 1-inch aluminum-dome tweeter. Since they only go down to 120hz (-2db point), these puppies will benefit from a subwoofer but sound surprisingly good on a desktop, picking up a bit of bass gain from a desk's surface. Easy to drive, they're also great fun when married to a small vacuum-tube amplifier when listening nearfield. The MilleniaOnes are so resolving, Paradigm fans might mistake them for the award-winning Signature Series speakers. No joke.





Harbeth P3ESR

\$2,095/pr.
www.harbeth.co.uk

Harbeth's P3ESRs mix the old and new school. Granted, these are expensive enough that only listeners assembling a fairly advanced desktop system need apply. But they will be highly rewarded. A definite descendent of the original LS3/5a monitors, the smallest Harbeths share the BBC objective of achieving a wide, smooth frequency response and natural midrange.

A while ago, we reviewed a pair of vintage Rogers LS3/5as as well as the more recent Stirling Broadcast version. Without question, Harbeth nailed this combination in the P3ESRs. They have all the midrange purity you could want, and thanks to Harbeth's RADIAL 2 woofer (the same used in the company's larger models), lack the originals' wooly, tipped-up mid-bass.

Transparency and speed are greatly improved, and, tellingly, the P3ESR acts as a chameleon. Its highly resolving nature reveals the character of any amplifier with which it's paired. Mate these with a good amp and you might even forgo a big system! While an inexpensive, mass-market amplifier doesn't offer much fidelity, better electronics boost the P3ESR's enjoyment factor. And, they reach down just far enough on the bottom to provide a slice of heaven when listening nearfield.



Meridian DSP3200

\$6,000/pr.
www.meridian-audio.com

Yes, it's pricey. But considering that the DSP3200 includes preamp, power amp, DAC, and DSP crossovers/equalization, it stands as more of a complete system than just a pair of speakers. Most users will probably buy it to anchor a small room system. Yet, it's awfully tempting to use as a decadent desktop pleasure.

Thanks to each having a pair of built-in 75-watt analog amplifiers along with Meridian's DSP processing and a 24/96 apodising DAC, the DSP3200 speakers could well make for the ultimate desktop speakers. The limiting factor? While they can connect to a Sooloos Control or Media Core via Meridian "Speaker Link" inputs, a \$695 adaptor is required to make them part of a non-Meridian system. Those with a Sooloos system elsewhere in their home or office can enjoy the 3200's flexibility. Volume is controlled via remote, desktop use of the Control Mac or PC client, or can be directly controlled on the Sooloos Control via touchscreen.

Spendy for strictly desktop use, the Meridian DSP3200 is nonetheless a quintessential solution for high-quality sound, technical sophistication, and ease of use. Add in superb build quality and a white- or black-gloss finish that's right at home on a six-figure pair of Wilson speakers, and the system is the pinnacle of luxury. ●

Jazz & Blues

By Jim Macnie

Some jazz is meant for the head, an array of cerebral gambits forming a thick web of action. But some is meant for the body, a clutch of deeply swinging episodes that keep everything in motion while prioritizing groove. Saxophonist James Carter, especially when fronting his much acclaimed and now decade-old organ trio, has a saucy eloquence regarding the latter. On this new date, he repeatedly proves this expertise, milking bedrock R&B motifs for all the ribald flavor possible.



© Photo by Ingrid Hertfelder



James Carter Organ Trio

At The Crossroads
Decca, CD

Tunes on *At the Crossroads* are simple enough. Uptempo shuffles, bluesy ballads, a gospel prayer—each feeds the fire in establishing an overarching mood. Vehemence makes them stand out. Whether he's romping around on baritone, tenor, or soprano, Carter's much-vaunted virtuosity remains in the foreground. Through storms and swirls, his horn populates—and in a few cases, overwhelms—pieces with the kind of animated solos that can instantly earn whoops from a live audience. Aggressively assisted by drummer Leonard King, Jr. and B-3 maestro Gerard Gibbs, he demonstrates that ardor is his go-to stance.

Several nice moments deflect the focus from the leader's tsunami. Detroit singer Miche Braden works the sexy side of the street on "The Walking Blues" and "Ramblin' Blues." The latter also makes plenty of room for a bawdy horn section. Braden, meanwhile, brings Amen Corner passion to "That Old Ship of Zion."

Still, the high note comes at the close. Carter once worked with World Saxophone Quartet kingpin Julius Hemphill; the album's update of his former collaborator's "The Hard Blues" is nasty, nasty, nasty. Teeming with swagger, it finds the leader trading lines with guitarist Brandon Ross while shredding through a scad of rip-snort textures. To some degree, it represents what Carter is all about. The joy he finds in the power of unabashed exclamation is unmistakable.



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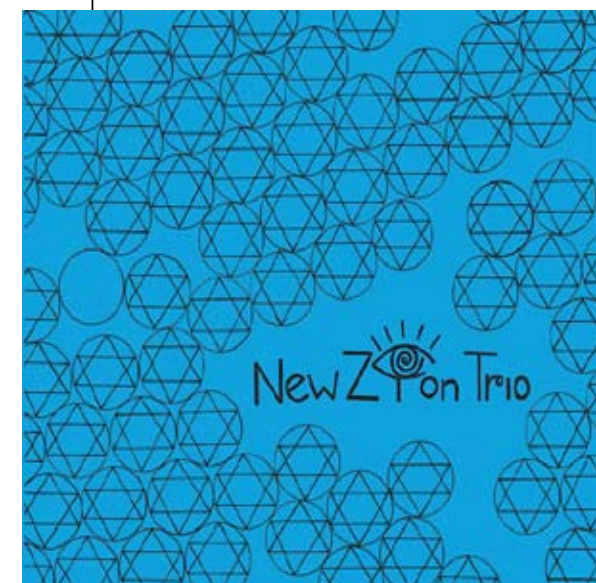
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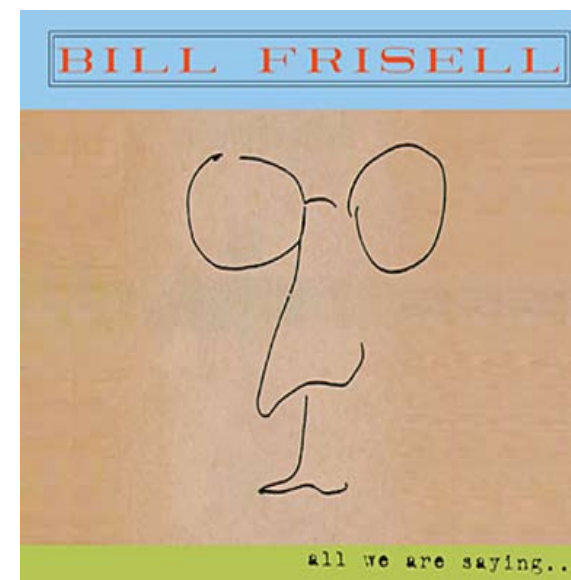
Take the eerie atmospherics of Scratch Perry and apply them to the realm of acoustic piano. Add a flair for insightful improvisation tempered by years of experimental derring-do, and voila: In a flash, you have one of the year's most bewitching small ensemble records. Pianist Jamie Saft, bolstered by the springy riddims of bassist Larry Grenadier and drummer Craig Santiago, comes up with a dub-influenced jazz program that reflects Jamaica's studio sorcery while harking back to Alice Coltrane's dreamy elaborations.

With several provocative titles on the Tzadik imprint, Saft works myriad arenas. But he's no dabbler. The resonance of New Zion Trio stems from the music's focus on getting the vibe right. As Santiago's high-hat clicks and Grenadier's bass lopes on "The Red Dies," an airy atmosphere takes over. Saft's right hand does lots of heavy lifting on this session. Trills are repeated, a mood is established, and as the groove insinuates itself in your head, a narcotic tone dominates. The threesome concocts something both engaging and ethereal.

On "Hear I Jah," Saft switches to a Rhodes and launches into a prayer with fervid conviction. The band may be genuflecting to Scientist and Augustus Pablo, but it's Lonnie Liston Smith who opens the Pearly Gates. Through warm clusters of keys, the pianist weaves a rich fabric of sound. "Lost Dub" allows things get sparse again, and the song's insistence becomes addictive. Ultimately, the groove supplies the leader with all the liftoff his reveries need.



New Zion Trio
Fight Against Babylon
Veal, CD



Bill Frisell

All We Are Saying ...
Savoy, CD

A spacey echo here, a piercing shriek there: After a quarter century of recording, Bill Frisell has developed one of jazz's most keenly distinctive guitar sounds. So distinctive in fact, it occasionally steals the spotlight from his oft-inspired solos, which on the best of nights, contain some of jazz's sagest strategies. It really doesn't matter what trajectory his lines take; the music's sonic aura makes a potent artistic statement on its own.

And that's what happens here, on Frisell's romp through John Lennon's songbook. *All We Are Saying ...* doesn't revamp the structures of these nuggets in any kind of elaborate manner. It simply gives the guitarist and his associates—violinist Jenny Scheinman, steel player Greg Leisz, bassist Tony Scherr, and drummer Kenny Wollesen—ample room to personalize arrangements we've all come to love. Yep, there's an ornery swirl at the end of "Come Together" and a drifting reverie on "Julia," but they were there in the originals, right? Throughout the program, the group comes on like the most insightful bar band ever, reveling in the original designs and bringing its string-centric persona to bear on time-tested melodies.

The gallop of "Nowhere Man" and "Please Please Me," the parlor poise of "In My Life"; the quintet leaves the tunes intact while gussying them up around the corners. Some listeners might gripe that the pieces should be messed with a bit more. But when you hear "Love" trickle into "Beautiful Boy," you'll likely agree that the collective's rich personality is more than enough to broker a modern spin. At that point, it's all about panache. ●



Fiat 500 Sport

Approx. \$19,000 www.fiatusa.com

More often than not, Ferrari or Ducati is usually the marque on the tip of Italian motoring enthusiasts' tongues, with Maserati and Alfa Romeo close behind. However, many less affluent Baby Boomers' first brush with Italian automobiles came via Fiat. Before 1975, back when unregulated hydrocarbons kept things simple and 5mph bumpers were just a glimmer in Ralph Nader's eye, a plethora of cool choices emanated from our Italian friends.

Upon introduction in 1957, the Fiat 500 actually *had* a 500cc, 2-cylinder engine that was mounted in the trunk and offered a whopping 13 horsepower. These days, bigger engines are attached to leaf blowers. So when the car was reintroduced in Europe in 2007, a 1.4 liter, 100-horsepower, front-drive configuration became the standard—one that is very similar to the current 105-horsepower four-cylinder model. Our European neighbors are also able to take advantage of a turbocharged Abarth version that claims 40 more hp, upgraded suspension, and subtle styling cues.

On my trip to Monaco last November, the 500 and upscale Abarth sibling proved extremely popular. I spotted almost as many 500s parked in front of the Hotel de Paris as Ferraris. The Fiats are like a four-wheeled cup of gelato, oozing sweetness and flavor as they pass by. In the States, the car grabs the attention of beautiful women and baristas everywhere.

Weighing in at just 2,363 pounds, the 500 sold in the US market (as a 2012 model) is tiny by North American standards. The Mini Cooper carries an additional 200 pounds and, while slightly larger, feels a bit cramped by comparison. However, the Cooper S offers an additional 80 horsepower and 80 foot pounds of torque. Until the Abarth comes our way, the Mini gets the nod when it comes to performance options. *(continued)*



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The 500 does almost everything right. You can't ask for a bigger helping of Italian style for the price.

Easy to drive in town, the 500 possesses more than enough zip from stoplight to stoplight, but suffers from a vague clutch mechanism that does not encourage a run for the World Rally Championship. However, when winding down a patch of curvy pavement, the car remains firmly planted and reveals sportier aspirations, with well-damped steering that pairs with a stiff chassis and minimal body roll. Cruising at 65-80 mph on freeways is problem-free and quiet. Inside, the rear seats easily fold down, revealing enough cargo space to haul a pair of large power amplifiers to FedEx. Yes, the 500 is more than just a pretty face.

The 500 does almost everything right. You can't ask for a bigger helping of Italian style for the price: A 500 Sport fetches only what the 30,000-mile inspection costs on the latest 12-cylinder Ferraris. And with gasoline still hovering at around four dollars per gallon, it's certainly the most fun you can have on a per-gallon basis. Suddenly, that Mini Cooper in the parking lot looks so 20th Century. —Jeff Dorgay



Kiss Plushies

\$10.99 each
www.funko.com

Move over Bart Simpson. The hottest plushies in the land are here, and they rule. At about eight inches tall, the likenesses of the band's four individual members are captured in grand style, from the platform boots to guitarist Ace Frehley's gold Les Paul. And let's not forget Gene Simmons' trademark tongue. If you love Kiss, or great memorabilia, you need these. —Jeff Dorgay

SureFire UB3T Invictus Flashlight

\$695
www.surefire.com

In the wake of Hurricane Irene, I was one of countless residents in the Northeast to lose power for an extended period of time. As I scrambled for a flashlight, I couldn't help but notice that my flashlight stunk. Yeah, it lit up the room, but it didn't do so too well. As a gadget freak, I wondered about better options.

Happily, I recently discovered SureFire, a California-based illumination company. It produces the UB3T Invictus LED flashlight, which will make your model look like a mere toy. The UB3T yields a whopping 800 lumens, boasts 11 settings, and is comprised of extra-strong, Mil Spec hard-anodized aerospace aluminum to ensure longevity. An ultra-high-output LED emitter produces light, and according to SureFire, is "virtually indestructible." The best part? The device will run for hours, meaning that you won't often replace batteries. No, the SureFire UB3T Invictus doesn't come cheap: It will set you back \$695, yet it cuts through the dark like nothing else. —Kevin Gallucci





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If the remastered *Head* soundtrack is simply too much for you, then grab a Monkees 45th anniversary tour t-shirt. Printed to look as if it's been fading in your dresser drawer for the last 20 years, the timeless Monkees logo appears in bright chartreuse. If nobody notices the tour info on the garment's back side, people will likely think you've been in the know since the 60s. —Jerold O'Brien

Nike+ GPS watch

\$195

www.nike.com



If you think your favorite Blu-ray player has a long and convoluted start-up procedure, you haven't experienced the latest TomTom GPS-enabled watch from Nike. But the end results are worth any headache. The watch tells you almost everything you want to know about your daily walk and/or run: Distance, pace, whether or not you've beaten your best time. And, if you purchase the \$69 heart-rate monitor, it even keeps you posted on cardiac information. More options than Batman's utility belt? Why not.

To mine most of the data, you also need a pair of Nike+ shoes, in which you can implant the data monitor inside the left insole. Total investment in the Nike+ system comes to about \$400. Hey, this is starting to sound like high-end audio!

But, once everything is properly configured, the watch helps you meet fitness goals and, thanks to the onboard GPS, even generates routes for daily runs—no matter where you are in the world. (Well, as long as you don't live within five miles of Dick Cheney's house, around which gaps in the GPS network allegedly exist.) Moreover, a handy USB port in the wristband connects the Nike+ watch to your Mac or PC in order to download data and provide a charge.

The only caveat? The watch is designed for people with small wrists. If you are big-boned, you may not be able to clasp the device shut around your wrist. We suggest getting an in-store trial to confirm a perfect fit. Holy technology, Batman! —Jeff Dorgay

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What could be better than interfacing your grill with your iPhone? Not much. If your pursuit of carnivorous activities demands perfection, get your hands on an iGrill now. This 21st century cooking accessory combines an innovative probe and iPod-sized grill monitor that keeps your meat on track.

No mere digital thermometer, the iGrill can simultaneously utilize *two* probes to track different parts of what you are grilling (i.e., one probe can monitor the turkey breast, while the other ensures that the drumsticks don't overcook). Plus, macho types with more than one grill can keep track of separate slabs of meat at the same time! Trust me, being a vegan was never this much fun.

But best of all, in addition to grill-side monitoring, the iGrille interfaces with your iPhone or iPad via Bluetooth and claims a 200-foot range. So, while everything is smoldering out back, you can watch the game without fear of anything getting out of hand. Become an instant master of the grilling universe and the envy of your friends with an iGrill. Isn't technological superiority worth \$99? Of course it is. —Jerold O'Brien



TheWino

By Wayne Garcia



A Trio of Refreshing Warm Weather Wines

Global-warming deniers may think this year's extreme heat was merely an act of God—don't worry, I'm not going to stir too much shit in this, my first Wino column for *Tone*—but wherever your thinking on the subject lands, if you love red wine, it's hard to deny that a heavy glass of Cab, Zin, or Syrah holds little appeal on a scorching day. And while we're heading into autumn and the cooler days that await, given the warmth much of the country continues to experience, I'm focusing on three wines to bridge the seasonal gap: Wines to refresh the palate, wines that are low in alcohol but high in character, and wines that won't knock you on your butt with a boozy punch.

Before we discuss the wines, a note on serving temperature.

Most wines in America are enjoyed—although not as much as they otherwise might be—at less-than-ideal temperatures. Meaning that reds are usually poured too warm (room temperature is not the same as cellar temperature), while white wines are typically served too cold (what's good for Budweiser is unlikely to bring out the best in a fine white). The reasons being that too warm a temperature dumbs and dulls both the bouquet and taste of wine, quickly dissipating the alcohol and knocking it off balance, whereas a wine served too cold will have stifled flavors and aromatics.

My general rule of thumb is to think less about the color of a wine than the *weight* of a wine. For example, red varietals such as those mentioned above—plus others such as Sangiovese, Merlot, and Sicily's Nero d'Avola (generally thicker-skinned types)—

should indeed be drunk at relatively warmer temps (60 to 62 degrees), while lighter reds such as Pinot Noir are better served a few degrees cooler, say, 50 to 58 degrees. In some cases, as with the Sicilian red Frapatto, very cool climate Pinots from Austria, or some of the Cab Francs from the Loire Valley or Lagrein from Italy's Alto-Adige, I like to pop the bottle in the fridge for 15–20 minutes to ensure a slight chill (50 to 52 degrees).

When it comes to whites, crisp, minerally types such as Sauvignon Blanc, the Pinots Blanc and Grigio, the Loire's Muscadet (from the Melon varietal), un-oaked Chardonnay, and sparkling wine, including Champagne, should be nice and chill but not frigid (43 to 50 degrees). More broadly shaped whites, such as white Burgundy, or the Timorasso grape from Piedmont, are ideal somewhere between 50 and 54 degrees. These are, of course, generalizations. Each bottle, and palate, will vary.

2009 Enoteca Bisson Pigato

LIGURIA, ITALY \$23

Essentially one vast vineyard from the Alps to the most southern Mediterranean shores, Italy is an overflowing treasure chest of both well- and barely-known grape varieties, many of which are confined to just one region. Take the grape Pigato, which grows only in Liguria, north of the port city of Genoa, on the Italian Riviera.

With unknown origins—some say the grape came from ancient Greece, others say it is a genetic variation on the more widely planted Vermentino—Pigato makes a wine with a strong sense of the place from which it is grown. (The name is thought to derive from the word *pighe*—“freckles” in the local dialect, in reference to the grape’s spotted skin.) Ligurian vines are planted on steep, rocky terraces overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. The hillsides are rich with herbs, and while the maturing grapes get plenty of sunshine, they are also exposed to plenty of cool sea breezes. These you’ll smell in Pigato’s bouquet, which, in the case of Bisson’s 2009, are joined by hints of dried white flowers. On the palate, Pigato is both expansive and mineral, with a bright lingering nature that finishes with a kiss of sea air.

Serve cool with seafood dishes such as grilled sardines and fried calamari, or with pasta with pesto sauce, a Ligurian specialty.



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– Michael Fremer, *Stereophile* (January 2011)

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TONE STYLE

2010 Tenute Sella "Majoli" Rosato

PIEDMONT, ITALY \$18

The Sella family has been making wine since 1671 on its property in Italy's northwest Piedmont region. Unlike the deepest, most age-worthy Nebbiolos produced in the areas of Barolo and Barbaresco, Tenute Sella's vineyards lies farther north, in an area called Lessona, which produces not only lighter and more approachable Nebbiolo-based reds, but also wines such as this delicious and refreshing *rosato* (rosé).

The aromatics here suggest summer fruits like strawberry, watermelon, and pomegranate, yet they also offer classic Nebbiolo notes such as rose petal and fennel pod. As the bouquet implies fruits, the flavors do, too—partially, but with a bit of crunchy varietal tannin and an earthy dash of savory minerals.

Serve well-chilled with a platter of charcuterie.





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TONE STYLE

2009 Catherine & Pierre Breton “Cuvée Trinch!”

LOIRE, FRANCE \$20

The Loire Valley is one of the most intriguing wine regions in France. It makes some of France's best-known wines (such as the whites Sancerre and Muscadet), some of its least understood (such as those from Vouvray's Chenin Blanc grape, which are vinified dry, off-dry, sweet, still, and sparkling), and a range of reds, such as those from the Cabernet Franc grape that can be deep and inky to as pale as faded rose petals.

Catherine and Pierre Breton are both winemakers, and one of the Loire's most celebrated couples—especially in the so-called “natural” wine movement. They practice biodynamic farming, minimal cellar intervention, and add little-to-no sulfur to their wines. Their wines are pure, fresh, and occasionally a bit on the wild, perhaps even slightly funky (earthy) side. They make a range of wines, mostly from the Bourgueil appellation. Cuvée Trinch! is young-vine Cabernet Franc (to understand the name, simply observe the clinking friends on the label—cheers!), which is meant to be drunk young. On the nose, I find hints of red fruits—plum, cherry, raspberry—mixed with granite, earth, and a hint of smoke. The wine is fresh and flavorful on the palate, medium-bodied, with a smooth albeit intriguing finish that keeps you sipping.

Serve chilled with grilled salmon and fat, spicy sausages. ●

Wayne Garcia is the owner of San Francisco's DIG wine shop, a boutique operation with a focus on small-production wines from France and Italy. Visit him at digwinesf.com.



FEATURE

Bel Canto C5i Integrated Amplifier

Small, Stylistic, Simple

By Jeff Dorgay

Many of my non-audiophile friends would love to have a great music system, but often ask the same question: “Do I really need that rack full of components?” With the Bel Canto C5i DAC integrated amplifier you don’t. For those who want a serious hi-fi system with a diminutive footprint, the C5i is the perfect place to begin. Add speakers, a source, and you are ready to rock.

FEATURE



The \$1,895 the C5i includes a 60-watt-per-channel Class D power amplifier, 24/192 DAC, MM phonostage, and a respectable headphone amplifier. Bel Canto skips the preamplifier stage, driving the amp directly from the DAC section, utilizing its 24-bit digital level control. Designer John Stronczer likes to point out that the company's approach leaves "no stinky pots to wear out." The MM and line level inputs go through a 24/192 ADC into the DAC section, eliminating the traditional line-level preamplifier function. And it's all neatly tucked into a box the size of a Stephen King novel. Thanks to the Class D amplifier, the C5i only draws about 13 watts from the outlet, so your carbon footprint won't be taxed.

Fortunately, 60wpc is also enough juice to entertain a wide range of speaker possibilities. Most of my listening sessions took place with the new Dali F5 speakers, which boast 88db sensitivity. Yet the C5i had no

trouble when mated with the 83db Harbeth P3ESRs likely due to the fact that it doubles its rated power into 4 ohms and can deliver up to 30 amps of peak current.

A Plethora of Inputs

Along with losing the stack of gear and piles of cables required by a more traditional set-up, you need just one interconnect pair to operate a system based on the C5i—another plus. With the C5i, your computer or laptop is only a USB cable away from becoming a first-class digital front end. In addition to the USB port, the unit boasts a pair of RCA SPDIF inputs as well as a pair of TOSLINK optical inputs. You can connect a cable TV box, game console, or whatever other digital device suits your fancy, turning the C5i into a media hub. The USB port offers digital playback up to 24/96, while the SPDIF and Toslink ports take full advantage of the DAC's 24/192 capabilities.

In addition to the MM phono input with standard 47k-ohm loading, a high-level analog input is available should you add another phonostage or perhaps, a tuner—like Bel Canto's FM1. Using the phonostage with a handful of MM cartridges delivered excellent results. The Shure V15mvxr, Rega Exact, and Cleaudio Maestro Wood all worked well with the on-board phono, and I was also happy with the sound of my recent LP-12/V15 combo. Quiet, dynamic, and musical, the on-board phonostage is equal to if not better than any of the sub-\$300 external phonostages I've experienced.

The Rega RP1/Ortofon OM5e also effortlessly pairs with the C5i. Listening to a handful of budget 70s rock records revealed enough mid-range warmth and depth to feel the analog love. Bottom line: If you don't already have a turntable, the C5i makes adding analog to your system a painless process. *(continued)*

GamuT S7

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True analog fanatics will want more performance, but they aren't the model's target audience.

Love digital? So does the C5i. High-resolution and 16/44.1 files via a Mac Mini, Sooloos Control 15, and MSB Universal Transport transmit without a hiccup. When you push play and the music begins, the sampling rate blinks on the C5i's main display. Since most of my high-res collection is at 24/96 I didn't audition any 24/192 material.

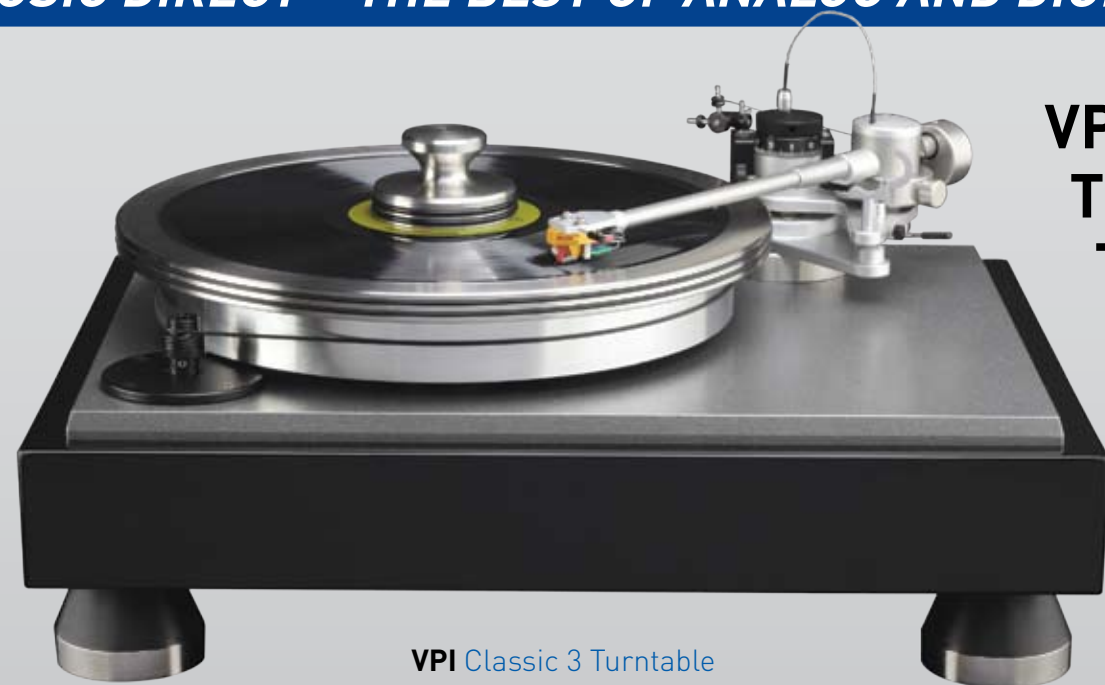
The C5i's DAC performance also impresses by holding its own with a number of competitors in the \$500-\$1,000 category. Listening to my fair share of the BBC's *Bax: The Symphonies* box set, I couldn't help but notice the DAC's level of tonal purity and separation, even on 16/44.1 recordings. Should these options seem like too much work, the C5i works great with an iPod. Plugging in a little 4GB iPod Nano yields fab results, especially with Apple lossless files.

Serious Authority

A prominent sonic wallop is likely the first thing you'll notice when firing up the C5i. Bass is particularly well controlled, as is transient attack. The California Guitar Trio's “Led Foot” demonstrates the C5i's ability to maintain pace while simultaneously keeping separate and clean the three distinct guitar voices. California Guitar Trio records contain a wealth of musical information in a small space, an acoustic that most moderately priced integrated models fail at recreating.

Bill Bruford's *Earthworks* lies at the opposite end of the sound spectrum. A skilled drummer that never hesitates to maximize his kit, Bruford provides a great torture test. The C5i has no problem keeping the cymbals in their own distinct space as the percussionist takes flight on several rapidly paced solos on the album. *(continued)*





VPI Classic 3 Turntable

VPI Classic 3: The Hottest Turntable of 2011



“Every detail is there, rock-solid, immovable, and alive within the soundstage. The VPI Classic 3 is an exceptional effort by a company that knows the analog landscape like few others. With each spin it invites you to become reacquainted with every record in your collection. A class-leading product by any yardstick, and, simply put, a class act!”

—Neil Gader, *The Absolute Sound*, October 2011

“The Classic 3 is the fastest, most coherent-sounding VPI turntable I’ve ever heard. Most significant, the Classic 3 played on the same field as the Continuum Caliburn (\$149,995) and it costs \$6,000...one of today’s great values in analog audio. I don’t hear how you can go wrong buying one!”

—Michael Fremer, *Stereophile*, October 2011

Oppo—The Audiophile’s Blu-ray Universal Disc Player



OPPO BDP-95 Universal Blu-ray Player

Oppo Digital is an extremely successful manufacturer that, despite its relatively small size, keeps raising the bar. Since its inception, Oppo has elevated the standards for reference-level video performance, audiophile sound quality, and disc-loading speed. Guaranteed to give you astounding video performance, the new BDP-95 is the very best transport Oppo has developed. On the audio side, it is built to a degree we’ve never seen in a sub-\$1000 product. The Oppo BDP-95 comes with our highest recommendation.

\$999

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- New Toroidal Transformer and Balanced Outputs
- 2nd Generation Qdeo Video Processing
- 3D, Streaming, Wireless, eSATA, and USB
- Simply the Best Video Performance



Comparing the C5i to the much larger REF500M monoblocks reveals a close resemblance at less-than-earthquake levels, and for good reason: The C5i uses the same power modules, albeit in stereo rather than in a bridged mono configuration. Again, Bel Canto doesn’t sacrifice sound quality at a lower power level, making the C5i an even more attractive proposition regardless of where you sit in the audiophile pecking order. And diversity abounds.

The high-level outputs give it even more versatility for listeners that desire a satellite/subwoofer system. Users that either don’t want or can’t get speakers right now should think of the C5i as a wonderful headphone amp that happens to have a great DAC and phono stage. It adequately drove the new Grado PS500, Audeze LCD2,

AKG 701, and Sennheiser 650 headphones. Yes, you can drop another \$500-\$1,000 on an outboard headphone amp, but this one works well and is miles beyond any pod or tablet.

New Balance

As much fun as it is to listen to the C5i, its seamless integration into any environment means there’s no reason *not* to have a great hi-fi in your house. You don’t need a pile of gear, massive loom of cables, or gaggle of remote controls. If you’d like to build a system a few marks above the budget level, the C5i awaits your discovery. It combines both functionality and performance in a compact package, underscoring the fact that you don’t need to spend a small fortune to get good sound. More, please. ●

www.belcantodesign.com



Dealers That Mean Business

AV SAN FRANCISCO

By Jeff Dorgay

The guys at AV San Francisco have come a long way in the past decade. Starting with a 200-square foot space, they've since built their store into an audio oasis that recalls the stereo stores of hi-fi's golden age. Located on the corner of Pine and Van Ness, the facility houses two major showrooms and an extensive range of audio and home-theater products.

Earlier this year, I attended one of the dealer's events and chatted with many of its customers. When I walked through the front door for the first time, I heard Brian Eno's *Small Craft on a Milk Sea*, which had just been released that week. Not a bad introduction.

In addition to its obviously good taste in music, the telling factor of AV San Francisco's success came to me when I asked approximately 75 of its customers how often they listened to music. Nearly half raised their hand when I said "more than 15 hours a week?" Even better, when I inquired how many had made a purchase at the store within the last six months, most of the hands went up again. Such loyalty partially stems from the fact that shop partners Antonio Long and Randy Johnson are genuine music enthusiasts.

A former marketing rep for Elektra Records, Johnson spoke with me about the store's past and present.



TA: *When did you open the store?*

AVSF: September, 1999.

What did you guys do before? What made you take the leap into being hi-fi merchants?

Antonio was working at a high-end furniture shop on Van Ness and wanted to get back into hi-fi. He talked the owner into giving him some space upstairs to start a shop. It was only 10 feet wide by 20 feet deep, with a 7-foot ceiling! I had to build sound blocking for the space, as it faced the street and had windows on one side. Antonio ran the shop solo for two years and asked me to join when Elektra Records went under when the record industry was tanking.





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FEATURE



What did you feature in the original product mix?

Triangle, JM Renaud, Antique SoundLab, Arcam, and Simaudio Moon. And three of these vendors—Triangle, Arcam, and Simaudio—remain great vendors to this day.

Has business always been strong?

Except for the last two years of this recession, the shop has always done better than the year before. But we're hanging in.

What would you consider the key to your success?

A lot of advertising to get people in the door. But then knowledge, mutual respect, a deep love of music, and a lot of hard work. We did the SF *Stereophile* show our first year in the Pine Street location and beat every previous

show record with nine rooms. That was insane!

How much does having ample stock on-hand played into success?

A lot, especially on more moderately priced items that we sell day to day. People like to be able to walk in to the showroom and walk out with product in hand. They are definitely a bit more understanding on big-ticket items, but having inventory is a big factor.

What's your product mix like these days? And are you selling a lot of analog?

I'm pretty sure we have more hi-fi in-house than any other showroom in the country. Project is our entry-level 'table, Spiral Groove is the reference product, and in between, we have Rega, VPI, Hanns, and Clearaudio. We definitely sell more turntables than CD players. *(continued)*



Are you seeing a lot of new customers or is it mostly legacy business?

All of the above. I just sold a small system to a Canadian kid that just walked in the door. He works for Apple, and bought a Pro-ject 'table to go along with his system as he's now getting into vinyl. Customer referrals have always been a big part of our business.

What's the wackiest sale you've ever made?

We had one customer who came in to purchase some cable and spent over \$450K on a system. Most importantly, we made a friend.

Is working with your close friend like being married? Is one of you the business guy and one the vision guy, or do you interchange roles?

Antonio and I have known each other for more than 24 years. I met him a few years before I met my wife. We're like brothers and yes, to a certain extent, married. The shop is definitely Antonio's vision, and he's a helluva businessman, to boot. I'm very tactile. I love trouble shooting, making sure things do what they're supposed to do and do it well.

Has being immersed in the high end allowed you to keep your love for music going on outside of work or are you done with it at the end of the day?

We still love music, but often when we're done at the end of the day and shut down, it's on to other things. Before I had my daughter, we went to more concerts than I can remember. Now Antonio and Marlen (our other employee) attend most of the live shows.

What music have you guys recently purchased?

Radiohead (LP), TV on the Radio (LP), *Tron* Soundtrack (CD), Elbow (CD), Lykke Li (LP), Seu Jorge (CD), Ryuchi Sakamoto (CD), Little Dragon (CD), James Blake (CD), Explosions in the Sky (LP), San Francisco Symphony Mahler Box Set (LP).

If you could hit the reset button and start again, would you still choose this path?

In a heartbeat. ●

Audio Research PH8 Phonostage

www.audioresearch.com
\$7,500

Completing a trilogy of ARC phonostages that we've had in for review, the PH8 offers performance closer to the flagship REF Phono 2, a reference component here for the past year. Instead of writing a traditional review, we will soon have a full comparison of the PH6, PH8 (pictured), and REF Phono 2, describing *exactly* what you get as you move up the range of Audio Research phonostages. Watch the Comparo section on our Web site for more.



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REVIEW

The B&W 802 Diamond Loudspeaker

An Audiophile's Best Friend

By Jeff Dorgay





Having owned a pair of B&W 805 Diamond loudspeakers for the past year, I'm tuned into B&W's current sound: Powerful, detailed, and accurate. The latest diamond tweeter and crossover design combine to produce a very musical speaker that handles nuance with aplomb, yet also rocks at realistic levels when the demand arises.

And yes, the speakers are drop-dead gorgeous. Available in two wood finishes and piano black, they are visual as well as aural works of art. However, Gino Vanelli once said, "Black cars look better in the shade." This statement easily applies to speakers dipped in high-gloss black. Much like my neighbor's triple-black Porsche GT3, it looks breathtaking for about five minutes after it exits the car wash.

Much as I love the black finish on my 805 Diamonds, I let out a sigh of relief when I noticed that the 802 Diamonds that arrived for review were marked "Rosenut." Being slightly obsessive compulsive, I knew there would be no way to roll the 802D's around without getting them full of fingerprints. Call me traditional, or perhaps lazy, but just don't call me Shirley—I'm digging the wood finish of the 802 Diamonds. Derived from the original Nautilus speaker system (still hand-built in small quantities), the wood woofer enclosure nicely contrasts the gloss-black tweeter and midrange modules sitting on top of the cabinets.





A Quick Tour

When I visited B&W's UK factory earlier this year, I watched the assembly of the speakers in the company's impressive facility. It employs close to 400 people and takes up almost 60,000 square feet in the seaside town of Worthing. Every aspect of 800 series construction takes place there. The administrative offices are on top of the factory and provide a breathtaking view of the plant, which looks more like an aerospace center than a loudspeaker firm.

Akin to an Eames Lounge Chair, which uses damp wood pressed around a die under pressure to achieve its signature shape, Diamond series cabinets are built from layers of sheets of thin wood, which is visible from the cabinet's edge. Glued together with high-strength adhesive, this sandwich is placed in a curved die and allowed to dry under pressure. Once removed from the die, the rough cabinet back is trimmed to shape and mated to the front face. But, only after the patented Matrix inner enclosure is fitted, giving the 800 series its famed rigidity and eliminating any seam on the curved back of the enclosure.

Meanwhile, mid/tweeter pods are crafted in a clean-room facility on another side of the plant. Craftsmen wear white suits and matching booties, keeping dust to a minimum. This is also where the bare, molded enclosures (made from Marlan resin, claimed to be as rigid as granite) go from primer coat to final finish, and then off to have the drivers installed. Notably, B&W's skilled workers utilize the same tools my good friends at Scottsdale's European Detail Specialists use while buffing multi-million-dollar automobiles for the world-renowned Barrett Jackson Auto Auction. *(continued)*



REVIEW



Speaking of fussy, cabinets are wet-sanded multiple times with abrasives so fine that they almost feel like nothing at all. Then, the cabinets are polished to a mirror-like finish that would make a Dusenbergs owner drool. Once everything is completed and inspected, any remaining blemishes—no matter how tiny—are sent back for one last pass. The end result is perfection. Driver production takes place in yet another part of the factory. B&W is one of the few speaker companies that designs and builds all of its own drivers in-house; the engineering offices are down the street in a separate location. *(continued)*



POWER TRIO

The latest additions to Burmester's Top Line offer award winning fidelity and tremendous versatility. The 088 preamplifier features X-Amp 2 modules and can be configured with an on-board phono stage or DAC. The 089 CD player uses an advanced Belt Drive system to keep digital jitter to a minimum, while also featuring a preamplifier stage with volume control and a pair of analog inputs. The 100 phono preamplifier combines two phono inputs and an optional 24-bit/192kHz analog to digital converter, so that you can capture your favorite vinyl treasures at the highest quality possible.

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REVIEW

Once the woofer cabinets are joined with the midrange/tweeter pod, drivers and crossover networks are installed, with workers still wearing gloves for most of the process. Each finished speaker is run through a mini anechoic chamber at the end of the assembly line; an operator uses a computerized measurement system to compare each speaker to its master reference. All finished Diamond series speakers must be within .5db of the reference standard or they are sent back for another inspection and rework. During my visit to this part of the factory, the six pairs of 802 Diamonds I observed passed their tests on the first go. A technician with whom I chatted said that because of the exhaustive testing on the individual components leading up to final assembly, "precious few don't make the cut."

Finally, the 800 series speakers are carefully packaged for staging in B&W's immense warehouse, ready for shipment to dealers in 90 countries. The cutting-edge packaging involves substantial engineering. My tour guide smiled and said, "We don't want them harmed after all this work, do we?" B&W includes packaging assembly instructions on the side of the box, but I suggest shooting video while you unpack the speakers. Should you ever decide to move and repack them, you'll be glad you did.



REVIEW

Luxurious Feel

Unpacking the 802 Diamonds gives you ample opportunity to get up-close and personal with the speakers, and appreciate the care that goes into their construction. Woofer grilles are wrapped in foam and attach via magnets, as do the midrange grilles, enclosed in one of the two accessory boxes accompanying the speakers. Along with a thorough instruction manual, you'll also find a microfiber cleaning cloth and pair of jumpers, should you not have speaker cables equipped with bi-wired termination.

I highly recommend always keeping the grille on the diamond tweeter. The diaphragm is vapor-deposited a layer of molecules at a time, and is very unforgiving of fingers and noses. Unlike some speakers' soft-dome tweeters, these will not survive a dent, pulled out with Scotch tape or other methods.



They Really Do Roll...

More manufacturers should follow B&W's lead and put casters (or, as they like to say in the UK, a trolley) on the bottom of speakers weighing more than 100 pounds (45kg). It saves wear and tear on those squishy disks in your spinal column and simplifies the set-up process. The wheels made it easy to fine-tune placement for the best balance of imaging and bass response. For final placement, B&W offers a set of traditional spikes and set of hard-rubber feet to insert in place of the casters. *(continued)*



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"...my new reference in AC conditioners."
– Robert Harley,
The Absolute Sound,
Issue 193



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– Jeff Dorgay,
TONEAudio
Magazine,
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REVIEW

Your floor's surface may determine what method you choose, but the soft feet can also be used to slightly fine-tune the bass response, supplying a bit looser sound than that of the spikes. Your room and ears will be the ultimate judge. While the spikes allow a modest amount of tilt, it shouldn't be necessary, as the primary purpose of Nautilus enclosure provides for proper time alignment of the drivers. Thanks to wide vertical and horizontal dispersion, I gained nothing from tilting the speakers back. However, in typical nervous audiophile fashion, I ensured both speakers were perfectly level.

The smaller speakers in the 800 series have their "flowport"—B&W's patented and trademarked name for its bass port, dimpled like a golf ball to provide more controlled air flow and less "port noise" than a standard port—mounted on the front face. But the 800 and 802 Diamond have downward-facing ports, making them even easier to place. Indeed, precious little jockeying was required to optimize the 802 Diamonds in my listening room.

...And They Really Rock

A prerequisite for a great studio monitor is the ability to play loud without fatigue. The Diamonds excel in this area. If you love to crank up the volume, the Diamonds do not disappoint. Peter Gabriel's "Lay Your Hands On Me" paints a wide and deep soundstage, combining densely layered vocals with delicate percussion and explosive drums, a challenge for any system. The 802 Diamonds remain firmly anchored, breezing through while maintaining detail in all three dimensions. Mixing it up with a 12" 45RPM single of Van Halen's "I Don't Want To Hear About It Later" has the same effect, keeping the explosiveness of both Van Halen brothers in check, yet appealingly separating the backup vocals of guitarist Eddie Van Halen and bassist Michael Anthony. *(continued)*



I easily noticed the differences between the original LP pressing, 45RPM single, and recent remaster of the first Van Halen album via the track “Little Dreamer.” With the Burmester 911 mk. 3 fairly warm to the touch, and my walls thumping, the 802 Diamonds segued into “Ice Cream Man” without missing a beat, capturing the delicacy in David Lee Roth’s vocal stylings. My collegiate swim coach used to say, “Finish hard.” So the volume control took a healthy clockwise spin as “On Fire” closed out the LP at maximum volume. I see why these speakers are the tools of choice in so many recording studios.

But Above All, They Balance

An early pressing of the Talking Heads’ “Heaven” from *Fear of Music* illustrates the 802 Diamonds’ panel-like ability to keep everything in perspective. Tina Weymouth’s bass line lingers in the back of the soundstage yet maintains the plucky, bright bass tone for which she is famous. Moving directly to *The Yes Album*, the difference between Chris Squire’s growling Rickenbacker and Weymouth’s Hofner presents a study in tonal contrast, while the beats in LL Cool J’s “Big Ole Butt” have necessary weight and power. Few speakers in this price range possess this level of discerning bass response.

As much fun as those 1989 beats can be, the 802 Diamonds also do an exceptional job of anchoring in place the percussion on LL Cool J’s *Walking With a Panther*. When blasting hip-hop tracks at club volume, it’s easy for the rest of the information on the record to get lost in the powerful bass grooves. However, the 802s retain their composure and wring out detail, even with meters on my prodigious McIntosh MC 1.2kws almost pegged—sending nearly 1200-watt peaks to the 802 Diamonds, which take it in stride without a trace of distortion.

Your favorite vocalist will reveal a marvelous coherence from top to bottom, the transition between woofers, midrange, and diamond tweeter as flawless as one can expect from a three-way cone speaker. For example, the strings on



Roberta Flack’s “Jesse” are perfectly placed, occupying their own space without overpowering the singer.

Quite Cooperative

With a somewhat high sensitivity of 90db, but more importantly, a decidedly tube-friendly crossover, the 802 Diamonds should present a formidable experience regardless of amplification. Tube amplifiers in the 20-50wpc range have no problems driving these speakers to more than reasonable levels. The highly resolving nature of the B&Ws will uncloak whatever tonal character your amplifier might possess. I tried more than a dozen amp/preamp combinations, each with disparate characteristics.

My two top pairs comprised the all-tube combination of the ARC REF 5 preamplifier paired with the Decware Zen Torii, and the all solid-state Burmester 011/911 mk. 3. A pair of Classe M300 solid-state monoblocks also provided an excellent match, yielding a simultaneously fast, nimble, and weighty presentation. The only amplifier in my stable that didn’t achieve symmetry? The Channel Islands D-500II. If you have class D amplification, insist on a test drive, as such amplifiers tend to be more speaker-dependent.

While the 802 Diamonds sound their best with world-class electronics, to their credit, they admirably sync with modest gear, making them easy candidates to stand as anchors of a system that will grow with as your budget allows. The 802 Diamonds proved exciting to hear even when paired with the humble PrimaLuna ProLogue One.

Conclusion

I’m pleased to offer the 802 Diamonds one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2011. These are truly a destination speaker at a price well under what one would expect for this kind of performance. I’ve heard my share of speakers in the \$40-60k range that can’t compare to the meticulous level of finish this model exhibits, and thanks to a massive worldwide retail network, you’re guaranteed great support. ●

B&W 802 Diamond
MSRP: \$15,000/pair

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Single Box Elegance

dCS Debussy DAC

By Jeff Dorgay

Computer audio has grown exponentially in the last few years, its orbit quickly accelerating over the past 18 months. Since they provide many ways to serve CD and high-res digital files, DACs have become the center of this universe. Once headed towards extinction, they've become a primary component in many systems, vinyl-centric or not.

An abundance of sub-\$1,000 DACs currently exists, similar to the plethora of turntables in the same price range. But, just like in the analog world, if you want cutting-edge sound, there's a price to be paid. While some argue that with so much evolution, the \$11,495 price on the dCS Debussy is a bit much, I beg to differ.

REVIEW

Again, using analog as the benchmark, things become spellbinding as you hover around the \$10-\$15k mark. It's where the distinction between the digital and analog worlds blurs—especially for those building a serious collection of high-resolution music files. Even five years ago, there wasn't much digital available at any price that sounded natural. Technology trickle-down is solid, albeit not at a level at which every audiophile can participate.

As a four-box dCS Paganini owner, to me the Debussy seems like a bargain, especially if you no longer spin silver discs. And even more so if you haven't any need for an analog front end and use the Debussy as a control center, eschewing a line-level preamplifier. A prodigious system can be built around the Debussy, a pair of \$10,000 speakers, and suitable power amplifier, which is precisely what I did.

The Debussy spent half of its evaluation in my reference system in direct comparison to the Paganini (with and without the Paganini Master Clock) to explore the ultimate limits of its performance. The other half of the review involved the Verity Audio Rienzi speakers (\$10k/pair) and Conrad Johnson MV-50C1 power amplifier. Adding a pair of Cardas Clear Light interconnects, speaker cables, two Shunyata Venom 3 power cords, and a Running Springs Elgar power conditioner made for a highly impressive system that came in just under \$25k.

Ins and Outs

The Debussy boasts five digital inputs: an RCA SPDIF, BNC SPDIF, USB, and pair of balanced AES/EBU inputs. All accept 24/96, and the USB and Dual AES interfaces are 24/192 capable. *(continued)*



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REVIEW



(A single-wire 24/192 software-only update is in development.) The balanced AES inputs can be used in single or dual configuration. The FireWire input of the Paganini is absent but should not be an issue for most users.

Aesthetically, dCS forgoes the mirror finish of its two top line systems in favor of a matte silver finish with black writing that is far easier to read than the markings on the Paganini. After living with the mirrored-surface Paganini, I'd have picked the silver had it been an option. It shows off the Debussy's smart, curved design, yet it's more resistant to fingerprints.

The learning curve on the Debussy is less daunting than that on the Paganini, which has more buttons than Sebastian Vettel's steering wheel. Here, we get power, input, mute, volume+/-, and two DSP filter choices—linear phase with pre-ringing or non-linear phase without pre-ringing. Which is optimum? Log onto an Internet forum and knock yourself out.

As in all dCS DACs, the Debussy uses its proprietary Ring DAC, ultimately oversampling all incoming data

to 2.822 or 3.07MHz with a 5-bit depth. When touring the dCS factory, I learned all the DACs share a common "motherboard." The basic chipset and layout are the same, with more functionality as you go up the range. Such a strategy keeps manufacturing streamlined and designs future-proofed. All updates can be executed via software, further ensuring the unit's longevity.

These benefits were the paramount reasons I chose dCS for my reference system. With so much change in the digital world, knowing my DAC could stay current by merely downloading new software made it that much easier to write a big check.

Should you use the Debussy as a preamplifier/control center, the digital volume control works brilliantly, with no degradation to the sound even at low listening levels. A switch on the rear panel offers the choice of 2V or 6V output. I can't imagine anyone needing 6V, and would prefer to see the choices as 1V or 2V, especially with today's amplifiers having so much gain. *(continued)*

Should you use the Debussy as a preamplifier/control center, the digital volume control works brilliantly, with no degradation to the sound even at low listening levels.



Touring the dCS Factory

Earlier this year, I visited dCS' new factory in Cambridge. The bigger facility condenses all manufacturing to one level, greatly streamlining build and test processes. Company principal David Steven and Sales Manager Rav Bawa were great hosts, showing off how much dCS grew since I toured the previous facility in 2010. Bawa explains that "assembly centers around a kit of parts, so that a box can be easily followed from beginning to end with one operator. In the old building, we had to go up and down stairs. You can imagine how nerve wracking that got, considering how heavy some of our components are."

dCS sources mechanisms from Esoteric and keeps a substantial cache of spares on hand in the unlikely event one fails. Casework is machined and anodized nearby, with all engineering, assembly, and testing done in-house. dCS employs around 20 people and ships digital hardware to over 40 countries. When we walked through the shipping department, almost 100 boxes were on their way to dealers worldwide.

All dCS DACs use the same basic circuit board, with different software loaded for various iterations of the final product. Various assembly stations build and test, and the complete unit is tested yet again when complete. Ironically, because of the virtually nonexistent distortion and jitter in its products, dCS must design and build all of its test equipment. Finished components are burned-in for 48 hours and run through rigorous tests before final packing and shipment. *(continued)*

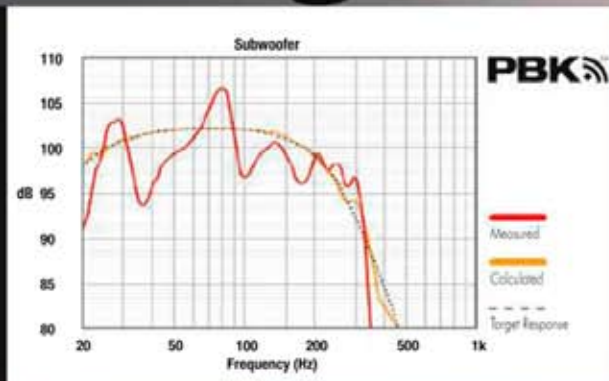


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REVIEW

Clock

USB
AES 1
AES 2
SPDIF 1
SPDIF 2
32
44.1
48
88.2
96
176.4
192

dCS

Proof is in the Listening

Due to its popularity, I figured the new Bon Iver record a perfect place to begin listening. "Holocene" possesses a wide soundstage with guitars panned to the left and right in the mix. Comparing the CD to the LP proved a close heat, with the Debussy doing an excellent job at keeping what little front-to-back dimension that exists intact. Black Country Communion's first, self-titled album duplicates the experience. The vinyl sounds decent but not overwhelming, and much like when paired with the first Fleet Foxes record or Tom Jones' *Praise and Blame*, the Debussy gets the nod in terms of providing a more liquid presentation, with more extension on the top and bottom ends of the tonal scale.

As with the Paganini, the big surprise arrives when listening to fairly dreadful digital recordings. The Debussy pulls tons of detail from recordings I believed completely lacking such information. Yes, my Japanese copy of Kiss' *Alive!* sounds better than ever. Quite possibly the most highly compressed CD in my collection, the self-titled album from Glenn Hughes and Pat Thrall, now leaves me astonished that air actually lurks on the disc.

However good the Debussy is at untangling dense recordings, it does not embellish tonally to either side of neutral. If you'd like a bit of warmth added to the sound of digital files, look to tubes in the output stage. But my experience has been that these players give up resolution and transient clarity in return. The Debussy gives you the truth, like it or not.

Like the other players in dCS' lineup, the Debussy is not harsh or clinical. The best digital recordings in your collection will sound virtually indistinguishable, if not better, than favorite analog files. Charlie Haden's *The Private Collection* (Naim) is excellent for comparison purposes since it is manufactured to an equally high level in analog and digital formats. And now, you can purchase it as a 24/96 download.

Comparing the high-res file played through the Paganini gives the advantage to the dCS stack in terms of sonic dynamics and overall cleanliness. The Debussy comes close, and with the addition of the dCS Paganini Master Clock (an additional \$8,000), it takes the lead in overall musicality. While I consider myself a devoted analog fan, it's easy to lose sight of the fact that a lot of records are poorly produced, no matter the generation. (continued)



Making similar comparisons between MoFi's recent remaster of Beck's *Sea Change* and the high-resolution files available from HD Tracks uncover revealingly indistinguishable results. The sources are even more similar in sound when I contrast a digital copy I made from the MoFi pressing, recorded to a 24/192 file via Nagra's LB studio recorder. Even friends with canine-like hearing have a tough time determining the analog pressing from the high-resolution digital copy.

As it does in my Paganini stack, the Master Clock offers extra tonal ease and pace. An early British pressing of Elton John's *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* put up against the latest HD Tracks download shows the digital file again yields more music. The gulls in the background of "Sweet Painted Lady" possess a previously absent palpability, and the bass line stays firmly anchored compared to its somewhat nebulous position on LP.

dCS also offers nearly bottomless bass grip when playing my favorite Deadmau5 and Thievery Corporation tracks. The deep bass on these albums doesn't come through well on LP, and if it does, no matter how good your turntable might be, at club-level volume, feedback intrudes on the party and greatly diminishes the effect.

I don't plan on getting rid of my turntables anytime soon, but it is wonderful to know that this level of parity is attainable. Thanks to dCS and a few other great combinations I've heard, my analog agnosticism is put to rest. Granted, \$10-20k is not a casual purchase for most carbon-based life forms. But a similar investment in the analog domain is necessary to get maximum performance. Digital has matured far beyond the point where your average turntable outperforms a high-dollar digital front end. As always, the recording quality will determine which source gets the nod, but you'll never have to "settle" for digital with the Debussy.

Fantastic

The dCS Debussy equates to a triumph, bringing world-class digital performance to a price point previously out of most audiophiles' reach. But don't listen to the Master Clock unless you are ready to press the "buy now" button. Once you've had such insight, it's tough to go back to listening without it.

If one could exchange their CD and LP collection for high-quality, high-resolution files, this would be an easy choice to make. But it's not that easy. Yet. For those that already have a substantial collection of 16/44 digital files, whether ripped on a hard drive or from CD, the Debussy makes it easy to not only enjoy them like never before, but to obtain the necessary amount of air and warmth that you enjoy from analog sources. The experience allows you to listen for hours without fatigue. And for source components, there's no higher praise than that. ●

dCS Debussy
MSRP: \$11,495

MANUFACTURER
Data Conversion Systems, Ltd.

CONTACT
www.dcsltd.co.uk (Mfr. site)
dCS North America, LLC
www.tempohighfidelity.com

PERIPHERALS

Preamplifier Audio Research REF 5

Power Amplifiers Audio Research REF 150,
Conrad Johnson MV-50C1

Speakers GamuT S9, Verity Audio Rienzi

Cable Cardas Clear, Shunyata Aurora

Power Running Springs
Dmitri, Maxim and Elgar PLCs

Hearing The Hoof Beats of a New Breed

Benz Micro Ruby Z Stereo Phono Cartridge

By Lawrence Devoe

More phono cartridges than I care to remember have passed through my stereos over the past four decades. Given the relentless onslaught of digital media, it's great to see that Benz Micro has not only stayed in the game but continues to strive for better products. The Ruby Z stereo cartridge, named for its zebra wood body, represents the evolution of one of the company's top moving-coil cartridge lines, falling just below the flagship Ebony LP cartridge. But, does a shift from Bruyere in the previous model to zebra wood in the current unit make a noticeable sonic difference? How about the new microridge stylus?



The Zebra Enters the Corral

The six prior Benz cartridges I've owned were all standard-output Rubys. Setting them up on VPI 'tables has always proved straightforward. Adding the Fozgometer, available from Musical Surroundings, simplified azimuth configuration. Indeed, the Fozgometer is an essential analog tool, especially if you have multiple cartridges and tonearms.

I set the tracking force on the Ruby Z to the suggested two grams and loading to 47k ohms, with the cartridge body approximately to the record surface of my modified VPI Aries turntable with flywheel drive and VPI 10.5 tonearm. A full complement of Pass Labs electronics took care of the signal from the XP-15 phono preamplifier, all the way to the MartinLogan CLX speakers. Along with 50 hours of cursory listening before critical evaluation, the Cardas Sweep LP accelerated break-in time.

Out on the Range

Zebras are not domestic animals, yet the Ruby Z cartridge is anything but wild and untamed. The "house" sound for Benz Micro's higher-end MCs is often described as warm and spacious, albeit articulate. I concur with this reputation. However, each subsequent generation offers improved tracking abilities and increased dynamic range. The Zebra continues this fine tradition. *(continued)*



The Ruby Z's ability to capture the compositions' big dynamic swings confirms its superb tracking prowess and extended frequency range.

A slightly low output of .35mv presented no problem for my Pass Labs XP-15 phono stage (currently under review) that boasts 71-76db of gain. Those with lower gain need to make sure their phono stage can accommodate the Zebra. The varied and simple songs on J Ralph's *Wretches and Jabberers* soundtrack feature well-recorded vocals, and the Ruby Z did not disappoint, offering realistic presence and body with near-perfect reproduction of each of the solo singers' distinct timbres. Similarly, Grammy-winning jazz artist Esperanza Spalding's voice and string bass were beautifully reproduced on her *Chamber Music Society*; the depth of the recording bowled me over.

On ORG's reissues of London "blueback" LPs, *Espana* and de Falla's *The Three-Cornered Hat*—both of which represent substantial improvements over the legendary original editions—the Zebra transparently resolved the difference between the old and new pressings. The spread of the orchestra, as well as the inner voices, created a dramatic experience. The Ruby Z's ability to capture the compositions' big dynamic swings confirms its superb tracking prowess and extended frequency range.

For its high-end cartridges, Benz Micro supplies a performance graph that shows measured frequency response and channel separation. While separation tapers off somewhat above 7kHz, it is still amazingly high at almost 40db. (continued)

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It has an excellently neutral balance across the audible spectrum, with the frequency response curve almost ruler flat. Swapping arm wands with the VPI tonearm is a snap, so a quick side-by-side comparison with previous sources confirmed what my aural memory intimated. While the Ruby 3 is still an excellent transducer, the Z's fuller soundstage and better low-frequency extension stood out. The most complex passages tracked with greater ease, allowing previously buried minute details to clearly emerge.

Ride the Zebra to the Finish

The Ruby Z not only delivers on the excellence suggested by its cost, but also outperforms its predecessor in every way, with improvements extending to tracking, musicality, and soundstaging. As with the best cartridges, the Ruby Z will not transform poor records into good ones; it is not overly "voiced." But it retrieves the maximum from all LPs and does justice to the greatest audiophile recordings. Current Benz Micro or Clearaudio cartridge owners wishing to upgrade can take advantage of an authorized trade-in program that should ease the financial burden of buying a Ruby Z. Check with your dealer, or contact Musical Surroundings to get the exchange rate.

With an increasing number of cartridges selling well beyond the \$3,995 cost of the Ruby Z, the latter offers up a substantial degree of what cost-no-object models muster. Best of all, the presentation reinforces the relevance of vinyl in the 21st century. ●



REVIEW

Benz Micro Ruby Z
Stereo Phono Cartridge
MSRP: \$3,995

MANUFACTURER
 Benz Micro

CONTACT
www.musicalsurroundings.com

PERIPHERALS

Amplifier Pass Labs XA 100.5

Preamplifiers Pass Labs XP-20 and XP-15

Analog Source VPI Aries (modified) with flywheel and VPI JMW 10.5 I tonearm

Speakers Martin Logan CLX

Cable Nordost Valhalla and Odin

Power Running Springs Dmitri and Maxim

Revelations Per Minute

MSB Technology Platinum Data CD IV Transport and Platinum Signature DAC IV

By Steve Guttenberg

Digital audio doesn't have a sound, per se. What we describe as *digital sound* is the sound of analog-to-digital and digital-to-analog conversions. There's not much we can do about the A-to-Ds used when music you love is recorded, mixed, or mastered, but as for the D-to-A conversions, the MSB Technology Platinum Data CD IV Transport and Platinum Signature DAC IV sound as good as digital gets.

Many analog lovers are certain that vinyl is more musical while digital devotees claim the zeroes and ones approach is by-the-numbers accurate. Vinyl's sins are mostly additive: analog has higher levels of distortion, speed variability, and noise issues, but digital somehow loses the juicy richness we associate with the sound of the proverbial real thing. Each camp stakes its claim of sonic superiority and often dismisses the opposite side's formats as non-musical garbage, and I swear the name-calling has been going on since analog was first converted to digital. That's not to say there aren't audiophiles that straddle the analog/digital gap. I include myself in that group.



MSB's Technology Platinum Data CD IV Transport and Platinum Signature DAC IV narrow the analog-digital divide, and again remind me of the source's role in determining the sound of my hi-fi. It really comes down to this: If musical information is "lost" at the source, it can't ever be regained with better amps or speakers. The old garbage-in, garbage-out credo still stands, and improvements made at the beginning of the chain—the source—are huge.

Being Discrete

The \$3,995 Platinum Data CD IV Transport and \$17,489 Platinum Signature DAC IV are available in Matte White (a.k.a. silver) or Satin Black; heat sinks on the chassis sides come in silver, black, or blue. The DAC offers an extensive (and at times, bewildering) range of set-up options. Input switching modes, digital filters, and dither options via the remote. The US-made DAC IV is discrete. It doesn't utilize Burr-Brown or any off-the-shelf chips to convert digital-to-analog, and that's a really big deal. MSB rolls its own ultra-high resolution, upwards of 384-kHz/32-bit DAC modules in-house, achieved straight through with no complicated side operations. The DACs use high-precision aerospace grade resistors, specifically selected and matched for use in the Signature DAC. The modules can be upgraded down the road, so a Platinum can become a Signature and a Signature can become a Diamond. *(continued)*



Perhaps the highest resolution is available via MSB's new Pro I2S MSB-Network connection, featuring ground isolation, higher bandwidth, and markedly lower jitter.

The front end of the DAC IV series uses the largest blank SHARC chipsets available. They also contain four digital filters, input receivers, and two upsampler algorithms all written in-house. The unit is designed to be field upgradable with firmware downloads for new digital filters, future formats, and many other pre-conversion functions. Analog and digital sections are completely isolated from each other.

You can configure your Platinum Signature DAC IV with a range of options, including the Signature volume attenuator for \$2,295; the Signature USB 2 384-kHz board for \$1,395; a remote control power on/off feature for \$485; a second analog input for \$995; and an integrated iLink (iPod dock) for \$1,995.

After inserting a disc, the Transport starts reading and rereading the disc and puts the data in a memory, like a computer-disc, transport would. MSB engineers listened to and tested dozens of drives before selecting the one employed in the Data CD IV. This drive performs just one function—it reads the data from the disc and the Data CD IV's custom-designed electronics control the drive. This approach is what separates its performance from other transports. Jitter is reduced to the point that MSB had to develop its own measurement system to more accurately monitor the readings.

The Transport requires an outboard 12-volt power supply, and MSB offers two options: a small desktop supply (\$595) or an MSB Platinum Power Base that comes with an MSB Platinum DAC. The Data CD IV's performance is the same with either power supply. The Transport has AES-EBU, RCA coaxial, Toslink optical, and MSB's proprietary Network digital outputs.

The DAC claims the same connectivity options as inputs, plus a 75-ohm BNC digital input and XLR or RCA analog input that passes through the purist volume attenuator, as well as RCA and XLR analog outputs. Perhaps the highest resolution is available via MSB's new Pro I2S MSB-Network connection, featuring ground isolation, higher bandwidth, and markedly lower jitter. *(continued)*




Visually, the Data CD IV Transport and DAC IV are much prettier than any previous MSB Tech components I've seen. The deeply rounded front fascia and low-slung chassis are flanked by gently curved heat sinks. The underside of the chassis' four corners are stocked with brass pointed feet, and the corresponding top corners are fitted with inserts to accept a stacked MSB component's pointed feet.

Physically, the Data CD IV feels nice and solid, but the generic plastic disc-loading tray and tiny transport control buttons seem out of place on gear that pushes the state of the art. Granted, they don't make a whit of difference to the sound, but I'd love to see a machined metal tray for this kind of money. The tray is the primary point of contact with the Transport, and it breaks the high-end spell. The Transport and DAC are also each shipped with a lightweight aluminum-faced remote control. Again, they're nothing fancy, but the remote works well, and I prefer it to

the massive devices that come with some high-end components.

Who Needs Surround?

I'll quickly concede that higher-than-CD-resolution digital gets closer to analog's musical nature, but there's precious little new music coming out on Blu-ray, SACD, DVD-A, or high-resolution download these days. By far, the CD is still the best-sounding widely distributed digital format. I own around 3,000 CDs and buy on average two per week, and I want to hear them at their best. Presto: The MSB components made the little silver discs sound better than ever. So much so I didn't shed a tear when I discovered the Platinum Data CD IV Transport doesn't play SACD or DVD-A discs, but spins DVD-ROMs encoded with WAV files with up to 384 kHz sampling rates with 32-bit resolution. If you possess a large SACD/DVD-A collection, check out MSB's \$3,995 Universal Media Transport (review in process). *(continued)*



Before starting a review of digital gear, I like to exclusively listen to LPs for a few days. The process clears my head. The MSBs acquitted themselves well during the first few plays—not so much that they sounded analog-like, but sounded good. Really good. As I played a stack of CDs, the MSBs connected the dots better than most digital gear I’ve heard.

I spent some time running the Platinum Signature DAC IV straight into my Pass Labs XA100.5 amps, and controlling the volume from the DAC. Sure, this approach is possible with some other DACs, but I’ve never actually preferred this method to using a preamp between DAC and amp. It makes a lot of sense to eliminate the preamp, but too often, dynamics go south and the sound loses too much of its essential mojo. Not this time. Straight-in, the DAC was a smidge more transparent, soundstaging more open, and focus better. Dynamics were better straight-in than with my Parasound JC-2 preamp in the chain. If you don’t have a lot of other analog sources (the DAC can be configured with up to two RCA and XLR analog inputs), you might want to forgo a preamp altogether. For those already possessing a high-quality linestage, the purist attenuator can be switched out completely.

While listening to 176.4-kHz/24-bit hi-res music from Reference Recordings’ *HRx Sampler 2011* DVD-ROM disc, the sound was nothing less than astounding. To my ears, high resolution gets you closer to being in the venue as you hear more low-level atmospherics. The illusion of being in a concert hall ranks ahead of what I’ve heard from SACD or DVD-A surround discs. The soundstage on the Reference disc may be strictly two-channel, but it’s so huge, I felt no loss of surround. Uninhibited large-scale dynamics, like the big bass drum that opens Walton’s *Crown Imperial* finale, just about knocked me over and had me reassessing my Magnepan 3.7 speakers’ dynamic capabilities.

The small- and large-scale dynamics on the disc’s solo piano tracks were, again, the most lifelike I’ve heard at home. The studio-recorded jazz tracks’ more intimate soundstage perspective added a degree of presence that made returning to CD an unpleasant option. So I popped in a 96-kHz/24 DVD-ROM of Paul Simon’s recent *So Beautiful or So What* album. It’s not an audiophile recording and, compared to the Reference Recordings’ discs, it’s dynamically compressed and processed. But it’s not bad. It’s also Simon’s best effort in years, and the lovely acoustic guitar picking on the instrumental “Amulet” is awfully pretty.

The MSBs let me hear more low-level (quiet) sounds in my CDs. Reverb, whether natural or added in the mix, seemed newly apparent in recordings I’d heard hundreds of times. It’s always been there, but no digital playback system I’ve had at home boasted the resolution to reveal it. Having worked on a number of Chesky Records sessions, including dozens recorded at St. Peter’s Episcopal Church in NYC, I can state for certain that the MSB Transport and DAC resurrected more of the 173-year-old building’s sound than I’ve ever heard from the CDs, SACDs, or DVD-As. The CDs never came close to this level of resolution. And, as you hear more deeply into a recording, soundstage focus and dimensionality are also enhanced.

Reconsidering the Analog-Digital Divide

In the great analog-digital divide, for me, engagement remains analog’s key advantage. I feel more connected and involved with music when listening to analog. And yet, the MSBs are distinctly more analog-like on these emotional fronts. Rhythm and pace are better than what I’ve come to expect. Imaging is another key strength: Instruments and voices project sound—if not in a complete 360-degree, omni-directional pattern, then something close to that experience. *(continued)*



The MSB Technology Platinum Data CD IV Transport and Platinum Signature DAC IV are expensive, but the best stuff almost always costs.

Of course, it's rare to reproduce a combination of direct and reflected sound over a hi-fi system. The fact is that information isn't found on most close-mic'd recordings; the "space" is an effect added in the mix.

You're much more likely to hear these details with so-called audio-ophile recordings since they take place in acoustically interesting places as opposed to acoustically dead studios. Howard Levy & Miroslav's *The Old Country* CD on MA recordings equated to a full-blown, virtual-reality

experience. Engineer Todd Garfin- kel records with a pair of B&K mics placed above the musicians. Via the MSBs, his mic technique was crystal clear, the spatial relationships between musicians perfectly rendered. No other digital playback gear came close to revealing this kind of accuracy, including my long-standing reference, the Ayre C-5xe mp SACD/DVD-A player. The latter remains a great machine, but blurs the instruments' outlines and flattens the soundstage. The MSB duo is a much sharper "lens."

So it came as something of a shock when the MSB worked its magic on less-than-stellar recordings like Trio Beyond's live *Saudades* CD. I've always enjoyed Jack DeJohnette, Larry Goldings, and John Scofield's music, but it's zippy, fuzzy, and nasty-sounding. Yet the MSB somehow toned down the negatives. My Japanese pressing of Jethro Tull's *Bursting Out* is another live recording that was previously too aggressively bright and thin to really enjoy, and yet the MSBs fleshed out the sound.

That's good news, because hearing 1978-era Tull blast through "Cross-Eyed Mary," "Aqualung," and "Thick as a Brick" is freaking awesome.

Admittedly, the MSB Technology Platinum Data CD IV Transport and Platinum Signature DAC IV are expensive, but the best stuff almost always costs. Then again, the components are also about as future-proof as digital gets, so it's the sort of digital gear in which you can invest for the long haul. The analog-digital divide has never been smaller. ●

MSB Technology Data CD IV Transport

MSRP: \$3,995

MSB Signature DAC IV with Signature Power Base

MSRP: \$17,489

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PERIPHERALS

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Digital Sources PS Audio PerfectWave DAC, Oppo BDP-83 Special Edition

Electronics Parasound JC 2 preamp; Pass Labs XP-20, Whetst 2.0 phono preamp; Be Canto REF500S, Pass Labs XA100.5 and First Watt J2 power amps

Speakers Dynaudio C-1, Zu Essence, Mangepan 3.6, Mangepan 3.7

Cable XLO Signature 3 interconnects; Analysis Plus Silver Oval interconnects and speaker cables; Audioquest Sky interconnects

From the Web site

When we're in between issues, we constantly add gear reviews to the *TONEAudio* Web site. The following are links to the two most recent reviews.



QSonix Q250 Music Server

www.qsonix.com

\$5,195-\$7,500 (depending on configuration)

The latest version of the QSonix music server improves upon the early model, with a larger capacity (now up to 2TB, with NAS compatibility on the horizon) and easier interface that can now be used directly via an iPad, making the Q250 ultimate in flexibility.

Thanks to a partnership with Wadia and new digital output board, the QSonix server's sound quality is world-class, giving you a choice of SPDIF and balanced ABS/EBU outputs. Moreover, the model is also compatible with high-resolution files, so you can truly have *all* of your digital files in one place.

- Read the rest of the details here.

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—Neil Gader, *The Absolute Sound* April 2011

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Slummin'

By jeff Dorgay

Altec Lansing 445A

Not for Sale; Echo Audio



This vintage piece was not even for sale the day I dropped into Echo Audio to pick up an LP-12 turntable. But I was charmed by its cool factor and remarkably good looks. Echo owner Kurt Doslu gave it a thorough check-up and verified that its inputs worked just fine. Originally made in 1959, the 445 uses transistors in the tape head, phono, and mic preamp sections; it utilizes a pair of vacuum tubes for the output stage. A recent EBay search revealed that a clean 445A will set you back around \$1,500. And it sounds better than any preamp you can buy today.

Am I putting you on? You'll just have to hunt one down and see.

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

ALO Audio: www.aloaudio.co

Anthem: www.anthemav.com

AudioVision SF: www.audiovisionsf.com

Audio Research: www.audioresearch.com

AudioQuest: www.audioquest.com

AVID: www.avidhifi.co.uk

B&W Music Club: www.bowers-wilkins.com

B&W Loudspeakers: www.bowers-wilkins.com

BelCanto: www.belcantodesign.com

Benchmark: www.benchmarkmedia.com

Burmester: www.burmester.de

Cardas Audio: www.cardas.com

Conrad Johnson: www.conradjohnson.com

dCS: www.dcsLtd.co.uk

Dynaudio: www.dynaudio.com

Echo Audio: www.echohifi.com

Estelon: www.estelon.com

GamuT: www.gamutaudio.com

iPort: www.iportmusic.com

JM Labs/Focal: www.audioplusservices.com

JL Audio: www.jlaudio.com

MartinLogan: www.martinlogan.com

McIntosh: www.mcintoshlabs.com

Meridian: www.meridian-audio.com

MICS: www.mics.mc

Mobile Fidelity: www.mofi.com

Mystere: www.mystere-usa.com

Musical Fidelity: www.musicalfidelity.com

Music Direct: www.musicdirect.com

Music Instrument Museum: www.themim.org

Music Matters: www.musicmattersjazz.com

Music Millennium: www.musicmillennium.com

Nagra: www.nagraaudio.com

Naim: www.soundorg.com

Paradigm: www.paradigm.com

Pass Labs: www.passlabs.com

Polk Audio: www.polkaudio.com

Primare: www.soundorg.com

Red Wine Audio: www.redwineaudio.com

Rega: www.soundorg.com

Running Springs Audio: www.runningspringsaudio.com

Save the Music: www.vh1.com

Simaudio: www.simaudio.com

Totem: www.totemacoustic.com

Upscale Audio: www.upscaleaudio.com

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