

# TONEAudio

Music.Gear.Style.

No.42 December 2011

## More Music Than Ever

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- **New Release Blowout:**  
Reviews of New Records from  
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- **2011's Best Rock and Pop  
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**AWARDS**  
**2011**

Product of the Year  
Publisher's Choice  
Awards







## Beauty, Brains, and Muscle!

I'm really proud of AudioQuest's new series of audio interconnect cable. I consider the essence of good design to be making rational and informed compromises, balancing all ingredients and compatibility requirements. It's not a perfect world ... if one isn't aware of imperfections and degradation, one can't design a superior product. The truly good-news is that the necessity to design cables which accommodate 3.5mm Mini-Phone plugs and 30-pin iPod/iPhone/iPad connectors in addition to RCA plugs, pushed me to create cables which are also significantly higher-performance than the larger cables they replace.

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## PUBLISHER'S LETTER



**W**ill you have physical media in the future? Does it matter? Given the constant noise surrounding the impending demise of the compact disc, legacy audiophiles are jumpy that no one will any longer collect, trade, and covet physical media. It might seem counterintuitive to ask, but how much do you really care about physical media these days?

I used to consider moving, but didn't because I own so many books, records, and CDs. While I'm probably more obsessed than the average human, the thought of my entire book collection being held on a 64GB iPad or 10,000 albums loaded on a few hard drives feels, well, liberating. I can pack my Sooloos in one suitcase and a pair of Meridian DSP3200 speakers in another. Home has always been where the stereo is, and going mobile has never been easier.

This isn't a call to stop buying albums but, instead, a time for reflection. While many in the hi-fi industry remain nervous about future sales of audio components, I don't think we're asking the right questions or mining the right data. I don't even believe that the dealers have dropped the ball by not availing customers to the merits of fantastic sound, only to lose them to the iTunes empire.

Rather, it boils down to an anthropological change. As Carole King once prophetically asked, "Doesn't anybody stay in one place anymore?" Not really. We don't hang out as much as we used to. At least, we don't hang out like Beavis and Butthead do (the new episodes are brilliant, by the way), sitting on our couch listening to music while goofing on things.

No, we're all talking, texting, and posting to Twitter and Facebook. And while I probably spend a little less time sitting down in front of a pair of speakers than I did during my twenties, I find this new social landscape invigorating. *TONEAudio's* Facebook page statistics reveal that we now reach 130,000 people per week. It's exciting to interact with readers on myriad topics ranging from the latest Mastodon release to the legendary Bose 901 speakers.

*TONEAudio* will keep exploring it all. Whether you enjoy chilling on the sofa or stopping by the Web for a few minutes, our staff will continue to delve into as much music, gear, and cool stuff as we can get our hands on. We hope you will enjoy it, however you choose to experience your data.





*"I want an exobyte drive for me and some black plate 12AX7s for my dad."*

PUBLISHER Jeff Dorgay

EDITOR Bob Gendron

ART DIRECTOR Jean Dorgay

MUSIC VISIONARIES Terry Currier  
Tom Caselli

RESEARCH Earl Blanton  
Ken Mercereau

STYLE EDITOR Scott Tetzlaff

SENIOR CONTRIBUTOR Ben Fong-Torres

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS Bailey S. Barnard  
Lawrence Devoe  
Andy Downing  
Anne Farnsworth  
Kevin Gallucci  
Steve Guttenberg  
Jacob Heilbrunn  
Ken Kessler  
Jim Macnie  
Mark Marcantonio  
Jerold O'Brien  
Paul Rigby  
Michele Rundgren  
Todd Sageser  
Jaan Uhelszki

UBER CARTOONIST Liza Donnelly

WEBSITE bloodymonster.com

ADVERTISING DIRECTOR

Christina Yuin  
toneaudiosales@gmail.com

**ON THE COVER:**

Deadmau5  
by Jeff Dorgay

**tonepublications.com**

Editor Questions and  
Comments:

tonepub@yahoo.com

800.432.4569

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**Lincoln Hall**

Chicago, Illinois

**September 29, 2011**

By Bob Gendron

Photos by Jeff Dorgay



# GIRLS

The dozens of long-stem flowers scattered about the stage at Girls' sold-out Lincoln Hall show suggested a scene reminiscent of a somber funeral or celebratory wedding. Aptly, moments from the indie-rock group's convincing 80-minute concert could've served both events, with its music leaning towards malaise and cheerfulness, sometimes within the same song. Delving into private thoughts and confessing innermost desires as if he was conversing with himself in front of a mirror, Girls singer/guitarist Christopher Owens utilized the performance as a platform for his tortured emotions—the kind of which often resonate with individuals punctured by the travails of unrequited romance, wishful longing, and feelings of inadequacy.

As a bandleader, Owens strikes a reluctant figure. He seems to still be processing the extra attention paid to his group as a result of its excellent sophomore album *Father Son Holy Ghost*. While he stood at center stage and faced the crowd, he usually kept his head bowed. His eyes concealed by drifting bangs, his mouth became the only primarily visible attribute on his face. During frequent tuning breaks, Owens ignored the comments of those in the audience intent on baiting him to submit a response. The silence had nothing to do with immodesty or unconcern. It related to Owens' shyness and manner of communicating what he needed to say through song.



While meditating on love, Owens often became consumed by it, the ruminations taking the form of questions-as-statements (“Could we fall in love?”), wounded admissions (“My heart’s been broken”) self-referencing observations (“I’m not as young as I used to be/I’m not as beautiful”), tragic memories (“When I said I loved you, honey/I knew you’d break my heart”), bummed-out disclosures (“I’m feeling so sad and alone”), and the pained revelations of a single man that believed he’d forever be *célibataire* (“It’s hard enough to be alone/It’s harder still to spend so long looking for happiness”). His lanky, skeletal frame and stringy hair helped give shape and believability to his lyrics by way of the fact that, in addition to being sung in an earnest and genuine voice, the words fit the front-man’s physical profile.

Owens never came across as the type of bachelor yearning to troll trendy bars or impress with flash. Instead, his unthreatening posture and mellow, occasionally nasal-tipped timbre belonged to a man genuine in his intent to find companionship, relief, and comfort. Of course, Owens’ concerns are nothing new in pop music and, when bereft of context and support, usually reveal themselves as insufferably piteous and laughably pathetic. In strumming jangly melodies from Rickenbacker guitars and leaning on a thumping rhythm section for slight turns of rough-and-tumble grit, Owens appeared to understand the need for sonic personality, muscle, and, yes, brief elements of transcendence.



Rather than encase tunes in down-cast arrangements, Girls met Owens’ flinching anguish and star-crossed romanticism head-on with bouncy surf riffs, curb-hugging bass lines, and resilient countermelodies streaked with positivism and brightness. The emerging scenarios hinted at Owens overcoming darkness and finding the light, the conversion of soul-scorched ache into reasonable hopefulness. The quintet’s tonal variations—shifts between distortion, fuzz, reverb, and delay effects painted songs with intriguing textural colors—produced stronger, punchier renditions of fare such as “Alex” and “Like a River.” Extra freedom afforded the keyboards and drums added to the aural expansiveness. On the epic “Vomit,” psychedelic haze yielded to edgy, craggy feedback and winding, ugly beauty that ultimately bled into the repeated invitational refrain. Illuminating Girls’ contrasts, wordless doo-wop harmonies underscored the childlike glee in “Magic,” while on “Die,” bottom-end 70s-drenched sludge briefly positioned the band as successors to Deep Purple.

“Yeah, I’m just crazy/I’m totally mad,” proffered Owens on the jitters-inspiring “Lust for Life” as his mates bop-bopped sunny rejoinders in the background. As he checked off simple wishes and hungered for a new start, Owens already realized what many of his newer, more complex and assured songs probe with more detail: That there’s nothing insane about wanting a partner with whom to camp out in front of a fire, share experiences, and risk soul-baring secrets. What’s crazy is to give up hope that such a situation will ever occur.





# Dum Dum Girls

**Empty Bottle**

Chicago, Illinois

**October 14, 2011**

By Bob Gendron

Photos by Kaitlin Fenci

Few songs are more appropriate for Dum Dum Girls to cover than “There Is A Light That Never Goes Out,” the Smiths’ ode to violently romantic death. “And if a ten-ton truck kills the both of us/To die by your side/Well, the pleasure, the privilege is mine,” crooned lead singer Dee Dee, embracing bizarrely embedded themes of dedication, sacrifice, loneliness, and love. Related threads of longing, companionship, and sensuality dominated the female quartet’s hour-long set at Chicago’s sold-out Empty Bottle, where the group convincingly proved its merit above that of a mere novelty act.

Of course, it’s easy to understand why detractors think of the band as little else than another in the long line of cute, nostalgia-chasing opportunists. Dum Dum Girls members are identified by invented aliases and referred to on a first-name basis. With their legs wrapped in black patterned stockings, the foursome conveys a unifying visual gimmick relied upon by a host of retro-based acts determined to express bygone styles and attain a trademark look. Yet the Dum Dum Girls possess what most of their lesser peers lack: Catchy, fuzz-churned, mildly complex fare sung from the gut, and in Dee Dee, a vocalist that channels both the ruffled-up street-cool toughness of Chrissie Hynde and sensitivity of the 60s-era’s premier girl-group leaders.

Onstage, she’s a no-nonsense figure, her aloof shyness diffused by a willingness to channel bruising loss, aching need, and exposed vulnerability into dreamy, alluring tunes that, via their edginess, warn listeners to keep their distance. Dee Dee never teased, batted an eyebrow, or waffled. Yet aspects of her understated seductive delivery—equally capable of sounding like blown kisses, lashing scolds, and hesitant whispers—betrayed the unrequited emotions and sorrowful feelings brimming underneath her leather-clad outer shell. Akin to her mates, which primarily hid in the shadows and made no attempt to stray from supplying ample backing parts, she remained assertive and tortured, a handsomely dangerous combination that translated via concise, contagious melodies assembled from a wellspring of influences.





**Akin to her mates, Dee Dee remained assertive and tortured, a handsomely dangerous combination that translated via concise, contagious melodies assembled from a wellspring of influences.**

Underpinned by a reverb-laden indie-pop aesthetic, songs alternately stabbed like a prison-made shank (“Always Looking”), bopped amidst dark currents (“Bhang Bhang, I’m a Burnout”), crossed surf-rock waves with clattering country train-song percussion (“Catholicked”), utilized distortion as one might use lipstick to smear details (“Wasted Away”), and romped along to handclap-derived beats tailored for jump-rope competitions (“He Gets Me High”). Innocence and iciness often clashed. Caught in uncertain limbo, Dee Dee split time between letting go of her inhibitions and pulling secrets closer to the vest.

Amidst the confessions, hopes, and worries, several moments of levity relieved any potentially oppressive drama. Watching the

collective sway their legs during the four-part harmonies on “I Will Be” brought to mind Robert Palmer’s “Addicted to Love” video. Trashy vibes, and the sweat glistening off of Dee Dee’s upper lip, lent “It Only Takes One Night” a one-and-done rawness absent from the more mature, heart-on-a-sleeve material.

If there was ever any doubting the Dum Dum Girls’ candor, it was immediately put to rest during the fluid “Heartbeat (Take It Away).” Built atop crawling, counterpoint guitar lines and a simple drumbeat, the cathartic cry for deliverance from pain steadily rose in intensity, the climax eliciting sympathy and empathy—and the conclusion that, as she grows into her role as a confident bandleader, Dee Dee has no ceiling.

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# Deadmau5

**Aragon Ballroom**

Chicago, IL

**October 22, 2011**

By Bob Gendron

Photos by Jeff Dorgay

f Deadmau5, a.k.a. Toronto native Joel Zimmerman, ever tires of his gig as an electronic artist and producer, he could probably secure a job as a media consultant or party coordinator without problem. At the first of two sold-out shows at Chicago's Aragon Ballroom—performances that came on the heels of a headlining Lollapalooza appearance as well as an unprecedented multi-night run in New York City—the man that conceals his head with a rodent-themed mask (on this night in the shape of a piece of Swiss cheese) gave a clinic on how to make a concert into a sensory-triggering event.

While dizzying light displays and thumping speaker systems are *de rigueur* at raves and other electronic-minded spectacles, Deadmau5 took such normalities to a plateau on par with the mind-rattling exhibitions staged by arena-rock acts.





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Taming the Aragon's nightmarish acoustics to the point where sound is largely free of echo is laudable; turning the 5000-capacity venue into an aural funhouse, as Zimmerman did, borders on miraculous.

He proved equally adept with aesthetics. Two geometrically matched risers functioned as projection screens, each flanking an approximately 20-foot-tall command module on which Deadmau5 stood, operating computers, mixers, and sequencers. Rather than bomb the audience with blinding strobes and incessant flash, the visual array (which also included backdrop screens) worked in tandem with the tempo of songs. Pop-culture-referencing symbolism, sequences, and similes enhanced the dance-centric blend of techno, trip-hop, soul, and pop; sound and sight converged into coordinated, progressive-house-music symphonies. Seemingly aware of how and why music continues to cross over into and become an inextricable part of multi-tasking, entertainment, and language, Deadmau5 excelled at rendering meaningless any separation between gaming and art, social networking and entertainment, artificial and real, original and borrowed. *(continued)*



LIVE MUSIC



**The lanky 30-year-old creative wizard transcended genres in the similar fashion that today's most immersive, plugged-in entertainment systems explode cultural parameters.**

Scenarios stemming from popular video games, witty taglines and phrases, iconic shapes and matrices joined a miasma of advanced graphics in simultaneously stimulating the imagination and punctuating the liberation inherent in primarily instrumental tracks such as "Bad Selection," "Professional Griefers," and "Some Chords." Affording the fare a more sensual feel, vocalist Sofi joined Deadmau5 for "Sofi Needs a Ladder" and "One Trick Pony," with the host stepping down from his perch and removing his mask for a brief moment—a well-deserved victory lap before he, once again, climbed back into his technologically savvy tree house for another hour of programming, knob-twirling, and oscillating.

By frequently narrowing and expanding pitch and frequency, slowing and quickening rhythmic speed and pace, Deadmau5 toyed with textures and moods, as well as the ignorant notion that anyone, provided the requisite equipment, can string together loops, grooves, beats, samples, and percussive noises into coherent, cerebral music. Linking together dubstep and psychedelia, club and ambient, trance and rock strains into both mellow and hyperactive expressions, the lanky 30-year-old creative wizard transcended genres in the similar fashion that today's most immersive, plugged-in entertainment systems explode cultural parameters. Welcome to the future.

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# Fleet Foxes

**Chicago Theatre**

Chicago, Illinois

**September 30, 2011**

By Bob Gendron

Photos by Jeff Dorgay



**B**earded Fleet Foxes frontman Robin Pecknold stood alone onstage during the start of the encore, framed by a backdrop on which projections of stars and aurora borealis lights gently flickered. The calming ambience suggested the singer could very well be perched on a mountainside in front of a small campfire, singing to natural surroundings. Organic, intimate, rustic, serene—albeit immense-sounding and group-involving: The first of the band's sold-out two-night stand at Chicago Theatre had all the transcendent makings of a jarring dream in which existential musings and personal reflections come to fore as brief visions before fading away, not unlike the sextet's voices, into an ethereal abyss.

While studio technology affords musicians the ability to manipulate sounds into any imaginable concoction they deem favorable, performing in acoustically reverberant halls can be a less-than-forgiving exercise. Nonetheless, at its headlining appearance earlier in July at the Pitchfork Music Festival, Fleet Foxes seemed up to the challenge of meeting head-on the creative expansion demonstrated on its superb sophomore *Helplessness Blues*. And judging from this event, in the two months that passed, and as summer turned to fall, the Seattle-based collective's mellifluous capacity appeared to increase, with skyscraping harmonies and baroque accents assuming a majestic quality that aligned with songs' mystic imagery and spiritual deliverance.

It's relatively easy for a rock band to shape budding soft-to-loud dynamics to their advantage; it's much more difficult for a folk-rock act—augmented with unplugged accoutrements such as stand-up basses, fiddles, and mandolins—to generate similar swells sans the aid of bruising amplification and overstated orchestration. *(continued)*





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LIVE MUSIC

Championing nuance, Fleet Foxes couched multi-part choral sections amidst lithe, airy arrangements that frequently dilated to accommodate crowd-participatory handclaps and tambourine-whacked rejoinders. Shaded in bluegrass, pop, and Americana disciplines, songs inhaled and exhaled, the various combinations of stringed instruments yielding to organ fills steeped in droning intensity as well as sweet, baroque-flavored moments of relief. Nothing appeared out of place or inserted for academic sake.

Guitars chimed like soft bells on "English House." Pedal steel appointment prompted "Grown Ocean" to stomp and soar. Vocal waves rose and fell akin to late-August Lake Michigan tides during the cascading "White Winter Hymnal." A saxophone blared during the segue to the middle of "The Shrine/An Argument," which began as a comforting lullaby and finished as a tussle of conflicting

sentiment, the ascending progression yanking the tune from its safe moorings. No matter how involved the fingerpicked structures or stacked harmonies, Fleet Foxes turned complexity into simplicity, broke down labyrinthine canvases into pinpoint details. Pecknold was there at every turn.

Not only does the 25-year-old singer command an encyclopedic knowledge of his parents' record collection, he possesses a golden-throated timbre that, heard in tandem with the dulcet voices of his mates, radiated an atmospheric glow to which the angels, painted on the venue's arched ceiling, could likely relate. Marveled by the grand dynamics and hushed moods, they—and the verklempt audience—stood in awe, secretly hoping that Pecknold and Co. don't arrive at any definitive answers to their metaphysical questions any time soon.



Shelby Lynne's current album, *Revelation Road*, represents a new twist for the veteran singer-songwriter. On it, she plays all the instruments and sings every note. When discussing the subject of potential band mates for her tour, she noted, "[The material] is way too personal. I have to perform these songs myself." Indeed, the set constitutes a personal journey for an artist that's never had a problem baring her soul on record or in front of a crowd.

And so it was when she appeared at Portland's diminutive Mississippi Studios. Obsessive about sound quality, Lynne sorted out a few minor issues with the sound man and got to business, grinning as she announced, "I'm gonna play the new songs first and then we'll visit the old stuff." She proceeded to perform *Revelation Road* in its entirety, albeit in a different sequence than that on the album.

A soft rendition of "Lead Me Love" warmed up her vocal chords before a potent rendition of "Woebegone" made it clear that her powerful pipes need no other accompaniment besides a guitar. Wasting no time, Lynne provided insight into what inspired her newer songs, all the while deftly handling the drunken rambling of a fan trying to draw attention to a recent Oregon Ducks football game. "I believe y'all got your asses handed to you last weekend," she cracked.

Played solo, her earlier tunes resonated with new life. Sounding like a big, fat mono mix on a vintage Sun LP—with just a touch of added reverb to make the tiny hall sound larger than life—the stripped-down fare conveyed an effortlessness spurred on by Lynne's seamless darting between loud and soft dynamics. Flashing her trademark wit, she proclaimed "unhappy memories make for great country songs" and eased into "Jesus on a Greyhound," her voice down to a whisper.

As the show drew to a close, Shelby Lynne became lost in the moment. It's hard to tell if she remains tortured by these songs or, if for a brief moment, is at peace. ●



# Shelby Lynne

## Mississippi Studios

Portland, Oregon

**November 20, 2011**

Text and Photo by Jeff Dorgay



# New Releases



## Mark Lanegan Band

*Blues Funeral*

Beggars Banquet, LP and CD



**“If tears were liquor/I would’ve drunk myself to death,”** confesses a troubled Mark

Lanegan on the allegorical “St. Louis Elegy,” a haunting organ-laced ballad that stands in as the second cousin to the Animals’ “House of the Rising Sun” and reinforces the afflicted moods coursing through *Blues Funeral*.

Spectacularly diverse and consistently impressive, the vocalist’s first studio album in more than seven years arrives after several rewarding collaborations.

Three duet efforts with Isobel Campbell, a stint with the Queens of the Stone Age, appearances on sets by Marianne Faithfull and Soulsavers, and a go-around as one half of the Gutter Twins gave the ex-Screaming Trees crooner plenty of time to dwell on original material. And akin to 2004’s *Bubblegum*, *Blues Funeral* blows open the primarily acoustic roots-based approach taken on his first five solo records. What hasn’t changed is Lanegan’s impactful voice—impregnated with back-of-throat huskiness, nicotine-stained depth, lived-in wisdom, and liquor-soaked ache. It’s an intense instrument—a soul-penetrating stare wielded with careful precision as it wades into dark landscapes scarred with mental disease, corrosive relationships, sad disgrace, enslaving addictions, and unhealthy fixations.

While his range is limited, Lanegan switches between his shovel-scraping baritone and mellower falsetto capacities. The former digs at unrequited desires while the latter works to convey undying dedication. Measured, dusky, and unhurried, the daylight-allergic frontman’s voice alternately palpates with claustrophobic presence and tortured mysticism. This is a man for who gray cedes to black, the hangman constantly lurks, and bullets and guns qualify as appealing. Navigating emotions hair-triggered by blossoming chaos, ruined loves, and deleterious circumstances, Lanegan surfs atop brimming tension and sweeping crescendos as well as any contemporary singer. He inhales words into his lungs before exhaling with unforced anguish. A twisted spirituality informs his phrasing and timbre, helping turn deliverance pleas into requiems of Biblical proportions. Lanegan makes feeling bad sound incredibly good, inviting listeners into clandestine worlds in

which temporary visits are preferable to taking up residence.

Obsessive longing recurs, and never more so than on “The Gravedigger’s Song.” Metronomic rumbling and blindsiding guitar riffs coincide with smothering vocals and a verse delivered in seductive, low-register French—the move underscoring Lanegan’s smitten condition and poetic wanderlust. On the electronically textured “Harborview Hospital,” he’s removed from a beautiful union and joyous celebration spotted in the near distance and, unable to free himself from a paralyzed state, asks a sister of mercy, “Are they supposed to be as sick as you and me?” For Lanegan, desolation isn’t a curable emotion or cause for shame; like it is for Kirsten Dunst’s character in Lars von Trier’s *Melancholia*, it’s an ailment that must be tolerated. Salvation, if all possible for this burdened Saturday’s child, comes from blind faith, blunt confessions, and imaginative atmospherics.

Whether via the tangled folk psychedelia of the balladic “Deep Black Vanishing Train” or noisy R&B throttle of the aptly titled “Quiver Syndrome,” complete with doo-wop backing vocals, Lanegan couches shivers, moans, and grumbles amidst mercurial musical combinations. He largely skirts conventional rock structures, daring instead to stir within manipulated trip-hop backdrops (“Phantasmagoria Blues”) and avant-garde chamber-pop melodies (“Leviathan”). On the synth-pop “Ode to Sad Disco,” Lanegan even channels late-80s Depeche Mode and Leonard Cohen. Pairing a drum-machine track with a reverb-spiked country guitar line, he creates a dance number tailored for the coat-check room in Satan’s discotheque. —**Bob Gendron**





Photo by John Peets

**T**he Black Keys might be the only recession-proof thing Akron, Ohio has produced in recent decades. Even as the former rubber capitol—at one point in its history home to four major tire companies—struggles to reinvent itself, the blues-rock duo has continued its rise virtually unabated.

Since *The Big Come Up* first surfaced back in 2002, the group's music has practically become ubiquitous in popular culture, with songs appearing in an endless stream of films and television commercials—a development singer-guitarist Dan Auerbach and drummer Patrick Carney joked about on an episode of "The Colbert Report," engaging in a "sell-out-off" with Vampire Weekend frontman Ezra Koenig that ended in a humorous, *Warriors*-style brawl. More recently, critical success followed. This past year, the duo even netted a trio of Grammys for its 2010 album *Brothers*.

The record's success must have been a nice bit of validation for the pair, who spent a chunk of its creation struggling with internal tensions stemming from Auerbach's decision to release a solo album in 2009 as well as a range of personal issues—including the fallout from Carney's divorce, which took one final ugly turn when his ex-wife published a lengthy article about the dissolution of their relationship on the popular Web site, Salon, earlier this year. Then there was the duo's enviable (if risky) decision to go it alone, producing the album themselves rather than re-teaming with Brian "Danger Mouse" Burton, who helmed 2008's *Attack & Release*. (continued)



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If the in-demand producer had any hard feelings about the slight, they've clearly long since evaporated. He rejoins the fold for *El Camino*, a sturdy, riff-heavy effort that simultaneously sharpens and expands on the Keys' musical palette. Opening song and lead single "Lonely Boy" sets the tone, piling on a thundering drums, a lean and propulsive guitar line, and Auerbach's damaged-soul vocals. "You pulled my heart out," he sings, "And I don't mind bleeding." Perhaps unsurprisingly, it actually sounds like he minds very much.

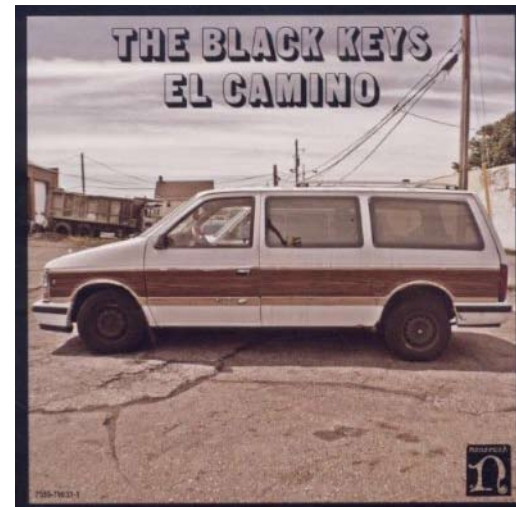
It's a recurrent theme for Auerbach. While happily married with a daughter of his own, the singer, who currently makes his home in Nashville, can't quite shake his she-done-me-wrong woes, singing: "You took advantage of the one who showed you love"; "Everybody knows that a broken heart is blind"; "All this love of mine/And all my precious time/You waste it cause you don't know what you want." Perhaps it's a vestige of his well-documented blues obsession, which culminated in a teenage pilgrimage to Junior's Place, the Chulahoma, Mississippi juke joint run by late bluesman Junior Kimbrough—a spur-of-the moment trek that has since become an integral part of the band's early mythology.

Of course, each successive album finds the pair drifting further from such primal, bash-it-out blues roots. *El Camino* hits on musical touchstones as varied as T. Rex (the glammy, organ-fueled stomp

of "Gold on the Ceiling"), Michael Jackson (the icy, disco strut of "Sister" bears at least a passing resemblance to "Billie Jean"), and the Clash (the reggae-rock bounce of "Hell of a Season"). This idea that the Black Keys are, at least in some sense, burying the past carries over into the artwork for the "Lonely Boy" single—a photograph taken in Akron of a bulldozer stationed on a barren patch of concrete where the factory that housed recording sessions for 2004's *Rubber Factory* once stood.

In recent years, the Keys have started taking extra musicians out on the road, fleshing out their live sound with the addition of keyboard and bass. Fittingly, *El Camino*—as muscular as the roar emitted by its namesake auto's engine—sounds more like a full-on band effort than the product of two dudes bashing away in a garage. Vintage strains of keyboard weave through much of the album, and a female vocalist adds a soulful punch to several songs, including "Gold on the Ceiling," an insanely catchy number destined to end up in at least a handful of Hollywood films and network programs.

On *Attack & Release*, Danger Mouse and the Keys toyed with tempo, recording two versions of "Remember When," including a folksy, bluegrass-tinged take and a comparatively balls-out rocker. It's a trick they resuscitate better effect here on "Little Black Submarines," which opens amidst casual Sunday-morning acoustic picking



### The Black Keys

*El Camino*

Nonesuch Records, LP or CD

before jumping into fifth gear, Auerbach laying down a cranky guitar riff that sounds like a heavily distorted take on Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers' "Mary Jane's Last Dance" blasted through blown-out speakers.

Clocking in right around 40 minutes, *El Camino* never risks overstaying its welcome, a point Auerbach seems to hit on with the album-closing "Mind Eraser," repeating, "Oh, don't let it be over." Sure, he's likely singing about yet another relationship gone to pot—in his mind, the dude must be the emotionally battered Charlie Brown of rock stars—but it's a safe assumption many listeners will feel similar pangs as the final seconds of this exceptional record tick down. A suggestion? Simply hit play again and crank the volume till the walls rattle. —Andy Downing




**Kathleen Edwards**

*Voyageur*  
Zoe, LP and CD

**K**athleen Edwards experienced a lifetime of changes during the past three years. She divorced husband and frequent collaborator Collin Cripps. She began a romantic and creative relationship with Justin Vernon, the Bon Iver namesake who helped produce and played on her new *Voyageur*. And, as detailed in witty fashion on the album-opening “Empty Threat,” she temporarily relocated to the United States from her native Canada. She also matured as an artist, expanding on the roots-based palette of Americana and amps-blurring rock of 2008’s *Asking for Flowers* by undertaking a record augmented by a number of co-writers and guest participants. Transformative shifts also extend to her lyrical scenery, surroundings, and situations.



Photo by Todd V. Wolfson

A cult favorite since debuting in 2003 with *Failor*, Edwards stands to benefit from her association with Vernon, who currently can’t do wrong and, more importantly, whose textural motifs adorn the singer-songwriter’s material with evocative layering, greater depth, and music-box fragility. She exchanges the humorous brashness and loose playfulness of her past for concentrated pathos, reflection, and sensitivity.

In doing so, Edwards becomes exposed in ways that, at times, makes listening uncomfortable. Fresh scars, persistent regrets, unanswered questions, two-way accusations, lingering doubts, and consuming guilt pepper her narratives. Her voice often possesses a soul-shattering sincerity and delicate softness that turns the fare into private, reflexive conversations that sound as if they transpire in front of a mirror. A majority of the songs are shot through with transformative anguish and reality-grounded balance. Yet Edwards’ greatest accomplishment on *Voyageur* pertains to the record’s overall mood and perspective. While poignantly addressing circumstances and feelings connected to her breakup, she never settles for vindictive revenge, emasculating blame, or debilitating pessimism.

By confronting her own flaws and roles in the dissolution, Edwards shows she’s already moved beyond anger and acquiesces to the consequences. Despite moments of weakness, disappointment, and disillusionment, Edwards suggests humans haven’t any other logical choice than to move on—no matter how hurtful as such processes can be. Reluctant understanding and

shared acceptance arrive during the heart-lacerating “House Full of Empty Rooms,” an elegy on which the vocalist admits she’s less than perfect while singing, “You don’t kiss me/ Not the way that I wish you would/ Maybe I don’t look at you/ In the way that makes you think you should.” Edwards doesn’t play martyr; rather, she finds fortitude in honest contemplation, recognizing that the process leads to the type of hope embodied in the upbeat “Sidecar” and dissipating darkness of “Going to Hell.”

Space-conscious and hovering instrumental touches—faint electronic washes, subtle xylophones, bluegrass-hinting banjos, filter-echoed guitars—underline Edwards’ guarded optimism, bringing to tunes fleshed-out arrangements and band-involved contributions largely absent from her previous efforts. From the back-and-forth exchanges on the baroque-flavored “Chameleon Comedian” to the militant percussion, sawing violin, and somber piano on the comfort-seeking “A Soft Place to Land,” tonally reverberant blends shade Edwards’ storytelling and singing. The combination is seldom more effective than on the sighing lament “Pink Champagne,” throughout which building notes cut like broken shards of glass and swelling country accents function as pain-dulling whiskey shots.

Indeed, after hearing Edwards scourge herself for mistakes that didn’t seem so, the following two tracks—the last on the album—seem anti-climatic, even as the closing “For the Record” serves as a statement of purpose on an album on which determination isn’t optional but prescribed. —**Bob Gendron**




**Kate Bush**

*50 Words for Snow*  
Anti-, 2LP or CD

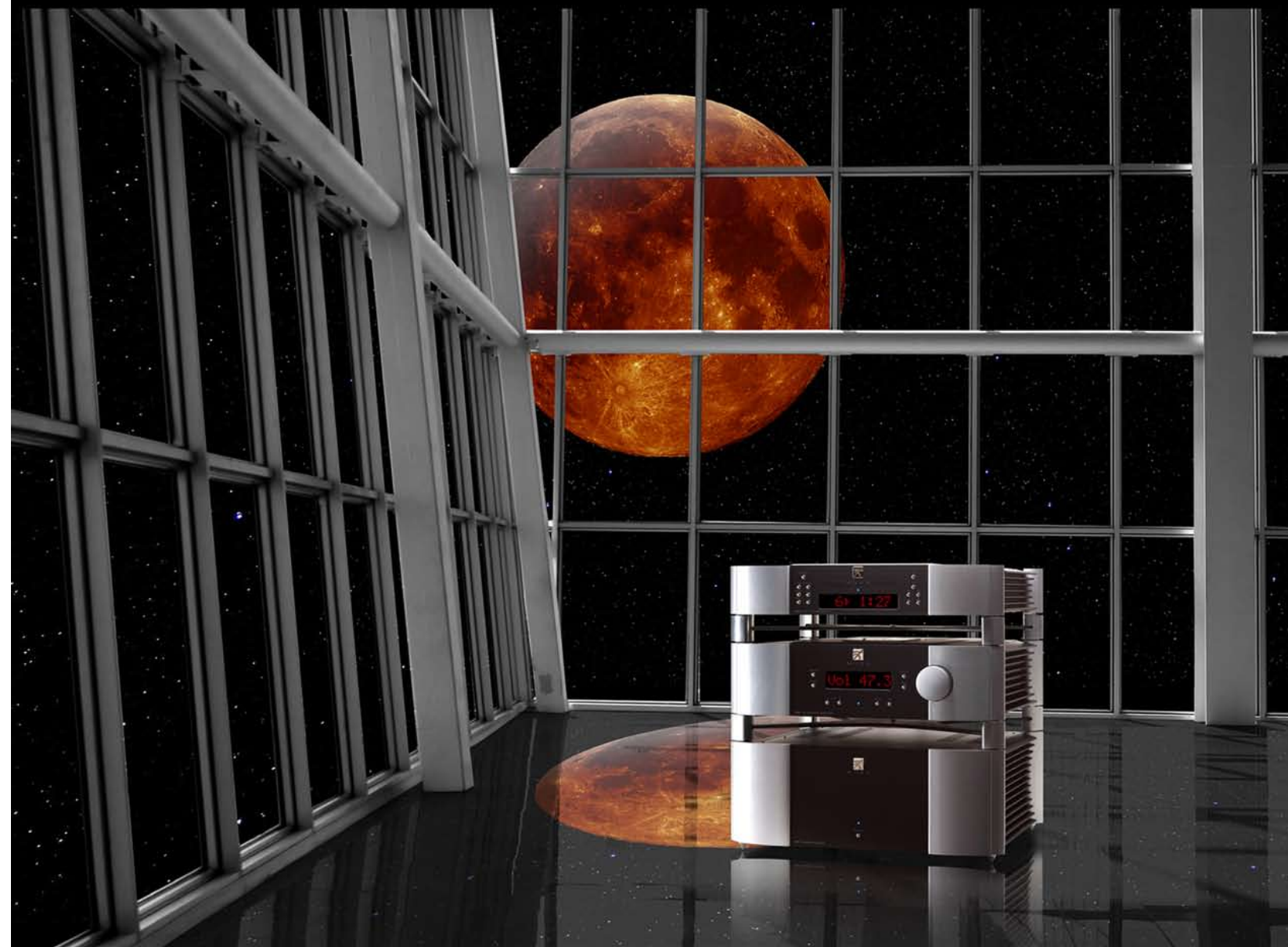
**A**s Kate Bush's recording output has gotten more and more sparse—*50 Words for Snow* is only her second album of new material since 1993—so, too, have her arrangements gradually calmed. An artisan of the piano, Bush was always more chamber than concert hall. But *50 Words for Snow* begs the listener closer, its hushed quality a cleverly crafted comfort to disguise the turmoil underneath.

The album title only hints at the level of coldness and emptiness explored throughout this seven-track, 65-minute set. "Lake Tahoe," for instance, becomes increasingly gripping as one unravels the story, and it will be downright frightening to animal lovers. At 11 minutes, the song could use some trimming—Bush's airy piano and choir voices largely frame the tale—yet there's a dead body, and an aging dog that misses its deceased owner. "Here's my lap," Bush sings, channeling the dreams of a hound, "that's where you lay your head."

Such an attention to detail is what makes *50 Words for Snow* a remarkable albeit potentially difficult listen. Few songwriters, of course, possess the lyrical gift that can put a decomposing body in a lake and, minutes later, wring tears from thoughts of a lonely pet. On *50 Words for Snow*, Bush splits the difference between such stark realism and the odder, more otherworldly thoughts that mark much of her 80s-era work.

The metaphor in "Snowflake" seems simple enough, but knowing that a bulk of the vocals are handled by Bush's young son, Albert McIntosh, adds a layer of bizarreness. The teenager is billed as lead vocalist, and Bush is resigned to the chorus. Without reading the credits, one would think Bush is playing a character. "My broken heart, my fabulous dances," presumably sings the teenager, turning the no-two-snowflakes-are-alike cliché into a dissertation on fading childhood. *(continued)*

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Photo by John Cardner Bush

Some of Bush's old lyrical oddness returns on "Wild Man," which many longtime fans have excitedly noted, represents her revisiting of the abnormal. The song appears to be about a hunted Yeti. But such a diversion into the mystical isn't nearly as bracing as when Bush touches on very real human emotions. Still, her playfully skittering vocal whisper—and deranged, Cee-Lo-like choirs—ultimately redeems the song.

More interesting, however, are the final two tracks. The title cut does indeed offer 50 words and phrases inspired by snow, with an assist from author/humorist Stephen Fry. But they may as well be 50 words for tragedy and gloominess: "avalanche," "robber's veil," and "bad for trains" among them, all delivered while soulful backing vocalists taunt him on.

The Elton John duet "Snowed in At Wheeler Street," however, is heartbreak at its most haunting. London smog, the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and burning Rome are among the images that reverberate around a buzzing, horror-soundtrack keyboard. "Have we been in love forever?" Bush asks, a narrator unsure of herself, her partner, and her feelings toward nostalgia. In such moments, the languid arrangements seem to come to a halt. After all, the answer to such a question is a deeper look into the abyss than anything involving an Abominable Snowman.

—**Todd Martens**



Florence Welch's voice is an undeniable weapon. It brought concertgoers to a halt in 2010 at Southern California's Coachella Valley Music & Arts Festival. Welch and her band, Florence & the Machine, were stationed at an outpost—a relatively small tent safely tucked away from the two outdoor mainstages. With a mid-afternoon slot, it would have been easy to walk right on by. But Welch shouted, and onlookers stopped.

Hers is a tone that is equally strong and delicate—a versatile instrument that can grind out a soul cover and minutes later force journalists to use clichéd words like “ethereal,” simply because there's few other ways to describe a voice than can seem to dance over a harp's fragile tones. Once television-viewing audiences got wind of this dynamo singer, they responded in kind. After an appearance at the MTV Video Music Awards in the fall of 2010, Welch's 2009 debut, *Lungs*, suddenly took off and earned Florence & the Machine a Best New Artist nod at the Grammy Awards.

So it's a strange, head-scratching thing that *Ceremonials* opens with a song in “Only If a Night” that goes all of 60 seconds before completely neutralizing Welch's greatest strength. It starts slow and brooding enough, with a smattering of piano notes, deep bass tones, and dreamy harpsichords. Then comes the church choirs. This in itself wouldn't be immediately offensive, as Welch is singing of doing handstands in a cemetery, after all.



But with the choirs come an anchor's thud of over-production. Strings? Yep. Giant, hip-hop-like beats? Check? A midtempo piano for Welch to go all Alicia Keys? That's here, too. This doesn't appear to be the result of some evil major-label overload now demanding a “hit,” as *Ceremonials*, like *Lungs*, is produced by Paul Epworth. Unlike *Lungs*, however, this record feels more like an exercise in production than an expression of artistry.

OK, fine, that's one track. Next up is the first single, “Shake It Out.” Sadly, this isn't a song as so much as a piece of music built for gargantuan set-pieces. One can practically see the close-up on Welch as the veins in her neck quiver. And no doubt she'll look striking in what will surely be an angelic, glitter-filled costume. Yet, as on “Only If a Night,” Welch is soon joined by what sounds like all of London's entire cadre of backing vocalists. One may as well pile on the window dressing and create a diversion, however, as all the Queen's singers and even the most trained philharmonic couldn't add a sense of drama to nonsense lyrics like “damned if I do and damned if I don't.” Sigh.

It carries on for 12 tracks, much like this. Sure, there are nice atmospheric touches here and there. The tribal drumming of “Heartlines” promises good things to come, as do the scrapes and clacks of “All This and Heaven To.” Likewise, “Breaking Down,” on which Welch sticks close to some steadily building orchestral strikes. But these are cursory nods to experimentation. Melodies are sacrificed for choruses loud enough to be shouted from the Vatican, and Welch can't go more than 40 seconds without someone thinking she needs layer upon layer of vocals.



### Florence & the Machine

*Ceremonials*

Island Records, 2LP or CD

Even Welch's trademark harp is denigrated by the studio gloss. It sounds so heavily processed, it feels ripped from a Radio Disney album.

The great crime here is that Welch has a personality that demands attention. *Lungs* is an expansive record full of possibilities, with hints of Gothic blues and rock n' soul fierceness. It has its share of celestial touches as well, but there's plenty of theatrics to be pulled from songs that grapple with faith. PJ Harvey and Nick Cave, for instance, have catalogs that prove it. It isn't until the album's final moments that Welch seems to seize the potential at which her debut hints. “Don't need a husband, don't need no wife,” she sings through gritted teeth on the album-closing “Leave My Body.” The verses are striking in their simplicity, and she sounds angry enough that the gospel choir keeps its distance. It's the rare moment on *Ceremonials* where the song is placed ahead of the spectacle. —**Todd Martens**



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## MUSIC

**T**

he Big Pink's 2009 debut, *A Brief History of Love*, often sounds out-of-step with its openhearted title. It

boasts an array of shoegaze-laden electro-rock cuts as bone-chilling as a winter breeze in a darkened crypt. The British crew's sophomore album, by contrast, is a much warmer affair, blanketed in lush synths, the electronic pulse of programmed drums, and Robbie Furze's casually tossed-off vocals.

Furze, who used to play with Alec Empire, sounds miles removed from his noise-rock past here, and songs like "Rubbernecking" and the kinetic "Lose Your Mind" hew much closer to the gauzy output of revered Britpop acts such as the Stone Roses. Still, it's impossible to shake the feeling that Furze's heart isn't fully invested in this current guise. He's akin to a tattooed biker that, after getting trapped in the 'burbs with his old lady, is forced to swap his leather jacket for pleated khakis. How else to explain the emotional disconnect in the music? Even the prettiest numbers sound somewhat dead inside. Like a Stepford Wife. Or Britney Spears.

That said, the group displays a better command of space and melody than on its claustrophobic debut, and a handful of ear-catching moments punctuate the most memorable tracks. "Hit the Ground (Superman)," built around a sample from Laurie Anderson's "O Superman," layers on deep piano chords, wobbly synthesizers, and a fuzzed-out guitar drone that clings to the tune like barnacles on a ship's hull. Despite lyrics seemingly cribbed from *The Outsiders*, the massive "Stay Gold" (one can almost picture Johnny advising Ponyboy to "stay gold" as the chorus glides in) comes across as



### The Big Pink

*Future This*  
 4AD, LP or CD

if it's genetically engineered to pack the dance-floor at the now-shuttered Hacienda during the height of the Madchester craze. Similar vibes creep into "Lose Your Mind," which samples Siouxsie & the Banshees and waves the flag for goth night at the discotheque.

Had the Big Pink been content to host its own rave—a number of the album's 10 cuts are decidedly glowstick-friendly, after all—the record might connect better. As it stands, repeated attempts to add emotional heft to the material bogs everything down. Witness the skittish, album-closing "77," for one, on which Furze sings of his late father with the mechanical dispassion of a robot that can't quite grasp the meaning of love.

"There's something missing," Furze yowls on the numbing "13" (the guy loves digits more than the Count on *Sesame Street*). Listening to *Future This*, it's often hard to disagree.

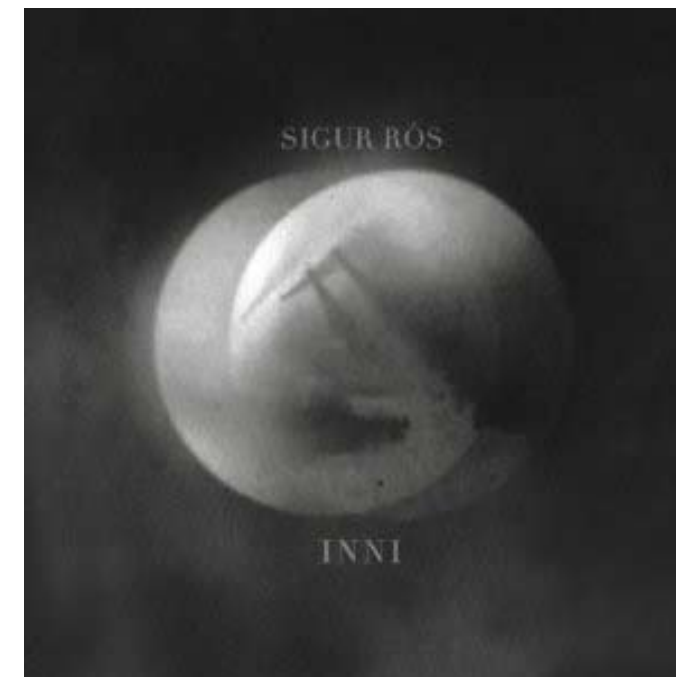
—**Andy Downing**



**A**llow, please, for a left-field link to Sigur Rós, the Icelandic rock band that celebrates the slow-build and mysterious. Listening to this double-disc live effort, a recording tactic employed by film composer Hans Zimmer—a cinematic cheerleader of all things loud and blatant—springs to mind.

Granted, this is the first and likely last time Zimmer and Sigur Rós will be mentioned in tandem. Sigur Rós, after all, writes songs that take their time, pieces that continually ebb rather than ever reach a destination. Yet it was Zimmer who took his booming score for *Inception* and blasted it over the speakers of the Warner Bros. lot. With mics set up around the studio, it was the echoing, dense-with-atmosphere compositions that Zimmer used in the film.

Likewise, Sigur Rós onstage is a slightly different beast than in the studio, as live, the sounds of a bowed guitar feel like communications with a satellite, and accordions and strings are mystical connections to the past. To be sure, the distinctions between recorded Sigur Rós and live Sigur Rós aren't terribly drastic. But what is pristine and elegant on album has much more buoyancy on *Inni*, as if this is music made to traverse the night sky. In fact, for those unfamiliar with Sigur Rós, *Inni* is a rather good place to start. And that's notable, as most live albums tend to be for-fans-only souvenirs.



### **Sigur Rós**

*Inni*

XL Recordings, 3LP box set or 2CD/DVD

*Inni* is different. Jónsi Birgisson's falsetto, which sings lyrics in the band's largely made-up language, is more clearly allowed to drift amidst the classically inspired rock n' roll orchestrations. Where songs begin and end is sometimes only made known by occasional interruptions of crowd noise. The dream-like constructions are equally abrasiveness and pillow-soft. "Ný batterí," for instance, begins with crystallizing electronics that seem to be destroying a solar system before soon settling into a mourning lullaby. Meanwhile, "Við spilum endalaust" opens with old-world church sounds and ascends into a glorious guitar-and-cymbal symphony.

This is music that hints at possibilities, and it's made by a group more interested in explorations than any end goal. The previously unreleased "Lúppulagið" hints at what Sigur Rós still has to offer. Instruments squirm and squeak, moving like some heretofore-unknown alien creatures. Elastic synths and an affectionate piano dot the mix, but it's the ambiguous life beneath that grabs one's attention. If not quite a transport to another world, it is the kind of music, perhaps, that should score films.

—**Todd Martens**





**Los Campesinos!**  
*Hello Sadness*  
 Arts & Crafts, LP or CD

**G**areth Campesinos!, frontman for the sprawling Welsh collective whose members, like those of the Ramones, all share a last name even if they don't share familial blood, has always been infatuated with the way the human form reveals emotional wounds accrued through the years. "I cannot emphasize enough that my body is a badly designed poorly put together vessel harboring these diminishing so-called vital organs," he sang on the title track to 2008's *We Are Beautiful, We Are Doomed*. "Hope my heart goes first. I HOPE MY HEART GOES FIRST!"

Now, years later, the vocalist's poor heart is still pumping away despite his contrary wishes. Witness the album-opening "By Your Hand," a buoyant indie-pop number on which he invites a lover to take his miserable life, joining his bandmates in a group singalong that could have been choreographed by *Glee* producer Ryan Murphy. "By your hand is the only end I foresee," they wail.

Elsewhere, Gareth examines the emotional damage left by a rocky relationship on "Life Is a Long Time," singing, "There's cartography in every scar" atop jangly guitar and the interwoven vocals of Ellen and the now-departed Harriet Campesinos! Then, on the epic title track that builds to a near-orgasmic crescendo of strings, horns, and chugging guitars, he tries desperately to spackle over the ever-expanding cracks in his busted heart.



While past albums remained relatively merry affairs—the celebratory musical backdrop playing counterpoint to the band's oft-dour frontman—here, Gareth occasionally drags his mates into the morass. "To Tundra," a song every bit as chilly and barren as its title suggests, moves as deliberately as an ice floe. The woozy "Hate For the Island" is similarly ethereal, a funeral ode delivered amidst a wash of ghostly guitar. The frontman's anger ("I've a whole lot of hate for the island") can't quite overcome the obvious grief brought on by his having lost a lover that now rests beneath six feet of sand. While these moments initially feel like a welcome change of pace, the slower tempos don't really suit a band that caps its moniker with a well-deserved exclamation point.

Fortunately, the crew bounces back for "Baby I Got The Death Rattle," a tune that gradually evolves from introspective to celebratory before closing with a full-on group chorus that sounds lifted from an off-Broadway musical. Of course, the song's title is inspired by a medical term describing the phlegm-y sound produced by someone nearing death, and the lyrics reference headstones and digging one's own grave. While this might seem morbid coming from some bands, it's a fitting turn for a group that's made a career mining joy from life's endless stream of disappointments. —**Andy Downing**

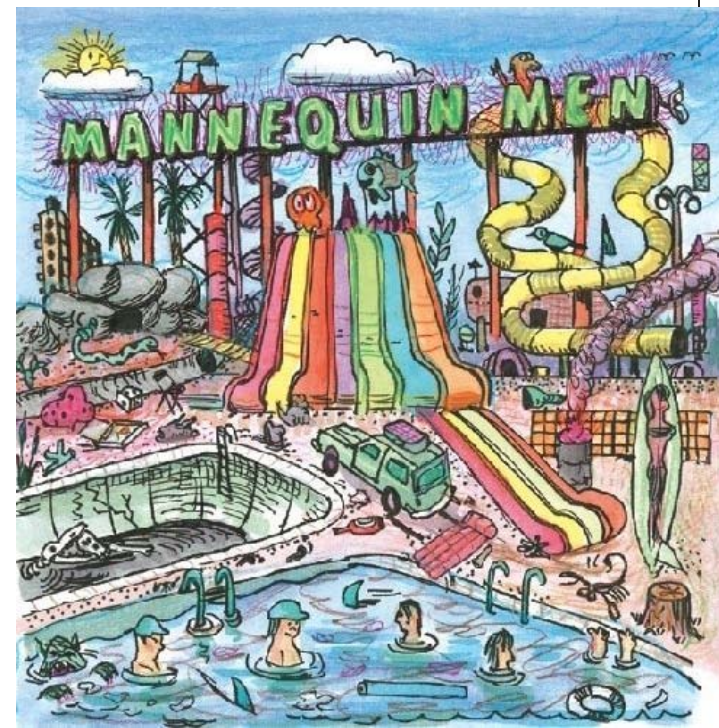


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## MUSIC



### Mannequin Men

*Mannequin Men*

Addenda Records, LP or CD

**E**arly in 2011, there was a girl this particular writer fancied. Don't worry, dear readers that are anti-first person. My story ends soon—as did the relationship. The latter was the long distance sort, taxing for numerous reasons that needn't be discussed in a record review. But an L.A./N.Y. relationship with two workaholics, and one who hates phones (this one), was doomed from the start. One night, when not feeling particularly excited about having a conversation in which each party recounts his/her day, I may have said, “You need a hobby.”

Her reply: “Hobbies are stupid.”

I will not get into the ins and outs of such a statement, as well the blatant immaturity implied by said statement. Suffice it to say, she was, ultimately, a lovely girl, but a political one, and one who worked for the city. She was, quite frankly, smarter than me in nearly every respect. Yet when someone says, “Hobbies are stupid,” no intelligent response can follow it up. Instead, I was exasperated. I knew we were over and wanted to get back to my own, non-conversing-on-the-phone hobbies.

Whether the aforementioned instance is something someone can relate to (or not) is beside the point. Exasperation at the end of a workday, however, is universal. And that's exactly what Chicago's Mannequin Men nail on “Hobby Girl.” Go to St. Louis, paint a picture, whatever, pleads drummer/vocalist Seth Bohn. Just leave him alone, as he wants some grown-up time all to his lonesome.

This sort of attitude is captured, musically and lyrically, time and again, on Mannequin Men's fourth effort. Once one of the Windy City's rowdiest, drunkest punk groups, the band takes a more measured approach here. It's as if everyone wants to get crazy—but not so crazy that the next day's hangover will be a complete drag. “Gonna Forget About Me,” in fact, could be a straightforward country tune in different hands, but here, it's a matter-of-fact dumping anthem.

“Enough” feels as if it should be shouted by every Occupy movement, overworked union, and underpaid civilian around the country. Kevin Richard's snarl is no longer bitter, just simply resigned to the fact that things ain't looking all that hot. The adult obligations of “Medill” are delivered with pristine, 50s rock guitars that recall the best of the Flaming Groovies. Meanwhile, tracks like “Flying Blind” function as gritty updates of the blues in which urban numbness is a daily affliction. Call this self-titled set punk rock for the daily grind. —**Todd Martens**





### Lou Reed & Metallica

*Lulu*

Warner Bros., 2LP or 2CP

**E**arly on in this ill-advised yet much-hyped collaboration, Lou Reed offers up what must have been the overriding mindset during the recording sessions that spawned this miserable album: “There is no time for guilt or second guessing.”

It’s clear from listening to this project, which finds former thrash masters Metallica serving up an array of turgid, by-the-numbers riffs while Reed recites lyrics that read like the rejected Penthouse Forum letters of a creepy sociopath, that no one involved gave pause to consider what exactly it was they were trying to accomplish. How else to explain a song like “The View”—admittedly not among the five or six most egregious efforts here—on which Metallica singer James Hetfield repeatedly howls “I am the table.”

Elsewhere, the famously pugnacious Reed takes center stage, delivering an assortment of cringe-worthy, spoken-word bon mots in his graveled timbre, rasping: “I swallow your sharpest curdle like a colored man’s dick”;

“Spermless like a girl”; “If I waggle my ass like a dark prostitute would you think less of me and my coagulating heart?”

Uhh, right. Can we get back to Hetfield’s philosophical carpentry talk now?

What it lacks in quality, *Lulu* makes up for in sheer, unforgiving length. Clocking in at nearly 90 minutes, the album runs longer than most feature-length films, and you feel the weight of every second during molasses-slow tracks like the eight-minute-plus “Little Dog.”

Indeed, it’s difficult to think of a more unlistenable musical pairing. Maybe Kurt Cobain and author William S. Burroughs on *The “Priest” They Called Him?* But even that drug-induced guitar squall/beat-poet collaboration spawned a great quote from the Nirvana frontman. Asked about his playing on the recording, Cobain simply said, “I just masturbated for 20 minutes.” If someone posed the same question to Reed, he’d likely respond with a 40-minute dissertation on human sexuality and German expressionism (the project, after all, is inspired in large part by German expressionist author Frank Wedekind). As far as “super groups” go, Loutallica (or is it Metallica Machine Music?) makes Chickenfoot sound like goddamn Temple of the Dog.

In a small bit of redemption, the album does manage to close on a slightly positive note with the orchestral “Junior Dad,” although I feel saying so is a bit like praising the cup of coffee at the close of a bad meal because the waitress managed to get it to you hot.

When it comes right down to it, it’s not at all surprising that the combination doesn’t work. When the concept was announced—Lou Reed and Metallica collaborate on a batch of songs inspired by a German expressionist—only a small subset of Reed obsessives clutching dog-eared copies of *Metal Machine Music* and one national magazine held out any hope that this thing would work. What we got is what virtually everyone else expected: A Reed/Metallica *Human Centipede* as horrifying as that movie’s unholy creation. Now please, god, somebody kill it. —**Andy Downing**

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# Out of Tune With You

*When everything one knows about love and sex is learned from a pop song, is normalcy an impossibility?*

The first of an occasional column by Todd Martens



here are two big warning signs one must heed when flying cross-country to win the heart of an ex.

One, if during catch-up beers on her back porch, the only album you hear is Nine Inch Nails' *The Downward Spiral* on repeat, go and book a hotel room. And, should you find open condom wrappers strewn about her bedroom floor, amidst her unwashed laundry, go and book a hotel room.

Ignore these warning signs at your own peril.

Trent Reznor recently posted online that fans should not, under any circumstance, purchase the 2011 re-release of 1989's *Pretty Hate Machine*. I breathed a sigh of relief. Maybe, perhaps, I had been spared once again from listening to early NIN work, an area that remains a gap in my knowledge. Yet further investigation reveals Reznor was speaking about a particular repackaging, and not the remastering of his catalog as a whole. The shrink-wrapped reissue of *The Downward Spiral* I have in my collection is, in fact, Reznor-endorsed.

I should, I thought to myself, suck it up then. Since 1999, I have used a girl as a reason to avoid a portion of Reznor's music and, as I will soon venture into my mid-30s, it seemed high time to grow up. After all, work required I do so. My day job is soon taking me to Reznor's Beverly Hills house, where I will interview him about his film score for *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*.

Should the conversation turn toward his earlier work, I can say I still want a deeper exploration of the politically dead future world of *Year Zero*.

But that would be pretty much about it. I love the electronic expansiveness of *Year Zero*; I have avoided most everything else branded by Reznor. Whereas *Year Zero*, despite its sci-fi trappings, seems topical, I live in fear of *The Downward Spiral* due to its more personal aggression.

*The Downward Spiral* is also closely tied to Nicole. She was, perhaps, the biggest NIN fan I have ever met. For many years, she called to wish me a happy birthday on May 17. Yet my birthday is May 19. This wasn't a completely random mistake on her part; she treated Reznor's May 17 birthday as something of a holiday.

Nicole was my high-school girlfriend, at least for a couple weeks. Right before I left for college, she went back to her ex, and would tell me about their sexual trysts in graphic detail. I tolerated this because when I saw her, we would still fool around. Then she would say, "I'm so glad we can do this without you wanting to date me." Then I would say, "I'm doing this because I'm going to eventually date you." Then we'd fight. This went on for six years—yes, until I was 24. (continued)



In the midst of this torturous relationship, during which I dated no other woman while I was between 18-24 (for the record, this is entirely on me, as I can't pin it on her), Nicole invited me to Detroit. She was a budding designer and had an internship in the city. Away I went. After my flight from Los Angeles landed and Nicole picked me up, I remarked that Detroit looked like Los Angeles if the year was 2032 and robots had destroyed much of earth. She thought that funny, and I figured the weekend would be swell.

I was wrong. Nicole and I made these sort of cross-country flights every couple months. Usually we'd hang out, fool around, Nicole would proclaim us friends, I would be sad, and in three months we'd do it all again. This time, however, Nicole mentioned she had a serious boyfriend.

I heard her say this. But I ignored it. I was no dummy. There were things I wanted to do in Detroit. I had seven days here, and I planned to go to the Motown Museum and the new Tiger Stadium. I could address the boyfriend nonsense after Motown and baseball, two things I did not want scarred by Nicole.

So three days into the trip, it was time to discuss this boyfriend. She politely rebuffed my advances and said, "On this trip we're friends." To which I replied we're not friends, we never have been friends, we never will be friends, and she's a piss-poor friend if she thinks she is one.

Nicole stood up when things finally came to a head around 4 a.m. She put on *The Downward Spiral* and played it loud. Then she looked at me and said, "Call the airline. You're leaving in the morning." I couldn't get a flight until 7 p.m., and we did not leave the house until it was time to go to the airport. Nor did she turn off *The Downward Spiral*.

I heard thirteen hours of that album, as if I was a prisoner of war and Reznor's brutal, digitized anguish was being used to turn my mind to mush. Such was the effect it had, especially during each hour when Reznor screamed "I want to fuck you like an animal," and the image of those open condom wrappers became burned in my brain. I think I cried at first, and just sat there numb, ten hours later.

No, I have not listened to *The Downward Spiral* yet. Now that I've written this, I can't come up with any reason to bother. After all, the emotion I felt—the deadened sensations of paralyzed anger and immobilized anguish that come from having listened to *The Downward Spiral* for thirteen straight hours, all while the girl you tricked yourself into believing you would marry had kicked you out—seems to be the precise adolescent turmoil Reznor wanted. ●

*I remarked that Detroit looked like Los Angeles if the year was 2032 and robots had destroyed much of earth. She thought that funny, and I figured the weekend would be swell.*

*I was wrong.*



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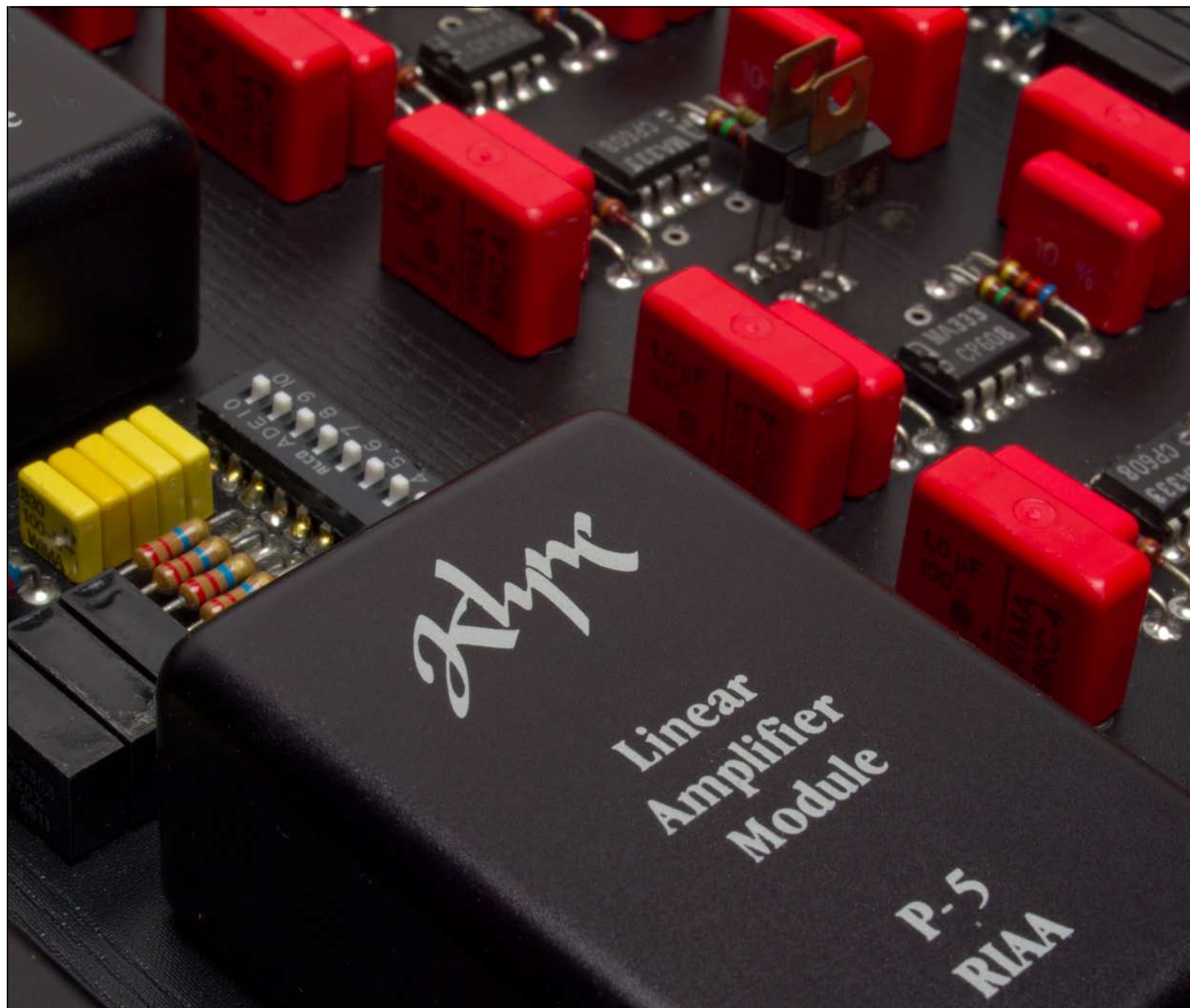
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# Solid-State Sleeper

Klyne SK-5A Preamplifier

By Jerold O'Brien

**T**ONEAudio publisher Jeff Dorgay handed me this handsome preamplifier from the 80s with a sly look on his face. I vividly remember Klyne from the late 80s and early 90s. It was a small company that received high praise from the audio press and in-the-know enthusiasts, yet its products were tough to find. The manufacturer had a small dealer network and did not advertise. The SK-5A pictured here originally sold for \$2,795, putting it on par with what Audio Research, Mark Levinson, and a few others charged for their top preamplifiers.





## FEATURE

This particular unit was manufactured at the dawn of the CD era in 1984—and with only three high-level inputs: aux, tuner, and tape. Indeed, the Klyne is a vinyl lover's dream. The onboard phonostage offers a wide range of MM and MC settings with adjustable gain, loading, and capacitance. You can even install your own custom resistors if the onboard settings don't match your cartridge. If that isn't enough, behold the settings for high-frequency contours that damp the high-frequency resonant peak exhibited by many moving coil cartridges. Many of today's standalone phono preamps lack this functionality.

Fully stabilized in 24 hours, bass slam and image depth are nothing short of amazing; it's hard to believe this preamplifier is 25 years old. Since it features minimal current draw, you'll want to always leave it on for best results. Once fully powered up, the Klyne offers a silky smooth presentation—but not the kind of smoothness you get from a preamplifier trying too hard to sound tube-like. Harmonic structures in the upper registers are just right: neither dull nor slow, but full of low-level resolution. These aspects cause the listening experience to be something very special. The unit delivers the type of harmonic richness that, after trudging through sterile silicon trenches, today's finest high-end solid-state gear takes so long to produce.

And there's plenty under the hood: A big circuit board with a layout that, save for Burmester products, is the most meticulous this writer has seen. Three pair of Linear Amplifier Modules figures prominently into the mix, as do a power-supply section and multiple banks of capacitors. Klyne even built-in its own noise filter, and this coming years before power-line conditioners became part of the audiophile vocabulary. *(continued)*





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FEATURE



The Klyne SK-5A holds its own when compared to today's gear. Only slightly lacking in ultimate detail and soundstage design when compared to several leading tube preamplifiers, the unit doesn't shortchange dynamics and often exceeds its contemporaries in this field. Plus, it has a phonostage.

Both the vintage Acutex 421STR and a current Denon DL-301 offer an excellent level of transparency—one well beyond what's expected from a modern \$1,000 phonostage. Considering that a clean SK-5A can be had for about \$1,000, it represents a true bargain.

I'm still scratching my head as to why Klyne never took off in the marketplace. You'd easily pay \$5,000 - \$6,000 today for such preamplifier performance—and one without a phonostage, to boot. If you can find a unit for sale, grab it. I'm keeping mine.

Stan Klyne currently makes new preamplifiers to order, and happily services existing products. My serial number reveals that this unit qualifies for a full capacitor upgrade (about \$1,000), which will make it a truly modern preamp that yields the extra resolution and ultimate clarity that it currently lacks. ●

www.klyne.com



# Make the Investment

## 2011's Best Box Sets and Collections

By Bob Gendron

With traditional brick-and-mortar record retailers in short supply, box sets graduated into the hyper-collectable realm in 2011, largely leaning on limited-edition exclusivity, various bells and whistles, and encyclopedic completeness to attract attention. More than a few releases crossed practical lines—and not for the better.

Elvis Costello's *The Return of the Spectacular Spinning Songbook* includes just one CD and one DVD but sells for upwards of \$325, a price that drew fury from Costello himself. Nirvana's disappointing *Nevermind: Super Deluxe Edition* features nothing—save for a box, book, and CD—that can't be otherwise had for a total of about \$40. The Rolling Stones' *Some Girls: Super Deluxe Edition* essentially charges \$150 for the rights to a book, 7" single, and separately available DVD; what, Mick and Co. need cash to buy another private island? Not to be outdone, the Beach Boys' *SMiLE* autographed light-up box comes with a custom-made surfboard for a mere \$6,000. The replica version of Bono's "The Fly" sunglasses enclosed in U2's *Achtung Baby 20th Anniversary Uber Deluxe Edition* has got nothing on a waxed Hobie board.

Cost obscenities aside, a number of musically superior and reasonably priced box sets and collections spanning formative jazz to French pop to Canadian-bred prog-rock to kitchen-sink soul emerged throughout the year. All deserve a place on coffee tables and shelves.



### The Beach Boys

*The Smile Sessions Box Set*  
Capitol, 5CD + 2LP + 7"

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. *(continued)*



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 Linnett 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 Linnett 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-infinitum 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. Inspired packaging—the box sports a three-dimensional "window"—adds to the enjoyment.

**Boddie Recording Company**  
Numero Group, 3CD or 5LP

**B**etween 1958 and 1993, husband-and-wife team Thomas and Louise Boddie operated a soul, R&B, and gospel recording clearinghouse in Cleveland, Ohio. Thousands of hours of tape, more than 300 releases, and countless artists passed through the pair's homebrewed studio/pressing plant, largely pieced together from scrap parts and secondhand gear by Thomas, a lifelong tinkerer and electronics maven. Due to a confluence of racism, logistics, and luck, Boddie Recording Company never registered a national hit let alone a regional smash. Its colorful story remains unknown to most of Cleveland itself. And yet the mom-and-pop enterprise—largely kept afloat by income generated from Thomas' day jobs as an organ and television repairman, as well as traveling musicians seeking a cheap place to lay down a few songs—outlasted every other studio, pressing plant, and imprint in the city's history.



Unparalleled as crate diggers and investigative researchers into the old, weird history of regional music, Numero Group crowns another year of fascinating finds with its 3CD (or 5LP) *Boddie Recording Company* box set. Resembling an old file folder, with discs, exhaustively annotated booklets, and memorabilia trinkets stuffed inside the pouches, the proletarian packaging mirrors the do-it-yourself quality of the ad-hoc gospel and R&B tunes from intriguingly named unknowns such as the Gospel Hebrews and Harvey & the Phenomenals. Because Boddie recycled dead-label inventory to save money and lower costs, a majority of fare stemming from 1974 and onward sounds particularly lo-fi. Yet it only adds to the charm of a label that's seemingly the soul equivalent of the white blues and hillbilly operations that helped give birth to the roots fare on Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music*.

Better still is the meticulous detail with which Numero's sonic archeologists approached the project. Superb essays unravel the almost-unbelievable history in a manner that's akin to going on an exotic adventure; the producers even tracked down the biographies and related artifacts related to the more than two dozen artists represented on the set. Selections are organized according to the Boddie imprint on which they were originally released. Despite lacking time and money for promotion, the couple possessed a marketing vision and strategy designed to appeal to certain audiences and, depending on the style of music, assigned their releases to a certain label. Consumed as a whole, *Boddie Recording Company* is as close as it gets to knowing what it must feel like to step inside Indiana Jones' boots—provided they saw the inside of a soul club."



**The Bridge School Concerts:  
25th Anniversary Edition, Volume 1**  
Reprise/Warner Bros., 2CD and 3DVD

To celebrate its 25th anniversary of staging benefit concerts and raising money for physically challenged children, the Bridge School compiled a bevy of remarkable live performances on CD and DVD sets that claim both overlapping and unique program material. Rather than strictly focus on the obvious, producers also opt for diversity and surprise.

Vide, Bruce Springsteen turns in a riveting solo acoustic version of “Born in the U.S.A.” true to its protest roots—and not the dreaded flag-waving patriotism with which it later became associated. R.E.M. pairs with Neil Young on a harrowing “Country Feedback,” about which singer Michael Stipe declares as his favorite R.E.M. song before breaking down in tears towards the end. Other highlights: Metallica dares to unplug and recast “Disposable Heroes,” Fleet Foxes reach for skyward Appalachian-style harmonies on a gorgeous “Blue Ridge Mountains,” and Emmylou Harris and Buddy Miller speak the truth on a tortured “Love Hurts.”

Many of the same tracks appear on the DVD package (which includes a bonus documentary disc), but Norah Jones’ show-stealing go at Wilco’s “Jesus Etc.” does not, which means that both formats are worth exploring. And the DVD boasts non-CD fare from the likes of a typically spirited Patti Smith (“People Have the Power”), gruff Tom Waits (“16 Shells From a Thirty-Ought Six”), and excitable Paul McCartney (“Get Back”) that stem from various eras, lending to an experience where it’s as much fun to spot bygone fashion and hair styles as it is to savor the music.

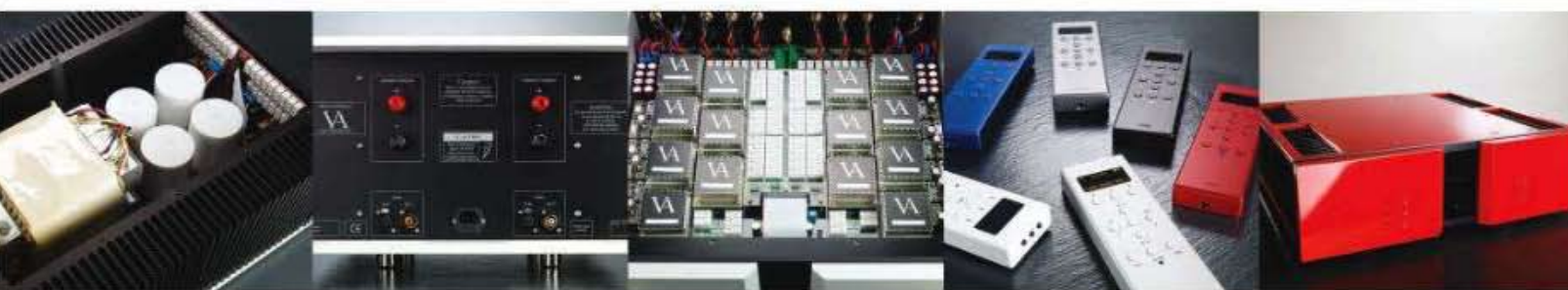
**Leonard Cohen**

*The Complete Columbia Albums Collection*  
Legacy, 18CD

Sony/Legacy’s reissue specialists devised a clever solution to the problem of marketing box sets in an era during which most record retailing has shifted online, a move that lessens the chances that listeners notice the existence of finely designed compilations and collections. Namely, the label created affordably priced complete studio anthologies of household artists and then, bypassed middlemen by offering said releases on its own Web site. Billy Joel, Electric Light Orchestra, Wynton Marsalis, Nina Simone, and Sam Cooke are among the familiar names whose catalogs have been neatly placed into space-conscious boxes. Yet none rivals Leonard Cohen’s *The Complete Columbia Albums Collection*.

Gathering every single studio LP the Canadian troubadour/poet made between 1967 and 2004, plus five live sets—including 2009’s superb double-disc *Live In London* and archival *Live at the Isle of Wight 1970*, as well as 2010’s victory-lap *Songs From the Road*—this treasure basically amasses every official recording attributed to Cohen. Oh, and it’s all remastered from the original analog tapes. Discs are housed in vinyl-replica sleeves while the credits, liner notes, and original layouts are contained in an accompanying booklet. Purists might balk at the infinitesimal font size and shrunken album art, but it’s a small price to pay for the ability to pick up 17 records in pristine digital sound for approximately \$10 per.

Most impressive? The sheer consistency pertaining to Cohen’s output. His debonair baritone grows deeper as time wears on, but his knack for irony, observation, betrayal, wryness, and relationships never wanes. The folk-based icon suffers a small dip in quality during the late 70s and early 80s before rearing back to form on 1988’s bracing *I’m Your Man*, as relevant as ever. Meanwhile, the concert sets act as fifth-row invitations to some of the most simultaneously scathing, bitter-sweet, and atmospheric performances ever captured on tape. Quintessential.



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**Miles Davis Quintet**

*Live in Europe 1967: The Bootleg Series, Vol. 1*  
Legacy, 3CD + DVD

It's a wonder that, given the success of its Bob Dylan Bootleg Series, Legacy took so long to undertake a similar Miles Davis venture. Akin to the first Dylan entry, the initial Davis release features three CDs (as well as a DVD) and, in terms of material and sonics, can't get any better. Documenting six European concerts by the jazz icon's longest-running quintet—saxophonist Wayne Shorter, pianist Herbie Hancock, bassist Ron Carter, drummer Tony Williams, and Davis—the archival set zeroes in on a high point not only in the composer's career but that of his vibrant interaction with a band that, at the time, deserved every word of the superlative-laden praise thrown its way.

On the cusp of moving beyond post-bop, Davis and company showers standards such as "Round About Midnight" and Shorter's "Footprints" with boundless intensity and head-exploding panache. The instrumentalists are united not only in harmonically accenting arrangements but in their desire to discover what lies beyond existing borders, and press on to aural frontiers not yet traveled. Rules don't apply. Lines are crossed, familiar interpretations ignored. And so the multiple versions of "Agitation" are completely unique, with Shorter spinning melodic flights as Williams drives it all forward via aggressive percussive dialogues. Davis seemingly exists as both an excited conductor and proud parent, realizing that what he assembled is achieving exactly what—and more—he intended.

This is music rooted in freedom, looseness, risk, and intrepidity; it's a bold rebuff to predictability and a salutary gesture to new era. Rootsy, elastic, lyrical, offbeat, experimental, daringly rhythmic—these aural expressions claim one foot in modalism and another in free-form harmonizing, the songs flowing into one another, sans traditional break, with solos, themes, developments, and improvisation superceding established structure and technique. In essence, *Live in Europe 1967: The Bootleg Series, Vol. 1* is the sound of jazz reinventing itself and, with little persuasion needed, taking the audience along for the ride.

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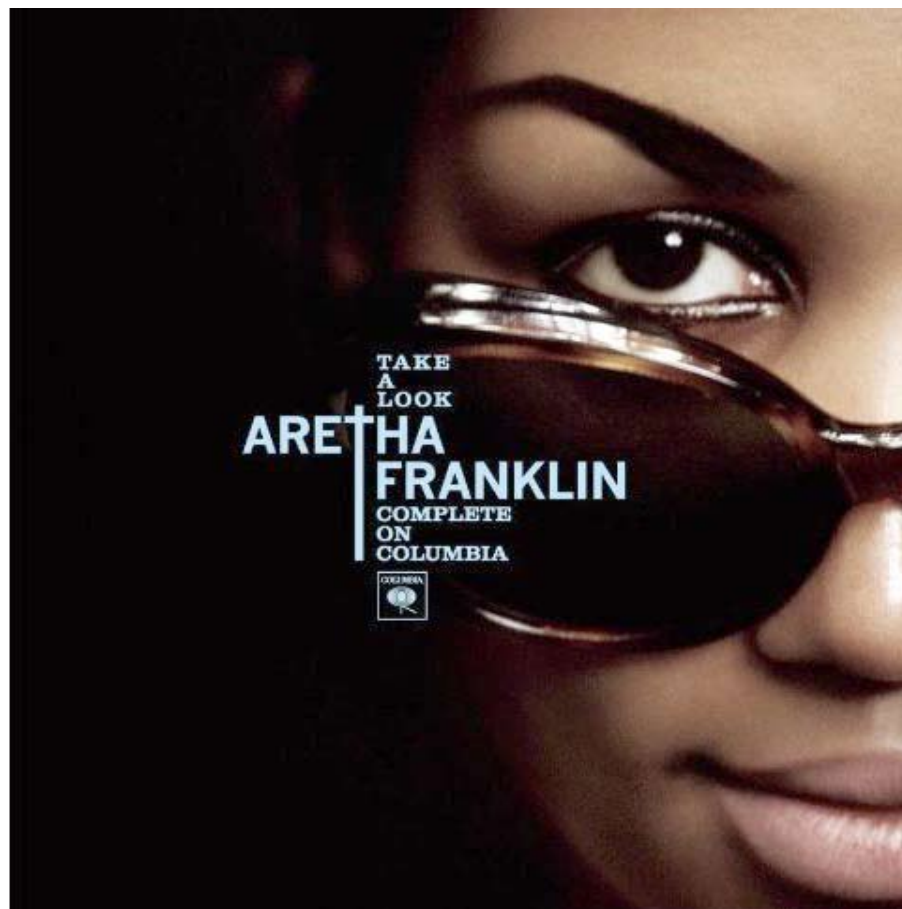
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### Aretha Franklin

*Take a Look: Aretha Franklin Complete on Columbia*  
Legacy, 11CD + DVD

**T** rue or false: Aretha Franklin never reached her potential at Columbia. Producers and associates saddled her with incongruous material and arrangements. Her tenure merely served as a learning curve, and her true greatness—and ultimate reign as the Queen of Soul—emerged only as a result of her transition to Atlantic in 1966. Such misconceptions and misperceptions continue to be accepted as givens throughout the music industry, as Franklin's Columbia output is either often treated as necessary footnotes to her broader story or, worse, completely dismissed. And they all make *Take a Look: Aretha Franklin Complete on Columbia* the most convincing myth-busting box set to emerge in recent memory. Indeed, if any legend's early career deserves to be revisited, it's that of Franklin.

Encompassing Franklin's seven full-length Columbia LPs, collaborations with Bobby Scott and Clyde Otis, and several singles and rarities—as well as a 1964 performance on “The Steve Allen Show”—the twelve-disc compendium sets straight the singer's pre-Atlantic legacy. On 1961's *Aretha: With the Ray Bryant Combo*, her Columbia debut, the vocalist sparks with the renowned pianist on small-band jazz fare, plying phrasing, timbral, and rhythm techniques with erudition well beyond her 19-year-old age. No matter the setting or stage in her career, Franklin has always maintained she leaned on her gospel background and upbringing in the Baptist church.

Evidence of her spiritual roots surface on a number of big-band albums on which she adroitly utilizes vocal swoops and dynamic passages gleaned from performing under grand ceilings painted with angels, heavens, and harps. For 1964's *A Tribune to Dinah Washington*, an incredibly overlooked vocal gem, Franklin not only taps into a divine aesthetic but also one related to the blues and the genre's trademark mournful characteristics. She proves equally masterful on a rich assortment of pop songs, orchestrated show-tune fare, and bebop standards that round out her Columbia era. Appointed with stellar liner notes, mini-LP-style packaging for each disc, and stellar sound (particularly on the mono mixes), the cleverly named *Take a Look*—undoubtedly a call for a fresh evaluation of a long-misunderstood body of work—makes its case and then some.

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To a majority of Western listeners that know his name, Serge Gainsbourg is primarily recognized by a stereotypical “the dirty old man” handle due to his high-profile philandering, sexually suggestive singles, and ill-advised “Lemon Incest” duet with daughter Charlotte. Yes, the elder Gainsbourg traded in provocation, sleaze, scandal, satire, pun, and peculiarity—occasionally doing so for mere effect, with the results treading the fine line between comical and pathetic.

Yet the Jewish singer/songwriter/composer stands as France’s greatest pop artist for more than his mastery of controversy, women, booze, and witty rejoinders. And while cult landmarks, LPs such as *Jane Birkin/Serge Gainsbourg* and *Histoire de Melody Nelson*—recorded within a three-year span—only hint at the profound diversity and prolific consistency Gainsbourg cultivated during a 30-year-plus career.

Completely remastered and superceding all prior reissues, the French import *Integrale: 20th Anniversary Box Set* gathers 16 studio albums (including bonus fare) and four compilation-arrayed discs themed according to singles and duos, television and radio performances, vocal film material, and instrumental film-soundtrack compositions, respectively. A comprehensive 60-page book (*oui, il est en français*) and 20 photo cards supplement a heavyweight, scrap-book-style box that’s assembled as well as the music is organized.

Experienced in chronological order, the reissue magnifies Gainsbourg’s evolution from a traditional lounge-jazz crooner into a pop alchemist that ultimately embraced funk, strings, dub, orchestrations, and electronica. The surfeit of cabaret, baroque, reggae, soul, rock, and new wave tracks subscribe to a mad eccentricity and irrepressible curiosity. Familiar tracks (the erotic “Je t’aime...moi non plus,” double-entendre-laden “Les Sucettes,” goading “Aux Armes et cetera,” dozens of duets with Jane Birkin and Brigitte Bardot) join a mélange of equally intoxicating numbers spanning pianistic *chanson* (“Elisa”) to ye-ye (“Chez Les Ye-Ye”). Numbered and limited to 9000 copies, this 20CD behemoth functions as an addictive portal not only into French culture but the mind of a pop genius on par with that of any American or British contemporary. Enthusiastically recommended.

### Serge Gainsbourg

*Integrale: 20th Anniversary Box Set*  
Universal, 20CD



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## FEATURE

Leave it to archival concert pioneers the Grateful Dead to issue all the known recordings from a tour staged nearly 40 years ago, dump them all in a miniature steamer trunk that resembles the suitcase George Bailey wanted to take on his aborted world travels in *It's a Wonderful Life*, limit the initial run to 7,200 copies, and sell it out in less than 96 hours. A day-by-day sonic journal of one of the inimitable band's most sought-after and much-discussed tours, *Europe '72: The Complete Recordings* rivals the long-out-of-print *Fillmore West 1969: The Complete Recordings* in matters of chemistry, ambition, and transcendence.

Deadheads have forever traded spring 1972 shows for a bevy of reasons. The outing came on the heels of the ensemble's most consistent studio efforts (*Workingman's Dead* and *American Beauty*), clicked to the beat of a single drummer (rather than the usual two), introduced the tandem of Donna and Keith Godchaux, and, most importantly, stood as the final tour on which original keyboardist/vocalist Ron "Pigpen" McKernan embarked. Achieving a level of seamless interaction and telepathic communication that set the standards for all future shows, the Dead renders improvisational jams, challenging segues, and spontaneous transitions as if guided by a spiritual force, turning in signature renditions of favorites such as "Dark Star," "Truckin'," "Turn on Your Lovelight," and "Good Lovin'." New, unreleased material like "One More Saturday Night," "Ramble on Rose," and "Jack Straw" burst forth with insouciant energy and contagious looseness. There's nothing not to love. Same goes for the sonics, as the HDCDs are mixed from the original 16-track tapes and sound exquisite.

One problem: The cost-conscious packaging falls short of the workmanship warranted by the \$450 price tag. The trunk should be sturdier; the bi-, tri-, and quad-fold cardboard disc sleeves easily tear. It's nigh impossible to free a disc from a sleeve without triggering a small rip. It's unfortunate, too, as new, original Stanley Mouse artwork signifies each individual show with unique designs.

### Grateful Dead

*Europe '72: The Complete Recordings*  
Grateful Dead/Rhino, 73CD





## The Jimi Hendrix Experience

Winterland

Legacy, 4CD or 180g 8LP



Go ahead. Roll your eyes at this, yet another Jimi Hendrix reissue. The deceased guitarist continues to “release” more albums than productive indie favorites Guided By Voices and Robert Pollard combined. *Winterland* isn’t the only new offering. *Hendrix In the West*, a collection of performances originally issued in 1972 and out of print for nearly three decades, is also remastered and expanded, yet remains inconsistent and scattershot. Far superior is *Winterland*, a four-disc anthology of the Seattle native’s three-day, six-show October 1968 stand at the famed San Francisco ballroom.

“I think we got four speakers left and maybe three more valve tubes,” announces Hendrix on the last day of the run, his statement indicative of the firepower he, drummer Mitch Mitchell, and bassist Noel Redding bring to standards such as “Red House” and searing covers like Cream’s “Sunshine of Your Love.” The admission also suggests why, due to such onstage technical

problems, these tapes have largely stayed in storage despite having been recorded by noted engineer Wally Heider. Audiophile purists and fans craving direct interpretations of nuggets like “Foxy Lady” should look elsewhere. Indeed, *Winterland*’s appeal resides in the band negotiating taxing sound issues and, at nearly every turn, countering with even more violent bursts of earth-scorching feedback, vibration-inducing distortion, and thundering rhythms.

The Experience becomes more audacious with each passing concert. Whereas the first two performances, by no means orthodox, attenuate the improvisational runs and tweeter-blowing intensity, the trio stretches out on a subsequent rendition of “Are You Experienced?” and—via a thoroughly transcendent go-round with Bob Dylan’s “Like a Rolling Stone,” complete with organ accompaniment—engages in soulful communion that contrasts the dive-bombing wanderlust on the Troggs’ “Wild Thing,” the frayed closer to the entire shindig. Note: *Winterland* does not present the shows in their entirety, and questionable edits to introductions and sequencing take the set down a notch. Those caveats aside, smart pricing and a wealth of consistent vocabulary-shaping performances justify its existence.

## Howlin’ Wolf

*Smokestack Lightnin’: The Complete Chess Masters 1951-1960*  
MCA/Universal, 4CD

Chester Arthur Burnett’s face was tailor-made for Hollywood. Bigger than life, and accented with an old-school football linebacker’s imposing jowls and weather-proof skin, his visage could be simultaneously threatening and welcoming, tough and friendly, serious and comical, confrontational and mild. Of course, the 6’3” Mississippi native better known as Howlin’ Wolf opted for music over movies, and lived in an era that placed less of a premium on image. But when it came to performing, no blues artist came close to generating such primal energy and fearsome aggression.

Akin to similarly limited-edition sets spotlighting Muddy Waters, Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley, and Little Walter, *Smokestack Lightnin’: The Complete Chess Masters 1951-1960* presents every master take Wolf cut during his first decade as a professional musician, with culture-changing songs such as “Smokestack Lightnin’,” “Wang Dang Doodle,” and “Forty Four” alongside deeper, equally boisterous songs like “Howlin’ for My Baby,” “Don’t Mess With My Baby,” and “Who’s Been Talking?” Wolf’s gritty, megaphone-caliber-loud voice pairs with Hubert Sumlin’s amplified guitar to make one of rock’s most foundational building blocks: Raw, cathartic, eerie boogie, R&B, and jump blues played with unyielding intensity and anchored by rhythms that attacked and bit at listeners’ heels. Wolf’s ground-shaking growls and fiery harmonica fills complete a sonic architecture that everyone from the Rolling Stones to the White Stripes emulated.

Featuring an array of outtakes and more than a dozed previously unreleased performances, this 4CD set brings you into 2120 S. Michigan Avenue and allows you to witness the oversized personality and magnetic charisma of the man Sun Records founder Sam Philips tried to record before Chess won out. For all of the tired debates regarding whether or not blues will survive, and the often-pathetic attempts to revive a style that cannot be taught but only inherited, *Smokestack Lightnin’: The Complete Chess Masters 1951-1960* acts as resounding answer that, no matter what the genre’s future holds, its core will never die.



**Pink Floyd**

*The Dark Side of the Moon: Immersion Box Set*  
EMI, 3CD + 2DVD + Blu-ray

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 *Immersion* 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.

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.

**Pink Floyd**

*Wish You Were Here: Immersion Box Set*  
EMI, 2CD + 2DVD + Blu-Ray

Saddled neither with the trumped-up myth of *The Dark Side of the Moon* nor the pompous grandiosity of *The Wall*, *Wish You Were Here* remains Pink Floyd's pinnacle commercial achievement. Inspired by founding member and former mate Syd Barrett, the group addresses longing, madness, and loss with rare poignancy and instrumental acumen.

Mirroring *The Dark Side of the Moon: Immersion Box Set*, this edition is arranged in similar fashion, featuring a newly remastered CD; a disc of previously unreleased tracks; a DVD containing surround, Quad, and LPCM stereo mixes; a second DVD replete with concert-screen films and a six-minute short film; and a Blu-ray disc that replicates most of the content on the DVDs. Newly designed books round out the graphic element. Unique coasters, marbles, memorabilia, and a scarf address the wants of collectors that crave Pink Floyd-related imaging on everything imaginable.

Of course, the reservations that plague *The Dark Side of the Moon: Immersion Box Set* resurface here. While it's almost impossible to fault this *Immersion* volume when it comes to experiencing *Wish You Were Here* in myriad configurations—and few albums are better-suited for debates regarding the merits of a 5.1 surround mix versus the benefits of a Quad presentation—the archival material falls short. Yes, there's the rendition of the title track with violinist Stephane Grappelli, a take so heartwarmingly transcendent it's a mystery as to why it wasn't utilized on the final studio album, and a few free-form live cuts that ultimately morphed into songs for *Animals*. Nonetheless, there's an overwhelming sense that Pink Floyd and/or EMI is holding back vault content. Welcome to the machine?





### Elvis Presley

*Young Man With the Big Beat*  
Legacy, 5CD

Last year witnessed the release of the landmark *The Complete Elvis Presley Masters*—a 30-disc behemoth home to every single master recording the hip-swiveling performer put to tape. What else can possibly reside in the vaults? Presumably, not much, but it's also safe to assume a minority of fans were able to pony up \$750 for the colossal set, meaning that its contents could be recycled on a smaller-scale set.

More manageable and strictly concerned with 1956, the year rock n' roll broke, *Young Man With the Big Beat* hones in on the master recordings cut in New York, Nashville, and Hollywood that landed on Elvis' self-titled debut and follow-up LP. Bestowed with the same superb mastering gracing the 30CD trove, twang-and-snap-sparked standards such as "Heartbreak Hotel," "Don't Be Cruel," "Hound Dog"—and a bevy of other classics that transformed culture and music—sound fantastically dynamic and vibrant. A third disc contains remastered live performances from Las Vegas and Little Rock as well as a previously unreleased Shreveport concert. A hardcore-fans-only disc of outtakes counts eleven takes of "Lawdy, Miss Clawdy" and a dozen run-throughs of "Shake, Rattle and Roll." And history buffs, rejoice. The final disc is stocked with rare interviews—the most comprehensive collection of Elvis spoken-word material ever put on an RCA title.

In addition to the landmark sides, the key attraction on *Young Man With the Big Beat* relates to the coffetable book that could easily command \$30 as a standalone product. Exhaustively researched and impeccably organized, the 80-page tome reveals a day-by-day chronology of Elvis' life in 1956, charting concerts, sessions, television appearances, personal events, and more. The obsessiveness extends to images of memorabilia spanning tickets to fan-club souvenirs to tour itineraries, not to mention the armada of photographs presenting the Mississippi-born phenomenon in all his early glory.

### Rush

*Sector 1, 2, and 3*  
Mercury/Universal, 6CD + DVD (each)

**Please see this issue's Audiophile Pressings section.**



### Smashing Pumpkins

*Gish* and *Siamese Dream*  
Virgin, 2CD + DVD (each)

"This is probably the only record I'll ever make that is that perfect in its intention," divulges Smashing Pumpkins leader Billy Corgan in the liner notes to the expanded reissue of *Siamese Dream*, his band's 1993 sophomore smash that, in tandem with the also-deluxified version of the group's debut *Gish*, form an alt-rock union that hasn't peers in a landscape otherwise dominated by Seattle acts. Prophetically, the Chicago-based quartet toured with Pearl Jam and the Red Hot Chili Peppers in the early fall of 1991, shortly before Nirvana's *Nevermind* and the resultant sea change transformed pop culture.

Twenty-plus years on, *Gish* and *Siamese Dream* still come across as refreshingly isolated from everything else around them, a pair of incandescent works whose mushroom-triggered psychedelia, melodic pop, arena bluster, mystical themes, radiant textures, personal revelations, leftover-hippie folk, and distinctive high-pitched vocals stand apart from the angrier, soft-loud dynamic embraced by the group's Pacific Northwest contemporaries. Corgan's effects-laden guitar playing, too, speaks to an understanding of prog- and acid-rock influences—as does his utilization of space, atmosphere, and sound. Combined

with Jimmy Chamberlain's powerhouse drumming, James Iha's choral-voiced guitar passages, and D'Arcy Wretzky's sober bass playing, Corgan attained heaviness, trip-piness, and sensuality—sometimes on the same track. His perfectionism, and quest for supremacy, also play considerable roles.

It's evident even in the band's formative tracks, here on bonus CDs in the form of demos and sessions—nearly every one previously unreleased. The Pumpkins' initiative and strangeness belie their collective age. Witness the collective's prowess and projection on two soaring concerts, the first, from the Metro in 1990 on *Gish*, and the second, part of a three-night stand, also from the hometown venue in August 1993, on *Siamese Dream*. The former illustrates a band on its own terms preparing a surprise attack on an unsuspecting public, and the latter conveys the look, feel, and sound of a confident ensemble ready to detonate. Picture postcards, fine remastering, shiny flip-top boxes, and thought-provoking liner notes (Corgan explains his suicidal state while penning the band's breakthrough "Today," discusses his drug appetite, and admits the group's already-fractured state in 1993) round out these quintessential volumes.





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## FEATURE

### The Smiths

*Complete (Deluxe Box Set)*

Rhino UK, 180g 8LP, 25 x 7", 8CD, DVD

Please see this issue's Audiophile Pressings section.

### Phil Spector Presents the Phillies Album Collection

Legacy, 7CD

Phil Spector's immeasurable aural contributions have already been chronicled in various forms, whether via the 4CD *Back to Mono* box, 2CD *The Essential Phil Spector*, or any number of single-disc reissues released in early 2011. Intended for fanatics, *Phil Spector Presents the Phillies Album Collection* goes even deeper by providing in their entirety, and for the first time on CD, six mono albums from his Phillies label as well as a compilation disc of ultra-rare B-sides. For girl-group aficionados and Wall of Sound students, it's a godsend.

Due to the significant overlap that graces the Crystals' *Twist Uptown* and *He's A Rebel*, casual listeners need not apply—exactly the set's intent. As much a historical artifact as music collection, the box authentically replicates select album covers and track sequences associated with Spector staples such as Bob B. Soxx and the Blue Jeans, the Crystals, and the Ronettes. Each disc is housed in mini-LP-style sleeves. A full-color booklet reveals an informative essay penned by Ace Records consultant/producer Mick Patrick, who sheds light on intriguing trivia, not least the least interesting morsel of which exposes that "He's a Rebel"—forever credited to the Crystals—is actually sung by Darlene Love and the Blossoms. The real Crystals learned it on the fly so it could be added to their concert repertoire.

It goes without saying that the purely innocent and hypnotically melodic appeal of classics like "Da Doo Run Run," "(The Best Part of) Breakin' Up," "On Broadway," and "Why Do Lovers Break Each Other's Heart" continues unabated. Spector's flair wasn't confined to the producer's chair; it emanates via his dominance of suspended harmonies, choral dynamics, and eminently infectious rhythms. All of which account for why the bonus disc, *Phil's Flipsides*, billed to the Phil Spector Wall of Sound Orchestra, is the most audacious revelation here. The brassy instrumental tracks venture into sprightly jazz and blues territory far removed from the usual A-side fare.



***This May Be My Last Time Singing: Raw African-American Gospel on 45RPM 1957-1982***

Tompkins Square, 3CD

Ever wonder what it would be like to be a successful crate digger obsessed with a very specific type of music? Mike McGonigal invites listeners to peruse many of the superior aspects of his record collection on *This May Be My Last Time Singing: Raw African-American Gospel on 45RPM 1957-1982*, a three-disc set compiled from his expansive archives. Akin to his work for 2009's *Fire In My Bones: Raw + Rare + Otherworldly African-American Gospel*, the Portland resident again made selections in relation to the most soulful and spiritual sides he attained during the past decade. In the liner notes, he admits that audiences benefit from his enthusiasm as, in search of rare finds and unknown tracks, he's spent good money on 45s that fail to live up to their promise.

The same cannot be said for the nearly four hours of music on this archival wonder. While the annotation and packaging falls short of the standard set by Numero Group, songs alternately scorch and sway, roll and tumble, uplift and hypnotize, moan and holler. From the distorted albeit insistent piano lines gracing the insistency of Prophet G. Lusk's "The Devil's Trying to Steal My Joy" to the overlapping harmonies on Clefs of Cavalry's organ-spiked "Baptized," the material delves into the core of American gospel. There's no polish, commercialism, or ulterior motive found. As made evident by the album title, every track here stems from a 45RPM single, a process McGonigal states is due "to their democratic/DIY nature; almost anyone could raise enough money to release a seven-inch single."

Indeed, the list of anonymous performers confirms his theory. At least a third of the cuts here were self-released and self-financed by church congregations and/or the artists. Such context partially accounts for their fervent garage-like properties and robe-swishing energies; the rest owes to the unspoiled passion pouring from the mouths of singers in collectives such as the Crump Brothers and Spiritual Echoes. A closer, more genuine glimpse into the storefront churches, salvation services, and worship gatherings that played immeasurable roles in African-American communities does not exist on record. Electrifying.

One of the five best and most crucial releases of the past 20 years, *Achtung Baby* represents not only the rebirth of U2 (and its reclamation from borderline-parody pomp during its *Rattle and Hum* era) but the group's most ambitious, integral, and ageless album. Treatises on romance, hypocrisy, desire, freedom, fear, and faith, its Berlin-born songs are thematically mired in regret, darkness, and solitude. The optimism of yore (and the quartet's future) is replaced by grim views, jaded sarcasm, frayed sacrifices, clenched-teeth confessions, and jaundiced experiences. "Love is clockworks/And cold steel/Fingers too numb/Too feel," Bono exhales on the sobering closer "Love Is Blindness," the same tune that U2 used to end its 1991-92 shows, night after night, leaving audiences with a forbidding, throbbing hymn rather than a celebratory anthem. About that tour.

It's captured on the flawless sensory explosion that is *ZOO TV: Live From the Sydney*, one of the four DVDs included on this hardshell-bound volume, and time and again, comes on as a performance, concept, and visual spectacular that no modern artist has yet to surpass. Recognizing the record's connection to metaphorical lyrics and symbolic imagery, the producers afford this set with a binder of Anton Corbijn prints as well as a hardback book pregnant with complementary photos and insightful essays by the likes of producers Brian Eno and Daniel Lanois, Corbijn, and author



Bill Flanagan. Three other DVDs—including the recently released documentary *From the Sky Down*, about the album's creation—round out the visual portion. The audio options are even better.

A remastered *Achtung Baby* is abetted by its sister album, the colossally underappreciated and more experimental *Zooropa*—and two discs of remixes, a platter of B-sides and bonus tracks, and *Kindergarten*, an alternate version of *Achtung Baby* featuring tracks in somewhat-unfinished form, complete with different lyrics and twists on final arrangements. Gospel choruses on a remix of "Mysterious Ways," cut-and-paste

vocal tricks on a manipulated "Numb (The Soul Assassins Mix)," and "Salome," the original flipside to the "Even Better Than the Real Thing" single, count themselves among the myriad highlights. As for *Achtung Baby* itself, the multiplatinum effort continues to reveal soulful and soul-baring secrets with each repeat listen. From the sinister crossed-wires heartbreak of the ghostly "So Cruel" to the where-did-those-come-from electronic-laced riffs on "The Fly," it's genius-level art. If you have to settle on a single box set this year, this should be the one. ●

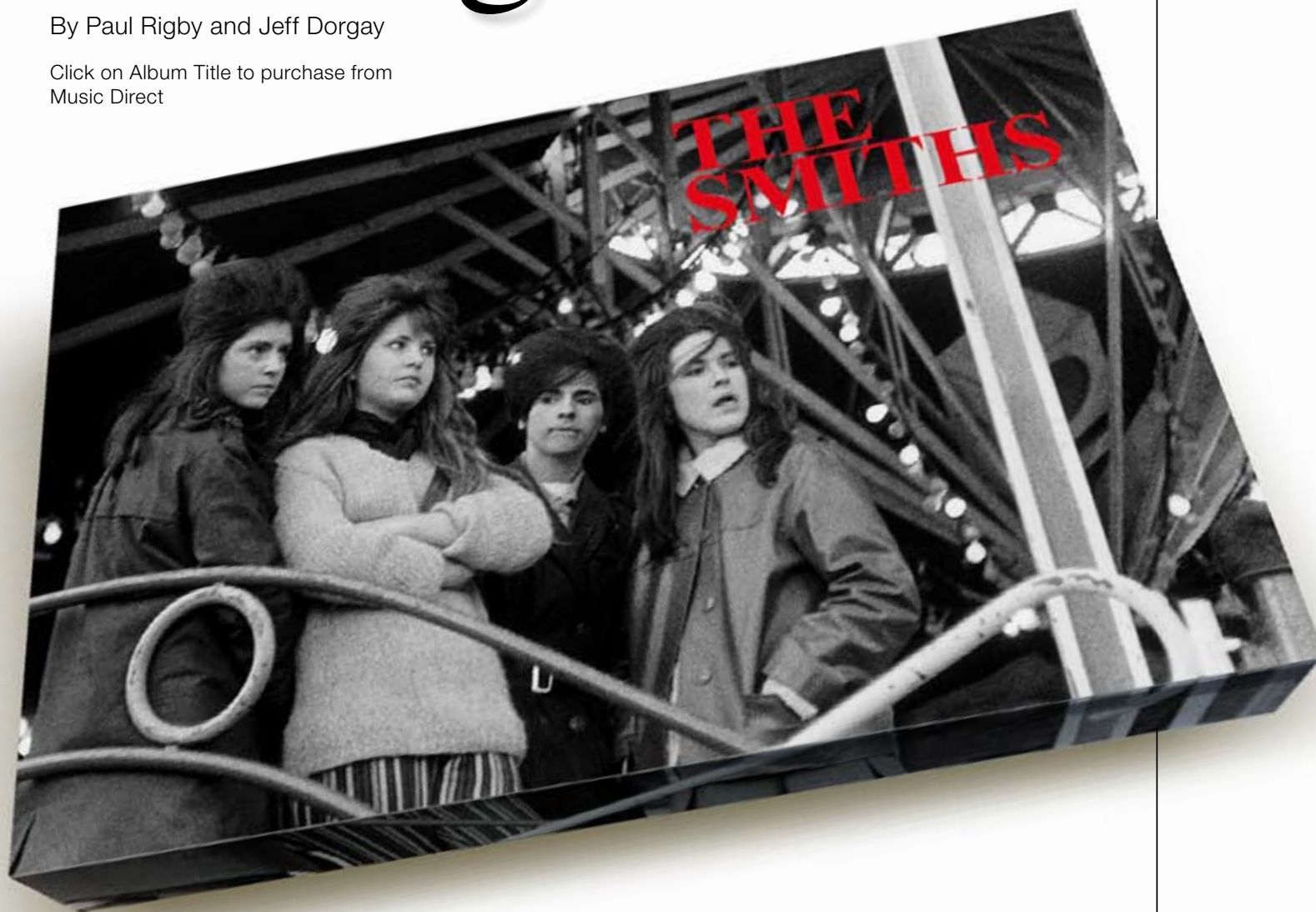
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# Audiophile Pressings

By Paul Rigby and Jeff Dorgay

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## The Smiths

*Complete (Deluxe Boxset)*

Rhino UK, 180g 8LP, 25 x 7", 8CD, DVD Box Set

## The Smiths

"These things take time," crooned Morrissey on the Smiths tune of the same name, the B-side to 1984's "What Difference Does It Make." How right he was. After more than a decade of pleas from fans eager to clutch the group's drama as close to their hearts as possible, the Smiths—the iconic, 80s jangly indie-rock group that reigned supreme as the spotty, angst-ridden, back-bedroom touchstone of a generation—are finally the subject of a magnificent, career-spanning retrospective box set that's among the most-sought-after collector pieces of the year.

Contained in a 20" x 13" x 2" box replete with a hinged opening and magnetically sealed lid, *Complete (Deluxe Boxset)* documents every professionally recorded note of the band's tenure via eight vinyl LPs, eight CDs, and 25 7" singles. The CDs and the vinyl duplicate the content—four studio albums (*The Smiths* (1984), *Meat Is Murder* (1985), *The Queen Is Dead* (1986), *Strangeways, Here We Come* (1987)), the live *Rank* (1988), plus the compilations *Hatful Of Hollow* (1984), *The World Won't Listen* (1987), and *Louder Than Bombs* (1987).

Visually, a bonus DVD presents all of the band's official videos. A large poster of the box cover art, a 12"-square booklet detailing the albums, and batch of eight, 12"-square art prints of each album's sleeve art round out this mammoth beauty that, for those lucky enough to find a copy, will probably tip the scales as the heaviest box set they'll ever own. More importantly, the sonics justify the expense.

Compared to the original LP pressings, improvements abound. "Reel Around The Fountain," from the band's debut, shows enhancements in more expansive soundstaging. Bass is stronger and more forceful, giving the track added presence; upper mids are also more focused, giving the vocals extra impact.

Comparing the box set's vinyl with Rhino's 2009 LP reissues proves the most intriguing study. In 2009, the vinyl was remastered from the original master tapes with the help of guitarist and co-writer Johnny Marr and London's Metropolis Studios mastering engineer, Frank Awkright. Reportedly, duplicate vinyl is included here. However, audiophiles should be aware that this is not the case. The pressings are wholly different in terms of both aesthetics (the center labels are changed) and sonics. They sound much more confident and transparent.

Hence, "The Headmaster Ritual," from *Meat Is Murder*, exhibits stronger bass levels and an appreciable reduction in midrange compression, reducing distortion and making Morrissey's lyrics easier to discern. In addition, the superior soundstage gives each instrument more room to maneuver.

The CDs are somewhat disappointing. "Girlfriend In A Coma," from *Strangeways, Here We Come*, is mastered too loudly, with compression hardening the upper mids. Digital fans would do well to seek out the original mid-80s CD issues, mastered to lower volume levels that give the ear more clarity and transparency. No matter.

*(Complete) Deluxe Boxset* is about collectability and the vinyl. It's not only to be desired, but is an absolutely essential purchase. Grab one now: Limited to 4,000 worldwide copies, it's already out of print in several territories. —**Paul Rigby**





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MUSIC

## Rush

The Internet is ablaze with controversy over these recent Rush remasters. Fanatical collectors insist that major differences in mastering quality exist between the original analog masters and what's presented here—specifically, music remastered in 24/96 digital and then transferred to CD. Making everything more bizarre? Each of the three *Sector* sets includes just one album (out of a total of five studio records in each box) presented on DVD-A in full, high-resolution glory.

Considering Rush fans' loyalty, and that many already have every studio effort, it would have been nice to see (even at a higher price) the entire catalog produced in high resolution. Just how many listeners will shell out approximately \$150 to acquire the three DVD-As remains to be seen.

Nonetheless, a cursory comparison to original LPs and early CD releases reveals the *Sector* volumes as consistently good—certainly better than the CDs, but not as dynamic or full of low-level information as the vinyl. Sure, books could be written regarding the minute differences between the new discs and myriad earlier versions. And only you can decide if the three high-res discs are worth each set's \$50 cost. But

considering the high percentage of awful SHM-SACDs for which I've paid that exact amount, the *Sector* series' awesome packaging and inclusion of the Mercury-era Rush catalog seems like a bonus.

Indeed, for those simply wanting the band's discography in good-sounding standing, here's an excellent way to get your full fix, and neatly boxed at that.  
—**Jeff Dorgay**

**Rush**  
*Sector 1, 2, and 3*  
Mercury, 6CD + DVD (ea.)





# Miriam Makeba



## Miriam Makeba

*The World Of Miriam Makeba*  
Speakers Corner, 180g LP

**B**y bringing popular African sounds to massive western audiences during the 60s, Miriam Makeba became the most important female vocalist to emerge from South Africa. *The World Of Miriam Makeba*, her third album, features her soon-to-be husband, Hugh Masekela, as conductor of the orchestra.

When compared to the original pressing, Speakers Corner's newly remastered version stands out for its level of stark clarity. On "Forbidden Games," a Spanish guitar line sits alongside basic percussion with a quiet precision that exudes textural details absent on the original. Such concentration on informational extraction is enhanced, via this new stereo version, by a broad-brushed soundstage that allows instruments more room to breathe. When a drum solo comes to fore on "Pole Mze," for example, it resonates with a deep, throbbing sound notable not so much for its resident power but its physical potential. The drum skin's give is readily apparent.

Vocally, Makeba is clear and concise. A slight hardening within the upper-midrange regions makes itself known but seems more a facet of the original recording. That said, Makeba's fine vocal performance might challenge brighter hi-fi rigs. Even so, the singing is more enjoyable here than on the original. And on "Umhome," the new master reveals wide, dynamic improvements with sculpted ambience that reflects the backing instrumentalists' understated albeit perceptible preparation. You can hear their careful shuffling, breathing, and adjusting.

Featuring admirable reproduction of the original packaging, Speakers Corner's LP is both faithfully considered and wonderfully enthralling.—**Paul Rigby**



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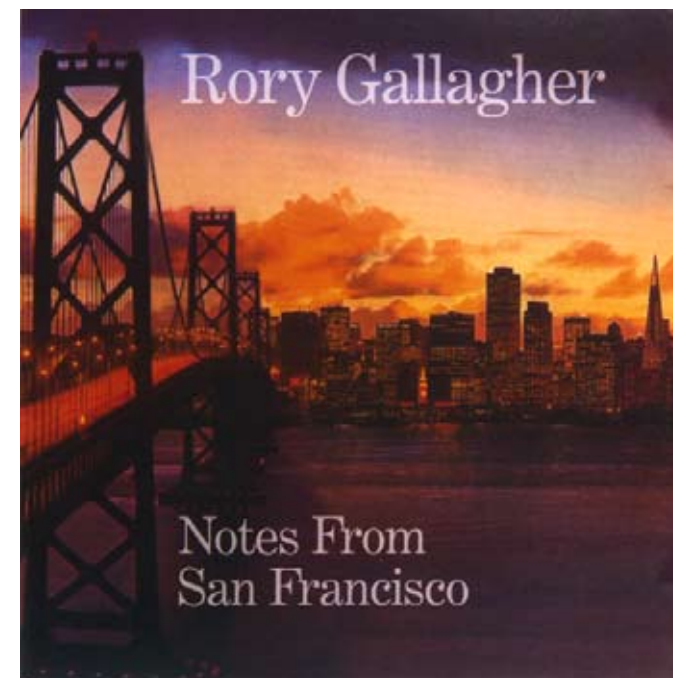


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## Rory Gallagher



### Rory Gallagher

*Notes From San Francisco*  
Music On Vinyl, 180g 3LP

**N**otes From San Francisco features a previously unreleased, decades-shelved 1978 studio album as well as a newly unearthed 1979 live set. Music On Vinyl's gatefold 3LP edition also features a 36-page booklet plus a download coupon for the Osaka Jam Sessions and bonus tracks.

How does it fare when compared to the digital editions?

The studio effort offers surprising bass strength and punch, competing well with the CD issue. On "Rue The Day," the LP's inherent analog filtering provides a more organic presentation, giving the drums that desirable "dead skin" tone. Soundstaging is also more alive on LP, yielding greater presence and depth. Dynamically, the album is not the most exciting on either format, as it lacks the impact that careful studio engineering can provide. Instead, you get more of an authentic live sound (and this is the studio album, mind you).

This collection's archival nature is made evident by the original master's unevenness, distinctly revealed on "B Girl," which sounds far dynamically superior to previous tracks on the same album—and also possesses an open, airy upper midrange. This stark difference, plainly heard on the vinyl version, is not as blatant on the digital edition, confirming the LP's extra transparency.

Recorded at a higher volume that doesn't help the dynamics, the live portion of the set showcases an intense sound that struggles to maintain its structure on CD format. Although the mic'ing is a touch eccentric, this is a live album that, on the vinyl version, teems with vibrant energy, passion, and gut-driven rock. Basically, a typically great Rory Gallagher gig, then.—**Paul Rigby**



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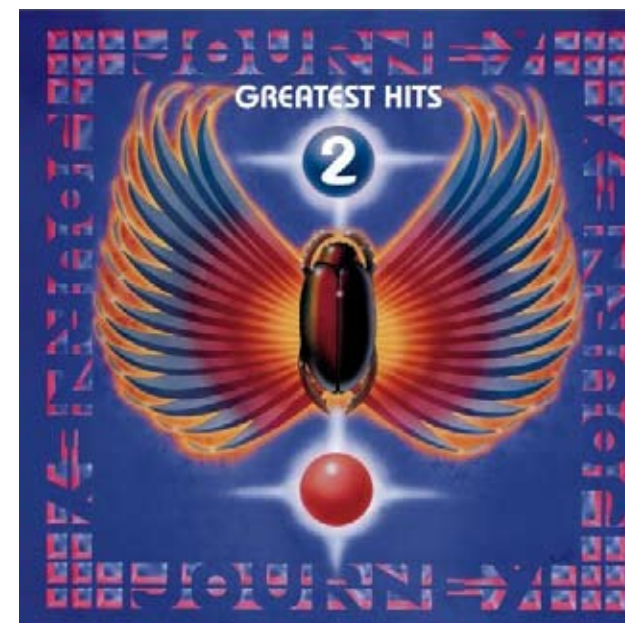


IN ADMIRATION OF MUSIC



Helicon 600 MK2

## Journey



### Journey

*Greatest Hits, Vol. 1 and 2*  
Sony/Legacy, 180g 2LP (each)

If Journey is at best a guilty pleasure, or perhaps a bit of reliving part of your youth during a time when you had just as much hair as these guys did (hopefully you left your shirt buttoned), and your favorite Journey albums are worn and weathered, you might consider this pair of greatest hits collections.

However, if you are a Journey fan looking for remastered treasure that sounds better than the band's original LPs, forget these newly issued editions. These LPs are terribly harsh and compressed. Using a Linn LP-12/Shure V15 combo tends to forgive such sonic sins, but not enough to make these LPs palatable. It's too bad.

That said, the studio albums from which the songs on these two collections are taken can be picked up at used bins for between \$2-\$5 a shot. Go that route. Look for low-stamper copies first, and enjoy one of arena rock's most successful bands as originally captured. —**Jeff Dorgay**



# Fit For Your Mac Mini

**CEntrance DACmini CX**

By Jerold O'Brien

Vinyl's resurgence notwithstanding, none of my twentysomething friends own a turntable. Yet they've all got a Mac Mini. And just as my friends like to argue about what turntable/cartridge combo reigns supreme, I've overheard younger music lovers debate what music player makes for a superior experience on the Mac Mini—as well as what hard drive sounds best and what memory configuration proves superior.

All of which might explain why these Gen Y listeners were excited to see the CEntrance DACmini CX. Built to the same dimensions as a Mac Mini, this silver box makes a ton of sense for anyone craving high performance in a compact cabinet. If you'd like even fewer boxes cluttering up your living space, CEntrance makes an alternate version that incorporates a Class-D power amplifier. That's another review for another day.





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## FEATURE



### Versatile Midget

Akin to prior Mac Minis, the DACmini CX is fed via a wall wart. Should you lose the latter, anything will do as long as it yields 9-19 VDC (the included supply produces 19VDC). Nice touch. The unit gets up and rolling in 30 seconds, offering USB, Coax, and Toslink digital inputs along with a single analog input—the key to the device's viability. The RCA/SPDIF digital input accommodates sources up to 24bit/192khz while the USB is, for the moment, limited to 24/96. A headphone jack helps make the box a highly versatile option in a main or second system.

For the main digital source, I used a MacBook Air via an AudioQuest Diamond USB cable and rustled up an old reliable CD player, the Pioneer 563 via SPDIF, to keep within the product's budget-minded parameters.

A pair of Vandersteen 1C speakers and a vintage Adcom 535 comprised the rest of the system; Audeze LCD-2 headphones were employed for headphone listening.

### Bad is Good

I waited a full 24 hours to begin serious listening sessions. An old-school audiophile, I remain amazed at what great sound comes from this tiny box. Take the title track from Bad Boy's *Private Party*. I'm impressed at the amount of separation that shines through between the multiple lead guitars, particularly given that the record is a marginal remaster. Audio Fidelity's reissue of Bad Company's debut presents an even bigger surprise. The opening cymbals on "Ready for Love" fade out with a delicacy that I expect from a fancier digital front-end. *(continued)*

**The unit gets up and rolling in 30 seconds, offering USB, Coax, and Toslink digital inputs along with a single analog input—the key to the device's viability.**



## FEATURE

Sticking with the bad bad bad theme, Badfinger's *Straight Up* admirably conveys the disc's analog mastering, showing off harmonies and maintaining spaciousness that otherwise sounds cloudy via budget DACs. Or marvel at the textures in guest singer Wendy Lewis' vocals on the Bad Plus' *For All I Care*. Whether it's Wendy Lewis or Wendy O Williams, the DACmini CX possesses a realism and tonal richness that always suggests performance in line with that of more expensive hardware. Not that the box can work wonders. Paul Simon's *So Beautiful, So What* sucks no matter the conduit. It's no fault of the DACmini CX; it's just an awful album.

Jazz standards also signal significant acoustic texture and body, along with smart sense placement within the soundstage. Miles Davis' *Live in Europe 1967?* Absolutely riveting. Davis' signature horn stays way out in front of the speakers, with the rest of the band spread out behind him. This record stands as an excellent test of pace, the rapid-fire drum rolls never getting lost in the mix as Davis hypnotizes. And the bass groove remains thoroughly locked in place.

### Hi-Res Reveals More

High-resolution tracks cast the DACmini CX in an even better light. Taking advantage of albums downloaded from HD Tracks and 24/96 files captured from LPs—the latter converted at *TONEAudio* with the Nagra LB Pro 2 track machine—music came even more alive. HDT's version of Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours* simply rocks. Sure, we've all heard "The Chain" too many times, but the song epitomizes bass dynamics, and the DACmini CX offers more than enough resolution to easily discern the

differences between standard and high-res versions.

Headphone listening is equally enjoyable. The LCD-2s are my go to 'phones, and there's more than enough power on tap to drive them to damaging levels. The Grado PS 500s also result in a great match, with smooth tonal balance and plenty of bass grip. Even the notoriously tough-to-drive AKG 701s do not pose a problem for the headphone section. If you don't control your whole system with the DACmini CX, it makes for a killer bedroom system, with minimal footprint, regardless of digital source.

As much fun as my new, younger friends had putting this DAC through its paces with myriad headphone and music player combinations, using it as a full-function preamp is where it's at—along with two turntables and a microphone, of course. It drove every power amplifier with which it was paired.

### Go to 11

A tweakophile, I couldn't resist the urge to connect the DACmini CX to a Red Wine Audio Black Lightning battery power supply. Here's some advice: For those wanting to take the DACmini CX further, toss the wall wart. It's always a great idea to keep such little switching power supplies away from your audio gear, and adding the clean power supplied by the Black Lightning enhances the listening experiences. Backgrounds grow even quieter, with more low-level detail—especially on high-res files of acoustic music, giving the overall presentation a more natural, organic feel. Lovely.

## Additional Listening

Jeff Dorgay

Since everyone and their brother seems to make a cheeseball DAC in \$500 range, it's nice to see a company with major engineering talent bring a product like the DACmini CX to market. A digital brainiac, CEntrance principal Michael Goodman has done work for Mackie, Alesis, Harman Pro, and Benchmark, to name a few. He's quoted in *ProSound News Europe* as "the one they call in when someone can't crack a tough problem."

Popping the top of this unit reveals attention to detail you might expect from a manufacturer such as dCS, or Vitus. The layout is impeccable. I'd love to see better rubber feet on the bottom, similar to those on the Wadia 1, but that's about it.

I have zero complaints with the sound, and applaud the decision to include an analog input, which elevates the device from merely great to outstanding. Should the urge arise, you can add a phono stage and turntable, which is what I did for half of my listening. Plugging in the Rega RP3/Exact via an EAR 834P functions as a can't-miss combination through the Conrad Johnson MV-50C1 and Polk Audio LSiM707 speakers. Indicative of its robust output stage, the DACmini CX suffers no fatigue driving a 15-foot pair of cables to the power amp.

The unit's overall sound is very neutral. And the match with the CJ amp is scintillating—but remember, I prefer things ever so slightly on the warm side. For \$795, a budding music lover/audiophile can fit one of these in the budget without going broke. I am proud to award the CEntrance DACmini CX a Publisher's Choice Award for 2011. Is there a better building block with which to start a system? ●

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# Jazz & Blues

By Jim Macnie



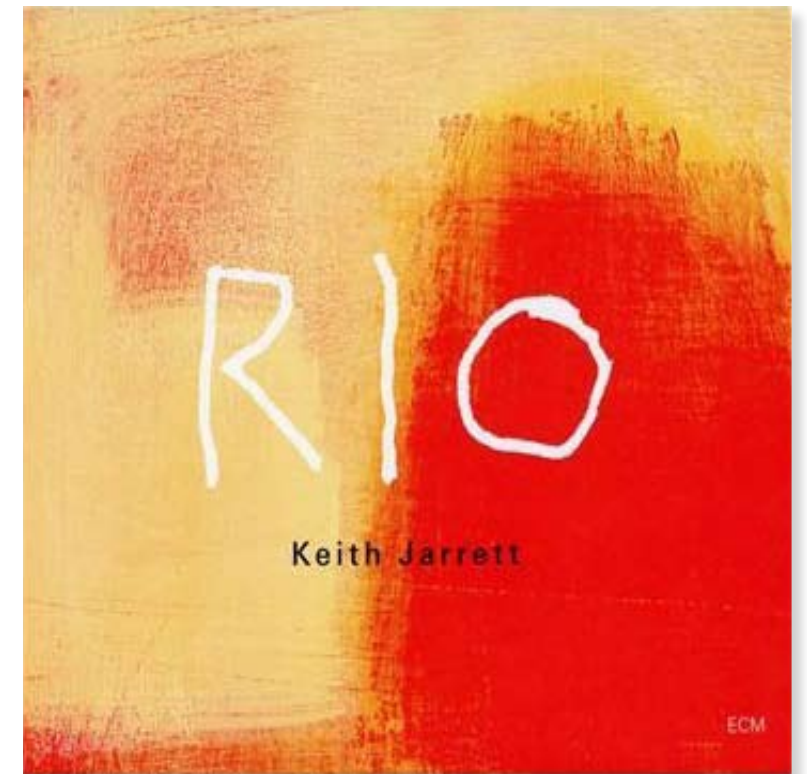
Photo by Jimmy Katz

The old tightrope-walker cliché that often gets used in jazz reviews actually takes on an irrefutable resonance when applied to the way Keith Jarrett has approached his solo shows through the last four decades. There is something truly daring about sitting at the piano and holding forth for 120 minutes of unscripted improvisation.

Doing so amounts to a big ol' crapshoot: Will the resultant music be engaging enough to thoroughly entertain an audience? Of course, from *Bremen/Lausanne* to *Testament*, Jarrett's managed to blend rumination with ebullience with enough dynamic thrust to earn himself an audience that hangs on his every note.

*Rio* keeps the icon's streak intact. Indeed, it's one of Jarrett's most fetching solo discs. The pianist has long moved back and forth between non-stop, rapturous excursions to short pieces that stand by themselves. This spring 2011 Brazilian concert is geared toward the latter. While I'm a fan of the free-flowing approach, the focus in each of the discrete tracks here is downright seductive. "Part XII" is lilting yet resolved, one of Jarrett's prettiest gossamer moments. "Part X" is antsy yet determined, a modern smooch to Art Tatum.

Most enchanting is the piece that begins the performance. Using tempo and tone, Jarrett turns a chattering stream of phrases into an essay on the alluring nature of dissonance. The left hand bounces bass patterns, the right hand responds with animated trills. The fact that the composition happens to be a spontaneous workout only adds to its rich mystique. Jarrett, like few others, has a way of making the extraordinary seem commonplace.



## Keith Jarrett

*Rio*  
ECM, 2CDs





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MUSIC

Volume 1 of this set is more present tense, a 2011 studio recording of a new quartet that finds pianist David Bryant joining the aforementioned players. The music is a bit cleaner, a bit more refined, but no less provocative. Strickland is developing a personalized rhythmic concept that weds funk and swing, and many tracks here suggest he's close to nailing its idiosyncratic chemistry. The approach brings refreshing breadth to the performances.

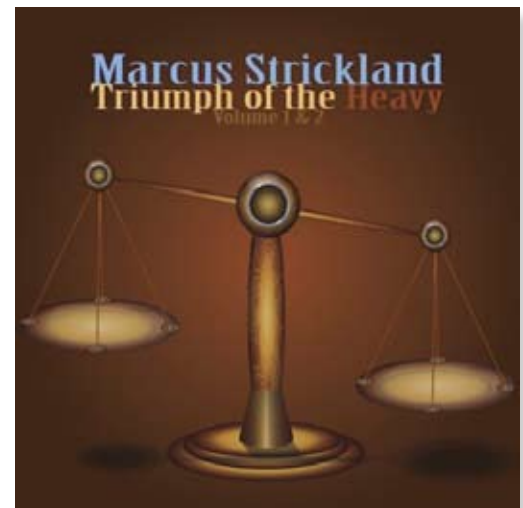
"Lilt" finds everyone feeding the fire, but AJ blazes the hardest. The crafty grooves that supply the ever-shifting landscape of "Bolt Bus Jitter" are also due to the drummer's agility. Here, the leader introduces another horn—an alto—into the program. Heard on five of Volume 1's tracks, it gives the record a much wider tonal palette. Heard after the trio disc, it shows the kind of forward motion that's possible for artists to achieve, and fits snugly into the schema. What you hear on *Triumph of the Heavy* is a full-court press for elocution. It isn't long into "Shapes" that the leader's well-rounded chunks of melody push the band just as hard as it pushes him. The surge of advancement is almost palpable.



Photo by Jati Lindsay

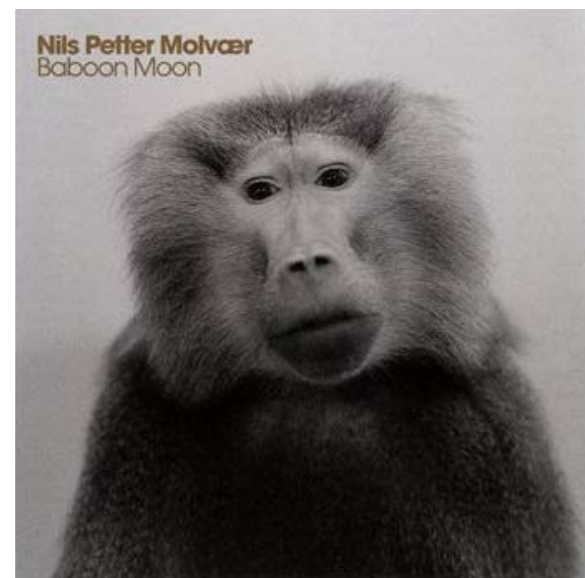
Here's an album—wait, make that *great* album—that illustrates how both improvisational advancement and an artist's career development are ongoing processes. The second disc of this two-CD set documents 32-year-old saxophonist Marcus Strickland's most recent working band, a bass-drums-horn trio that gives equal time to both finessed interplay and rock 'em, sock 'em physicality.

Strickland, a Miami native and New York resident for a decade or so, has turned lots of heads with swashbuckling maneuvers of late. Recorded live in New Haven last year, the music commands your attention. His tenor lines are feisty and inventive; his soprano work cunning and judicious. In cahoots with his twin brother AJ Strickland and bassist Ben Williams, the saxophonist proves just how simpatico the members of a working band can be. Whether gliding through the waves of "A Memory's Mourn" or negotiating the contours of Jaco Pastorius' "Portrait of Tracy," authority is in the air. A hot group on a hot night.



**Marcus Strickland**  
*Triumph of the Heavy*  
Strick Muzik, 2CDs





### Nils Petter Molvaer

*Baboon Moon*

Thirsty Ear, CD

The bandleader's catalyst for having the twain meet? The digital know-how he brings to the table. The thunderous rumble of "Recoil" is made even more epic by filters that color the program's piercing horn work. Harmonizers help thicken the action, and the trumpeter occasionally sounds like he's leading a brass choir. But back to that thunder: Molvaer's new drummer Erland Dahlen could be considered a combination of Ginger Baker and Ronald Shannon Jackson. When it comes to bringing sensuality to a martial thud, he's well-prepared. Guitarist Stian Westerhus helps thicken the landscape as well. On "Sleep With Echoes," he goes into strangulation mode, using an attack that conjures Robert Fripp more than it does John McLaughlin. He's also the producer of *Baboon Moon*, and one of his fortes is leading icy drones towards fevered piques.

Those drones could be Molvaer's strongest suit. Yes, when things erupt on this album, it's truly cinematic, but the suspended animation soundtracks that pass as the disc's ballads have a deeper impact. No wonder the most eloquent one is titled "Prince Of Calm." ●

Miles Davis created a brilliant juxtaposition when he crafted the music for *In a Silent Way* and *Jack Johnson* during a brief period that stretched from 1969-70. The first album is a tactile dreamscape, the second a muscular implosion. For the last decade or so, Norwegian trumpeter Nils Petter Molvaer has perused and personalized his mentor's accomplishments, creating fare that's a seductive blend of opposites—a sound that throws punches while drifting in a haze. It's an intricate chemistry to get right, and on *Baboon Moon*, Molvaer makes the ostensibly clashing elements wax pretty damned eloquent.

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# 2011's Best Rock and Pop Albums

By Bob Gendron

**L**ed by newer names such as Teri Suarez (Le Butcherettes), Kristen Gundred (Dum Dum Girls), Merrill Garbus (Tune-Yards), Zola Jesus, Erika M. Anderson (EMA), and Lydia Loveless as well as established names like St. Vincent, Feist, PJ Harvey, Carrie Brownstein, and Janet Weiss, 2011 was the year of the woman. The year's best albums tended to come from female artists and, unsurprisingly, indie labels, with Seattle-based Sub Pop turning in one of the most creatively rich periods in its acclaimed history.

While listening to every record released in 2011 is literally impossible, the following titles loom large now—and will also in the future. The same cannot be said for the year's most overhyped efforts and colossal disappointments, which should be avoided at all costs.

Happy listening.



## The Best

1. Fucked Up: *David Comes to Life* (Matador)
2. Girls: *Father, Son, Holy Ghost* (True Panther Sounds)
3. The Roots: *Undun* (Def Jam)
4. Le Butcherettes: *Sin Sin Sin* (Rodriguez Lopez)
5. Fleet Foxes: *Helplessness Blues* (Sub Pop)
6. Wild Flag: *Wild Flag* (Merge)
7. Trap Them: *Darker Handcraft* (Prosthetic)
8. Twilight Singers: *Dynamite Steps* (Sub Pop)
9. Dum Dum Girls: *Only In Dreams* (Sub Pop)
10. Wolves in the Throne Room: *Celestial Lineage* (Southern Lord)

## The Rest of the Best

11. The Black Keys: *El Camino* (Nonesuch)
12. Feist: *Metals* (Interscope)
13. Josh T. Pearson: *The Last of the Country Gentlemen* (Mute)
14. PJ Harvey: *Let England Shake* (Island)
15. Lydia Loveless: *Indestructible Machine* (Bloodshot)
16. Pistol Annies: *Hell on Heels* (Sony)
17. Drake: *Take Care* (Cash Money)
18. Tune-Yards: *Who-Kill* (4AD)
19. St. Vincent: *Strange Mercy* (4AD)
20. Zola Jesus: *Conatus* (Sacred Bones)
21. Tom Waits: *Bad As Me* (Anti-)
22. Handsome Furs: *Sound Kapital* (Sub Pop)
23. Das Racist: *Relax* (Greedhead)
24. Danger Mouse and Daniele Luppi: *Rome* (Capitol)
25. The Decemberists: *The King Is Dead* (Capitol)
26. EMA: *Past Life Martyred Saints* (Souterrain Transmissions)
27. Eleventh Dream Day: *Riot Now* (Thrill Jockey)
28. Tombs: *Path of Totality* (Relapse)
29. The War on Drugs: *Slave Ambient* (Secretly Canadian)
30. Craft: *Void* (Southern Lord)



### Please Go Away: 2011's Most Overhyped Sets

James Blake: *James Blake* (Atlas)  
No amount of floral language or hipster fawning distracts from this album's primary ability: boring listeners to sleep.

Bon Iver: *Bon Iver* (Jagjaguwar)  
Mediocre folk-pop sensitivity that, because of its indie status, gets away with bad 80s adult-contemporary synths and cringe-worthy lyrics.

Real Estate: *Days* (Domino)  
Music doesn't come blander. Snore.

Jay-Z and Kanye West: *Watch the Throne* (Roc-A-Fella)  
A missed opportunity of immense proportions, made worse by the self-serving attitudes of each headliner.

Gang Gang Dance: *Eye Contact* (4AD)  
Ensemble counts a member whose only task is to wave incense. Enough said.

### How Could You: 2011's Worst Disappointments

Coldplay: *Mylo Xyloto* (Capitol)  
Dull, uninspired, uninspiring. How can Brian Eno put his name on this?

Lou Reed and Metallica: *Lulu* (Warner Bros.)  
The pairing sounds bad on paper. But it's much, much worse in execution. Unlistenable, and riddled with lyrics that make the Penthouse Forum seem mature.

Lady Gaga: *Born This Way* (Interscope)  
A rush job that, rather than push any envelopes, tests patience and steals from predecessors like Madonna—and Poison.

Red Hot Chili Peppers: *I'm With You* (Warner Bros.)  
For all their faults, RHCP albums once stuck with you for weeks. You'll forget this one in an instant.

The Strokes: *Angles* (RCA)  
Coulda, shoulda, woulda.



# Benchmark



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# Fab in Every Respect

The Range Rover Evoque with Audio by Meridian

By Jeff Dorgay

The new Range Rover Evoque presents a quandary to high-end crossover SUV buyers. Since it doesn't have a massive V-8 engine, traditional Range Rover owners question whether it's worthy of the luxury nameplate. A four-cylinder, direct-injection, turbocharged power plant takes the V-8's place. Claimed highway mileage is 28mpg.

All but one of my friends that own full-sized Rovers (which start at \$82k) went Churchill when I suggested that this vehicle is sensible and would perhaps make the Range Rover accessible to the likes of Hyundai Tucson owners like myself. As my plane hit the ground in Los Angeles, where I'd be taking the Evoque for a spin, an episode of "Top Gear" crossed my mind. What did my automotive heroes think of the new Rover? Would this merely be an entry-level lump re-badged for a cash grab? Most importantly, how good was the Meridian sound system?





After a quick ride to the car park, there she was, with enhanced 20-inch wheels wrapped in black as well as a panoramic glass-roof upgrade. The window sticker revealed my model loaded with every conceivable option, pushing the scale at \$62,000. A nicely appointed version can be had for about \$52k. Eliminating the Meridian sound system drops the price well below \$50k.

### The System

But what a sound system. While Europeans can get a 12-channel, 11-speaker, 380-watt stereo or 15-channel, 17-speaker, 825-watt system, Evoque models delivered to US customers only have the latter option. Here, the American “bigger is better” philosophy makes perfect sense.

Taking advantage of its home-audio speakers that utilize the same technologies, Meridian designed a fully active DSP system that goes even further in the automotive environment.

Each of the 17 discrete speakers is directly driven by its own power amplifier, with the DSP engine working as a crossover network and room correction—or, in this case, cabin correction, by fine-tuning the system to the environment in a way not previously possible.

An in-dash CD transport joins high-level and USB inputs, accommodating about any portable device imaginable. The Meridian sound system offers Dolby PLIIx and DTS Neo:6 surround sound options as well as its namesake Trifield technology (based on Ambisonics). In short, the Ambisonics decoder processes the entire soundfield in a manner in which a specific signal is presented to each one of the speakers. It creates a more coherent surround soundfield, and one equally palatable to every listener in the cabin—no small feat. Bob Stuart, director of Meridian, said this particular masterpiece took “a lifetime of experience and 12 months of work” to go from concept to finished product. *(continued)*

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MARTIN LOGAN

www.martinlogan.com

Truth in Sound.



### Enough Talk, Let's Rock

Jumping on the 405 South and heading towards Newport Beach, I skipped Guns N' Roses' obvious "Welcome to the Jungle" and chose "Black Leather" from their 1993 covers record *The Spaghetti Incident*, cranking the volume control until it hurt, before ultimately dialing it down to perfection. The delivery? Effortless.

Meridian claims that "wherever you sit in the Evoque, you're sitting in the best seat in the vehicle." With the needle on the speedometer settling in at 115mph (with surprisingly little traffic on the 405), it felt like Slash was out on the vehicle's bonnet, in front of a wall of Marshalls, and the rest of the band in the back seat. Spectacular! Meridian's Cabin Correction eradicated exterior noise, and thanks to the ultra-comfy heated leather seats, I felt like I was sitting in a recording studio rather than driving a four-wheeled cruise missile through the heart of Los Angeles.

### Chilling at Sub-Light Speeds

Sliding onto the Pacific Coast Highway in the Evoque as the sun sets on the Southern California coast is the most fun you can have with your pants on. I slowed the vibe down with Stephane Pompougnac's *Hotel Costes 15*. "Close To My Fire" features some of the deepest, most dynamic beats on the record and reveals just how low the Meridian system goes. And again, I couldn't resist turning up the volume control—the system's natural delivery just begs you to do so.

As darkness ensued, Orelha Negra's self-titled disc provided a necessary R&B groove. All I needed to make the *mise en scene* complete were gangsters following me in a Camaro while I headed for Malibu. Returning from a quick bite revealed another of the Evoque's coolest features.



When you unlock the car, LEDs on the mirrors shine little puddles of light on the ground. If this is one of Posh Spice's style cues, it's a great suggestion. (Her office declined comment on the level of her involvement in the car's actual design.)

On the following morning's breakfast run, the BBC Philharmonic's recordings of Arnold Bax's *Symphony No.6 in C major* proved perfect, revealing both the Meridian's delicacy and tonal accuracy. The soundstage was tremendous, feeling as if I luxuriated amidst a giant Jacuzzi filled with musicians. This represented the best validation of the DSP processing: Few cars are quiet enough to play classical music in a satisfying manner.

My day with the Evoque came to an end much too soon. I shuffled jazz and some classic rock favorites, all to highly satisfying results. The Meridian system has no apparent limitations.

### A Major Success

Stopping to fuel up, curious to the price of my aggressive behavior, I discovered my mixture of in-town and freeway driving yielded 24mpg. Luxury, responsibility, and exceptional sound rolled into one package. I could report back to my good friends that this vehicle is worthy of the badge. Indeed, the Evoque ticks all the proper boxes. And the sound system propels Meridian to the top of the heap, on par with Naim (Bentley) and Burmester (Porsche) as the only purveyors of high-end auto sound.

Oh, and should you care to see what James May of "Top Gear" had to say about the Evoque's automotive performance, click here: ●

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



# TheWino

By Wayne Garcia



## The Wines of Autumn

As the holiday season kicks in, and brisk autumn days prepare us for the cold winter months ahead—okay, I live in San Francisco, everything's relative—our vinous thoughts shift away from cool, crisp whites and rosés toward red-hued wines that bring greater heft and warmth to the palate. Indeed, autumn is an especially great season for all types of wine. There's something about the clarity of light in the air, the smell of wet leaves and earth, and gathering with friends and family to enjoy seasonal foodstuffs like mushrooms, squash, and roasted birds that are especially welcoming to wine.

The following three suggestions are for reds ranging from medium- to full-bodied. Each proves highly versatile at the table, each delights with arrays of aroma and flavor, and each is affordable enough to keep us from pillaging junior's piggy bank.

## 2010 Tami Nero d'Avola

**SICILY, ITALY \$17**

Just 29 years-old, Arianna Occhipinti is already a star of the wine world. Of course, being a young, highly attractive Sicilian woman doesn't hurt. But putting shallow surface attributes aside, the real story lies with Occhipinti's terrific range of fresh and vibrant wines. She got her start at age 16, when her uncle, Giusto Occhipinti, the winemaker at Sicily's renowned Azienda Agricola COS, invited her to lend a hand at Italy's biggest wine fair, Vinitaly. Wine and winemakers entranced Arianna, and, after going to school to study winemaking, and some help from Giusto, she acquired her own property.

Occhipinti practices biodynamic farming and minimal intervention in the cellar, and adds but the merest dash of sulfur dioxide to her wines at bottling, to ensure stability. She offers wines under two labels. Those called Occhipinti are made from grapes she grows on her own property, while the less expensive Tami label designates grapes farmed at neighboring vineyards (however, they are also biodynamic and made with the same hands-off approach).

Nero d'Avola is one of Southern Sicily's main red varieties—the other is the lighter, somewhat spunkier Frappato—producing a dark, brooding, sometimes smoky wine. The 2010 Tami Nero d'Avola suggests both red (cherry, raspberry) and darker fruits (such as plum), as well as exotic Moroccan spices, a bit of licorice, and damp earth. It's medium-bodied, and while not as moody and smoky as the Occhipinti labeled Nero (\$32), at effectively half the price, it offers tremendous value.





## 2005 Castello di Cacchiano Chianti Classico

TUSCANY, ITALY \$22

When it comes to grape growing and winemaking, it's all too true that Europe has a distinct historical advantage over the New World. Pinot Noir and Chardonnay were first cultivated by monks in Burgundy some thousand years ago, and it's not uncommon to find estates such as Castello di Cacchiano in Tuscany that have been in the same family since the 11th Century. The current proprietor, Giovanni Ricasoli-Firidolfi, is both the winemaker and latest in a line of Barons Ricasoli-Firidolfi to produce wine from the Sangiovese grape. Bottling wine under its own label since just the mid-70s, Castello di Cacchiano is very traditionally made Chianti Classico. Combining roughly 85% Sangiovese, with a kiss of Merlot to soften the tannins (Bordeaux grape types also thrive in Tuscany), the wine is aged in traditional, large neutral wood casks. (While the winery used to produce a "Super-Tuscan," a pumped-up modern wine for the international marketplace, it now only makes this Classico, which, by the way, is the actual appellation, not necessarily a style.)

2005 is considered to be a great year for Italian wine, and even though Cacchiano's Chianti will continue to age gracefully for years to come, it is utterly delicious now. Aromas of sour cherry are a hallmark of Sangiovese. Add to that hints of spice, licorice, and dried herbs. Flavors are earthy, with velvety tannins, and culminate in a juicy albeit structured glass of palate-warming vino that begs to be savored with roasted meats, mushrooms, and hearty pasta dishes.

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### tone style

## 2007 Domaine René Rostaing Vassal de Puech Noble

COTEAUX DU LANGUEDOC, FRANCE \$21

**R**ené Rostaing is a master of the Northern Rhône appellation Côte-Rôtie (the roasted slope). He started very small in 1971, with a mere half-acre of Syrah vines in each of the region's finest parcels, Côte Blonde and La Landonne. Rostaing vaulted to the top of his class twenty years later when his father-in-law and uncle retired (both are legends of the region), providing him with an additional ten acres of prime vineyard land, mostly planted to very old vines.

In 1999, Rostaing purchased a small estate in Southern France's Languedoc called Puech Chaud (hot mountain), now known as Puech Noble. The property's limestone soils are also ideal for Syrah, which, with the addition of 10% Mourvèdre, creates the delicious Vassal de Puech Noble. (Rostaing also makes a lovely white blend from Grenache Blanc, Vermentino, and Viognier.)

Rostaing's wines typically combine power with elegance. The '07 Vassal de Puech Noble is a wonderful example of a wine that is absolutely delicious now but one that will benefit from further aging. Classic Syrah aromatics of black pepper, dark fruit, earth, and smoked meats lead to a rich yet earthy palate that balances fruit with an earthy spiciness. The region's Mourvèdre grape adds a bit of wild funk, as well as a quality known as *garrigue* (wild mountain herbs) prevalent throughout the wines of Southern France.

*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](http://digwinesf.com).*







## Angry Birds Red Bird Tee

\$19.95

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

**W**hat are we doing in Hot Topic in the first place? Whatever. Angry Birds is a *TONEAudio* favorite, so this was a must. All of the game's other birds are featured, along with the pigs. So show off your nerdiness with an Angry Birds shirt. Ba-hoonga!

## Kindle Fire

\$199

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

**T**he basic black-and-white Kindle has had a major makeover, featuring a 7-inch color screen and a stripped-down Android interface. For those reading books, magazines, and doing a bit of web surfing, the Kindle Fire has beaten Apple and Samsung at their own game—keeping the interface uncomplicated.

Amazon keeps the price low by making the Kindle Fire an 8gb device. All Amazon media purchases are stored in the Amazon cloud, so you never have to worry about backup. (Or the aggravation of losing iTunes purchases that haven't been backed up.)

The “ultra fast” Amazon Silk web browser is pretty perky, and you can also use the Kindle Fire to play movies and music as well, but most people will use it to read media as they did with their original Kindle. With a large install base of doggedly loyal users, this is sure to be the game-changing tablet in the months to come.





## Star Wars Stormtrooper DJ Headphones

\$39.95  
www.funko.com

**F**orget Beats by Dre. You want Star Wars Stormtrooper headphones. Featuring padded ear cushions (think old school Koss Pro 4aa here) and a padded headband with the Star Wars logo, and you're bound to rule the next party with a pair of these.

The stock pair features fairly robust construction and beg to be modded with some higher-quality internals. Who's going to be the first person at a Head-Fi meet with tricked-out Stormtrooper phones?



## iHog

\$129.95  
www.amazon.com

**E**asily this year's most fun iPod dock, with speakers for eyes and a downward-firing subwoofer, the iHog is fully 2.1, with robust sound. Maybe they should have named it an iBoar? Fully compatible with any iPod or iPhone, the iHog also features a 3.5mm mini jack to use as a line level input with your Zune!

The sound? Surprisingly good, making the iHog a great conversation starter—perfect for your kitchen countertop, or wherever you need to plug in your iPod.





# Polk Audio LSiM707 Loudspeaker

By Jeff Dorgay

**“I’m a stat guy at heart. I wanted that midrange openness and neutrality,”**

remarks Mark Suskind, Polk Audio’s VP of Product Line Management, as we listen to the nuances in Ginger Baker’s drumming through Polk’s latest creation, the LSiM707 speakers.

Incredibly, the \$3,999 pair of floorstanders is right at home in a six-figure reference system, throwing out a wide soundstage that both extends well beyond the speaker boundaries and claims three-dimensionality—each member of Cream takes up a distinct space in the listening room—that paints a vivid picture of a seemingly in-progress live event.



## FEATURE

Wait: Polk Audio and a six-figure reference system? What gives? Is this a *Fringe* episode where in an alternate universe Polk Audio rules the world of high-end speakers and Walter Bishop blasts Cream in his laboratory while he investigates the unknown? Nope. Just another instance of *TONEAudio* exploring exciting possibilities.

In the early 70s, Polk Audio grabbed the audiophile world's attention with its legendary SDA-SRS speaker system and has since counted a number of significant milestones. The LSiM707 brings the history full circle by leaning on nearly 40 years of speaker-production knowledge. Yes, these are handsome speakers, available in a Mount Vernon Cherry medium wood finish or Midnight Mahogany a black ash wood finish. Slim, magnetic grilles keep fingers, noses, and prying guests away from the drivers, or you can use the speakers bare and showcase the gorgeous gloss-black front panel.

### A Serious Audiophile Speaker in Every Way

When introduced in 2001, the LSi series garnered rave international reviews, proving Polk a solid contender in the audiophile speaker market. And you won't find a more loyal group of speaker owners; take a cursory look at the Polk Audio Owners Group on the Web. *(continued)*



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“It revealed an incredible wealth of genuine low-level detail... If times got tough and I had to sell my big rig, I could listen happily ever after to the Diva II SP. That’s how well balanced and robust its overall sound was.”

– Michael Fremer, *Stereophile* (January 2011)



Pulse Pro Stereo Stage

## FEATURE

The LSiM707 constitutes a four-way system with many new features, some of which break new ground and some that refine past processes. A cutaway view highlights the attention paid to every facet of the design—from the Dynamic Sonic Engine that incorporates Polk’s latest ring radiator tweeter and Extended Motion midrange driver to the meticulously assembled crossover network, featuring premium capacitors and inductors. And, there are a few things the naked eye cannot see, such as the aerated polypropylene woofer cones and rigid internal cabinet bracing. For in-depth tech explanations of these aspects, visit the Polk Web site at [www.polkaudio.com/homeaudio/lisim/index.php](http://www.polkaudio.com/homeaudio/lisim/index.php).

To ensure the speakers would perform at the top level, Polk made substantial upgrades to its in-house listening room. Visiting the company’s Baltimore office reveals a full complement of Audio Research Reference electronics—amplifier, preamplifier, CD player. No surprise, then, that the LSiM707 yields excellent results when plugged into my ARC REF 5 preamplifier and REF 150 power amplifier.

### Setup

Placing the speakers five feet from the rear wall, with the tweeters nine feet apart—combined with five degrees of toe-in and a slight rearward rake—proves optimum in my room. The LSiM707s sound good without critical placement, but taking the time to make adjustments to rake angle results in superior imaging. Sure, the process requires a few minutes per speaker, but it’s made even easier with the iLevel Pro app for the iPhone. Or you can go old-school with a traditional level. Just have both speakers raked back at the identical amount and use the supplied wrench.

I utilized three distinctly diverse systems to audition the LSiM707s. The ARC REF gear and dCS Paganini CD player highlight how the speakers perform in very high-end systems. (continued)





## FEATURE

My recently rebuilt (fresh power supplies and full CJD Teflon cap upgrades for both units) Conrad Johnson MV-50 amplifier and PV-12 preamplifier, along with a BelCanto CD player, makes for a great setup that won't break the piggy bank yet still renders highly satisfying performances. For budget-conscious music lovers that might make the LSiM707s a foundation on which to build, a vintage Pioneer SX-434 receiver and 563 universal disc player only add \$200 to the cost of the Polk speakers.

### I'll Take Polk Audio For \$4000, Please

The LSiM707s' slight out-of-the-box stiffness vanishes after about 50 hours of playing time, unveiling speakers much more sophisticated than what's intimidated by their price. A few snooty local audiophile associates experienced the LSiM707s (albeit with the Polk logos hidden from view) in my full ARC system. When asked to guess the cost of the mystery component, they estimated between \$10-\$20k, a conclusion spurred on by my spinning of well-known audiophile favorites. After the guinea pigs became convinced they were listening to \$20k speakers, I finally dropped the bomb by informing them the Polks fetch \$3,995 for the pair. Consider the so-called experts successfully duped.

While listening to a \$20k pair of speakers reveals the areas in which the LSiM707s fall short, this review isn't meant as a shootout.

Big bucks gear possesses extra resolution and refinement—and that's how it should be. Comparing the LSiM707s to speaker favorites in the \$4,000-\$5,500 bracket is more useful and interesting.

The \$4k Penaudio Cenya and the \$5k B&W 805D both present more upper-range resolution, but only solidly go down to 50Hz. Also, each requires a pair of expensive stands to achieve maximum bass performance. Meanwhile, the \$5,500 Magnepan 3.7s color a more grandiose aural picture but don't really rock. Plus, to be all they can be, they necessitate a \$10k high-current, solid-state power amplifier.

### A Serious Music Lover's Speaker

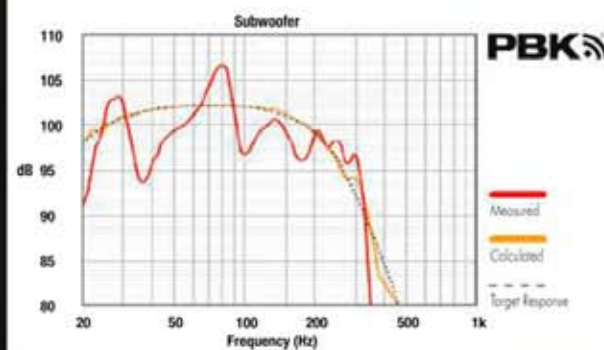
The 50 watts per channel that the CJ amp provides is great for most listening, but the configuration particularly excels at vocals and mellow music, as illustrated by Mobile Fidelity's 24K CD of Tom Petty's *Full Moon Fever*. The album's multiple layers stay intact, with not only the woodblock in "Face in a Crowd" anchored in space but its timbre and scale sounding exactly right. They seem minor, yet these minute details allow you to forget about the system and concentrate on the music. Gram Parsons' *Grievous Angel* and CSN's *Déjà vu* supply similar experiences. The LSiM707s unfailingly render subtle shadings without missing the larger dynamic swings. *(continued)*





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\*Connected to a 240-volt line

Check out the video of SUB 2 in action on Paradigm's Blog or our Facebook page

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## FEATURE

Swapping the CJ gear for the C500 preamplifier and the 450Wpc MC452 power amplifier, I effortlessly buried the big, blue power meters courtesy of albums from Van Halen, Slayer, and Nine Inch Nails. Todd Martens' column (on page 88) inspired a maximum-volume romp through *The Downward Spiral* that left me invigorated and convinced that the LSi707s play at high levels without instilling listener fatigue.

Jazz and classical listeners should be equally enthralled with the Polks. It's one trick to play really loud, but these speakers possess the necessary finesse to capture the essence of acoustic instruments. With a recent listening session to the mastering of Music Matters' analog edition of Herbie Hancock's *Empyrean* /s/es burned in my memory, I eagerly played a test pressing of the LP via the LSiM707s. They did not disappoint. Hancock's piano and Freddie Hubbard's coronet blast from between the speakers with great dynamics and zero overhang. Cymbals are natural, and bass is pregnant with texture—no one-note bass here.

### Man Up and Grab a Pair

The LSiM707s' greatest virtue owes to their overall performance level; they have no shortcomings. Honestly. The speakers offer major bass grunt—Polk claims 22Hz-40kHz, with a -3db point at 42Hz. However, when listening to test tones, the 30Hz band remains very solid. Moreover, the smooth high-end is grain-free and the mid-band extremely natural. The well-designed crossover network also provides a top-to-bottom coherence that's rare at this price.

It would be easy to say that these speakers' only errors are those of omission, but such a statement sells them short. When used with the ARC REF gear, the LSiM707s easily resolved the differences between the \$12k dCS Debussy, \$30k TAD 600, and \$55k dCS Paganini. Most sub-\$10k speakers fail this challenge.

Most importantly, for music lovers on a budget, the LSiM707s still deliver a very musical performance when paired with a garage-sale receiver. No matter with what they're mated, they put forward such substantial resolution that it will feel as if you acquire a whole new system any time you upgrade your amplification and/or source components. This experience translates to unending fun—and a *TONEAudio* Exceptional Value Award.

Revealingly, on our way to the airport, Suskind commented that Polk "wants the LSiM707 to be a gateway to the high end on a reasonable budget." The company accomplished this feat—and much, much more. ●





# Darth Insidious

## IsoTek Super Titan Power Conditioner

By Paul Rigby

When most audiophiles are ready to upgrade their hi-fi, they immediately look towards the principle components: turntable, CD player, amp, speakers, and the like. It's an obvious move, but is it the right one? Are you, for example, absolutely sure that you're even getting the best out of your current system? While unbeknownst to many users, multiple varieties of distortion prevent stereos from performing at their expected capability.





**Providing nine-section multiple filters in a series parallel combination—and doing so in a truly balanced supply—Super Titan aims to remove the noise by cleaning your mains supply without disturbing the natural transient musical information.**

Noise arrives in two flavors—differential and common. When your fridge switches itself off, do your speakers make a noise? If so, you’ve experienced differential noise, or distortion. This form of noise also derives from the less-obvious electronic switching of power supplies. Common noise applies to more subtle variants, and derives from point sources such as radio transmitters. These dual forms aren’t related. But both diminish systems’ abilities to resolve fine detail. Moreover, you usually don’t realize such noise exists until it’s eliminated.

Differential and common noise arrive via the live and neutral lines within your mains cable—precisely where the IsoTek Super Titan and its Direct Coupled Design circuit come into play. Providing nine-section multiple filters in a series parallel combination—and doing so in a truly balanced supply—Super Titan aims to remove the noise by cleaning your mains supply without disturbing the natural transient musical information. It also supplies impressive back-up figures that keep everything safe (a rated figure of 4,600W) and a fusing unit that handles enormous transient overloads.

Weighing in at a beast-like 30kg (66 pounds), Super Titan offers a quick and efficient way to gain your first hernia. Spanning 500 x 500 x 300mm, the unit works with its smaller brother, the already established Aquarius (£700). The latter can be used as a standalone power conditioner but reaches new heights when used as part of a team alongside the Super Titan.

“Super Titan is designed for high-current product such as power amplifiers and electrostatic speakers,” explains Keith Martin, founder and Managing Director for IsoTek.

“The Aquarius (a six-outlet, full-system power conditioner featuring two high-current outlets rated at 16 amps and four medium-current outlets rated a 5 amps) sits on top and is used for front-end equipment such as CD players. As you go up the IsoTek range, we split our boxes into two for high and lower current, as you would a preamp and power amp.” IsoTek is currently working on a rack that will neatly hold the power conditioning boxes in place.

Martin claims the best reason for splitting the power

conditioners into two boxes relates to the different current demands associated with source components and power amplifiers. “Plug your CD player, et. al. into the Aquarius because the CD player will only draw around 35W,” says Martin. “It won’t demand power in transients, which is what a power amp does. A power amp, when faced with dynamic pieces of music, gulps current and power. That creates noise of its own. So you need the additional bandwidth that the Super Titan supplies for the power amp.”

You can also run your turntable and CD player off the Super Titan, but it won’t be quite as effective as opting for the two-box approach: You need a different class of filtering for front-end boxes. That’s why the Aquarius has two high-current outlets and four medium outlets to provide different filtering. Super Titan is optimized for high-current applications. Indeed, it can handle 32 amps of continuous current.

“We were looking at the nature of the amplifiers coming through on the high end,” notes Martin. “Big amplifiers from Levinson, MBL, and such require huge power delivery. With that in mind, we built a true 32-amp power conditioner for the extreme high-end user. The Super Titan will run happily on a normal feed, but having the extra capability matters—we designed this product to be future-proof.”

(continued)





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*Cohearent Audio owner, Kevin has mastered music for every major label. He has more than a hundred top ten and Grammy award winning records, and dozens of RIAA certified gold and platinum albums and singles.*



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## REVIEW

**Plugging the Quad 57s into the Super Titan provides noticeably less upper-frequency distortion, revealing soundstage structures I've never before experienced.**

### Amps and more

IsoTek's monstrous, two-box power conditioning system works just as well in practice as in theory. I chose Skunk Anansie's *Stoosh* as a test CD, and fed it through an Icon CD-X1 CD player within a valve system. My basic reference system presents tight, thumping bass with a dynamic rhythm guitar, smoky vocals, and discernable acoustic guitar and cymbal elements located on the periphery of the soundstage. When the Aquarius mains conditioner is introduced into the chain, the latter yields a more focused soundstage replete with centrally placed rhythm guitar and bass. The downside?

A slight lift to the upper mid-range. Still, the reduction in distortion, improved bass grip, and added acoustic guitar and cymbal effects are promising.

Swapping the Aquarius for the Super Titan (and beginning with only the Icon monoblock power amplifiers connected) transforms the lower register of the system without slowing pace or rhythm. Bass guitar and drums remain sprightly and melodic, with more authority throughout the range. Plucked bass strings possess extended decay and claim deeper extension.  
*(continued)*





REVIEW

Plugging the Quad 57s into the Super Titan provides noticeably less upper-frequency distortion, revealing soundstage structures I've never before experienced. The improved focus produces genuine 3D effects, complete with textural contours and layers. Bass stays powerful and authoritative. But it also assumes its place within the mix with a graceful coherency far preferable to just simply dominating, as it does when the Super Titan is absent. Midrange and treble frequencies are also markedly smoother, boasting excellent clarity. It's as if the music is scrubbed clean and sports a new sheen.

Please note: A tinge of upper-frequency hardness remains when the Super Titan is paired with the monoblocks alone. Connecting the Quads to the Super Titan offers maturity and drastically reduces such hardness, resulting in a rich, deep sound that unveils expressive musical elements.

Used as intended, the full IsoTek system produces an effortless sound—there's no stress or strain to be found. Don't confuse such ease with a lack of dynamics, power, or excitement. On Skunk Anansie's "Hedonism", Skin's lead vocals benefit from a fresh bank of vocal modulations, sounding almost choral. The bass-shy Quad electrostatics present a proud, full lower register full of grip and true authority. Such power affords the bass a grand magnificence and tonal accuracy.

Midrange frequencies also exhibit thrilling transparency, claiming a fuller palette of tonal colors and silkier treble. Every conceivable tremor of Kate Bush's delivery on "Bertie" (from *Aerial*) comes across stacked with emotion and nuance. Moreover, with the IsoTek combination, the soundstage is noticeably more natural and able to resolve low-level detail.

Wash, Condition, and Go

The Super Titan and the Aquarius are sonic wonders. If you haven't addressed power delivery, get to know your system on a more intimate basis and consider adding these IsoTek components. Only then will you discover what your system can really deliver. ●

IsoTek Super Titan  
MSRP: \$9,398/€6,886

MANUFACTURER  
IsoTek Systems

CONTACT  
www.soundfowndations.co.uk (UK)  
www.soundorg.com (US)

PERIPHERALS  
Digital Source  
Icon Audio CD X1

Analog Source  
Avid Acutus, SME IV, Benz Glider

Phono  
Icon PS3

Preamplifier  
Aesthetix Calypso

Power  
Icon MB845 Monoblocks

Speakers  
Quad ESL-57

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Sennheiser HD650

Cables  
Avid SCT, Avid ASC



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- Multiple amplifiers, headphones or signal processors are all controlled

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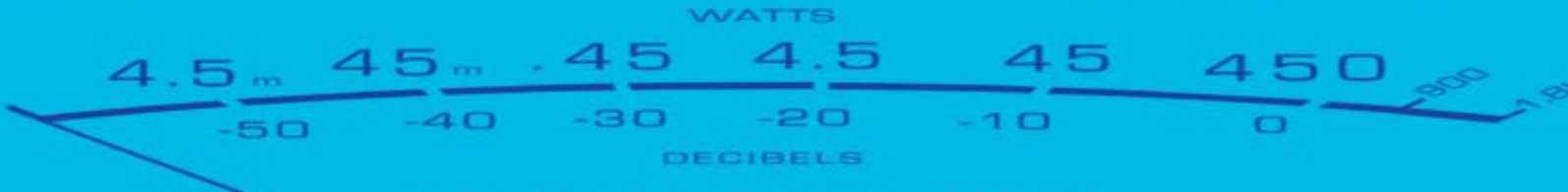
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# Let It Be

## Pass Labs XP-20 Stereo Preamplifier

By Steve Guttenberg





I first met Nelson Pass in the early 1980s, but for some reason, I always assumed he designed all Pass Labs products. Not so. While he's designed a preamp or two, including the original Pass Aleph, he focuses on amplifiers. Turns out most of his company's preamps come from Wayne Colburn, who started working with the namesake Pass during the Threshold days of the 1970s.

Colburn possesses an affinity for small signal designs, on which the game is all about keeping noise and outside interference at bay. Yet there's a lot more to it than that, and Colburn is the type of engineer who "listens" to capacitors and resistors to gauge their effect on the sound.

While we chatted, I learned the XP-20's volume control isn't a run-of-the-mill potentiometer or stepped attenuator; it's an optical encoder. You can hear a relay clicking when you make volume adjustments, but don't get nervous—it's an electronic, purely analog switch. Preamp gain is supplied by Toshiba FETs.

I love the XP-20's sleek, twin-chassis design. It's neither silver nor black but, like all Pass Labs designs, is finished in instrument grey. The front panel hosts a big volume control and input buttons, along with "Mute," "Mode," and "Input" selector buttons. An LED window displays volume level and source. The rear panel sports two balanced XLR and three single-ended RCA inputs; "tape" RCA inputs and outputs; and balanced XLR and single-ended RCA outputs. There's also what looks like a pair of speaker binding posts, provided to send trigger voltage to automatically turn on and off Pass Labs power amps.





The power supply chassis' rear end contains an AC power receptacle and two multipin connectors—one for the XP-20 and one that can be used with the XP-25 phono preamp. The chassis also houses a hefty Plitron toroidal transformer and utilizes Panasonic caps and regulators.

### Who Needs a Preamp?

Some digitally oriented audio-ophiles are starting to wonder why they should even use a preamp. They might assume that if their DAC has variable output controls, they can just hook the DAC up to their amp and be done. Sounds like a plan, so I listened to my system with such a configuration. Of course, if you have more than one or two sources—DAC, phono pre, tuner, etc.—it gets complicated. If you ask me, a great preamp, like the XP-20, is still required.

I left the XP-20 in my system for months before doing proper A/B comparisons with my Parasound JC-2 preamp, and I can't say I was bowled by differences when the XP-20 first arrived. Don't get me wrong: There were contrasts, and the JC-2 is a fine preamp, but when listening to Bob Marley's *Exodus* CD, the XP-20 delivers more bass weight and texture. The band's grooves are more viscerally developed via the XP-20, but I give the nod to the JC-2 in terms of definition. And the bass is rounder on the XP-20. Then again, real-life bass never sounds "tight," does it? Time to stick with the XP-20. *(continued)*



Shown: LTX 500 Projector



AVM 50v audio/video processor



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On Valerie Joyce's *New York Blue* Chesky CD, recorded in a church, it's easier to hear the venue's acoustic over the XP-20, which I attribute to the latter's superior low-level shadings and air. Front-to-back soundstage depth is excellent, Joyce's vocals fully present. Yes, I'm using Pass XA100.5 monoblock power amps, so the sound might be a result of superior synergy with the XP-20. But when swapping out the XA100.5s for my Bel Canto REF500 amp, the XP-20's contributions still rock my world.

Joe Henry's recent *Reverie* is a better-than-average sounding disc, and heartfelt, to boot. There's no overt studio trickery, but the recording is tonally threadbare, and the XP-20 or any other accurate preamp can't do anything about that. Henry's music will probably sound better over a vintage Conrad-Johnson tube preamp, so if you're lusting after Technicolor sound, the XP-20 won't ring your bell.

That said, my six-foot-tall Magnepan 3.7 speakers "disappear" when I play Brian Eno's recent *Small Craft on a Milk Sea*. Eno is a master of abstract soundscapes, populated with a gazillion tiny squeaks, buzzes, drones, hums, and rumbles. The sound feels organic and has a life force—characteristics that separate great hi-fis from the merely good ones. Teamed

with the right components, the XP-20 liberates the music and sets it free. While some components appeal more to the head and sound great, they don't move you. Others skip matters of the heart and focus on the physicality of music. The XP-20 splits such differences right down the middle.

#### Compared to What?

The XP-20 arrived as I was just starting to get acquainted with the Magnepan 3.7 speakers, and reveling in the thrilling transparency gains from model 3.6 to 3.7. Once the 3.7s were fully broken in, I removed the XP-20 out of the system and hooked up my PS Audio PerfectWave DAC directly to my Pass amps (the DAC has variable outputs).

Sure, on one hand, this combination has to sound better—I eliminated the pre-amp's active gain stage from the system—but it doesn't. Removing the XP-20 also removes the sonic body and soul. Why? It doesn't make sense, but perhaps the XP-20 drives the amps better than the PS Audio DAC. It's as if the amps sound more powerful when driven by the XP-20. Of course, the amps are no more or less powerful, with or without the XP-20. Nevertheless, the impression of power comes from the dynamic contrast. The XP-20 unleashes more of the music's energy. *(continued)*



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### REVIEW

**Pass Labs XP-20**  
**MSRP: \$8,600**

**MANUFACTURER**  
Pass Labs

**CONTACT**  
[www.passlabs.com](http://www.passlabs.com)

### PERIPHERALS

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

**Digital Sources** PS Audio PerfectWave Transport & DAC, Oppo BDP-95 Special Edition

**Electronics** Pass XP-20 preamp; Whest 2.0 phono preamp; Bel Canto REF500s, Pass Labs XA100.5, and First Watt J2 power amps

**Speakers** Dynaudio C-1, Mangepan 3.7

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

I remember having a similar reaction years ago when passive preamps enjoyed a brief period of popularity, and again, the idea of removing active gain stages and replacing them with purely passive preamps seemed a nifty idea. Still, if it was, why didn't passive preamps take over the market? I'm not claiming passive preamps never work; I've heard them sound great. But such systems are rare, and I imagine this the case with the XP-20 situation. It definitely sounds better than running the DAC directly into the power amps.

Witness Neil Young's intimate *Live at Massey Hall 1971*, which always raises goose bumps. You really feel like you're in the Toronto venue, when the classic songs were fresh, played by Young on just guitar or piano. After I reinserted the JC-2 into the system, I missed the XP-20's resolution and detail. With the Pass, Young sounds more human. After all, aren't such emotional connections what hi-fi is about? ●





# Variation On a Theme

## Verity Amadis Loudspeakers

By Jeff Dorgay

I make no bones about being a fan of Verity Audio. Its speakers push all my proverbial buttons. Visually, they are simple yet stunning, pinnacles of understated beauty, with some of the best cabinetry in the business. Sonically, they present a big, panel-speaker-like soundstage, replete with lifelike dynamics and natural tonality. Going up the range from the diminutive Finn to the statuesque Amadis reveals a similar sonic signature, with each model progressively having more frequency extension and the ability to render more low-level detail.

The Amadis is a slightly smaller variation on the theme established with the Sarastro II, which spent the better part of 2010 in my listening room. Both models claim the capacity to reach down to 20Hz, but the \$40k Sarastro II features an 11-inch woofer while the \$32k Amadis uses a 10-inch drive unit. (While the Sarastro II and Amadis both have a 6-inch midrange, each model has a unique driver.)



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## REVIEW

Here's where my admitted reviewer bias enters: Verity speakers with ribbon tweeters offer a slightly more immediate portrayal and more "jump factor" than soft-dome models, so you should listen to the Sarastro II and the Amadis no matter which you'll think you'll like more. It's like comparing a BMW M3 to an Audi S4. Both are superb cars, but when driving them within a short period, you will prefer one. I'll take the M3 and the Amadis.

### Setup and Associated Components

Verity speakers share a similar mechanical architecture, with the woofer facing rearward in a separate cabinet and the mid-range/tweeter module facing forward. All but the Finn constitute a two-box design, with a steel plate and sorbothane pucks dividing the modules and making initial setup incredibly easy. Since the Amadis' 108-pound weight is split into two sections, you won't need a friend to help unpack or set up. A quick knuckle rap reveals a complete lack of vibration emanating from the cabinets.

Akin to all large Verity models, the Amadis come packaged in custom-made fiber and aluminum road cases so that, in the event you move, they can be easily packed and safely transported. I wish more manufacturers charging tens of thousands of dollars for gear would make the extra effort to protect their contents to this extent. *(continued)*





The Sarastro II and Amadis' high 93db sensitivity means you won't need a ton of power to get their full effect. Verity claims "18 watts to unlimited power" is required. The Decware Zen Torii Mk.3 valve amplifier, with 26 watts per channel, proves more than up to task for all but the most serious head-banging sessions. So, while the Amadis has the resolution necessary to accommodate megabucks/megapower amplification, they are very satisfying with a high-quality low-power amplifier—and a great speaker with which to anchor an expandable high-performance system.

The Amadis has a natural tonal character and is easy to drive and highly compatible with all of the amplifiers at my disposal, from low-powered SETs to the massive McIntosh MC1.2kw monoblocks. Visiting staff members all had a favorite combination, but (here's that bias again) the marriage of the Audio Research REF 150 power amplifier with the matching REF 5 preamplifier remains my preference, offering massive low-frequency extension and control along with enveloping, three-dimensional sound.

### Comfortable with Any Source Material

In high-end audio's early days, speakers were often predisposed to one kind of music, which owed to their most predominant traits. It wasn't tough to label one speaker a "rock speaker" and another a "classical speaker" during the late 1970s—a time when precious few speakers on *Stereophile's* Recommended Components list cost more than \$5,000.

Today, with a healthy stable of speakers priced like the Amadis, and myriad models running past the \$200k mark, a successful \$30-\$40k speaker must do it all. Spot-on tonality, a smooth yet revealing top end, and rocking dynamics are essential. Of course, you can get most of these qualities in a \$10k pair of speakers. (And, if that is your budget, I highly suggest the Verity Audio Rienzi.)

What separates the \$30k Amadis from the \$10k competition is not only a sense of scale, but scalability. Lesser speakers lean towards having a single voice. Some possess a big, overblown sound no matter what kind of music is played on them, while others can't really rock, no matter how hard you drive them. *(continued)*

**The Amadis has a natural tonal character and is easy to drive and highly compatible with all of the amplifiers at my disposal, from low-powered SETs to the massive McIntosh MC1.2kw monoblocks.**





If you've ever heard someone complain about acoustic instruments sounding "too big to be real" on certain speakers—or, in the case of many small speakers, "too small to be convincing"—you know exactly what I'm talking about.

The Amadis sidesteps these issues, expanding and contracting with the music. Bob Dylan's recent collection of remastered mono albums sounds small and cozy, while Kraftwerk's *Tour de France* occupies my room with a surround sound-like presentation. Brian Eno's "Small Craft on a Milk Sea" is awash in epic synthesizer excursions, filling every corner of the room with texture. Mickey Hart's classic *At the Edge* comes on with similar explosiveness.

### In The End, Believable

Put simply, the Amadis offer a degree of realism that isn't matched by the lower-priced competition. This prized characteristic owes to many factors. The speakers' lightning-fast acceleration with minimal overhang results in fatigue-free listening, even after daylong sessions. Yes, it's this trait that convinces your brain that acoustic instruments sound real and causes even modest recordings to sound better than you remember.

Enter Bruce Springsteen's *The Wild, The Innocent & The E Street Shuffle*. The early Columbia LP (like so many Columbia albums of the period) features a more compressed sound obviously geared towards radio airplay. Yet the music comes to life via the Amadis. Handclaps in "Kitty's Back" sound realistic, and gain their own space in the recording. Plus, where did those bass-line textures come from?

(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.

*Burmester*  
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Top Line  
HANDMADE IN GERMANY



The Amadis also lays bare the soul of Cheap Trick's self-titled pop masterpiece, revealing layers of information in Rick Nielsen's guitar playing not as present on my Rienzis. The soundfield extends well beyond the speaker boundaries, again making a mediocre record highly pleasurable. And that's what for—and why—we pay the big money.

Auditioning Yello, Genesis, Pink Floyd, and Eazy-E tracks yields an abundance of bass grip, speed, and texture—essential tests that any \$30k+ speaker must pass. These speakers are impossible to punish, even when switching to a pair of Burmester 911 Mk.3 monoblocks (750 watts per channel) and playing Chris Joss' *You've Been Spiked* at discotheque levels.

### Highly Coherent

What about the human voice? The Amadis bring to life vocal recordings in ways that rival the best single-driver and full-range electrostatics. Mono favorites from *The Complete Elvis Presley Masters* box set boast a depth that feels surprisingly like stereo, with Presley's backup singers distinctly placed right behind him and sounding eerily real. Johnny Cash's *American Recordings* series is equally enthralling; there's a body to Cash's voice that makes it feel as if he is standing at a microphone placed directly in front of my listening chair.



Dexter Gordon, too, blasts in front of an imaginary yet lifelike soundstage. He sounds as if he leans over and plays into the crowd during "The End of a Love Affair" from *Dexter Calling*, all the while the band keeps pace, all in their own individual spaces. Having heard a number of the Gordon master tapes, I can confidently say that the Amadis present an incredibly realistic portrayal of acoustic instruments—accurate, albeit with decidedly non-audiophile-like tonal saturation. And that's a good thing.

Superlative performance with known audiophile cuts makes for an easy ride, but the Amadis provide the same excitement when paired with less-than-phenomenal recordings. "Booji Boy's Funeral," from *Hardcore Devo Vol. 2: 1974-1977*, takes on a new life, with gnarly Casio synthesizer riffs filling the room and sounding more like a recent Eno record than a clip from a demo tape. "Uglatto" now features super-sized guitars that sound like they are in adjoining rooms; Mark Mothersbaugh's voice dangles right in front of my face. Huge fun.

No matter what the selection, or the recording quality, I found myself listening to the entire side of an album or a full CD. Within seconds, the speakers vanish and you forget you are listening to a hi-fi system.

### A Winner

This is really the point of diminishing returns. Crazy as it may sound, a handful of fantastic speakers in the \$25-\$40k range, with careful setup and electronics selection, delivers 90 percent of what cost-no-object speakers portray. (continued)





And these select few models do so without making the kinds of demands on room setup and amplifier power that are often associated with six-figure loudspeakers.

The Verity Audio Amadis is at the top of a very short list of speakers in its price range for which I would happily write a check, a designation that helps win it our 2011 Product of the Year Award in the speaker category. ●

**Verity Audio Amadis**  
MSRP: \$29,995-\$37,995/pair,  
depending on finish

#### MANUFACTURER

Verity Audio

#### CONTACT

Verity Audio – Canada  
[www.verityaudio.com](http://www.verityaudio.com)

Verity Audio – US  
Tempo Sales & Marketing  
[www.tempohighfidelity.com](http://www.tempohighfidelity.com)

#### PERIPHERALS

**Analog Source** AVID Acutus  
Reference SP/SME V/Koetsu  
Urushi Blue

**Digital Source** dCS Paganini  
stack, Sooloos Control 15

**Preamplifier** ARC REF 5

**Phono Stage** ARC REF Phono 2

**Power Amplifier** ARC REF 150,  
Pass Labs XA200.5 monoblocks

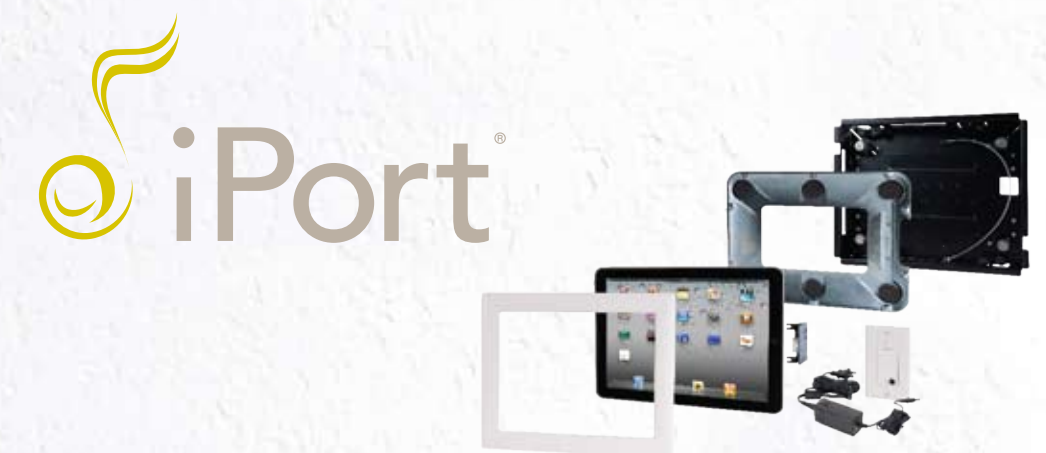
**Accessories** SRA Scuttle rack,  
Shunyata Aurora interconnects  
and speaker cable, PS Audio P10  
power conditioner



## CM-IW2000

The iPad has become the face of the modern home, with Apps for anything and everything. So doesn't it make sense to have a central location to check emails, post notes, update social networks, or even work out what to wear and which route to take to work.

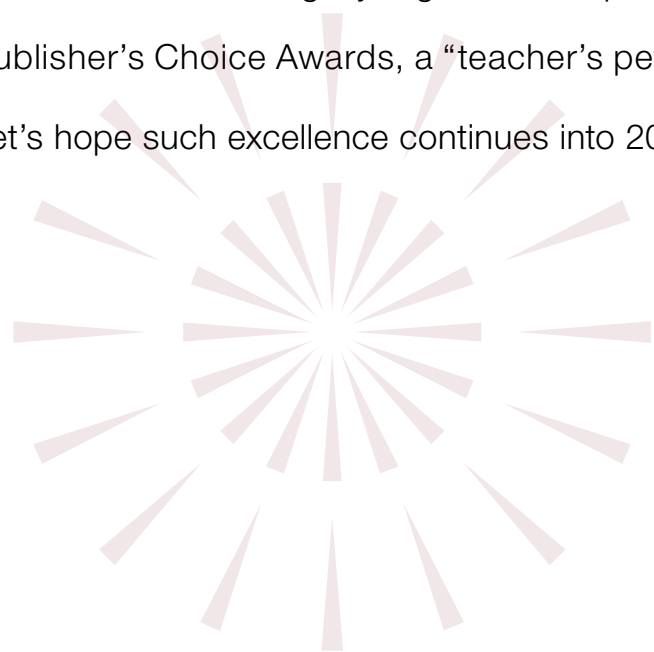
With iPort, the iPad is neatly installed into the wall, fully charged, and always ready to use.





# TONE Audio AWARDS 2011

2011 provided another banner crop of new audio gear. Yet the select components featured here are those most deserving of another look. Our awards are divided into Product of the Year Awards, for gear that redefines a category regardless of price, and Publisher's Choice Awards, a "teacher's pet" pick. Let's hope such excellence continues into 2012.



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# 2011 Product of the Year OVERALL

## Rega Brio-R Amplifier

\$995

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

**R**ega's diminutive amp gets the overall nod simply because of its high level of quality; the Brio-R goes far beyond clichéd "bang for the buck" performance. It is a serious high-end amplifier, up to task in a system comprised of some of the world's finest components. You won't believe that this small, 50-watt-per-channel amplifier drives the Magnepan 1.7s to a decent level until you experience it.

In typical Rega fashion, emphasis is first placed on sound quality and functionality. An excellent MM phonostage and basic remote are also part of the package.





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AWARDS

# 2011 Product of the Year AMPLIFICATION

## Audio Research REF 150 Amplifier

\$13,995

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

**A**RC's REF 150 is the first in its series of power amplifiers utilizing the new KT120 tubes. With a massive power supply twice the size of that of the REF 110 it replaces, the REF 150 is fully optimized to take advantage of the extra current required by the tubes.

No mere upgrade, the REF 150 stands as a completely new design

and employs much of what ARC learned from its latest generation of preamplifiers. The result? Effortless presentation. While the REF 150 possesses the inner delicacy you would expect from a world-class tube power amplifier, it features a level of control in the lower registers on par with that belonging to the world's finest solid-state designs.





# 2011 Product of the Year

## ANALOG

### **AVID Acutus Reference SP Turntable**

\$19,995 (without arm)

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

Everything AVID principal designer Conrad Mas knows about turntables is expressed to full potential in the Acutus Reference SP. Nothing—from the unique subchassis form to the chrome plating on the massive platter—is included unless it adds to the retrieval of analog data from the record's groove.

A suspended 'table, the Reference SP is easy to set up and requires no fiddling once complete. It recovers detail like nothing I've ever experienced, and delivers tremendous weight to the overall sonic presentation. A unique drive system—the Acutus Reference SP employs an over-the-top 1KV power transformer (most 300-watt-per-channel power amplifiers don't have a supply as big)—along with a high-torque motor, matched to the power supply, makes each model a semi-bespoke turntable.

Like the other AVID models, the Acutus Reference SP comes from the factory pre-drilled for any SME turntables while a complete lineup of mounting plates accommodates all other tonearms.







2011  
Product of the Year  
BUDGET ANALOG

## A black Denon DL-103R moving coil cartridge is shown. The cartridge is mounted in a black plastic housing. The Denon logo and the model number DL-103R are visible on the side of the housing. The cartridge itself has a silver tip and a gold-colored base.

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simaudio moon  
sonos  
soundsmith  
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wadia

AWARDS

# 2011 Product of the Year

D I G I T A L

### Naim DAC

\$3,495 - \$11,995

(configuration dependent)

www.naimaudio.com

The Naim DAC defies current practice by lacking a direct USB input, meaning that it requires computer audiophiles to invest in a high-quality sound card or USB/SPDIF converter. That issue aside, the sound is sublime, especially with the additional PS555 power supply, also used with the Naim CD555 CD player.

The PS555 takes the Naim DAC to the stratospheric limits of digital reproduction, sounding stunningly like the CD555. Liquid midrange, clear but unetched highs, subterranean bass response, and explosive dynamics make it easy to forget you are listening to digital. You just become immersed in the music. All of this performance is within reach, starting with the Naim DAC before adding an additional power supply as the budget allows.





# 2011 Product of the Year

## LOUDSPEAKER

### Verity Audio Amadis

\$29,995 - \$37,995/pr.  
(depending on finish)  
[www.verityaudio.com](http://www.verityaudio.com)

Verity Audio, a Canadian speaker manufacturer, wins our top honor in the speaker category again. Amadis offers a slightly different presentation than Verity's two top speakers (the \$42k/pair Sarastro II and \$90k/pair Lohengrin II) that feature ribbon tweeters. A three-way design featuring a 1-inch soft-dome tweeter, Amadis has a dynamic, natural sound that flatters any music. And the cabinetry, available in a number of different finishes, epitomizes modern elegance.

Thanks to its high 93db sensitivity, the compact Amadis packs a major wallop and is compatible with all amplification. The better your system, the more music the Amadis reveals, making it a prime choice for that "last speaker I'm going to buy" purchase.



# 2011 Product of the Year

## HEADPHONE AUDIO

### Cypher Labs AlgoRhythm Solo DAC and ALO Audio Rx Mk. 2 Amplifier

\$579 and \$449, respectively  
[www.aloaudio.com](http://www.aloaudio.com)

You can purchase both of these components separately, but we suggest keeping together this dynamic duo. Great on the go or even as a primary headphone rig, the Cypher Labs/ALO bundle is Apple-certified, so it will snag the digital bitstream directly from your iPod, iPhone, and/or iPad.

The Rx Mk. 2 drives even the most difficult headphone loads to maximum volume; the synergy between these pieces is undeniable. When paired with premium 'phones and uncompressed digital files, the units' sound will knock you out of your airplane seat (or Barcalounger) with imaging and dynamics that rival those of a great in-home system.





# 2011 Product of the Year

## ACCESSORY

### Feickert Adjust + and Protractor NG

600 euro/\$800  
[www.adjustplus.de](http://www.adjustplus.de)

The complete Feickert set of software and tools isn't cheap, and perhaps isn't the most cost-effective tool for those that use a cartridge forever. However, if you have multiple turntables/tonearms, or a turntable with interchangeable headshells, and/or utilize multiple cartridges, you can't afford to be without Adjust +. Requiring a Windows computer (or an Apple machine running Windows in some form), the Software Suite works in concert with Feickert's calibrated test record to measure every aspect of cartridge alignment.

The results are miraculous. Even the most capable analog expert will be able to find more performance with Adjust +. Once complete, you can expect better stereo separation, less distortion, and better low-level detail retrieval. Balking at the price? For the cost of a couple of "hot stampers," your entire record collection will be improved over the course of an afternoon.





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AWARDS

## Product of the Year

CABLE

### AudioQuest Carbon and Diamond USB

\$99 and \$549  
[www.audioquest.com](http://www.audioquest.com)

There's no better way to start an argument with most audiophiles than to tell them you've bought a premium USB cable. Bits are bits, and that piece of wire won't change a thing. Right? Wrong. AudioQuest's premium USB cable renders the same improvement that a good interconnect does in an analog setup. Overall coherence improves, and graininess decreases, producing a more analog sound.

AudioQuest offers a full range of premium USB cables from \$29 (Forest) to the \$549 Diamond. On a modest system, even the company's lowest-priced cable yields easily discernable differences between it and a standard-issue Radio Shack cable.







# 2011 Publisher's Choice

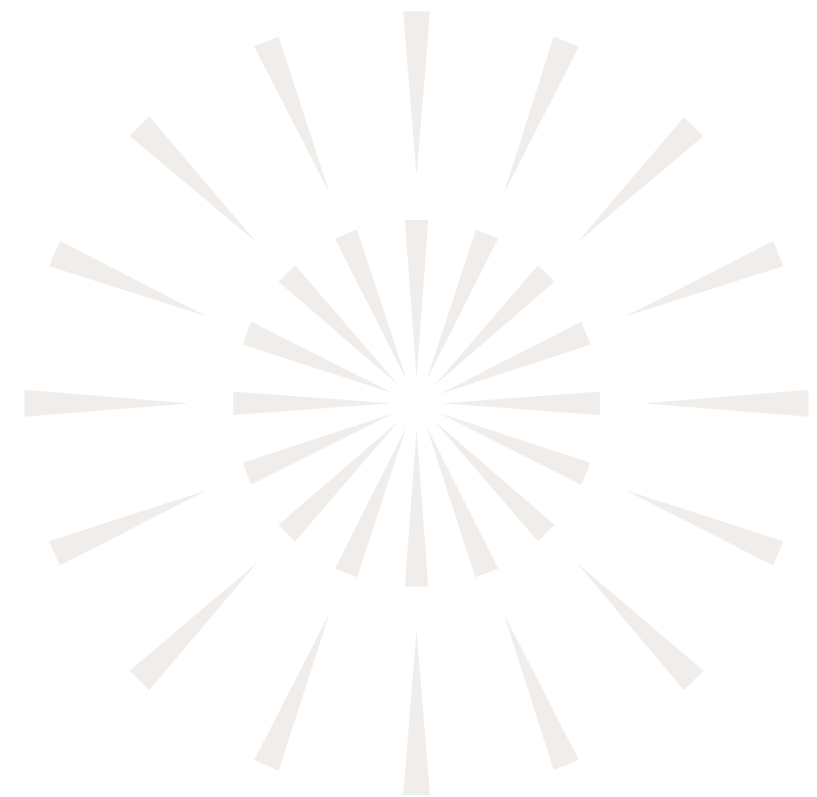
Simplification is almost always best. So rather than split our Product of the Year choices into multiple categories, we choose to highlight a few other products that excel in every sense and which repeatedly impressed publisher Jeff Dorgay. Think of these prizes as the equivalent of our “teacher’s pet” awards.

GamuT  
*S7*

Main Office:  
GamuT International A/S  
[gamutaudio.com](http://gamutaudio.com)

U.S. Distributor:  
KT Audio Imports  
[ktaudioimports.com](http://ktaudioimports.com)

Experience the “El Superiores” Speakers





# 2011 Publisher's Choice

## Pass Labs XA160.5 Monoblock Amplifiers

\$22,000/pair  
www.passlabs.com

Nelson Pass likes to say his amplifiers possess “tube sound without the headaches.” Indeed, the XA160.5’s holographic presentation will appeal to the most obsessed tube aficionado. Operating in full Class A mode, these behemoths make as much heat as a pair of tube monoblocks. The sound is heavenly, with exemplary smoothness, dynamics, and bass grip. What could be better? The XA200.5s just arrived. We’ll soon have the verdict, but they could be very well in this space come next year.



# 2011 Publisher's Choice

## MartinLogan ElectroMotion ESL Loudspeaker

\$2,195/pr.  
www.martinlogan.com

MartinLogan established high-performance benchmarks in the late 80s with the Aeries (and shortly thereafter, with the Aeries i) at the \$1,995 price point. The speakers became references for both audiophiles and reviewers alike.

The company’s ElectroMotion ESL combines everything MartinLogan has since learned. The key to attaining killer performance relates to setup and matching with your room and electronics. Once this is done, ElectroMotion provides more than glimpse into 21st century ESL sound, complete with previously unattainable dynamics and frequency extension. A side-by-side comparison with the Aeries reveals ML raised the bar in every way. Meanwhile, the firm kept the cost almost the same, even after 25 years have passed.





## AWARDS

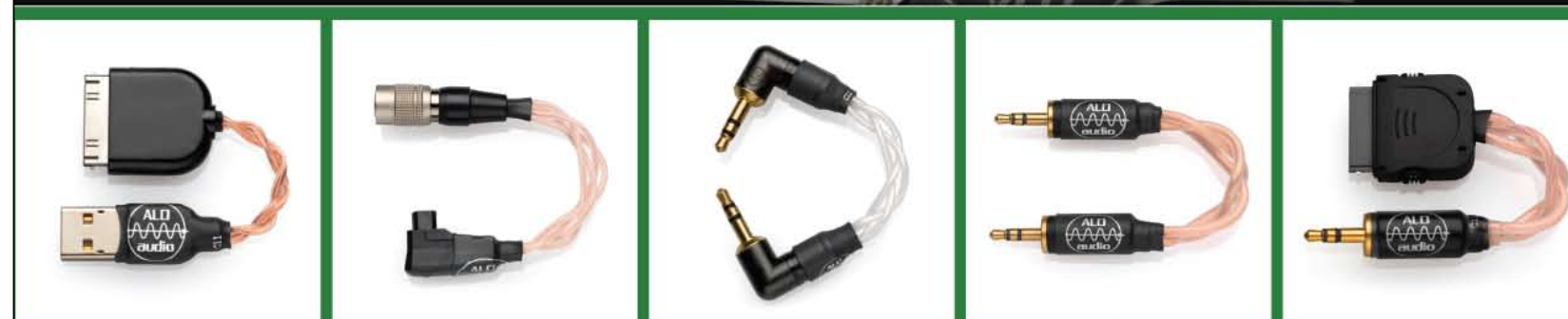
# 2011 Publisher's Choice

### Red Wine Audio Isabellina DAC

\$2,500-\$3,500  
(depending on configuration)  
[www.redwineaudio.com](http://www.redwineaudio.com)

**R**ed Wine Audio's Vinnie Rossi takes a different approach with high-current LFP batteries powering components, offering divinely quiet backgrounds and grain free-sound—and eliminating the need for expensive power cords and/or power line conditioners.

The Isabellina is intended as a combination DAC and headphone amplifier, complete with an NOS chipset combined with a vacuum tube output stage, all of which results in a smooth analog-like sound. For extra cost, an additional 24/192 DAC board can be added for those that need to decode high-res files. And analog outputs can be used in fixed mode should you want to utilize the extremely versatile Isabellina as a standalone DAC in your system—as well as a top-notch headphone amplifier.



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**ALOaudio.com**



AWARDS

# Publisher's Choice

## Simaudio MOON 700i Integrated Amplifier

\$13,000

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

**S**imaudio's latest integrated distills into one chassis all the technological breakthroughs established by its 850P preamplifier and 880M reference mono power amplifiers.

"Quality" is the key word here, with the 700i boasting the sound of the best separates. Its 175-watt-per channel power rating should accommodate all but the most inefficient speakers. A stunning match with Simaudio's 650D or 750D DAC/transports, the 700i yields world-class performance in a low-profile package.



# Fall in love

*all over again.*

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For nearly 40 years, Rega have been hand-crafting fine turntables in their Essex, England factory. Now we introduce a product that will make listening to your Rega turntable a whole new experience.

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For: P1 • RP1 • P2 • P25 • Planar 2 • Planar 3 • P2 2000 • P3 2000

- Tighter bass, clean mids and highs
- Hand-tuned for minimized vibration
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- Richer sound for only \$225



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The TT-PSU's advanced anti-vibration circuit offers even greater stability and a lower noise floor. Plus, it has the added convenience of electronic speed change, eliminating the need to manually adjust the drive belt between 33 and 45 rpm.

Please see your local Rega retailer for details

For information on your nearest retailer, please contact us at [info@soundorg.com](mailto:info@soundorg.com)



**rega**



Exceptional Hi-Fi, designed and built in England



# Publisher's Choice

## SRA Scuttle Rack

\$6,000

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

**W**ith premium equipment racks costing more than clean late-model Porsches, the SRA Scuttle combines high-tech vibration control with a contemporary look and battleship build quality. No coincidence, as company president Kevin Tellecamp designs vibration-control systems for the Navy and NASA, among others.

The Scuttle's strength allows it to hold incredibly heavy components without issue, and its sonic improvement will be noticed even by a system that seemingly has everything. Components placed on the Scuttle offer a bigger sound and lower noise floor.



# Publisher's Choice

## Polk Audio LSiM707 Loudspeaker

\$3,995/pr.

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

**P**olk Audio has been an innovator in the loudspeaker field for more than 30 years, offering excellent results while keeping a tight grip on the bottom line. The LSiM707 is the company's new flagship, the four-way floorstander one of the best values to ever come through the *TONEAudio* studio.

The model yields performance that few, if any, other speakers match. Polk Audio's design team far exceeded its initial goal of making "an entry-level high-end speaker." Here's a serious speaker around which you can build a major system and still have enough cash leftover to send your kids to college.





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## AWARDS

# 2011 Publisher's Choice

### TAD 600 CD/SACD Player

\$31,000

[www.tad-labs.com](http://www.tad-labs.com)

While downloads are on the upswing, there's never been a better excuse for owning a disc player than that presented by the TAD 600. CD and SACD (making a minor comeback in audiophile circles) playback is furnished, along with three SPDIF digital inputs for a music server.

Beautifully built, with elegant casework that resembles a Cadillac CTS, the 600 is launched into the upper echelons of digital playback by its amazing sound quality. This player offers tonality and dynamics that will have you questioning whether you really need to futz with a turntable.





# Publisher's Choice

## CEntrance DACmini

\$795

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

The DACmini represents the next generation of hifi component, offering high performance, versatility and a small form factor for those of us that don't want a huge rack full of gear. That it does so at such a reasonable price, puts great sound in everyone's reach. The DAC accommodates source material up to 24/192 files, has a killer headphone amp on board and offers an analog input, should the need for a turntable arise, so the DACmini offers plenty of expansion capabilities.

Future audiophiles, this is the beginning of your journey.



# Elevate Sound.

Power conditioners shouldn't change the way your electronics sound. They should take the noise out of your power line and then disappear—like magic.

Experience the new Elgar power line conditioner from Running Springs and take your system to the next level.



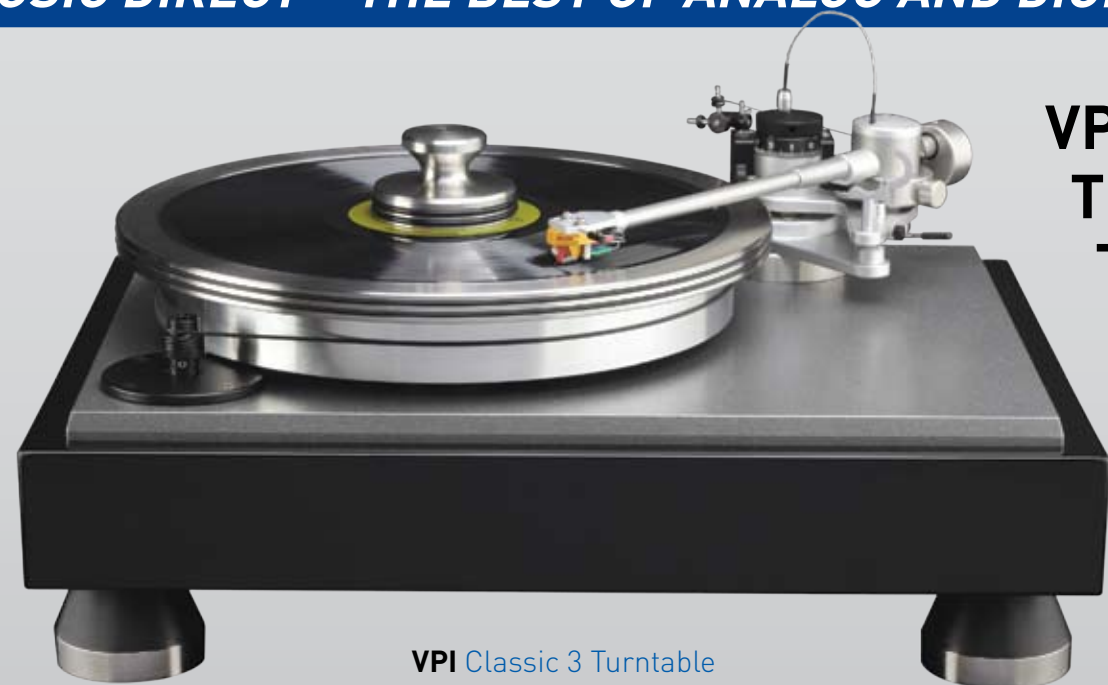
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Power Line Conditioners Hand Made in California [runningspringsaudio.com](http://runningspringsaudio.com)



running springs audio





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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- Dual ES9018 SABRE 32bit Reference DACs
- New Toroidal Transformer and Balanced Outputs
- 2nd Generation Qdeo Video Processing
- 3D, Streaming, Wireless, eSATA, and USB
- Simply the Best Video Performance



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

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

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

AudioVision SF: [www.audiovisionsf.com](http://www.audiovisionsf.com)

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

AudioQuest: [www.audioquest.com](http://www.audioquest.com)

AVID: [www.avidhifi.co.uk](http://www.avidhifi.co.uk)

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

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

BelCanto: [www.belcantodesign.com](http://www.belcantodesign.com)

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

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

Cardas Audio: [www.cardas.com](http://www.cardas.com)

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

Cypher Labs: [www.cypherlabs.com](http://www.cypherlabs.com)

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

Dynaudio: [www.dynaudio.com](http://www.dynaudio.com)

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

Estelon: [www.estelon.com](http://www.estelon.com)

GamuT: [www.gamutaudio.com](http://www.gamutaudio.com)

iPort: [www.iportmusic.com](http://www.iportmusic.com)

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

JL Audio: [www.jlaudio.com](http://www.jlaudio.com)

MartinLogan: [www.martinlogan.com](http://www.martinlogan.com)

McIntosh: [www.mcintoshlabs.com](http://www.mcintoshlabs.com)

Meridian: [www.meridian-audio.com](http://www.meridian-audio.com)

MICS: [www.mics.mc](http://www.mics.mc)

Mobile Fidelity: [www.mofi.com](http://www.mofi.com)

Mystere: [www.mystere-usa.com](http://www.mystere-usa.com)

Musical Fidelity: [www.musicalfidelity.com](http://www.musicalfidelity.com)

Music Direct: [www.musicdirect.com](http://www.musicdirect.com)

Music Instrument Museum: [www.themim.org](http://www.themim.org)

Music Matters: [www.musicmattersjazz.com](http://www.musicmattersjazz.com)

Music Millennium: [www.musicmillennium.com](http://www.musicmillennium.com)

Nagra: [www.nagraaudio.com](http://www.nagraaudio.com)

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Paradigm: [www.paradigm.com](http://www.paradigm.com)

Polk Audio: [www.polkaudio.com](http://www.polkaudio.com)

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

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

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

Running Springs Audio: [www.runningspringsaudio.com](http://www.runningspringsaudio.com)

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

Simaudio: [www.simaudio.com](http://www.simaudio.com)

Totem: [www.totemacoustic.com](http://www.totemacoustic.com)

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

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