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# TONEAudio

Music.Gear.Style.

No.46 May 2012



## Chill Ride

**Porsche's New 911 Carrera S  
With Burmester Sound**

**SPIN THE BLACK CIRCLE:** Insightful Reviews on New Albums by Neil Young and Crazy Horse, Kelly Hogan, Best Coast, Brandi Carlile, Neneh Cherry, Sigur Ros, and More

**ANALOG MADNESS!** The Audio Desk System Record Cleaner, VPI's Classic Turntable, Variations on the Technics SL-1200, Ortofon, Rega, Pass, and More ■ **Ken Kessler Revisits the SME 3009**

**STONE STYLE** Beer Snob Discusses Three Scintillating Brews ■ Build a BOCCIA Watch ■ Dyson AM02 Tower Fan



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# PUBLISHER'S LETTER

**W**e had so much great analog gear left after our last issue, why not go back for seconds? To squelch any fears that we've become the One Percent, this issue features a cache of more easily attainable albeit equally enticing goodies.

And, yes, the content skews toward analog products. The new Porsche 911 Carrera S Cabriolet gracing our cover does have a CD player in the dash. Man cannot solely live by agonizing over correct vertical tracking angles, and the integral Burmester sound system makes it easy to get off the couch and enjoy nature.

Besides, after 35 years of chasing analog excellence, I'm certainly closer to the grail, but also managed to negotiate a peaceful agreement with the process. Much like my experience pursuing photographic perfection, it's a journey. If you can approach attaining sonic nirvana from such a Zen perspective, it gets a lot easier. Perhaps Crosby, Stills, and Nash had it right all along when they sang "love the one you're with."

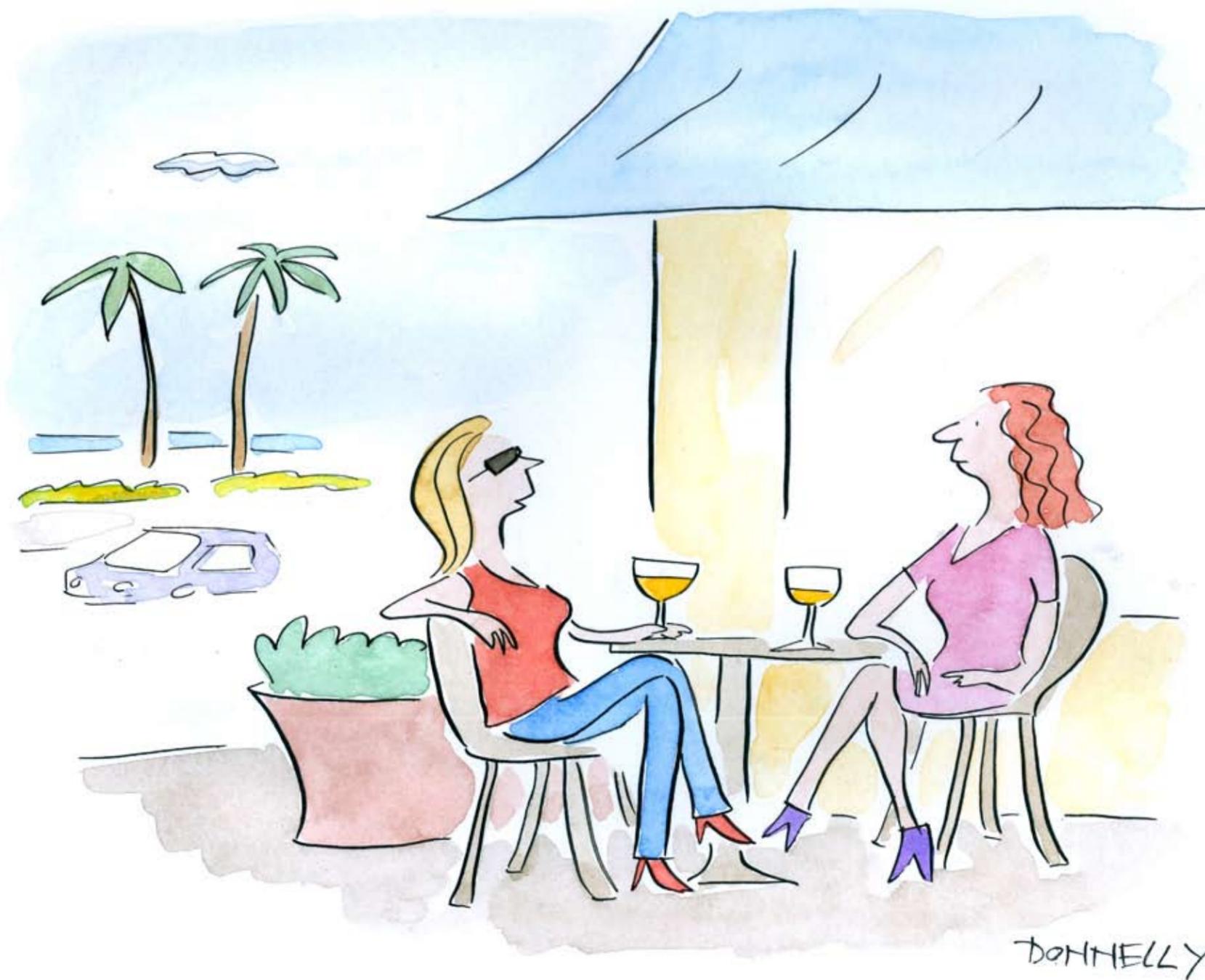
As someone who finds hardware and software symbiotic rather than exclusive pursuits, I've also appreciated the feedback given me by TONEAudio readers attending my talk at April's New York HiFi show. Many requested that we add a sound-quality rating to our music reviews. Starting with our next issue, we're integrating such a system into our Audiophile Pressings column, and will soon do so in our normal music-review section. I long ago made the editorial decision to hire music writers with exhaustive musical vocabularies foremost, and audiophile pedigrees second, because I'm a music lover first and foremost. But we have received enough commentary to move forward. At the end of the day, I am a benevolent dictator.

Record-purchase links to Music Direct are also now clearer. In the past, in the name of design stealth, we kept them subtle. Yet it came to our attention that they're too understated. Now, every album we review that's available on vinyl is accompanied by a small "purchase here from Music Direct" button should you be so inclined to combine reading and shopping.

Finally, given there's still so much analog gear up for evaluation in our equipment racks, we're expanding the Analogaholic section of our Web site. It will now be a secondary site containing all of our analog reviews broken down by category—along with the seven-year backlog of Audiophile Pressing reviews. We will continue to run analog reviews in the magazine, but look to our site for bonus content.

For now, sit back, cue up your favorite album, and enjoy. Our next issue returns to normal programming.





*“I told Harry I wanted a diamond for our anniversary so he bought me a Lyra Atlas.”*

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 Porsche's New 911 Carrera S  
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# SBTRKT

**Wonder Ballroom**

Portland, Oregon

**April 18, 2012**Text and Photos by  
Jeff Dorgay

The gigantic bass cabinets on both sides of the Wonder Ballroom stage, specifically added for this show, foreshadowed the low-frequency energy that would soon follow courtesy of London-based SBTRKT. Taking the stage bathed in a monotone crimson light, frontman Aaron Jerome and current collaborator Sampha opened with a string of beats so deep they seemed to bypass the auditory channel, heading straight to the cerebral cortex via the nervous system, just like sound travels in cockroaches. Jerome sported an abbreviated version of his trademark tribal headdress; Sampha merely wore face paint, as did a legion of fans.

Jerome and Sampha's musical prowess—and their willingness to include real drums and keyboards along with a plethora of samples—easily helped the duo eclipse the performances of the one-dimensional openers (Machine Drum and Celoso), which offered little else than pale rhythms interspersed with a stale barrage of beats. Sampha assumed the lead on most of the vocal duties; Jerome handled a majority of the heavy drumming.

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LIVE MUSIC

Whereas the band's self-titled debut is broken up into a dozen short tracks, the live set functioned as an extended remix, sans any gaps or breaks, of house, dubstep, funk, and more. The only aspect lacking from the album? Female vocals punctuating a few of the studio tunes.

Both men quickly worked up a James Brown-like sweat, feverishly zooming back and forth between various instruments and their laptops, arranged at center stage. Each consistently changed up tempos and mixed in additional layers of texture to their electronica cocktail. A bright light, reflected off an overhead disco ball, served as the crowning touch to the massive dance party. During the hard-hitting "Wildfire," one got the sense the room would explode akin to a house impacted by a nuclear bomb test in the 1950s.

After 90 minutes, the pace gradually waned and the pair prepared to exit, only to return for a highly charged version of "Hold On," cranking the volume and beats to the maximum, finishing hard and rewarding a crowd engaged in a serious trance.

**Aladdin Theater**

Portland, Oregon

**April 24, 2012**Text and Photo by  
Jeff Dorgay

Extending an invitation to take a trip down memory lane, Matthew Sweet told an eager Portland audience at the Aladdin Theater that it hadn't aged a day since he last visited. The singer then powered through the first four songs of his seminal *Girlfriend* album, kicking off a night filled with nostalgia.

With voice and sense of humor in great form, Sweet and his band skillfully maneuvered through the record's songs and its trademark harmonic complexity—well, at least a majority of the time. Lacking the overdub-assisted density of the LP, the band occasionally became raucous and harbored a rockabilly vibe. Its rendition of "Looking at the Sun" came across with more energy than the studio version, as lead guitarist Dennis Taylor blasted into a succinct albeit powerful solo. Throughout, Taylor's Fender Stratocaster added interesting spices to Sweet's jangly Rickenbacker sound.

# Matthew Sweet



Shifting gears on "Winona," a tune more pop than power, all four members delivered appealing harmonies that evoked Todd Rundgren and Utopia. The presentation represented one of the ensemble's myriad chameleon-like changes. Ready to switch styles at a moment's notice, Sweet and company became Beatlesque as they raced through "I Wanted To Tell You," deftly borrowing Fab Four vocal approaches even as Paul Chastain's punk bass lines gave the song a contemporary feel.

Yet the past trumped modernity at nearly every turn. Paying homage to the vinyl format, Sweet paused, laughed, and declared how much he enjoys LPs. "This is what happens when you put the needle down on side two," he announced before unveiling "I Thought I Knew You" as an acoustic duet with Taylor.

With enthusiasm getting the best of him, an out-of-breath Sweet slowed down the tempo for the album's final track, "Nothing Lasts." Notably, a marked sadness glistened in his eye and a crackle swept over his voice as he crooned "I tried to hold on to the past, but you know nothing lasts."

After a short break, Sweet returned for a brief, two-song encore. Perkiness intact, he assumed lead-guitar roles for "Sick of Myself," the crowd mobbing the stage, all sadness forgotten. Lost in a feedback-laden solo, Sweet broke a high e-string before sheepishly reminding fans about his recent *Modern Art* album and ending the 70-minute set much too soon with "She Walks the Night."

M83's frontman Anthony Gonzalez brings the crowd to attention at Vancouver's Vogue Theater on April 27th, 2012.

*Photo by David Thai*



# New Releases



## Neil Young and Crazy Horse

*Americana*

Reprise, CD or 180g 2LP

**Young brilliantly borrows songs from the U.S.' historical fabric and tosses them as live grenades that explode on impact, broaching the staple concepts—freedom, liberty, justice, equality, rights, conflicts, privacy, the common good—on which America prides itself.**

Neil Young's electric guitar jabs, retreats, and then stabs again, frayed-wire distortion coating the clusters of notes, the intensity evoking images of a fire-eyed preacher determined to spur his congregation to sit up and take notice. There's talk of killing a big red rooster, proclaiming "hallelujah," and celebrating with a communal gathering. Young's longtime Crazy Horse mates stomp and clatter, giving the tune a unified drive that turns it into an Indian war dance, the refrains doubling as dead-man's curves as the insatiable momentum tumbles forward.

No, the children's song ordinarily known as "She'll Be Coming 'Round the Mountain"—named "Jesus' Chariot" here in tribute to its Negro spiritual and salvation-based origins—has never sounded quite like this. It's one of eleven folk songs Young and his inimitable backing band reinterpret and upend on the impossible-to-ignore *Americana*, a thematic album exuding immediate relevance and forceful contemplation.

Never shy about making bold political or civil statements, Young brilliantly borrows songs from the U.S.' historical fabric and tosses them as live grenades that explode on impact, broaching the staple concepts—freedom, liberty, justice, equality, rights, conflicts, privacy, the common good—on which America prides itself. He and Crazy Horse invoke these broad subjects without advocating one party or another; *Americana* owes some of its political and cultural potency to its impartiality.

Unlike previous albums (i.e., *Living With War*) on which Young's issued unequivocal statements, there's no jingoistic intent, no direct order, no heavy-handed suggestion to take a potentially alienating stance.

Rather, *Americana* is unambiguous social commentary by way of clever intimation, traditional adaptation, and shared experience—tenets tied to folk music's definition and purpose, and to the familiar songs here transmitting myriad messages and challenges. Unlike other artists that chose to rail against current problems by releasing obvious and stern protest fare, Young and Co. assume a discreet approach, handpicking material ("Oh Susannah," "High Flyin' Bird," "Wayfarin' Stranger") that lacks loaded meaning.

These old murder ballads, folk tales, nursery rhymes, and drifter fables communicate between the lines. Their lyrical simplicity reveals issues of class warfare, worker compensation, rampant unemployment, labor conditions, responsibility, public ownership, burden and benefit, military combat, inclusiveness, and independence—matters that in today's deeply divided America are debated and questioned as fiercely as during any time in the past. Several selections, such as the raggedly glorious doo-wop garage-rock romp "Get a Job" and hayseed ramble "Travel On," convey points via a frisky humor and carefree attitude that better disguise the topical matters. *(continued)*

**Americana doesn't pretend to have the answers, but it's in the thick of igniting a balanced, cordial, and crucial conversation, sparking dialogues about identity and direction.**

*Americana* doesn't pretend to have the answers, but it's in the thick of igniting a balanced, cordial, and crucial conversation, sparking dialogues about identity and direction.

While Young and Crazy Horse wisely evade stamping the arrangements and deliveries with stony-faced seriousness, usually opting for a loose, fluid playing style and raw, in-the-room vibe, weighty drama and impending death ripple through a wind-whipped "Clementine" (complete with an unexpected plot twist pulled from early versions) and crackling "Tom Dula," the latter clinging to a rhythm that droops just like the protagonist's head—once he's hung. The nearest sonic reference to the groove-reinforcing manner in which Young and Frank Sampedro's guitar chords roll akin to waves washing up on the shore, and to the alternating currents of barbed sharpness and crunchy feedback Young conjures from fills and solos, arrives via the same lineup's take on "Farmer John" from 1990's ageless *Ragged Glory*.

Save for the more polished send-up of "Gallows Pole," a similarly rich and country-rock-reared aural palette echoes here.

Recorded on a Universal Audio tube console and to Studer two-inch eight-track analog tape, thick chords and rough-and-ready riffs hang, wander, growl, gurgle, and toss around in the dirt; drum beats smack and slap like wet towels whapped against a cement wall. Everything, save for several well-placed choir vocal passages, is captured in the moment, fortifying *Americana* as the sound of a real, live band performing in a real space. After the collective's nine-year hiatus, the dynamic is refreshing and reinvigorating to experience once again, even if it's now been in commission for four-plus decades.

And yet Crazy Horse and Young's aural vigor all feels new, particularly given the record's urgency and bold extension of tradition, expounded by educational and explanatory liner notes that accompany each song. Young also penned a few words to explain the significance behind the artwork. No elucidation, however, is necessary to empower the music, or what's at stake on a white-lightning-soaked rendition of "This Land Is Your Land" and proudly marching "God Save the Queen." On the latter, the band merges the de facto British anthem with melodies and lyrics from "My Country 'Tis of Thee." It's genius pairing that, in this, the centennial year of folk giant Woody Guthrie's birth, sounds a call to let freedom ring, loudly. —**Bob Gendron**

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**K**elly Hogan can be selfless to a fault.

Long celebrated in music circles for her vocal contributions to albums by the likes of Drive-By Truckers, Mavis Staples, and friend and musical compatriot and Neko Case, the singer has, at times, set aside her solo ambitions to benefit her assuredly grateful peers. With *I Like to Keep Myself in Pain*—her first full-length studio release since 2001's *Because It Feels Good*—Hogan appears to have called in every one of the countless favors she's amassed through the years. The vocalist's heavyweight backing band includes Booker T. Jones and Dap-Kings band-leader Gabriel Roth, among others, and the album features songwriting contributions from a range of heavy hitters, including M. Ward, Robyn Hitchcock, Stephen Merritt, and Andrew Bird.

Despite the assembled star power, the longtime Chicagoan, who now makes her home in rural Wisconsin, remains the central figure, delivering a string of bruised ballads, bar-band soul scorchers, and country weepers that could comfortably exist in any era. Hogan excels at mining beauty from heartbreak, and the album's title track—an aching torch ballad steeped in coffee-rich organ—serves as a fitting rallying cry. “In the quiet night I sleep to the sweet cascade of rain/Then your voices come to haunt me/So I like to keep myself in pain,” she sings before unleashing a tortured howl that sounds something like a thousand hearts shattering at once.



©Photo by Neko Case

Elsewhere, Hogan crawls inside the mind of Frank Sinatra *Being John Malkovich*-style on “Daddy’s Little Girl,” recounts hard life lessons learned on the diamond-tough “Ways of the World,” and turns “We Can’t Have Nice Things” into the saddest-ever version of MTV’s “Cubs,” showing off a home as battered as the relationship between the two that once shared the space. Despite the near-constant pileup of wreckage both emotional and physical, Hogan’s spirited presence prevents the album from turning into a total bummer. “Gaze into the ruins of your life,” she sings pointedly on the defiant “Haunted.” “Just don’t look down.”

Besides, the singer’s long-overdue return is cause enough for celebration. With a little luck, perhaps this time around she’ll even receive the mainstream acclaim that’s somehow managed to elude here all these years. Indeed, when Hogan sings, “I want to hear your voice coming out of my radio” on the sparkling “Golden,” it’s as though she’s giving voice to everyone that happened to catch her supporting her more famous friends or performing for too-small crowds at various dive bars in and around Chicago this last decade. Now, one would hope, it’s finally her time. —**Andy Downing**



**Kelly Hogan**

*I Like to Keep Myself in Pain*  
Anti, CD or LP



**W**hile she's not a comic-book hero Avenger, Brandi Carlile possesses a disarming, clear, clarion voice that could seemingly leap tall buildings in a single bound. Late last year, on her first-ever solo tour, the Seattle transplant wowed with volume-dealing pipes that expressed a broad range of emotions without resorting to petty histrionics, invoking maudlin devices, or coming across with the harshness that plague many pre-packaged pop contemporaries. Carlile's stage presence also mirrored the projective reach of her singing. She didn't draw attention to her sexuality or flaunt attitudinal clothing, and yet her independence was never in question.

Four studio albums into her career, Carlile now possesses enough top-flight songs to match that soaring voice. Lyrically, she latches onto relationship episodes involving longing, grieving, and regret, and still, invites enough lighthearted fare and happy-ending devotionals to complete a well-rounded whole. Given her hit-making potential—particularly at a time when Adele, with whom Carlile shares similar traits, dominates—it would seem that her new *Bear Creek* would prime her for a creative and commercial breakout.

While the album might see considerable sales success and doesn't lack for sporadic bursts of literate material, it's not the set Carlile needs. Well-manicured, with pronounced smoothness and rounded edges, the rootsy effort hems in the exuberance, grit, and spontaneity the Washington State native displays onstage. In addition to featuring an assortment of session instrumentalists, it again pairs her with longtime collaborators and bandmates Tim and Phil Hanseroth, who, aside from their songwriting contributions, weren't missed when Carlile went it alone. In the wake of T Bone Burnett and Rick Rubin, respectively, Grammy-winning Trina Shoemaker becomes the latest name engineer/producer unable to present Carlile in the proper studio light. One yearns to hear what she'd do with minimal accompaniment, or what she could muster if left alone with a piano and guitar. It'll have to wait.

Taking its name from the facility at which it was recorded, *Bear Creek* reflects a rustic bent, with mandolins and violins shadowing a majority of tracks. A streamlined, bluegrass-tinged blend of handclaps and gently stomping beats graces the opening "Hard Way Home" and "Raise Hell." Both songs demand mettle and defiance, and even as Carlile's pale country drawl and note-vaulting flutter demand attention, background vocalists and a pop sheen castrate their effect. Her timbre can't rescue the derivative "100" or "Hearts Content," either.

In spite of multiple stale, conservative arrangements—"Just Kids" is the sole take that plays with atmospherics and swaddles the music in adventurous, advantageous settings—Carlile's soulfulness and sincerity transcend a majority of the limitations. On the simple innocence of



### **Brandi Carlile**

*Bear Creek*  
Columbia, CD or 2LP

"Keep Your Heart Young," she rides washboard-like percussion and acoustic strumming back to her childhood days, relaying an old adage in a fresh, fun manner. Carlile flexes her sympathy-inducing falsetto and hiccupping lilt during "I'll Still Be There," which balances on a repeating piano riff and gives way to her big cry of a voice. With girl-next-door wholesomeness and predisposed ache, she excels at self-reflection, despair, and assurance, her singing patiently floating atop melodic flourishes until they crest, allowing her to cash in on dramatic crescendos. And she never requires much help.

For evidence, see "That Wasn't Me," a tender piano ballad that begins unaccompanied and finds Carlile tearing into words with a personal intensity and apologetic intimacy too often missing on the record's over-processed songs. Used sparingly, a gospel choir adds integrity and depth. But the head-turner is strictly Carlile's turn, as it should be. —**Bob Gendron**

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**Best Coast**  
*The Only Place*  
Mexican Summer/Wichita, CD or LP

**B**ethany Cosentino is pushing her luck. If there was one thing her L.A. band's 2010 debut *Crazy for You* makes clear, it was that Cosentino's only obsession greater than her cat might've been the state she calls home. One is charming, and one is a pop music cliché.

Best Coast's new *The Only Place* begins straight away with California love. "Why would you live anywhere else?," she gallingly asks on the title track, a galloping little vintage rock ditty as tidy and bright as Disney's Main Street. Granted, she sings the line sweetly, and yes, she sounds genuinely curious, but there isn't exactly a drought on odes to L.A.'s sun, sand, and babes—the latter word being hers.

And yet, it works. The tune serves a greater purpose than simply correcting the wrongs of Katy Perry's "California Gurls." (Also, give Cosentino credit for alluding to the fact that Californians actually have jobs.) With her musical companion Bobb Bruno in tow, the opening track signals the album's intent of giving way to a batch of crisp, windows-down, three-minute pop nuggets. What's more, before too long, it turns out Cosentino's romanticized version of California is less about home-state cheerleading than manufacturing an escape. *(continued)*

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This is an album about growing up inside your own head. “What a year this day has been,” she sings on “Last Year,” almost getting lost in the cascading guitars and starry-eyed harmonies. She’s losing sleep over what her friends think of her success in “How They Want Me to Be,” and she’s hunching her shoulders and admitting mom was always right on “My Life.” These are everyday issues, and the solutions are simple. “It’s no fun when I’m freaking out,” she proclaims on “Better Girl.” But the little things sometimes have the most timeless appeal, and Cosentino’s guitar is never less than upbeat.

Working on the record with producer Jon Brion (Kanye West, Fiona Apple), Best Coast trimmed a bit of its scruff. This is no longer the sound of music born in a garage, but music fit for sharing a shake at the soda fountain. The few ballads on *The Only Place* are showstoppers, largely because they take their time and always showcase Cosentino’s Laurel Canyon tenderness. “Dreaming My Life Away” boasts a tropical tinge and “No One Like You” feels like a doo-wop classic, one built around a rhythm that pleads patience and a vocal that echoes loneliness.

The latter, in fact, offers the most evidence that Best Coast has matured. “If I sleep on the floor, will it make you love me more?” Cosentino sings on the opening line. It isn’t until the second verse that it becomes evident that the song is not a love letter to a feline. —**Todd Martens**



### Neneh Cherry & the Thing

*The Cherry Thing*  
Smalltown Supersound, CD

**F**or the past two decades, Neneh Cherry has primarily served as an answer to 80s-minded trivia questions along the lines of “Who sang the hit ‘Buffalo Stance’?” The stepdaughter of trumpet great Don Cherry seemingly disappeared after crafting two memorable offbeat dance-pop records during the George H. Bush era, and one subpar effort, *Man*, during Bill Clinton’s reign. She’s sporadically surfaced since, briefly appearing on albums from Pulp and Gorillaz, turns recognized only by ardent fans.

Given the insatiable quest for nostalgia, it’s not surprising to see Cherry return after missing in action for the past 15 years. What’s exciting, however, is the way she saunters back, within a setting that speaks to her punk roots and familial heritage. On *The Cherry Thing*, the Stockholm native pairs with free-jazz trio The Thing, a formidable ensemble comprised of saxophonist Mats Gustafsson, bassist Ingebrigt Haker Flaten, and drummer Paal Nilssen-Love. These are not mellow petal-pushers. *(continued)*



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Members of the trio count Ken Vandermark, Atomic, and Thurston Moore among their collaborators. Their presence alone ensures this project isn't a vanity statement or attention-getting stunt. And Cherry's quick, early-career stints with the Slits and Nails—as well as the hip originality and social commentary punctuating her 1989 debut's blend of R&B, hip-hop, and rock—afford her the credibility to tackle fare by Ornette Coleman, Suicide, and MF Doom without coming off as a pretender. She sounds like anything but, often stepping away and letting her mates—on the same footing as the namesake headliner—make the big, slinky, uproarious noise one would expect to find in an underground, late-night European jazz hall.

Cherry contributes only one original, "Cashback," a tune that casually flaunts flexible rhythmic parameters, her vocals perfumed with a come-hither breathiness that lend to the chess-like playfulness. As the leadoff track, it serves as a digestible appetizer of what follows: creaking, cracking, squeaking, and bleating horn passages; off-the-hinge solo turns that boil to a frenzy before each instrumentalist retreats to their separate corners; percussion that stays behind the beat, fostering swampy textures and zigzagging lines

that trace the arcs of Cherry's twisty melodic deliveries. While her cohorts occasionally engage in blowout sessions, Cherry retains a cool poise, her timbre smeared with lipstick, sass, and persuasion. The group's knack for knowing when to hold back, and when to let loose, directly accounts for the record's exoticism and appeal.

An interpretation of Martina Topley-Bird's "Too Tough To Die" begins cautiously, evoking visions of late-night danger and mystique. Following the mood-setting intro, Cherry enters with a pouty attitude while the band works into a lather, the arrangement scuffling, rumbling, and driving with inertia. Ugliness and beauty collide on a sublime read of Suicide's "Dream Baby Dream," witness to a mellow finish at odds with the skronk sections plugging up the song's midsection. The quartet chops the pace of the Stooges' "Dirt" and lives to brag about it; the progressive build-up collects gunk, grime, and gristle as it moves forward, everyone losing control only after Cherry recites the phrase "touch me." The climactic eruption underscores a sexual vibe—and reinforces, on what's one of the most unexpected partnerships in memory, a chemistry that's as outside-the-box as it is natural. —**Bob Gendron**

\*Paradigm's PBK and PT-2 Wireless Transmitter available as extremely affordable options.



### Sigur Ros

*Valtari*

XL Recordings, CD or 2LP

# E

mily had music nerd appeal. Well, has, rather, as she's still alive, just not a part of this writer's life. Tall and dark-haired, and with a footwear collection that seemingly consists only of boots, Emily said things like, "In college, all I listened to was Sigur Ros. It helped me fall asleep."

Makes sense, as Sigur Ros songs don't build so much as drift, the journey ultimately more important than the destination. Often, the voice of singer Jónsi Birgisson melds into the arrangements, his falsetto sounding more like some heretofore unknown string or wind instrument, and the end musical result often regularly fit for the hippest spa in town. That is a compliment, just one that doesn't do Sigur Ros justice. This is art—especially the latter half of *Valtari*—that's otherworldly, the soundtrack to a satellite drifting away in space, provided the galaxy had a record player. *(continued)*

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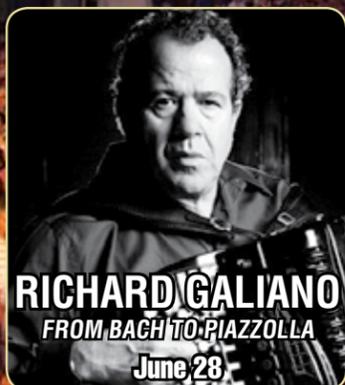
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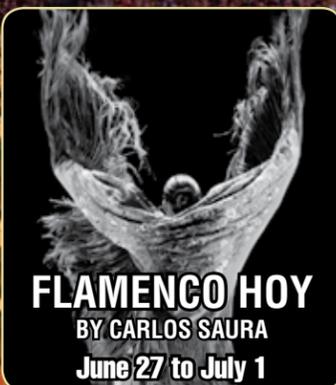
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MUSIC



Now back to Emily. She came to mind while listening to *Valtari*, the Icelandic band's first studio album of new material since 2008. Some compositions, such as the epic "Var" and the title track, into which the former slinks, don't really feel like songs at all. They're worming shape-shifters, and at certain moments are little more than the sound of carefully struck piano keys or delicately balanced wind chimes. At no point, however, does this Sigur Ros collection feel like music to which to fall asleep. The record gets spun on many an evening, post-midnight, with only night-lights and a kitten to distract, but *Valtari* ultimately turns out to be gripingly somber, the patiently space-filling sound of insomnia.

Much of it is vocal-less, and when Birgisso does sing, as on "Ekki m," his

voice is obscured by digital scratches, buried beneath a futuristic turntable. Violin strings are bent and stressed, and appear to just hang in mid-air. Though Birgisso doesn't sing in English, one will swear—or hope—he's repeatedly saying the word "love." It would lend a sense of optimism to the darkness, to the orchestral squirms and stark piano that dominate.

It won't be easy to discover Birgisso's lyrical intent, however, as Sigur Ros has created its own language for its vocals. Such pretension is for the best. When the album comes to a close with the seven-plus-minute "Fj," on which a mournful piano is overtaken by a soft-swelling panic of organic and manufactured noises, it becomes clear that this is music fit for a mystery rather than making a connection.

—Todd Martens

**N**ick Waterhouse is a young man with a very old sound. On his debut full-length, *Time's All Gone*, the burgeoning soul singer comes across like a relic from another time—as though he's been stowed away in a bomb shelter since the 1950s, a la Brendan Fraser in the admittedly awful 1999 film *Blast From the Past*.

In many senses, Waterhouse might seem an unlikely ambassador for the rowdy, R&B-steeped sound pioneered by the likes of Ike Turner & His Kings of Rhythm. Earlier this year at South by Southwest, the clean-cut singer walked onstage dressed in navy slacks and a crisp white button-up, looking as if he'd mistakenly wandered away from a nearby sales convention. But there's no denying what happens when the 25-year-old Huntington Beach native opens his mouth to sing. And he packs his debut with the requisite swagger ("If you want trouble, you got it," he growls on one tune) and sadness (the tortured vamp of "Teardrop Will Follow You") the genre requires.

Like most soul men, Waterhouse can't quite figure out the fairer sex—a statement, it's safe to say, that could extend to the entire male population—and he spends much of *Time's All Gone* pledging his devotion ("Raina"), struggling to get a word in edge-wise ("Is That Clear"), and handing himself over in entirety to a woman that will likely cause him nothing but hurt ("I Can Only Give You Everything"). Yet Waterhouse rarely sounds broken or beaten down, turning out hip-shaking songs that alternately strut, preen, and swing.



**NICK WATERHOUSE**  
**TIME'S ALL GONE**

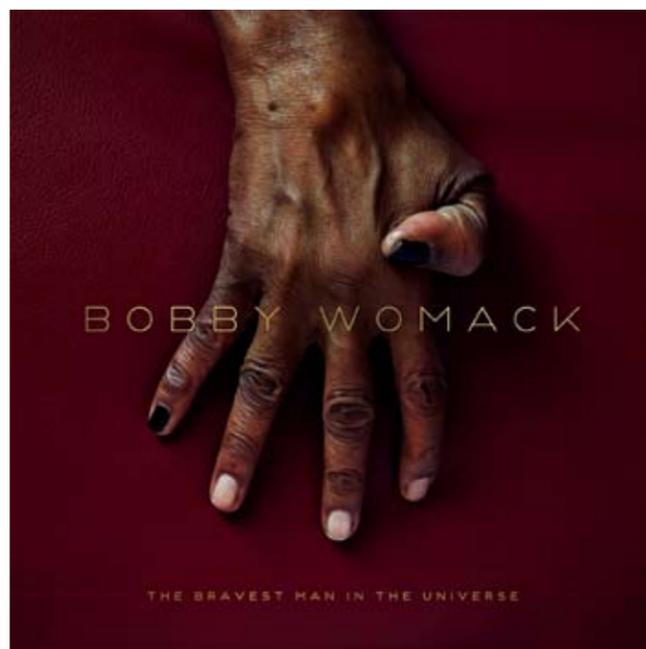
**Nick Waterhouse**

*Time's All Gone*

Innovative Leisure, CD or 180g LP

"Some Place," for one, thunders along on a piano line that plays like an homage to Little Richard, full-throated blasts of brass and chirping female backing vocals appearing while Waterhouse howls like a man this close to coming completely unglued. "Time's All Gone Pt. 1," a saxophone-spiked sock hop, sounds like a tune the DJ might have spun during *Back to the Future's* Enchantment Under the Sea dance. "Indian Love Call," by contrast, is far murkier—a spooky midnight incantation colored with staccato guitar and deep sax moans.

Sure, there are occasional moments when the frontman stumbles into reductive, soul-by-the-numbers ("Say I Wanna Know," for one, could be a Dap-Kings throwaway), and he still isn't all that convincing playing the tough, as he attempts to do on the brawny "(If) You Want Trouble." But by immersing himself so fully in the past—the crackling songs on *Time's All Gone* were even recorded on vintage analog equipment—Waterhouse has fully established himself as one to watch in the future. —**Andy Downing**



**Bobby Womack**  
*The Bravest Man in the Universe*  
 XL, CD or LP

**B**obby Womack's first album of original material in nearly two decades is news. But since the record is co-produced by Blur/Gorillaz frontman Damon Albarn and released by hip indie imprint XL Recordings, it easily qualifies as the year's most surprising nobody-saw-it-coming development. Given these circumstances, and Womack's 68-year-old age, can *The Bravest Man in the Universe* be anything but another attempt by a Baby Boomer artist to contemplate death, regret, and fortitude in their twilight years?

Fortunately, yes. Not that the reconciliatory themes of the first two songs (the title track and "Please Forgive My Heart") hint otherwise. Besides, after a five-decade-plus career that's witnessed Womack endure drug addictions, a controversial marriage, and a precipitous creative decline—not to mention being under-recognized as an R&B architect due to his early guises as a guitarist and songwriter—the dude is more than entitled to making peace with the world and himself, particularly after the long layoff. In a seemingly solitary state, the Cleveland native reflects and pontificates as if on his knees before his master.

Deeper in register than during his heyday, his huskily velvet timbre still lends to falsetto cries, closed-eyes concentration, and hunched-over postures tied to his church roots. Scored only with a gently strummed acoustic guitar, "Deep River" resonates as a moving spiritual witness to the record's finest vocal performance. "Please Forgive My Heart" also borrows from the preacher's pulpit, with shifty programmed beats mimicking handclaps and a slowly unfolding arrangement underscoring the feel, need, and desire of a man begging for mercy. "Stupid" concerns subjects related to god and faith, yet, apart from mellow 88 notes and a group-sung wordless refrain, shares more in common with hip-hop soul than sacred traditions.

Contemporary touches, and how they shape and impact the songs, are as big a story as Womack's vocal cords. Graceful, concise piano fills abet a majority of tracks, giving the singer a jazz-flecked bed over which to emote. Albarn also decorates structures with an array of atmospheric beats. *(continued)*

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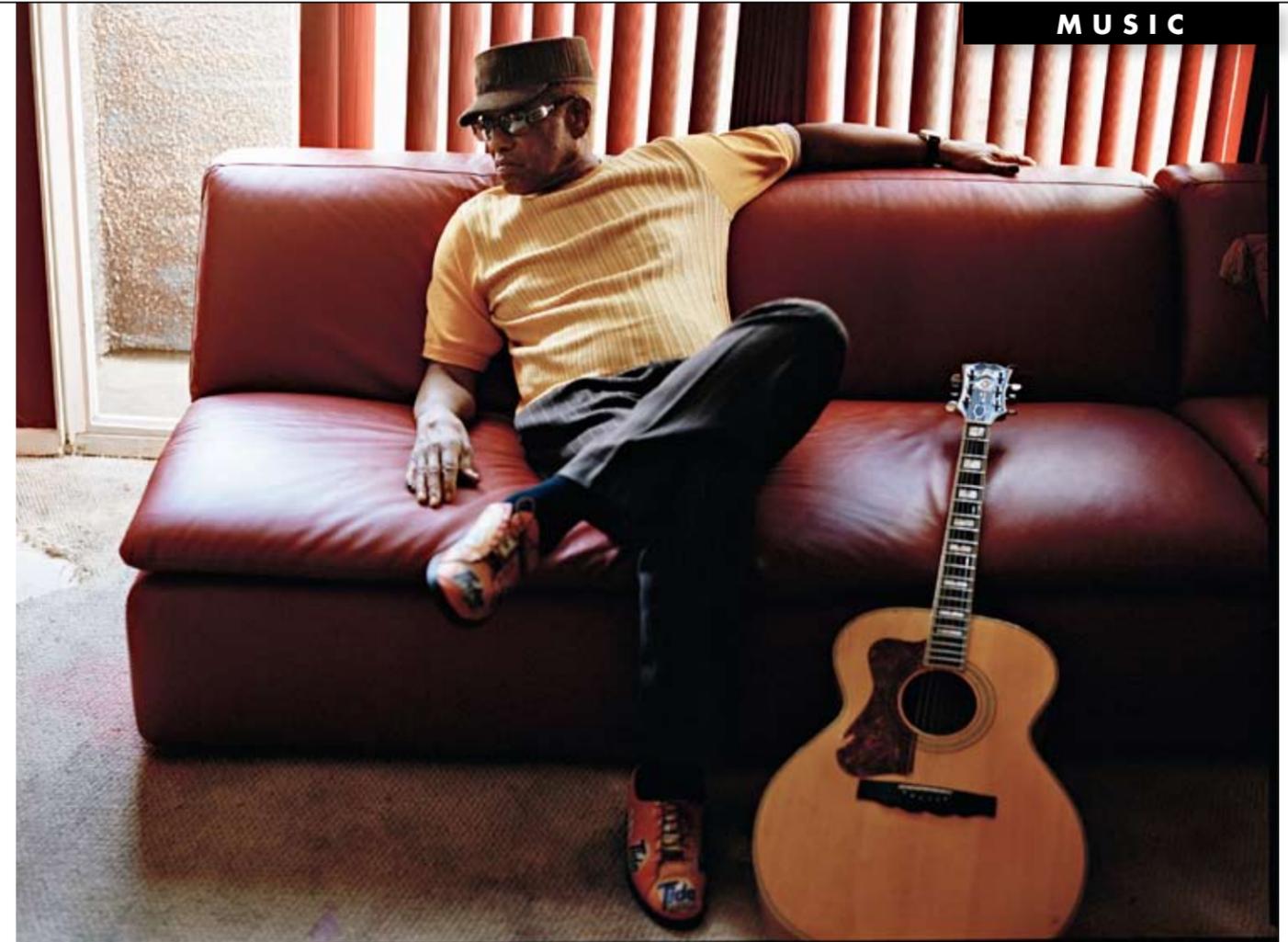
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**It's not always  
necessary to update  
classic fashions with  
the emperor's new  
clothes no matter  
how cool such  
accoutrements may  
seem at the time.**

Heard in combination with a droning organ and dark textures on the superb "Sweet Baby Now," on which Womack steps into the wandering shoes of an individual alienated by loss, the devices enrich the experience and even mesh with old-school telephone rings tacked onto the coda. Similarly, the distorted chorus and repeated scratches on "Nothin' Can Save Ya" work in tandem with the song's remote tenor.

Several experiments, however, fall short. The festive gospel send-up "Jubilee (Don't Let Nobody Turn You Around)" features annoying, computerized pulses that sound as if they are ripped straight out of a super-sized Super Mario Brothers game. Womack is colossally mismatched with it-girl Lana Del Rey on the duet "Dayglo Reflection," throughout which the latter's languid, breathy lounge-kitten timbre fails to blend with the crumpled rhythms. It, and the limp 80s synthesizer-and-drum-machine combination during "Love Is Gonna Lift You Up," serves as a keen reminder that it's not always necessary to update classic fashions with the emperor's new clothes no matter how cool such accoutrements may seem at the time. —**Bob Gendron**

## MUSIC

**N**ear the close of *Fear Fun*, former Fleet Foxes drummer Josh Tillman explains his musical rebirth as Father John Misty, singing, “I never liked the name Joshua/I got tired of J.”

Likely driven by a similar sense of boredom, the newborn frontman abandoned his former band at the height of the Seattle crew’s popularity. He now claims he spent the months following his departure on a drug-fueled, cross-country van trek—think *Fear and Loathing* with more facial hair and fuzzier sweaters—before finally settling down in the Laurel Canyon neighborhood of Los Angeles. Though Tillman might have racked up thousands of miles on his odometer fleeing the Foxes, sonically he landed but a stone’s throw away. His debut arrives awash in an array of familiar sounds: shaggy acoustic strumming, handclaps, church organs, and gorgeous vocal harmonies that call to mind Sunday service at a pastoral church.



### Father John Misty

*Fear Fun*

Sub Pop, CD or LP

But while there’s never any doubt the Fleet Foxes consider themselves Very Serious Artists—songs are polished to a heavenly gloss and Robin Pecknold, the ensemble’s singer-songwriter, spends much of his time pondering his place in modern society and the universe as a whole—Father John spends much of *Fear Fun* churning out freewheeling gut-busters about American oil dependence, funeral crashers, celebrity culture, and his newfound Hollywood home.

On “I’m Writing a Novel,” a galloping, organ-and-piano-fueled ditty that comes across like a lost cut from Harry Nilsson’s *Duet on Mon Dei*, Tillman comically eviscerates his fellow Canyon denizens, taking aim at the would-be authors that sit around drinking poppy tea and discussing Heidegger and Sartre (rather than, you know, writing) and the various d-celebs populating cafes and restaurants in the hopes someone might recognize them. “Funtimes in Babylon,” in turn, plays like a California tourism advertisement as imagined by Jeff Spicoli. “Smoke everything in sight with every girl I’ve ever loved,” he sings. “Look out Hollywood, here I come.” (continued)



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Elsewhere, Tillman does his best Neil Young impression on "Hollywood Forever Cemetery Sings," an invigorating stampede of caveman drums and fuzzed-out guitars with lyrics that come off akin to a darkly comic twist on David Cronenberg's *Crash*. "O I Long to Feel Your Arms Around Me," a deliberate hymnal set to sighing church organ, ventures closest to Fleet Foxes territory. "Now I'm Learning to Love the War," a deliciously tongue-in-cheek piano ditty, explores the reasons even the most ardently liberal music fan should think about peeling that anti-war bumper sticker off of their Prius.

"Try not to think so much about the truly staggering amount of oil that it takes to make a record,"

he sings. "All the shipping, the vinyl, the cellophane lining, the high-gloss, the tape, and the gear." As the song closes, Tillman envisions a day when his decomposed remains might be used in a similar manner, singing, "I sure hope they make something useful out of me."

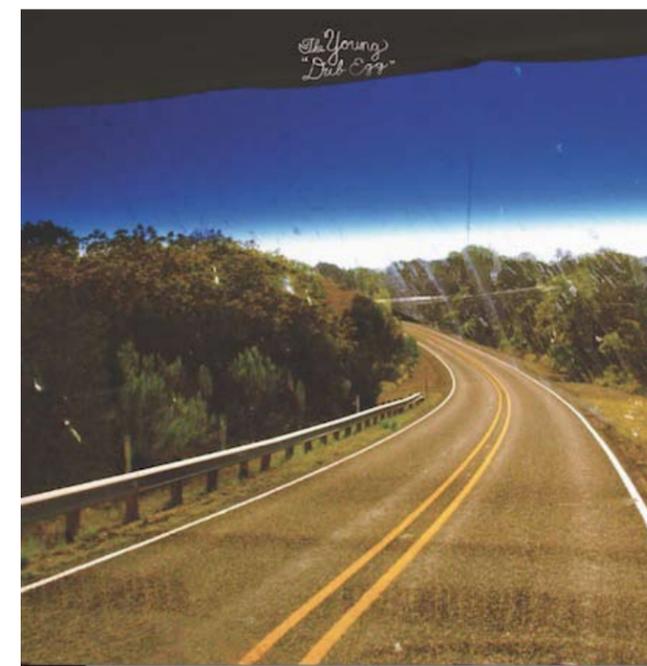
It's not the kind of message one typically hears emanating from the modernist hippie enclave of Laurel Canyon. Still, as he proves time and again on this wonderfully off-kilter effort, Father John Misty is far from the typical musician.

—Andy Downing

**It's not the kind of message one typically hears emanating from the modernist hippie enclave of Laurel Canyon. Still, as he proves time and again on this wonderfully off-kilter effort, Father John Misty is far from the typical musician.**



©Photo by Ben Aqua



**The Young**  
*Dub Egg*  
 Matador, CD or LP

**While the Young have a name that isn't the easiest to Google, given its sophomore *Dub Egg*, the band won't likely stay anonymous for long.**

Matador Records and the alt-rock era are intertwined. Acts such as Pavement, Superchunk, and even Liz Phair celebrated a form of rock n' roll that resided just left of the dial. There were hooks and there was craftsmanship, but it felt, occasionally, stumbled upon. Matador, ultimately, grew up and gradually got more sophisticated, bringing in acts such as Belle & Sebastian and the New Pornographers—groups with more orchestral ambitions.

Yes, this history lesson is Cliffs Notes short, and like anything in the class of rock n' roll theory, is subject to digressions and counterpoints. Of late, Matador has gotten back to its more ragged beginnings.

Acts like Ceremony and Fucked Up, as precise as their approach to hard rock may be, still celebrate the label's more reckless early days. Now, add quartet the Young to the imprint's list of alt-rock-era champions. The Austin-based act comes off, at times, like a more streamlined Dinosaur Jr.

But enough with reference points. The Young shows there's plenty of mileage left yet in guitar-based rock. In *Dub Egg*, the band presents a 10-song set that touches on a different genre and era with each track. All the while, it never strays from its mission of exploring riffs and solos.

"Livin' Free" starts off the experience in a smoked-out haze, with the upper-register scratchiness of vocalist Hans Zimmerman sinking into the guitars. Later, "Dance With the Ramblers" parties

like the 70s never ended, carrying on for more than six minutes with a cowbell-accentuated rhythm as well as guitars that crisscross like fading smoke from duel skywriters. "Don't Hustle for Love," meanwhile, features more of a fuzzed-up crunch, built around a choppy and funky bass, while "Only Way Out" strikes a boozed-up, bluesy vibe—like something that should be played on a dive-bar jukebox in New Jersey. Even when the band tightens up ("White Cloud"), the focus remains on quivering guitar strikes and lightly decorated solos, accouterments that emphasize the melody.

While the Young have a name that isn't the easiest to Google, given its sophomore *Dub Egg*, the band won't likely stay anonymous for long.  
**—Todd Martens**



# SME 3009 Tonearm

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By Ken Kessler

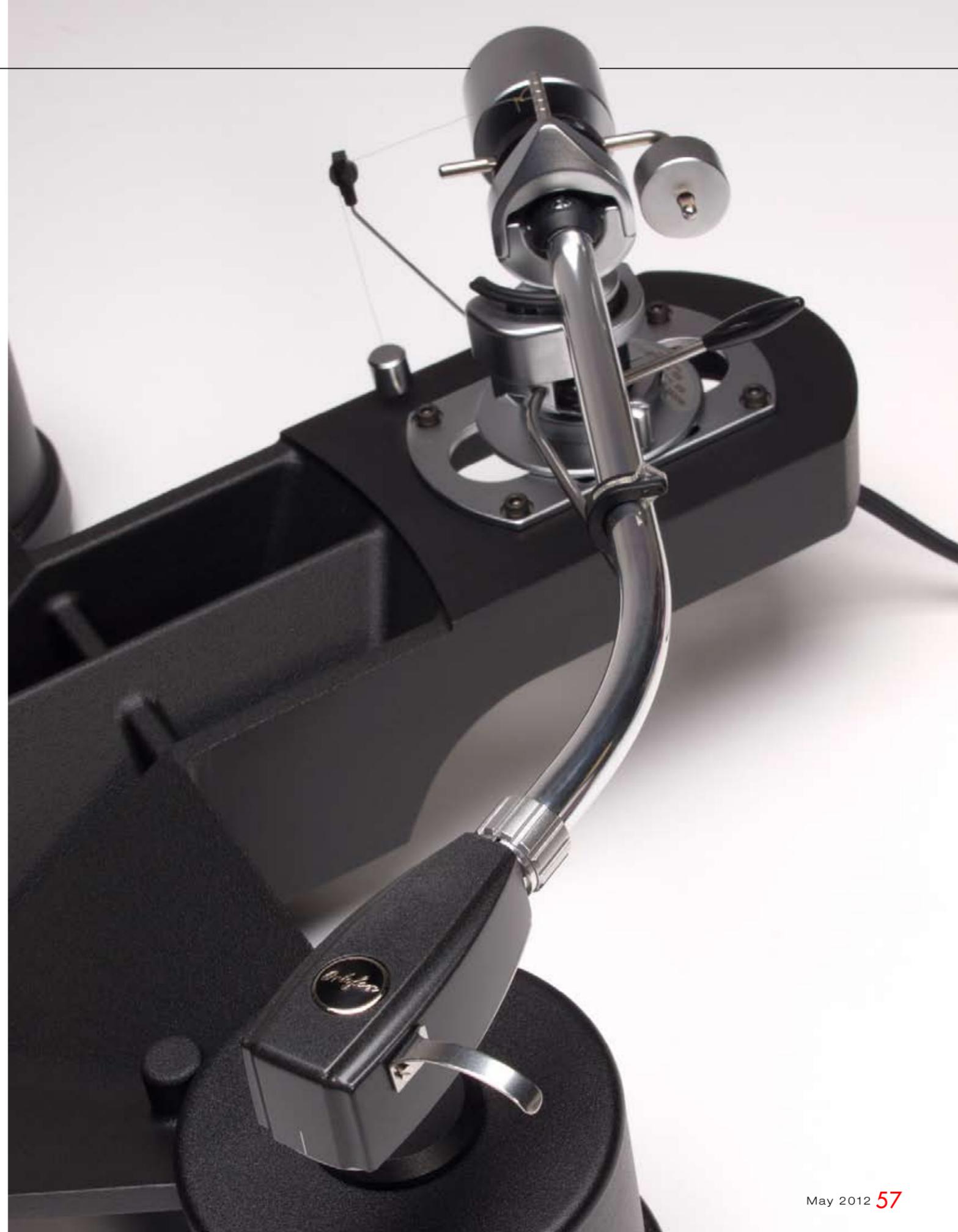
Depending on when you start the counting, last year marked the 50th anniversary of the SME 3009 tonearm.

Ignoring both xenophobia on the part of the British and envy on the part of everyone else, it remains the most successful high-end tonearm of all time, and is the template for superior “universal” tonearms able to handle a wide range of cartridges on an equally wide range of “motor units.”

Indeed, many audiophiles still swear by it, and with good reason: Despite it being associated, in the minds of many, with high-compliance moving-magnet cartridges because of strong associations with Shure, it was, in fact, designed with the then-dominant, heavy, low-compliance Ortofon moving-coil cartridges in the SPU series. Moreover, the first headshells used with the 3009—prior to the arrival of the familiar, drilled-out SME design—were Ortofon shells with SME badges on the front. Due to his unfailing honesty and integrity, SME founder Alastair Robertson-Aikman found it mildly disconcerting that the headshell-mounting system became known colloquially as the SME mount; Ortofon deserved the credit.

As a result of the arm’s ability to accept the heavy, low-compliance MCs we so love today, its performance is not that of a 50-year-old arm but of a still-viable contender. That’s the reason why boxed, second-hand examples in mint condition can command \$500 at UK audio flea markets. The arm is simply remarkable.

*(continued)*





It stayed in production until 2003-04, but not because the superior Series V supplanted it; both models ran concurrently for almost 20 years. The cost difference between an SME Series II Improved and a Series V kept the former in production for its value as an entry-level product. Robertson-Aikman felt the more affordable M2 was its true successor.

After four decades, total sales neared a half-million units. I trust *TONE* readers will immediately let me know if there's a separate high-end tonearm that comes anywhere close to that figure. The SME 3009 was, and is, the most popular and influential quality tonearm in history. Even the near-elliptical tonearm cut-out served as the default arm aperture for countless manufacturers that supplied armless decks, from Garrard to Thorens to Technics.

Founded in 1946 by Robertson-Aikman, SME made scale models and parts for the model-engineering trade and hobbyist model

builder. Robertson-Aikman, above all an engineer, was also a music lover able to construct his own system. He told me "the Series I precision pick-up arm was envisaged in the autumn of 1958. It came about because my burgeoning interest in hi-fi had reached the point where I was dissatisfied with what the market offered. At that time, the Scale Model Equipment Co Ltd, as SME was then titled, had a useful precision-engineering capability built up over the preceding 12 years. I recall going into the small tool room and asking if we had any aluminium tube.

"By the spring of 1959, a prototype was in use, and it was decided to show it to the then-Senior Technical Editor of *Gramophone* magazine, Percy Wilson, a man of great enthusiasm and some useful ideas." Asked what he thought of its commercial possibilities, Wilson replied that he and one or two of his friends would like to own one. *(continued)*

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Crucially, he told Robertson-Aikman, “Perhaps an annual turnover of as many as 1,000 pieces might be possible.”

Robertson-Aikman remembers it well: “I particularly recall this estimate because in the week of one of his visits, not so long before he died, we built 1,000 units and were averaging 750 units per week.”

After re-tooling the Series I, by then three years old, Robertson-Aikman replaced it with the Series II in 1963. Instead of a steel arm tube, the Series II used a polished, bright-anodised aluminium arm tube, 9.5mm in diameter with a wall thickness of 0.56mm. The Series II stayed in production for 10 years. “And for much of the time,” Robertson-Aikman notes, “there was a backlog of more than 2,000 units.”

In 1973, SME met the demand for an arm of lower mass than the Series II with the Series II Improved, which also offered, for the first time, a fixed headshell version. All of the same basic family ran for the next 30 years. By 1982, with the sudden burst in popularity of the moving-coil cartridge with lower compliances and higher tracking forces, Robertson-Aikman recalls that “cartridge developments precluded a ‘one size fits all’ philosophy.” It led to the creation of the even more sophisticated Series V.

Common to all are “J”-shaped arm tubes, the methods of applying tracking force, fully protected ball-races for the vertical axis, and 0.13mm-radius knife-edge bearings in chrome seatings for the horizontal axis. Precision is such that accurate tracking force up to 1.5g can be applied without a tracking-force gauge. Two counterweights were available, of 64g and 77g, allowing the use of very heavy cartridges, up to 32.5g. SME employed a hanging weight on a thread to set adjustable bias corresponding with tracking force, via notches on a rail. One popular option was the FD200 fluid damper for the Series II and later models.



Users delighted in the most coherent and thorough owner’s manuals ever seen in audio, as well as niceties such as a baseplate that allowed the arm to slide forward or back for setup with a supplied protractor. All of the arms were fitted with damped cueing devices, and VTA was easily set thanks to the adjustable arm height.

Collectors know the SME 3009 enjoyed numerous variants, especially the 3012 12-inch model. But others exist to tantalize completists. The original 9-inch 3009 is identified by enthusiasts as 3009/1 or 3009/2 to indicate which model series is which, as well as “3009 Series II Improved.” Then you have fixed headshell or removable; a Japanese version that’s 10 inches in length from pivot to stylus; gold-plated limited editions; variations in the form of cable connectors; choices of counterweights; and confusion in the US, where some called the 3012 a “16-inch” arm because it included the counterweight and headshell.

Half a century later, SME 3009 arms are cherished with an intensity matched by few other vintage components: the Quad “57” electrostatic, the McIntosh MC275, Marantz tube amps, and Revox’s G36 spring to mind. But, as *Stereophile* icon J. Gordon Holt once said, “You never forget your first SME.” ●

#### Official Factory Production Statistics

**Series I: 1959-1963,  
approximately 10,000 built**

**Series II: 1963-1973,  
approximately 180,000 built**

**Series II Improved: 1973-2003,  
260,484 built**

*Publisher’s Note: For those wanting to restore their 3009 to (and even beyond) its original glory, look no further than [smetonearms.com](http://smetonearms.com). The site has the world’s largest cache of NOS SME parts and will restore your arm with loving care.*

# Remembering Dick Clark

By Ben Fong-Torres



© Photo courtesy AP Wire Services

When Dick Clark died, I got several calls from media outlets seeking comments—or, more accurately, sound bites. And a magazine contacted me about writing about the man forever known as “America’s Youngest Teenager.”

But it wasn’t *Rolling Stone*, for which I interviewed Clark in 1973. It was *The Hollywood Reporter*. What used to be a trade magazine has been redesigned to reach a broader audience, with editors from *US Weekly* and, yes, *Rolling Stone*.

So I did an article, which you can see here:

<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/dick-clark-death-ben-fong-torres-rolling-stone-memory-315826>

The magazine used, as its headline, a quote from a sometimes brutally candid Clark, who responded to my whining about capitalist exploiters of pop culture. I wasn’t referring to him, but he took it personally and said, “The problem with you is that you’re a liberal, and I’m a fucking whore.”

Clark, who was 43 when we met in his office in Hollywood and then his home in Malibu, was making no apologies for being who and what he was.

*The Hollywood Reporter* piece details how Clark’s business smarts helped him weather the Congressional payola hearings of the late 50s. The hearings caught numerous disc jockeys in their web and destroyed some careers. Said Clark: “I found a better way to do it. To be in the

music business.” He got into talent management and music publishing. He invested in record distributors and pressing plants. He bought, at a low stake, an interest in several record labels. And when they profited—sometimes with a little help from exposure of artists and songs on “Bandstand”—so did he. “I had done nothing illegal or immoral,” he said. “I had made a great deal of money and I was proud of it. I was a capitalist.”

In my article, I recall a wonderful night, a couple years later, with Clark, who hosted Dianne, my wife, and I in a cruise around Las Vegas. And it ends with an acknowledgment of his inadvertent role in my getting started at *Rolling Stone*, in spring of 1968. Here’s my conclusion:

*Rolling Stone* had been publishing for only a few months, and, along with my post-college roommates, who were involved in music and media, I was a fan. One day, one of the roomies, Abe Jacob, told me about an upcoming free concert at a nearby park, featuring the Siegal-Schwall blues band out of Chicago, to promote a new movie about the Haight-Ashbury, produced by Dick Clark. What? I thought. Dick Clark and hippies? (The movie was *Psych-Out*, with Jack Nicholson, a year before his breakout in *Easy Rider*, in the role of “Stoney.”) I called the magazine, then based in San Francisco, with the tip, and wound up with my first piece in *Rolling Stone*. Not a story, exactly, but an item for “Flashes,” the precursor to “Random Notes.”

But I was in, and, within a year, joined the editorial staff. And I have Dick Clark and his exploitative, capitalistic ways to thank.

I felt for him, reached out to him in 2004 after he’d suffered his stroke. I continued to tune in to see him on his New Year’s Rockin’ Eves. It’s been difficult the last few years, as he struggled with his speech. Many people wondered why he’d put himself out there like that, for the world to see. But he’d never shied from the spotlight. In fact, he craved it. It was his comfort zone. And, for many years, it was ours, too. ●

# Audiophile Pressings

By Jeff Dorgay

Sponsored by Music Direct

## Bob Dylan and The Band

Volumes are written about this famous album, celebrating the collaboration of Bob Dylan and his backing band, the Hawks, whose members ended up becoming The Band. Not officially released until the summer of 1975, the set was recorded in 1967, the year after Dylan's motorcycle crash, which marked a pivotal point in his career.



**The Basement Tapes**  
Mobile Fidelity, 180g 2LP  
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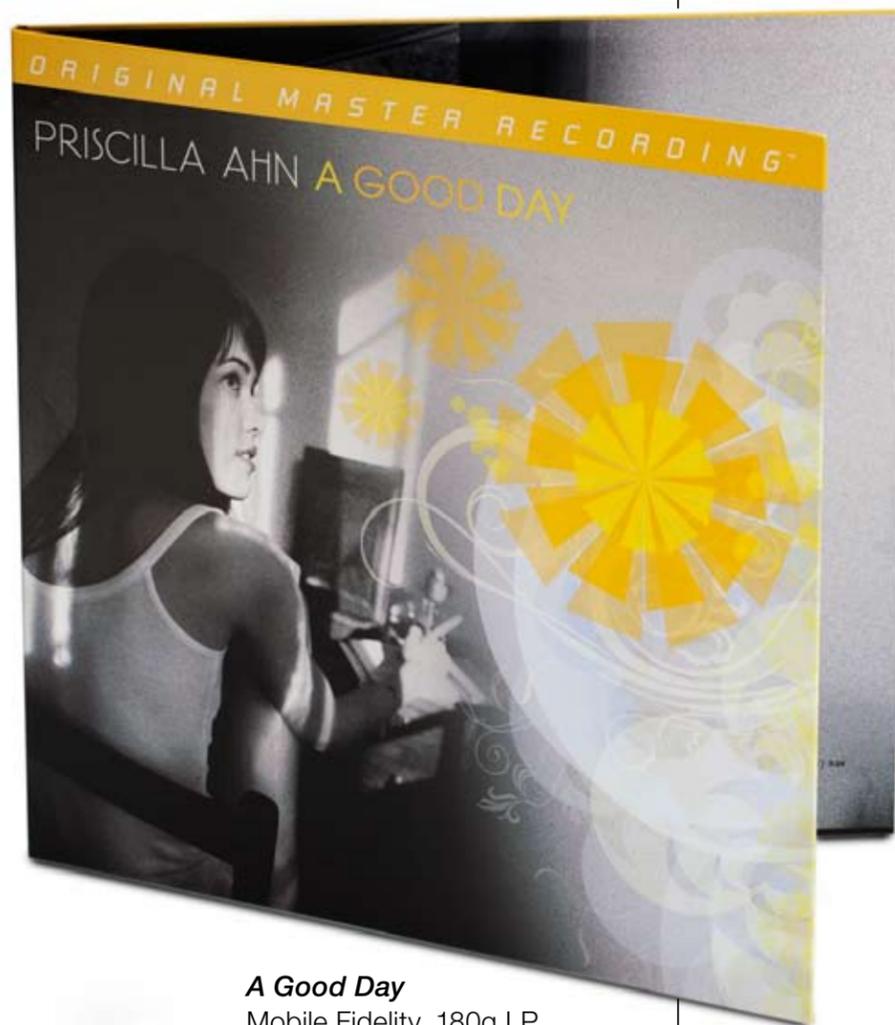
In a 1969 interview, the Bard told *Rolling Stone* publisher Jann Wenner: “[This is] really the way to do a recording—in a peaceful, relaxed setting—in somebody’s basement. With the windows open...and a dog lying on the floor.” The mellow vibe certainly comes through in the presentation.

Mobile Fidelity’s reissue features much richer timbres and dynamics than the original. But remember Dylan’s comment about being relaxed. While it’s still crackly in parts, occasionally sounding like it was produced on the Revox A77 tape recorder shown on the album cover, overall quality is very high, particularly given the stripped-down environment in which the record was captured—essentially, Dylan’s basement, concrete walls and all. Where the original is consistently flat, lacking air and decay, the new pressing comes alive.

Sure, various members of the Band, and even Dylan himself, are still not in agreement about what tracks should have been (or not been) included on the Columbia release. Debates aside, it’s a phenomenal time capsule, a stellar collection of songs.

And there’s more Dylan coming from the Chicago-based audiophile imprint. Josh Bizar, Mobile Fidelity’s Director of Sales and Marketing, says, “*The Basement Tapes* is one of the most important releases in our history and the perfect title to start the Mobile Fidelity Bob Dylan series.” We anxiously anticipate all of them.

## Priscilla Ahn



### **A Good Day**

Mobile Fidelity, 180g LP

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Put those Patricia Barber and Eva Cassidy albums away, and give something else a try. For those unwilling to forgo female vocalists as part of their audiophile heaven, Priscilla Ahn's debut is a good way to expand your repertoire.

Issuing the album on LP for the first time, Mobile Fidelity strips away the merciless compression present on the CD and leaves Ahn unsquashed. The perky, Pokemon-esque singer paints a rosy soundscape, with arrangements often resembling those of *It's a Beautiful Day*. Ahn's purity of tone and delicate phrasing should make vocal aficionados swoon, and while the top end crushes that of the digital version, it's still slightly on the hot side. This one will undoubtedly score more points with the vintage tube crowd than those that own ultra-resolving systems.

Another bonus: The pressing includes three bonus tracks not on the original CD. Keeping in character with the rest of the album, yet more sparsely arranged, they possess fairly little dynamic range, allowing seven tracks to fit on a side without compromising fidelity.

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## Roberta Flack & Donny Hathaway



### Roberta Flack & Donny Hathaway

HD Tracks, 24/96 Download

[Click here to order from HD Tracks](#) ●

**H**igh-resolution downloads remain crapsheets: some are brilliant, others a major disappointment. HD Tracks does a fantastic job invigorating this R&B classic, bringing to life, perhaps for the first time, the music at it should be experienced. Listeners that only own the CD may feel as if a blanket is lifted from the speakers, with the original version's AM-radio compression gone.

The 24/96 file also bests my LP, with the soundstage opened up in all dimensions. Cue up the mega-hit "Where is the Love" to experience Roberta Flack's voice to the fullest, predominantly in the left channel, with Hathaway mixed directly behind her in the right. Whereas the vocals previously felt mono, they now possess plenty of body. You can also clearly hear bleed-through from both singers' microphones.

Moreover, while the full complement of strings and percussion plod through on the LP (and are nearly unlistenable on CD), here, they take on a life of their own, with the crunchy drums replaced by natural timbre and extension. Great stuff.

## Where Have all the Good Stereos Gone?



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### What Does \$1000 A Watt Sound Like? - Neil Gader

Vitus SIA-025 Review / The Absolute Sound, December 2011

“ The SIA-025 is a superb component brimming with enough finely wrought performance skills to challenge all comers. ”

“ The Vitus Audio conveys the most tactile inner details—virtually down to the fingerprints on a performance. ”

“ ...every self-respecting audiophile should consider it an obligation to listen to one—if just for the hedonistic pleasure of bearing witness to the seductive musicality of one of the high end’s finest offerings. ”

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## Anne Bisson

For anyone that believes great vinyl can't be pressed from a digital master, look no further than Anne Bisson's *Blue Mind*, recorded live with minimal overdubs (only one track, "Dragonfly" features overdubbing) at Reference Studio in Saint-Calixte, Quebec. Vacuum-tube Neumann microphones contribute greatly to the pressing's enormous, breathy sound.

Bisson breaks no new stylistic or artistic ground, but she keeps the tunes upbeat. Drummer Paul Brochu and bassist Normand Guilbeault helm sparse arrangements that aid in accentuating her fluid voice. Fidelio brilliantly captures this essence, with Kevin Gray extracting every last ounce of dynamic range on LP. The result? It sounds like a master tape. Count on hearing this gem in many rooms at upcoming hi-fi shows.



### *Blue Mind*

Fidelio, 180g LP

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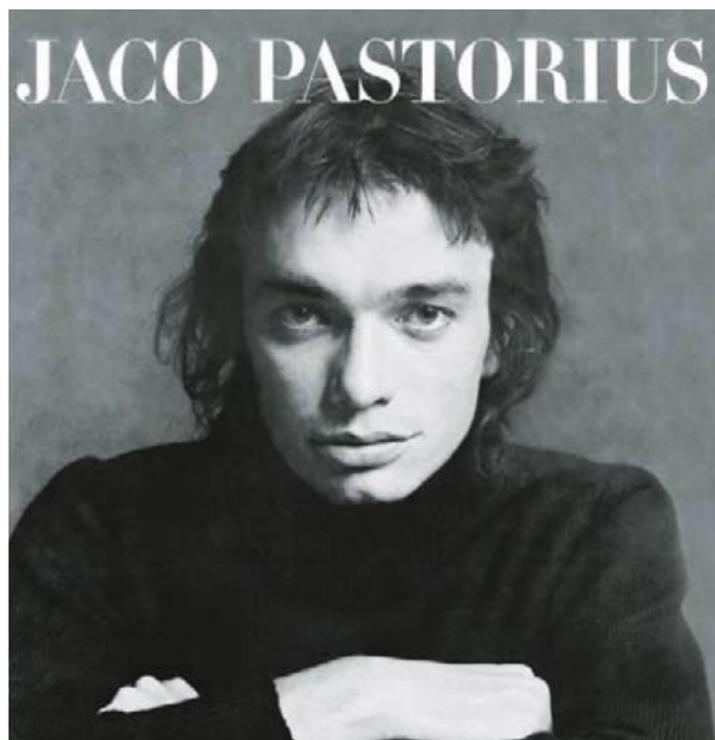
# Jaco Pastorius

Originally produced in 1976, arguably when records pressed at Columbia were at their sonic worst, this record now finds its volatile tracks split onto a pair of LPs. What a difference. Spinning *Jaco Pastorius* at 45RPM rules.

Released at the beginning of the instrumentalist's tenure with Weather Report, the record includes heavy hitters Lenny White, Herbie Hancock, and Wayne Shorter, to name a few. The mix is not straight-ahead jazz, but it's not fully locked into fusion, either. Some pieces sound like they could have been culled from the outtakes of Hancock's *Blow Up* sessions.

Bernie Grundman takes the production helm here and fully utilizes his lifetime of jazz-related experience to give this masterpiece the attention it deserves. Pastorius' bass is finely depicted, his parts effortlessly gliding through the soundstage. Hancock's piano soars, liberated from the sonic grunge of the original. My speakers can barely contain this record!

Note: To naysayers claiming today's remasters lack the vitality of the original recordings, grab this record now and await pleasant discoveries.



**Jaco Pastorius**  
ORG, 180g 45RPM 2LP  
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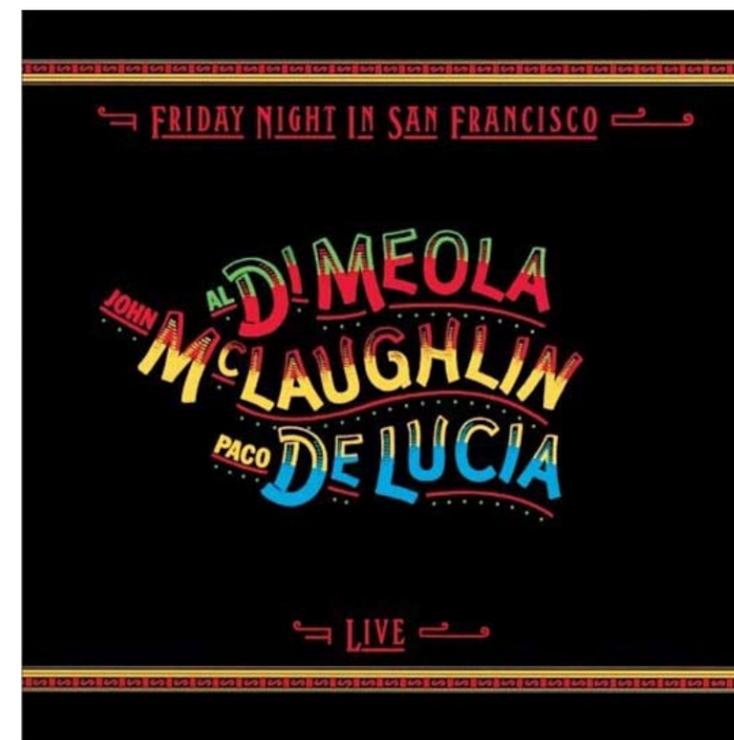
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## Al DiMeola, John McLaughlin, and Paco de Lucia

**R**ecorded in December of 1980 at San Francisco's Warfield Theater, these three mega guitarists convened to create one of history's most memorable acoustic-guitar records. Five of the seven tracks are duos, and the final two feature the trio. Bernie Grundman, the original mastering engineer, returns for remastering duties on this sweet ORG pressing. All the compression in my 1A original is swept away; spreading the music over two discs yields myriad benefits.

If there was ever an acoustic disc that encourages you to crank the volume, this is it. When the applause swells up at the end of songs, it's easy to close your eyes and be transported to that magical winter evening. Every nuance gets captured; every toe tap, every whack of the guitar body comes alive, and if your system is up to snuff, these guys sound as if they are right in the room. You can almost hear the guitar strings picking up weight as they become coated with sweat as the performance progresses.

The most exciting aspect of this recording, now restored to full brilliance? A toss-up between the rapid attack of the players' blazing speed and the low-level detail in the quietest passages. It's a shame unreleased material couldn't be included; this legendary evening begs for bonus tracks.



***Friday Night in San Francisco***

ORG, 180g 45RPM 2LP

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# Fleet Foxes

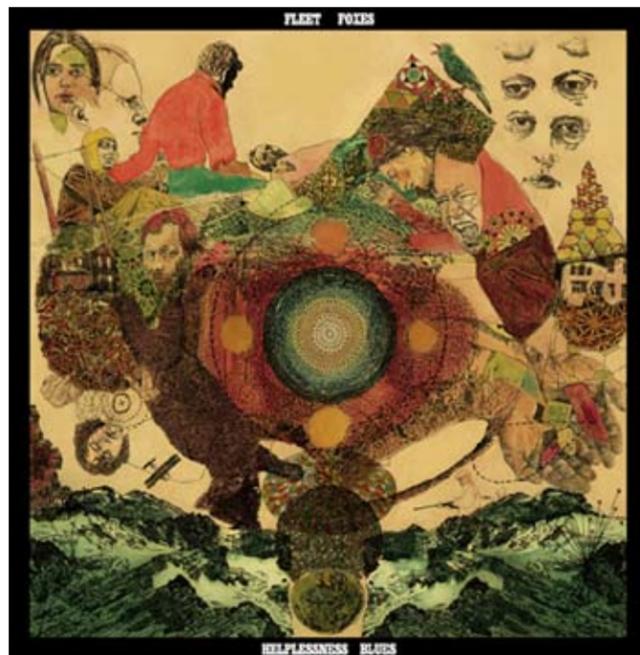
## Helplessness Blues

HD Tracks 24/96 download

[Click here to order from HD Tracks](#) ●

**B**ummer: One of 2011's most popular vinyl releases—not to mention one of the year's best albums—sounds incredibly disappointing as a high-resolution download. The standard Sub Pop LP remains the way to roll, offering a more inviting midrange, even if it and the high-res file are equally bright up on top.

Sure, the high-res option musters a bit more dynamic contrast than the free 320kb/sec MP3 download, but not by much, and neither the vinyl nor the 24/96 are paragons of audiophile quality.



# Jessica Pare

## Zou Bisou Bisou

Lions Gate Records, 7-inch EP

[Click here to order from Music Direct](#) ●

**S**exy girl, and seductive cha-cha-cha tune sung in French? What's not to love? Likely produced to cash in on the current popularity of the annual Record Store Day, this \$10 EP sounds like one of those plastic records that used to be attached to cereal boxes back in the "Mad Men" era. Yikes.

Even if you aren't a fan of the aforementioned hit show that re-birthed this song, this release could have been the audiophile track of the year—if not the decade—had it been done with care, i.e., pressed on the single side of a 12-inch 45RPM disc, as Classic Records did with Dusty Springfield's "The Look of Love." A missed opportunity.



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# Digitization 101

By Jerold O'Brien

**D**igital photography is like digital audio in many ways. Those who prefer analog film usually end up scanning their images into Photoshop so they can be used on Facebook or a smart phone. If that is your only goal, an inexpensive scanner offers enough resolution to achieve such a feat. However, placing those same analog originals in a magazine spread or replicating them with a high-definition, large-format printer requires an input device capable of higher resolution.

The same can be said for LPs. Producing mix discs for friends, digitizing favorite vinyl for a road trip, or taking a cursory peek at the whole process of transforming analog into bits doesn't require the sophistication that archival conversion demands.



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### Enter Rega's Fono Mini A2D

Just \$179 and a free download of Audacity (<http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>) gets you into the analog-to-digital game with Rega's A2D. Your level of computer savvy will dictate how much time you spend with the manual. Anyone familiar with film- and video-editing tools will feel right at home. The current Fono substantially upgrades the old Fono MM (which lacked a built-in A/D converter and retailed for \$350) and, like all Rega products is, hand-built at the company's UK factory.

The A2D is straightforward in operation. A 24V AC power supply and standard RCA jacks for input and output—should you decide to only use the unit as a phono preamplifier—are included, along with the necessary ground lug for non-Rega turntables. The analog-to-digital converter is used via an onboard USB port, which also has a volume control.

Audacity features the ability to digitize files up to 24/96k capability. But this level seems like overkill for an entry-level phonostage. I'll take great 16/44.1k over mediocre high-res any day, so most captures were done at 16/44.1k.

### Achieving the Best Results

With the A2D, cartridge optimization and output are critical. To keep with the budget ethos of the project, initial captures were carried out with the AT PL120D turntable and Shure M97 cartridge, but prove dull and lifeless. The Ortofon OM30 nets a more musical match. As expected, the best synergy is achieved with the Rega P3-24/Exact combination.

Tread the high-output path with caution. The Denon DL-110 (reviewed last issue) appears to be a potential match, yet its 1.6mv output has a tough time driving the A2D to full output. *(continued)*



FEATURE



When recording digitally, the trick is to utilize all of the available dynamic range. Going over 0db results in a harsh cutoff of the signal; leaving the gain low results in excessive resolution loss. Finally, employ a record-cleaning system (the \$79 Spin Clean is excellent) to eliminate as many clicks and pops as possible. Clipping above 0db renders record noise more objectionable when it's transferred to the digital realm, so proceed with care.

You won't put HD Tracks out of business with the A2D. Still, the results of digitizing LPs are equal to and, in some cases, slightly better than what is available from many of today's "remastered" CDs that

are nothing more than the original files with their levels cranked up. Of course, the original vinyl still sounds better, but we're talking convenience, and the A2D delivers brilliantly.

**Checking Your Work**

Just as a modest photo scanner can attain good results if handled with care, Rega's Fono Mini A2D produces excellent digital files if used within its sweet spot. An optimal cartridge match and careful eye on the level control will yield much better files than you likely thought possible. And when it comes to compression, the adage "garbage in, garbage out" has never been truer. The cleaner the initial scan, the cleaner your MP3 files sound.

I'm particularly impressed with 320kb/sec files produced with the A2D; they're perfect for when I'm at the gym and want to revisit my favorite albums via an iPod Nano. They even caught the attention of a workout buddy that noticed Iron Maiden's *Powerslave* captured from LP sounds superior to the version he downloaded from iTunes. Rock!

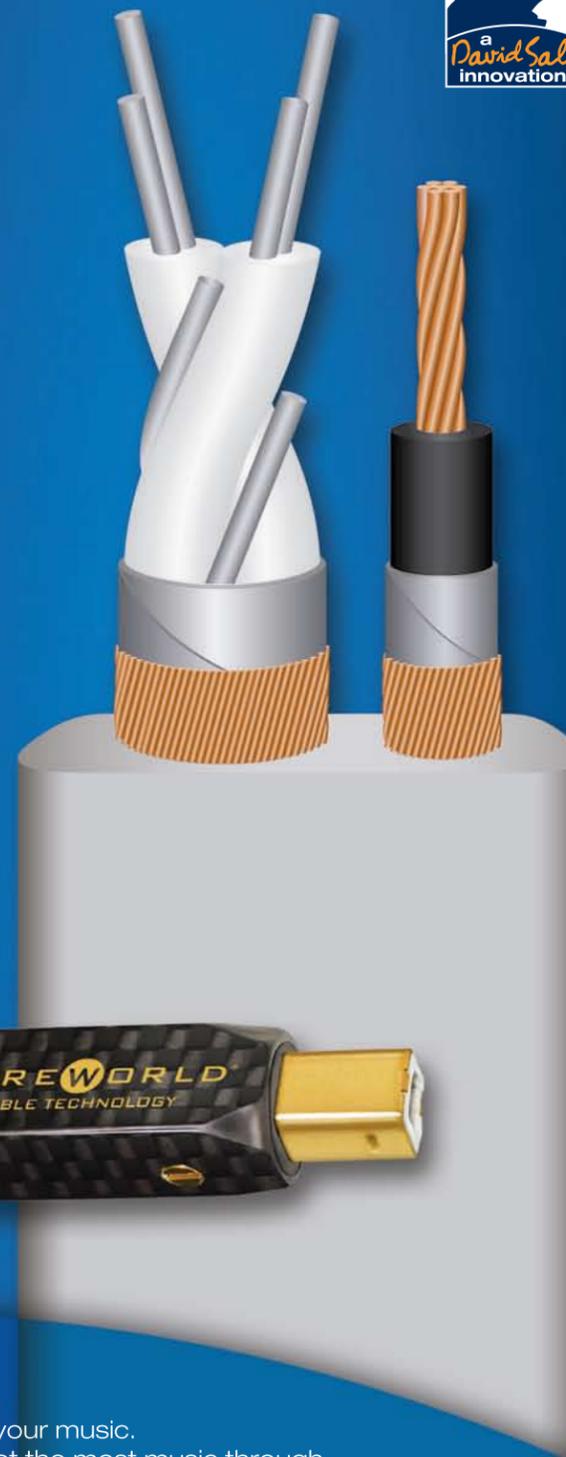
Indeed, the A2D is a fine way to get your feet wet while seeing if digitizing vinyl is for you. ●

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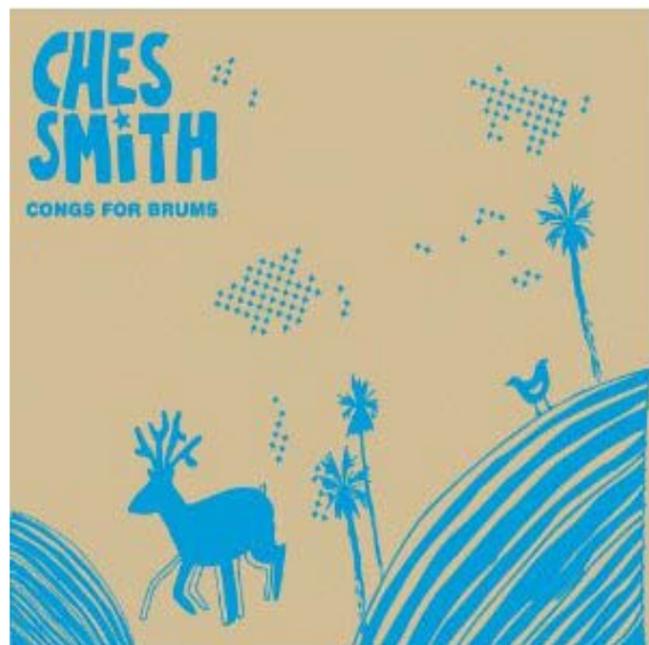
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# Jazz & Blues

By Jim Macnie



## Ches Smith's Cong For Brums

*Psycho Predictions*  
88 Records, CD

From Baby Dodds tumbling his way through “Spooky Drums” to Han Bennink getting giddy on *Tempo Comodo*, I’ve long been intrigued by the choices a percussionist makes when he or she sets up shop alone. Over the course of three discs, Ches Smith has come up with some intriguing turns. Away from noted collaborators such as Marc Ribot and Tim Berne, and under the moniker Cong For Brums, he’s melded his skills at the trap set with a yen for electronics and assorted percussive instruments. The resultant array of soundscapes is as logical and gorgeous as it is abstract and hermetic.



The three compositions on Smith’s latest outing are titled “Death Chart,” “Birth Chart,” and “Conclusion: That’s Life.” Drawing from mentors such as Pauline Oliveros and Alvin Currin, using lessons picked up during his studies at Mills College, the NYC drummer builds a narrative arc that includes moments of Morse Code mixed with doom-metal flourishes. He calls ‘em etudes, but you can call ‘em the most well-plotted *cris de coeur* ever—even the bleeps are nicked from Pac Man.

Smith, a lanky dude who plays a somewhat tiny drum set featuring a mile-high crash cymbal, recorded *Psycho Predictions* live, and its improvised design claims a deliberate feel. That’s a plus. It may seem like a parade of textured thwacks and buzzes, but each segue does a good job of leading the music away from randomness. “I’m trying to find a way to connect the three instruments compositionally,” he says when speaking about the drums, vibes, and electronics. “I had this whole thing mapped out harmonically, but it came together differently than what I had imagined when I set out.”

There are giddy passages with a Raymond Scott feel, luminous passages with a Cluster vibe, and a moment or two of good old Baby Dodds as well. Smith may do strong work with such associates as Mary Halvorson and Xiu Xiu, but he has no problem creating a load of eloquence on his own.

© Photo by Peter Gannushkin

## MUSIC

During the last several years, Brooklyn has been a hotbed for creative jazz, and it shows no sign of abating. To wit: The raucous yet architectural music of drummer Tomas Fujiwara & the Hook Up. On *The Air is Different*, the quintet demonstrates its scope with a program that allows a swirl of singular motifs to have their say while still presenting a unified statement.

At various points, saxophonist Brian Settles growls, trumpeter Jonathan Findlayson coos, and guitarist Mary Halvorson screeches; the cagey rhythm section of bassist Trevor Dunn and the bandleader gives such disparate textures a solidifying glide. Elements of swing have as much say as elements of rock, and Fujiwara's compositions remain eloquent, whether they're musing poignantly, as they do on "For Ours," or celebrating agitation, as on "Double Lake, Defined."

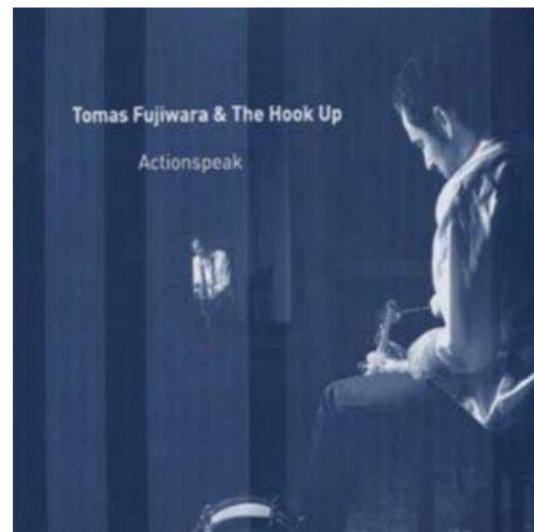
Breadth is something in which Fujiwara is truly invested. In the liner notes, he quotes Fela Kuti regarding the topic of rhythm's responsibilities, and reveals inspirational sources that include Bjork, a Buddhist bell-bowl, and the first 16 bars of Talib Kweli's rhyme on Black Star's "Definition." The curves that mark "Smoke-Breathing Lights"—a piece about the way different people walk—



© Photo by Peter Gannushkin

represent a microcosm of the program. In the middle of a 10-minute suite (of sorts), an exchange between Halvorson and Settles gives each a chance to move from stormy to sublime.

Something similar happens on the title track, dedicated to Fujiwara's grandfather, a Buddhist priest. It begins with a march vibe, makes room for a knotty passage, and harks to Coltrane's *Interstellar Space* with a romp between Settles and the drummer. Agility is a prerequisite for this outfit, and as the music morphs, a thesis starts to float between the passages: Life's contours are many, and you'd best be prepared for what's around the corner.



**Tomas Fujiwara & The Hook Up**  
*The Air Is Different*  
482 Music, CD

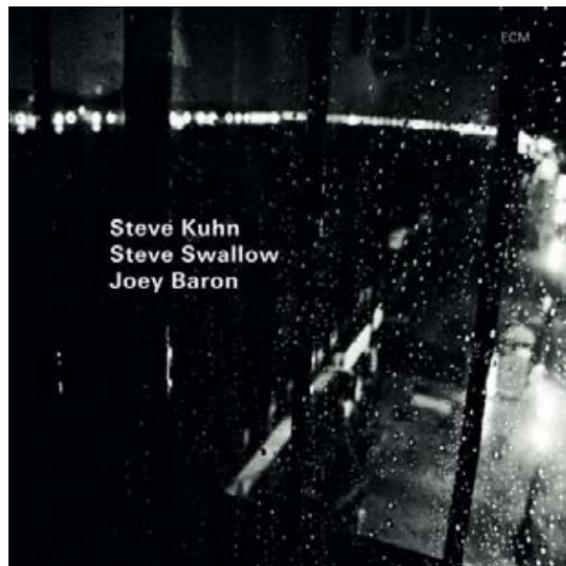
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**Steve Kuhn**  
*Wisteria*  
 ECM, CD



© Photo John Rogers/ECM Records

**M**easured moments dominate Steve Kuhn's new trio disc. The 74-year-old pianist isn't known for flaunting expressionism or dedicating himself to experimentation—unless expressionistic moves are deeply lyrical and inventing phrase after phrase qualifies as an experimental tack.

I'll stop the facetiousness: We know both notions to be true, and Kuhn, who brings a modern bop lingo with him everywhere he goes, is skilled in both approaches. This date with electric bassist Steve Swallow and drummer Joey Baron resonates because each musician claims a singular sound, so the group's collective demeanor is singular as well.

While the musicians don't always mesh, they don't always mesh in truly fascinating ways—ways draw you into the music. How cool is that?

When they do fully connect, which is often, it's in a variety of dynamics. "A Likely Story"—the track that would kick off side two if *Wisteria* were a vinyl LP—is a smoker, a piece that refutes the aforementioned "measured" comment. The crackling hard bop that Kuhn brought to Coltrane's post-*Giant Steps* working band becomes front and center here. With Baron conjuring Tony Williams and Swallow proving how waxing nimble can mean waxing provocative, the ensemble invests in exclamation.

Yet *Wisteria* is ultimately about variety, and the glide that arrives on "Pastorale," as well as the reflection that defines the title cut (a gorgeous tune written by another of the pianist's employers from more than a half century ago, Art Farmer), remind listeners that Kuhn is an expert at scripting a program. Sometimes plush, sometimes spartan, this is an album that shifts just often enough to keep you turning your head. ●

# Chill Ride

Porsche 911 Carrera S Cabriolet  
Featuring Burmester Audio

By Jeff Dorgay



A

As the new Porsche 911 Carrera S Cabriolet rockets out of an exit ramp at just under 150 kilometers/hour (about 90mph), with its 3.8-liter powerplant shrieking towards the 7900 RPM redline, I take full advantage of the 400 horsepower at my disposal and, for the moment, ignore the Burmester sound system installed in the vehicle. And, thanks to Porsche's latest version of PASM (Porsche Advanced Stability Management), I'm not thinking about the rear end of the car wanting to step out and join the front end—as it could have easily done with my 1983 911 SC. Nope. I feel like Speed Racer.

A quick blip of the throttle, and another rapid gear change via the paddle shifters conveniently mounted on the steering wheel (my test vehicle is equipped with the 7-speed PDK transmission), nudge the speedo past 200kph and grab the attention of local police parked on the side of the highway. Fortunately, they just blink their headlights to see if I'll get the message. Communiqué received: It's time for some Skynyrd. In Terminator mode, cranking "Gimme Three Steps," I briefly entertain raising the cops' dander, knowing their van is no match for the 911's 187mph terminal velocity. As Hunter S. Thompson used to say, "Any day is a good day for a high speed chase."





The PDK transmission allows drivers to shift faster than they can with a standard manual transmission, yet offers the convenience and smoothness of an automatic in tight traffic. The different driving modes, instantly available via the centrally located LCD touch panel, directly translate into more driver engagement, with gear changes becoming more positive and upshifts going to the redline with ease. Sport Plus, the most aggressive mode (utilizing Porsche's "racing circuit" program), holds the car in the chosen gear just like a pure manual even as it permits faster changes than a manual. Then there's the "launch control" option, which cuts .2 sec from the manual cars' 0-62mph time. Playing *Gran Turismo 4* does not prepare you for the 911 Carrera S experience.

I suspect the Sport Plus mode sacrifices fuel economy, but it's as easy to inter thoughts of fuel conservation as it is to bury the tachometer needle. If you have the cash to afford one of these, buy a Prius for a daily driver. For those laden with eco-guilt, Porsche engineers note this is the most efficient 911 ever made, and can actually yield 30mpg when driven gingerly on the highway. *(continued)*

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**Back to Burmester**

It's time to concentrate on the real reason I'm visiting Spain's Gran Canaria Island: to evaluate the Burmester Mobile Audio System. Slowing back down to the posted 60kph squelches the wind noise to a whisper and is more conducive to serious listening. The Supreme Beings of Leisure's "I'll Be Good Tomorrow" fits my brush with Johnny Law, and seizes upon the enormous bass capability in this system. Top-down motoring takes its toll on mobile music listening, with bass response suffering the most, as it's cancelled out by road, air, and tire noise. When funneled through the 12 speakers integrated into the 911's cabin, the 821-watt Burmester system easily overpowers nature.

Granted, environmental noise cuts dynamic range, and yet, something major is gained by removing the 911's soft top. Doing so takes only 13 seconds and can be performed at speeds up to 60kph/40mph. Cabin resonances disappear, and if you've ever taken your speakers out into your backyard, you know what I'm talking about.

Tooling around at boulevard speeds, the 911 Cabriolet sounds like a gigantic pair of Stax Electrostatic headphones on wheels. And what a comfy listening room it is. Make no mistake, Porsche has not abandoned its racing heritage while chasing creature comfort. The current 911 is almost 60kg (27 pounds) lighter than the previous generation. And it now sports an interior on par with anything coming out of the Aston Martin factory. I can't think of a better place to sit and listen to music.

The stereo system utilizes the same driver and AMT tweeters Burmester employs in its home speaker systems.  
*(continued)*

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TONE STYLE



When I asked Dieter Burmester how he's able to achieve such a high level of performance for the \$5,500 upcharge, he makes it clear that eliminating the stunning casework definitely factors into the savings, but that the big cost cutter stems from the power supply. "We put a lot into our power supplies. They are an integral part of the Burmester amplifiers, and make up a large part of the build cost. The car already has DC on tap, making our job easier in that respect."

A standard stereo mode is available, along with a surround mode and an "adaptive" mode that adjusts the DSP controls on the fly in relation to driving environment—i.e. top up, top down, etc. Neither Porsche nor *TONEAudio* suggest fiddling with the stereo system while driving. Come to a complete stop before changing modes, or have your co-pilot handle the task.

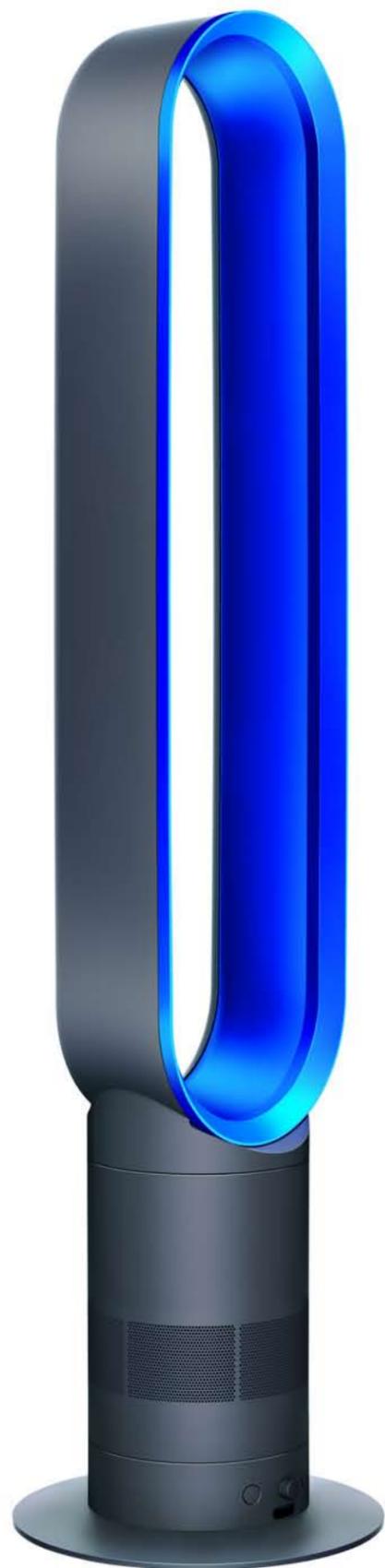
The stereo mode sounds a bit more natural with the top up, throwing a good stereo image, which can be optimized from the control screen. The other two modes feel better suited to topless conditions. Surround mode throws the soundstage way out beyond the cabin boundaries, while the adaptive mode is more intimate. Listening to

the Fleet Foxes' debut, I felt as if I were onstage attending an episode of "VH1 Storytellers," with Robin Pecknold singing in the passenger seat and the rest of the band surrounding me. The effect is truly psychedelic, and this car too much fun. I suddenly realize my 105-horsepower Fiat 500 Sport and Bose system is going to suck when I get back home.

### The Best Transformer Ever

The 911 Carrera S Cabriolet presents a constant challenge: enjoy music or spirited driving. There's only a small speed window in which you can relish both. Of course, you could always put the top up. Nah. Unfortunately, most of Burmester's hard work in optimizing the sound system flies out the window as the speed increases. But the symphony provided by the flat six is equally engaging, especially when zooming through a tunnel with the top down.

While the Porsche 911 Carrera S features multiple adjustments for the Burmester hi-fi system and the PASM, it really boils down to just two: thrill and chill, both equally enticing. ●



## Dyson AM02 Tower Fan

\$449  
dyson.com

**F**orget, momentarily, that the Dyson AM02 Tower Fan costs as much as a monthly car payment or very beneficial trip to the record store. Available in either blue or silver, it's an immediate conversation piece that practically invites anyone to stick their hands through the center and discover that, yes, like the story of the holes in Jesus' wrists, you can indeed put your fingers through the opening while air circulates.

Religious allegories aside, the AM02 adds up to more than an *objet d'art*. The bladeless design makes cleaning a breeze (bad pun intended) and owes to a technology utilized by jet engines. The fan's annular jet sucks in surrounding air and multiplies it 16 times before projecting it. Even at the highest setting, the model is quieter than conventional units. For pet owners, life doesn't get much easier. Take a cloth and simply wipe down. No disassembly and reassembly required; no fuzz-, dust-, and/or grime-covered blades and motors.

As for its cooling capabilities? Outstanding. Ditto its range. A remote control, which magnetically attaches to the top of the device, increases the ease. If you desire, the AM02 oscillates 90 degrees. Is \$450 a ton of cash? Yes. Incredibly, this is an instance where such an egregious amount seems justified.

—*Bob Gendron*

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# Beer Snob

By Bob Gendron

*Life is too short to drink mediocre beer.*

On the surface, numbers seem to indicate a dismal trend: For the third consecutive year, overall U.S. beer sales declined in 2011, down 1.3 percent from 2010 levels. Yet the losses are largely attributed to steep declines by both Anheuser-Busch and MillerCoors, both of which shipped less barrels than they had since George W. Bush's first term. In restaurants and at home, drinkers are increasingly opting for craft beverages and turning away from over-advertised, watered-down swill.

Want hard evidence? In contrast to the majors' slippage, the craft brewing industry grew by 13 percent in volume and 15 percent in dollars. An estimated 250 breweries opened in 2011, more than five times the amount that shuttered. And, for the first time since the 1880s, more than 1,980 breweries operated for some or all of 2011, the figures confirming a boom that seems to have no end in sight.

Yes, it's easier than ever for beer lovers to find new favorites on store shelves and bar taps without having to look very hard. Here's a trio of tasty libations to get you started.

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# Black Metal Farmhouse Imperial Stout

## Jester King

Austin, Texas

It's always a bonus when breweries display a great sense of humor. Aside from music aficionados and the tattooed set, one wonders how many everyday folk actually know about black metal—or that the character on the label of this imperial stout bears more than a passing resemblance to the dudes in Immortal, the legendary Norwegian noise-makers known for posing for unintentionally humorous photos in forests while clutching accoutrements such as battle axes, outstretching their arms, and making sourpuss faces—all while wearing spiked leather garb Gene Simmons might've donned on Kiss' 1976 Destroyer tour. Inspirations for a Texas-based beer? Why not? It's all in good fun.

As advertised, this stout is dark and heavy (10.4% ABV). Outside of its clever myth-baiting aliases—Iron Sword,

Blackened Death, El Martillo del Muerte—the liquid refreshment possesses plenty of lasting attitude and deep-ingrained taste. Initially, savor the incredibly squid-ink noir appearance while pouring it into a tulip-shaped goblet. A fair head briefly appears, along with scents of strong coffee, roasted malt, dark cocoa, and light alcohol. On the tongue, you'll be greeted with roasted barley and toasted malt. Coffee, chocolate, and cherry blend with a smooth, medium mouthfeel, all of which is bettered by an excellent level of carbonation.

Unlike many imperials, Black Metal doesn't suffer from too much of anything (bitter or sweet), and reveals more character (tobacco, woody esters) as it warms. For the full experience, pair with rare red meat, of course. Blastbeats optional.

# Zombie Dust Pale Ale

**Three Floyds**  
Munster, Indiana

**M**ention Zombie Dust, and watch bystanders begin to drool. Few beers inspire such fervent reactions as this American pale ale, which Three Floyds began bottling several months ago. Only problem is that the brewery cannot keep up with demand. Lines literally form the instant Zombie Dust is placed out for sale in the Chicagoland area; stores fortunate enough to get an allocation usually limit individual purchases to one or two six-packs.

Aesthetically, the beer showcases an amber-orange color, topped with pleasant lacing and a white head. Carbonated bubbles swim upstream the moment it hits the glass. You won't mistake them for the chewing gum, but aromas of juicy fruits—grapefruit, citrus, orange, peach—as well as lemon beckon one's lips. As it is with the Citra hop taste—delectably fruity, with Three Floyds' hallmark hoppiness and a finite crispness. Looking for malt? Not here.

The medium body and healthy carbonation, along with the relatively low 6.20% ABV (given Zombie Dust will remind many of an IPA), makes this an eminently drinkable spring and summer concoction. Add in the horror-themed comic label, complete with foil accents and art by Tim Seeley, and it's as close to perfection as suds get.



# Benchmark



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# The Sixth Glass Quad

**Boulevard Brewing Co.**  
Kansas City, Missouri

Since increasing its capacity and distribution in 2006, Boulevard Brewing Company has fast become one of the United States' premier microbreweries. Active since 1989, the Kansas City establishment claims the best-selling craft beer in the Midwest, Unfiltered Wheat. Simple advice: If you spot the rectangle-within-a-triangle logo, snatch up the bottle or four-pack. Nothing Boulevard releases is subpar.

Vide, the Sixth Glass, a Belgian-style quadrupel ale, replete with full-bodied personality and an enjoyable sweetness that will complement any dessert. From the copper-red appearance to the malt, candy, and fruity fragrances, to the rich, caramel taste—augmented with warm clove accents, toffee undertones, and brown-sugar inflections—the Sixth Glass does the Belgian tradition proud, and with a distinctive approach.

The finish is as good as the main course. A hint of bitterness, just enough so to round out what's a complex albeit very relaxed hybrid. Goes well with aged cheeses and spicy smoked meats, or solo on the back porch on a starry evening. Wonderful stuff. ●

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– Michael Fremer, *Stereophile* (January 2011)

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# Boccia Titanium Watch

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If you're seeking something a bit more "adult"-looking than a Swatch, the new Boccia Titanium collection should be on your radar. The beefy 45mm diameter case and rubber strap nicely accompany the assorted dial faces.

Like those belonging to Swatch, the plethora of cool colors and affordable price tags make it easy to have more than one in your watch drawer to complement your mood. The \$195 model features a full titanium band in black or natural titanium finish. Given that ladies now regularly wear men's watches, the 45mm size is unisex, while a 40mm size is available for more petite wrists.



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**A**udio historian and *TONE* Audio contributor Ken Kessler again takes to chronicling a legendary hi-fi company with style and insight on *KEF: 50 Years of Innovation and Sound*. Joined by former KEF engineer Dr. Andrew Watson, he starts with KEF's developmental origins, tracing the narrative back to Raymond Cooke's work at the BBC, and then, Wharfedale. Kessler's book illustrates KEF's humble beginnings in "the Nissen hut" and its rise as a high-technology company, all the way to its current ownership by Asian investment group Gold Peak.

Elegant design, and an abundance of pictures and interviews from many of KEF's top employees, makes for a fascinating read. Even if you don't own a KEF product, this concise journal will make you a fan. ●

# Post-Modern Analog

## Ortofon SPU Classic GM E Mk. II

By Jerold O'Brien

Whether talking about cars, beer, or sneakers, off-the-beaten-path solutions aren't necessarily for everyone, no matter how cool they might seem. Ortofon's SPU moving-coil phono cartridge came to life in 1959, designed by Robert Gundmansen (a 50-year veteran of the Ortofon company) as one of the first stereo phono cartridges. SPU stands for "Stereo Phono Pickup." The model was also one of the first moving-coil cartridges, and originally intended as a broadcast pickup.

The cartridge's seductive sound quickly made its way to the era's audiophiles, and represented a perfect fit for SME models and other tonearms utilizing a universal headshell-mounting system. The somewhat low-compliance SPU is heavy (30 grams) and includes an integral headshell comprised of Bakelite.

Eight variations on the design currently exist, and three are mono versions. Most share the conical stylus design of the original SPU, but the \$999 model reviewed here is the Classic GM E Mk. II, the only entry in the lineup featuring an elliptical stylus profile. It tracks at a fairly heavy 3.5-5 grams. Load to taste somewhere between 100 and 500 ohms, and keep in mind this vintage beauty only puts out .2mv. Hence, those with 58db phonostages will not be able to make optimum use of the cartridge.

### Pick a 'Table

If you're thinking this cartridge would combine fabulously with a Technics 1200, you're partially correct. However, the SPU's luscious sound is not the best fit for the dark sound produced by the stock SL1200. Swapping the stock arm for an SME 3009 (akin to the one we've had rebuilt and rewired by SMEtonearms.com) is the cat's meow: The arm provides the subtlety required to extract maximum performance from the SPU.

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## “Harbeth Monitors – the Choice of Music Professionals”

Harbeth speakers have the clarity, imaging, dynamics and fatigue-free character that I demand of speakers in my work. I highly recommend them! – Kevin Gray

*Coherent 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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### FEATURE

#### When the Shoe Fits

This cartridge will not be for everyone and every record, and unless you live on a steady diet of music from the 50s to the mid-70s, forget about employing it as a solitary cartridge. But that's what makes the 3009 so enjoyable; cartridge swaps are easy.

The SPU claims a likeable warmth and unmistakable tonality. If you're on a quest for tonal accuracy, pass, but if it is character you desire, you've come to the right place. The cartridge is the antithesis of the current A90, a fantastic performer, for certain, but then again, musical soul isn't always about high resolution. Think of the music played on many of today's best MC cartridges as a picture shot with the latest Leica M9 with a badass 50mm Summilux aspherical lens. Music played on the SPU is the same photo taken with a Leica M3 and similarly vintage 50mm lens and Kodachrome.

Do you prefer a crystal clear image with perfect fidelity, or do those tiny color fringes add romance and character? If you fall in the latter camp, the SPU will entice you. The SPU is all about major tonality. Set the conical stylus down on a Jimi Hendrix album and prepare to be blown out of your chair, Maxell style. Hendrix's guitar oozes so much soul, you can almost feel the grille cloth on his early Marshall cabinets flap. As it is with John Bonham's bass drum on the first two Led Zeppelin albums; it's more than just about adding weight to the presentation. The SPU provides a distinctive level of tonal saturation.



While publisher Jeff Dorgay uses the SPU with a similar SME arm and AVID Volvere SP turntable, *Stereophile* columnist Art Dudley actually inspired my obsession. His love for many things vintage and tubey parallels my own, and getting more in touch with the sonic essence of the music made for a great recon mission. The SPU grabbed me at first listen; this is indeed a special sound.

Installed in my SL 1200/SME 3009 'table, the integral headshell eliminates most of the set-up anxiety, as only azimuth and tracking force need to be set. The best balance of tracking and high-frequency response occurs at 4.1 grams.

## FEATURE

The key to successfully enjoying the SPU stems from playing favorite records that have a slightly compressed tonal range. Then, let the SPU do the work. Even some of today's pressings prove a perfect match for the SPU. If the LP sounds a little flat on your standard cartridge, there's an excellent chance it will come to life on the SPU. And if that sounds a little like a tone control, so be it.

### Both Sides Now

Remember, what the analog gods give, they also take away. Recordings with a ton of dynamic range come off sounding slightly lifeless. Music Matters' Blue Note pressings, which blast out of the speakers, are more subdued with the SPU, where the older originals really shine. It's exactly the opposite with a modern, high-performance MC cartridge; vintage discs are less exciting, yet the Music Matters discs explode.

While the SPU's lower register is a bit under-damped (which can be awesome in the right system), the high-frequency side is smooth and extended. And if you guessed that the elliptical stylus makes for a great tracker, you are correct, even if the idea of a little piece of diamond undulating through the groove walls at 4 grams is a bit unnerving.

Mids are where the music is at, and it's here where the SPU excels. Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young's classic *Deja Vu* offers great harmonies, and the SPU clarifies their individual voices with gusto. Play to the SPU's strengths and you might get spoiled for anything else.

Much like a pair of Quad 57s, the SPU does its thing with panache and might be better at painting a warm, musical, soulful picture of your records in a manner no other cartridge can. I'm now anxious to investigate other SPU models to see what they offer. ●

**Ortofon SPU Classic GM E Mk. II**

**MSRP: \$999**

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





# A Purist Masterpiece

**Simaudio Moon 810LP Phonestage**

By Jeff Dorgay

A cursory listen of Simaudio's flagship components is all that's needed to reveal that they boast cost-no-object performance at a fairly reasonable price. Producing everything in-house (even the elaborate casework, thanks to having a five-axis CNC machine in the shop) keeps costs down and quality control high. Granted, \$12k isn't exactly reasonable in everyone's budget. But in comparing the 810LP to similarly priced offerings from ARC, Burmester, Boulder, and the like—as well as our reference \$60k Vitus Audio MPP-201—it's clear Simaudio engineers produced a top-shelf phonestage.

During the initial 24 hours of play, the 810LP sounds slightly flat in terms of dynamics and a bit forward in the upper register. Don't panic. Half of it goes away after the first few days of the unit being continuously powered up. While you might take pause with your purchase right out of the box, you'll be on your way to vinyl nirvana within a week, and it only gets better moving forward. These aspects are not unique to Simaudio. Practically every solid-state component we've auditioned exhibits the same effects.



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PREVIEW

### Kapow!

Listening to the 810LP for the first time, one characteristic immediately springs to mind: it's super-quiet. To wit: In the world of four-color lithography, the maximum percentage of ink that can be addressed by any color is 100%. Which means you can't get more black without going to what is called four-color black, built by using all four of the available process colors and, effectively, going beyond 100% black. The 810LP is the aural equivalent of four-color black. Forget about "CD quiet." New LPs cleaned on the Audio Desk System and played through this Simaudio sound 24/192 quiet.

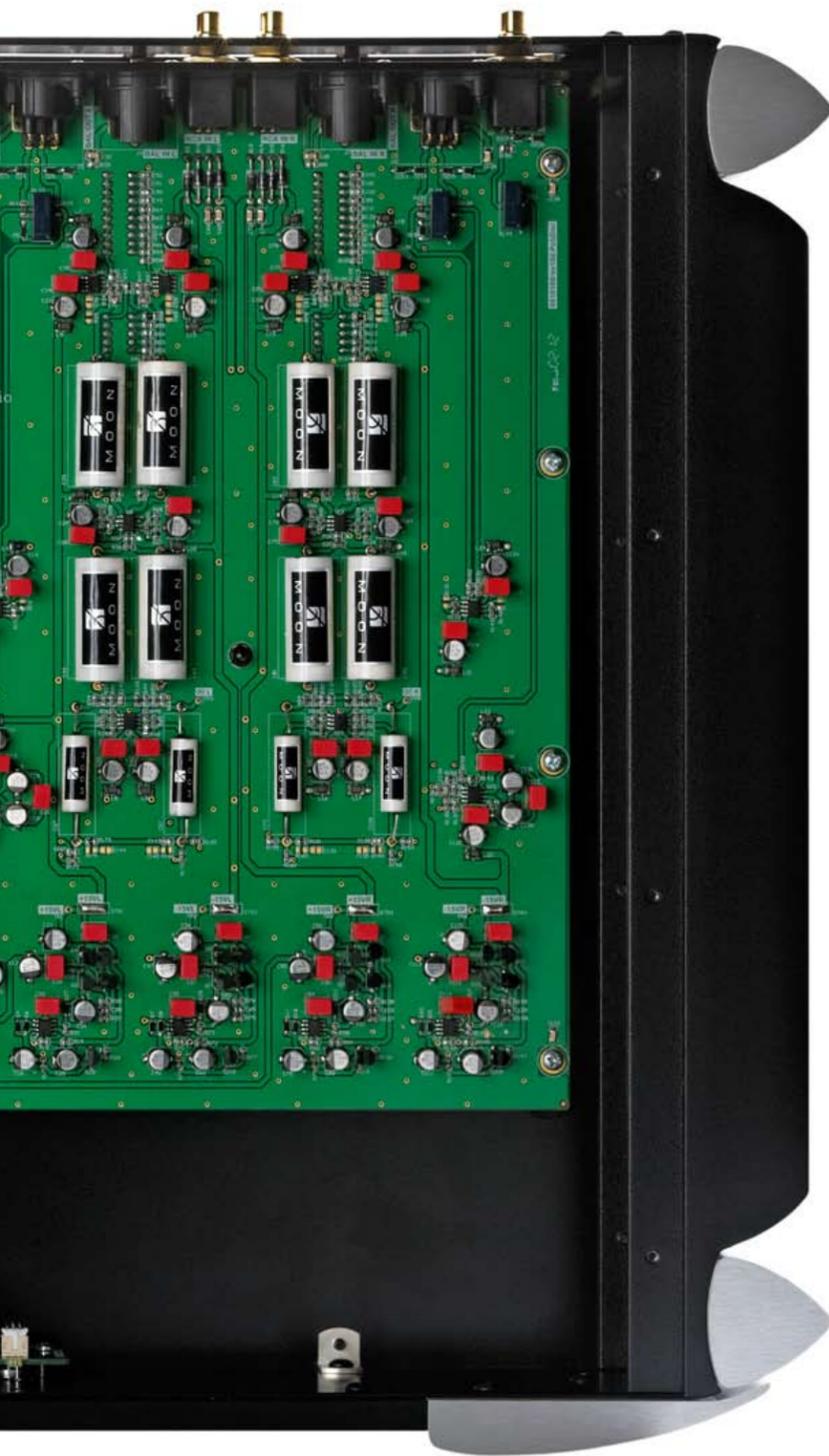
Should you begin your listening with a record possessing wide dynamic swings, like the new Analogue Productions copy of Shelby Lynne's *Just a Little Lovin'*, the 810LP confirms another major strength: dynamic contrast and impact.

### No Moon Rock Left Unturned

Removing the cover shows fanatic attention paid to every detail in construction—and why this phonostage commands big money. The M-Octave damping system fully floats the circuit board from the chassis, eliminating any ground or airborne vibrations, critical when amplifying a signal that starts out in the millionth of a volt range. A massive power supply is contained within a shielded environment and covered, utilizing large filter capacitors along with common mode chokes in a pi-type filter.

The 810LP is one of the few components we've tested that does not benefit in the least from any external power conditioning, a trait that testifies on behalf of its power-supply design. Go ahead: Plug this baby right into the wall without worry. (Nerd alert: the noise floor in the DC power supply is -150dB down from 1V.)





Moreover, this is a fully balanced, differential design featuring balanced XLR inputs and outputs in addition to single-ended RCA inputs and outputs. Much like a pair of headphones, a phono cartridge is a truly balanced device. Those in search of absolute maximum performance are advised to get their tonearm cable re-terminated to accommodate the Simaudio's balanced input.

Yes, the 810LP sounds stellar. However, analogaholics need to know a couple of things. The phonostage sports just one input and you must flip the unit over to set gain, loading, capacitance, and EQ, which probably means pulling it out of the rack every time you want to change settings. Listeners that own just one turntable, and that don't swap cartridges on a regular basis, won't notice this slight inconvenience. Audiophiles with multiple turntables should think about it—or just buy multiple 810LPs! Simaudio's VP of Marketing, Lionel Goodfield makes it clear that these choices were made in pursuit of a purist signal path. "We could have added multiple inputs, switching, and a remote control, but that would ultimately compromise sonics, and we didn't want that."

**For Now...**

The 810LP needs a few more hours on the clock for full evaluation, but it's highly impressive, and we've heard enough to highly recommend it. If you are shopping for a phonostage in the \$10,000 to \$20,000 range, put it on the short list. Watch for the full review on the new Analogaholic section of our Web site, totally devoted to all things analog.

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



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## Manley Chinook Phonostage

www.manleylabs.com  
\$2,250

Love the Manley Steelhead but don't have three turntables or an extra \$8k around? Put the Chinook on your short list. This one-input phonostage offers the ultimate in simplicity; the front panel just sports a solitary on/off button. MC gain and MM capacitance are set via easy-to-reach DIP switches on the rear panel and give you the option of 45db or 60db of gain—more than adequate for most cartridges.

Manley's tagline is "Tubes Rule," and after the 20 minutes it takes for the Chinook to fully warm up, it's instantly apparent. The Chinook is nice and quiet, a smidge on the romantic side, and, like a pair of Tannoy Westminsters, produces a big, dynamic sound. With sound this good for \$2,250, you'll feel like you won the lottery.



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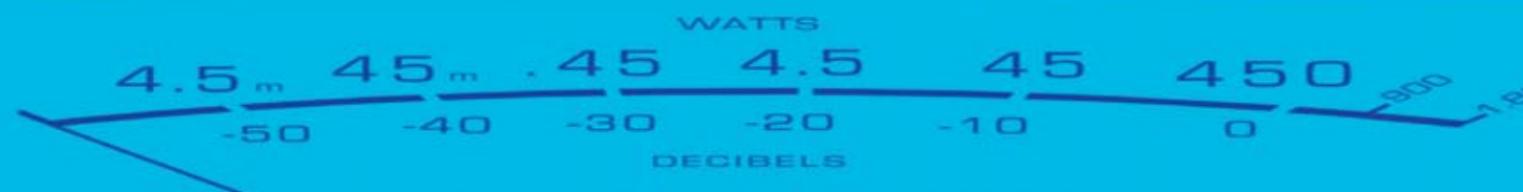
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PREVIEW

## Coffman Labs G-1A Preamplifier

[www.echohifi.com](http://www.echohifi.com)  
\$5,495

**R**emember when classic preamplifiers from Audio Research, Conrad-Johnson, and the like featured a high-quality, built-in phono stage? In keeping with the current vinyl craze, Coffman Labs' G-1A carries on the tradition.

This two-chassis design uses a basic, six-tube complement with external tube-regulated power supply. Designer Damon Coffman spent almost three years refining the preamplifier, experimenting with nearly 50 prototypes before settling on the final version. From the point-to-point wiring to the casework, nothing was left out of the equation.

An artisan product, the G-1A is limited to 500 units. Unlike much of the limited-edition tube gear we've seen, it does not rely on caches of long-out-of-production parts or NOS tubes purchased from Hobbits. The tube complement is simple: A pair of 12AX7s and 12AU7s for the phono stage, along with a pair of 5687s for the output stage. Did we mention the onboard, full-function headphone amplifier, with provision for both low- and high-impedance 'phones?

Bottom line: the G-1A is visually and sonically elegant. Watch for a full review shortly. ●

# DJ Heaven

## Origin Live Technics SL1200 Upgrade Kit

By Paul Rigby



Many people believe the Technics SL1200 roams the world in pairs in places where “scratching” is actually desirable, and where a lot of perfectly decent music is played backwards. You know what, Toto? We’re not in Kansas anymore.

But this DJ tool, often assigned to loft duties and has recently ceased production after 33 years, holds a secret. No joke, the Technics SL1200 is an audiophile turntable. Well, underneath—underneath the horrendous arm and useless feet, terrible cartridge, and ineffective slipmat. Enter UK-based outfit, Origin Live, which makes the strongest case for uncovering the SL1200’s sonic charms.

“One of my staff members who happened to have a Technics decided, for the fun of it, really, to put one of our Silver arms...on a SL1200, to see what it would do,” says founder and company director, Mark Baker. The staffer was shocked to discover that it out-performed his Linn Sondek. “He was a real audiophile nut. He encouraged me to make an armboard to allow others to fit the new arm too.

“It’s rigmarole to get any new arm to fit to the Technics. He fitted it with a piece of MDF.

I said that it would never catch on because the DJ world is not interested in high-quality sound. I agreed to give it a try. Even before it was reviewed, we began to get interest and started to sell one per day. At that time, it was purely an armboard thing because people can fit a regulation Rega RB250 arm to the deck. And the great thing is, because all of our arms are modeled on Rega geometry, you can drop any Rega or OL arm in there.”

**Power Corrupts**

After the armboard enhancement, the company developed an upgraded power supply (the Advanced) and then another, better upgraded power supply (the Ultra, fitted with superior components) along with a transformer. A set of upgraded feet followed, along with a platter mat. Voila! An upgrade kit existed that effectively transforms the SL1200 into a species of waterfowl that would have made Hans Christian Anderson proud.

Although the Technics upgrade is new, Origin is no stranger to upgrades or supplying quality components to other manufacturers. "For example," states Baker, "we have four manufacturers making decks in excess of \$16,000 (€11,500) that also buy our power supplies. For the last 15 years, we have been doing power supplies for every belt-driven deck under the sun. One of the most expensive supplies we do has been for the most expensive Transrotor, plus others like the Oracle, VPIs, Linns, and Roksans. The list goes on. The humble little upgrade power supply for the SL1200 is special, though. It will outperform massive Class A driven motors and the rest."

Upgraded Technics power supplies are not just designed to deliver low noise but have to cope with the terrific load from the motor, meaning that the instantaneous power delivery has to both be exceptional and boast very low impedance.

"The supplies are well regulated," says Baker, "with good ripple characteristics. The mains has a ripple, or pulsing effect, which threatens to introduce vibration onto the motor. We try and prevent that happening. For the armboard, most of our competitors utilize aluminium because it's cheap. But it doesn't sound anywhere as good as our product, which is made from a metal alloy that's very stiff and decouples the arm from the deck. The material is critical. Even the thickness is crucial. Anything thicker or thinner will not sound as good." *(continued)*



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## REVIEW

Origin Live supplies a range of arms priced in the hundreds that can be fitted to the Technics; others cost thousands. The company recommends upgrading no further than the \$2,200 (€1,550) Encounter. Anything more expensive, and you will be hitting diminishing returns and should upgrade the deck itself.

### Zero to Hero

I hooked an Origin Live Aladdin moving-iron cartridge into the basic SL1200 to act as a reference for both decks, and sat back to listen. The off-the-shelf SL1200 might not be described as fast in the bass, but when listening to Kate Bush's "p" from *Aerial*, the lower frequencies possess a measure of assurance and presence. Bass guitar features character and solidity. Midrange is decidedly sleepy, with an absence of any verve and attack on the initial movements within a typical acoustic guitar strum. With the Aladdin on board, all of the musical elements are laid out in front, but the deck flatly refuses to implement them. Upper mids suffer from masking that kills the excitement. The SL1200, in its basic guise, sounds like a well-meaning plumber with all of the knowledge and the wherewithal to do a great job, but who never gets off his backside to prove it.

I then connected the Origin Live Upgrade to the SL1200 with the Advanced power supply. First impressions after replaying the Bush track? The deck is coherent, with a relative avalanche of incisive detail and a 50% larger soundstage. Bass is now enjoyable, with a complete translation of every nuance within the lower registers. Where once a monotonous experience, the minor lifting and falling of bass fluctuations are a joy to behold. *(continued)*





**Midrange positively dances across the soundstage and across the rock-solid stereo image, which was a little wayward on the standard model. Midrange attack comes in buckets, and is best illustrated by the complex acoustic-guitar strumming.**

As for the mids? The plumber rose up and set to work! Midrange positively dances across the soundstage and across the rock-solid stereo image, which was a little wayward on the standard model. Midrange attack comes in buckets, and is best illustrated by the complex acoustic-guitar strumming. Vocals are more focused, more determined—even with a grain of emotion that makes the delivery more believable. New, previously hidden details also join the party.

Moving on and hooking up the Ultra power supply features the aforementioned advantages, plus extra bass weight and power. Bass also boasts newfound transparency and musicality, with a greater sense of rhythm. Midrange is akin to holding a conversation with someone who knows what he's talking about as opposed to someone who thinks he knows what he's talking about. The Ultra exhibits certainty, assuredness, and finality while also providing more information from deeper in the mix. Vocals dem-

onstrate more tonal variations, giving the performance more frailty, humanity, and chance to fail. In short, they sound real.

Spinning Kraftwerk's "Numbers" from *Computer World*, the Ultra-powered SL1200 comes across as supremely confident, offering big, sharp, attacking bass that reaches subterranean depths, giving the track a bigness that dominates the room along with short, sharp, fast, and punctuating synth stabs. The late entry of the sweeping synth only confirms that the

multi-tonal noise now emanates from a mature, self-assured turntable.

While the reverb behind the vocal on "They Say It's Wonderful" from John Coltrane & Johnny Hartman's self-titled album has the potential to destabilize weaker setups, the OL upgrade kept control, enabling Hartman to deliver his smooth vocal jazz. Coleman's sax stays restrained, too. A tough job to do effectively, yet the SL1200, assisted by the OL, digs deep into the mix to bring out the music's subtle nature. *(continued)*

## REVIEW

### Transformation

The Origin Live upgrade kit is a revelation. It takes a rough, unkempt, bad-mouthing, uncivilised turntable and turns it into a glowing, well-spoken, transparent, emotional, revealing audiophile entity. Adopting a Henry Higgins role, the company has taken the "pig" out of this particular *Pygmalion*. ●

Origin Live Technics SL1200 Upgrade Kit

Advanced Power Supply \$480/€338  
[black version \$562/€396]

Ultra Power Supply \$750/€529

Upgrade Transformer with kit \$302/€213

Replacement Feet and Damping Pads \$65/€46

Armboard \$75/€53

Origin Live Silver Arm \$1,100/€776

Origin Live Aladdin Cartridge \$807/€569

Platter Mat \$65/€46

### MANUFACTURER

Origin Live

### CONTACT

www.originlive.com

### PERIPHERALS

Phono Icon PS3

Preamplifier Aesthetix Calypso

Power Icon MB845 Monoblocks

Speakers Quad ESL-57

Cables Avid SCT, Avid ASC

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- Wayne Garcia, THE ABSOLUTE SOUND OCTOBER 2010

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REVIEW

Bringing Immediacy to the 'Table

# Audience Au24e Tonearm Cable

By Jeff Dorgay



The impedance and capacitance lurking in the short run of cable joining the phono cartridge to the phono preamplifier interface are important albeit often overlooked aspects. Some might argue that breaking the signal path with a connector compromises signal integrity. Yet, if there ever was a link in the audio chain that benefits from a few better strands of wire, this is it.

Analog and its associated tweaks continue to rise, yet, so do the number of users frustrated by the medium. Once the initial fever settles, that new turntable starts to feel like a slightly worn chew toy. The trinket still squeaks, but your tail doesn't wag like it did when you tore the plaything out of the wrapper.

Relax. It's not your fault. Audience's Richard Colburn says the company's inspiration for the Au24e tonearm cable came from the phono signal. "Taking the cable out of the compromise is what it's all about," he notes. When the interface is compromised, fine detail, high-frequency response, and microdynamics get sacrificed. He also stresses that this approach should not be confused with cartridge loading, which is a "completely different issue. This is optimization for the impedance characteristic of the cartridge itself."

#### A Choice of Cables

Three basic Au24e models comprise the line. The Low Z is optimized for cartridges with an internal impedance of 30 ohms or less; the High Z matches cartridges in the 30 to 100 ohms range; the MM is for 47k moving-magnet cartridges. Those using VPI turntables, or another brand with RCA jacks for the phono output, can save a few hundred bones since they don't require a more expensive (and more labor-intensive) DIN plug. Colburn suggests opting for the lower-impedance version if your cartridge is on the fence at 30 ohms.

*(continued)*

**Audience's Richard Colburn says the company's inspiration for the Au24e tonearm cable came from the phono signal. "Taking the cable out of the compromise is what it's all about," he notes.**



"It's truly **thrilling** to hear this level of sound quality from an amplifier with an \$895 price tag...this one could make a **crazed audiophile** out of you where you least expect it." - Jeff Dorgay, *TONEAudio* May 2011

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## Benefits of Optimization

Switching back and forth between the two decks, the Audience cable brings considerable immediacy to the 'table (pun intended). The layer of grain I've always found present in the 103 becomes greatly reduced, underscoring the Au24e's abilities as an incredible transducer.

Vide, the quietest passages in the Egberto Gismoti/Nana Vasconcelos collaboration *Duaz Vozes* now possess more air and space, and it feels as if the recording studio has grown larger. Both the leading and trailing edges of the attack on Vasconcelos' percussive excursions sound cleaner and more realistic. An identical experience comes via "Sun Song" on the Sheffield Labs pressing of Dave Grusin's *Discovered Again*.

Listening to other records I've spun extensively begets the same conclusion: There's a level of cleanliness now available that wasn't present before, and it's easy enough to go back to the control 'table and hear enough of a difference to justify the expense.

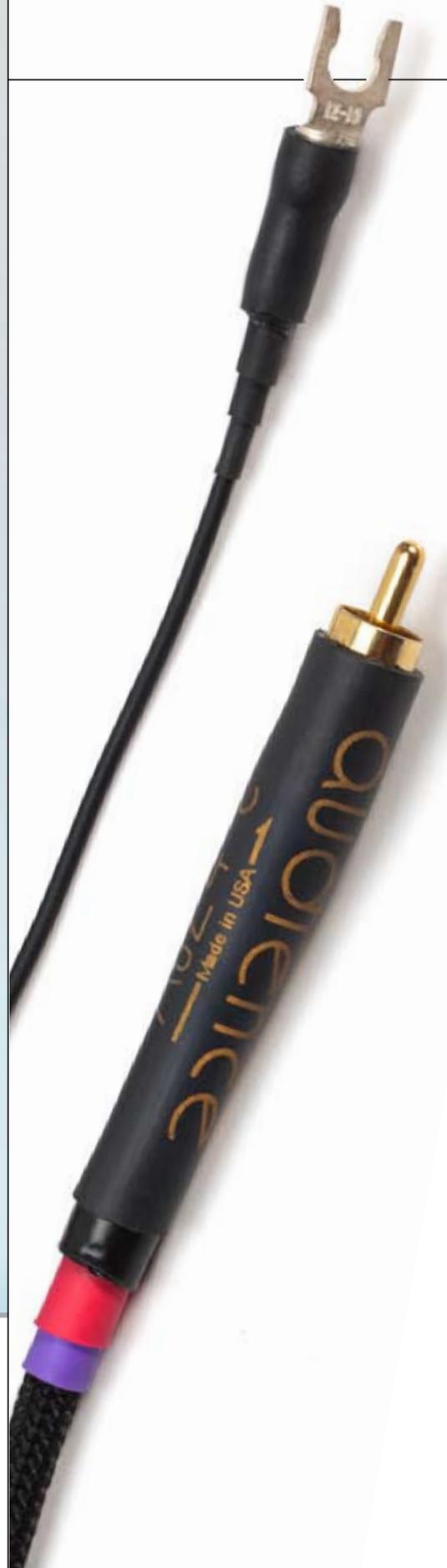
Remember, a great analog front end is a work in progress and always a cumulative proposition. I've found precious few things that are truly transformative, but every step in the right direction adds resolution without sacrificing in other areas. *(continued)*

The 1m version of the MM version is \$479 with RCAs, and \$729 with DIN; the MC versions are \$1,095 with RCA plugs at both ends, and \$1,295 with the DIN plug. All are made by hand and hand-terminated with Audience's latest Au24e cable, termination, and connector technology. As with all Audience cables, each is cryo-treated upon completion.

## Down to Business

I've been enamored with the sound of the highly musical Denon DL-103R cartridge and its variants for some time. I currently use the Zu Audio version, potted in a metal body with the AVID Volvere SP turntable and SME 309 tonearm, feeding an Audio Research REF Phono 2.

It's easy to get lost in cable comparison and freak yourself into thinking that you either hear a much bigger difference than is actually happening or, that you aren't able to hear anything at all. The miniscule signal present from a moving-coil cartridge only compounds matters. Even listeners with canine-quality hearing can get caught up in swapping a tonearm cable in and out of a system, and there's always the chance of knocking something out of alignment, corrupting the results. Fortunately, with another identical AVID Volvere 'table set up on the same rack, it's simple for me to make meaningful comparisons.



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- MICHAEL FREMER - *Stereophile* Vol. 35 No. 4 (April 2012)

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REVIEW

The Audience Au24e tonearm cable belongs in the latter category. Once I spent enough time between the two identical tables to confirm the difference, I moved the cable to a few other arm/combinations with equally positive results.

While this cable is not inexpensive, at \$1,100, it's not crazy money, either. I'm keeping it as a reference in my AVID Volvere SP/Funk Firm FX•R/Denon DL103R combination; it's that spectacular. Watch for a follow-up on the MM version in the near future. ●

**Audience Au24e Tonearm Cable**

**MSRP: \$479-\$1,295**  
(depending on configuration)



**MANUFACTURER**

Audience

**CONTACT**

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

**PERIPHERALS**

**Turntable** AVID Volvere SP/SME 309/  
Zu Denon 103 (premium grade)

**Phonostage**

Audio Research REF Phono 2

**Preamplifier**

Audio Research REF 5SE

**Power Amplifier** Octave Jubilee Monoblocks

**Speakers** GamuT S9

**Cable** Cardas Clear

**Power** Running Springs Dmitri, Maxim PLCs

**Accessories** Furutech DeMag, DeStat,  
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# As Clean As It Gets

## Audio Desk Systeme Vinyl Cleaner

By Lawrence Devoe

If you groove to the beautiful music that black vinyl discs produce, then you understand that there is a price of admission charged by the noise that gunks up the grooves.

The search for the ultimate groove cleaner, as older vinyl enthusiasts may remember, began with the Cecil E. Watts Dust Bug. Suction-mounted to the turntable plinth, it had a plastic arm terminating in a small brush and plush roller that swept the grooves and picked up, well, dust. The demand for more effective record cleaners led to automated or semi-automated machines. You could start with the VPI 16.5 or Nitty Gritty 1.0 (each about \$400 to \$500), or move to the mega-buck Keith Monks KMAL (about \$5000) professional record cleaner.

The vinyl renaissance has since yielded many options between such price extremes. By way of full disclosure, I own more than 10,000 LPs and two record cleaning machines, the VPI 17F and Loricraft PRC 3 (a “poor man’s” KMAL). I first saw the Audio Desk System Vinyl Cleaner at the 2011 T.H.E. Show. Robert Stein of Ultra Systems, the exclusive Audio Desk Systeme distributor in the US, kept dropping one LP after another into the gaping maw of this modern marvel. I was completely enthralled.

### There are Record Cleaners, and Then There are Record Cleaners

Audio Desk Systeme, Reiner Glass’ German-based company, specializes in LP and CD cleaning equipment. The ADS Vinyl Cleaner dramatically differs

from most other record cleaners that require placing your beloved platters on a turntable, applying some kind of cleaning fluid, and spinning the record. When one side is cleaned (often with a suction system), you have to flip the disc and clean the other side. It’s absolutely essential that the cleaner’s turntable surface remains ultra-clean. Otherwise, the previously cleaned side again becomes soiled.

By contrast, the ADS Vinyl Cleaner stands upright, eliminating the turntable from the equation. You add 4.5 liters of distilled water and a 20ml flagon of proprietary cleaning solution, which enter a reservoir. A proprietary sponge goes into a small side trough and, during the cleaning cycle, traps debris. *(continued)*

## REVIEW

The record is placed into a main trough between two rubber guides. Pushing the “on” button transfers the cleaning fluid from the reservoir to the trough that, when full, initiates a record spin cycle. Four microfiber rotors gently agitate the cleaning fluid around both record sides. After a minute or so, the fluid drains back into its reservoir, starting a four- to five-minute blow-dry cycle. A dinger indicates a complete cycle and, voila, out comes a super-clean record.

In layman’s terms, the cleaning process uses ultrasonic frequencies that create microbubbles and minute liquid jets that enter the grooves and literally blow out contaminants. For particularly dirty records, pressing the unit’s “on” button for a longer period extends cleaning time. A green light indicates a full fluid reservoir, a yellow light shines during cleaning, and a red light signals the need for a refill. One full tank of fluid handles up to 200 LPs, fewer if your discs are seriously grimy. The sponge needs to be periodically removed and squeezed out; microfiber rollers get replaced after cleaning 500 records. Fluid replacement is easily done via a release port on the unit’s rear of the unit and repeating the set-up process.



### Cleanliness is Next to Godliness

Buying any record cleaning system requires a significant leap of faith, particularly given when \$3895 is at stake. Will this finely engineered German machine resurrect your precious vinyl? After cleaning more than 500 LPs (all previously cleaned with one of my other record cleaners), I can assure you that before-and-after comparisons are simply no contest. The ADS cleaner brings out more life from my records, with noticeable reduction of surface noise. Most ticks and pops are gone. I continually hear details previously hidden within the grooves. Reduced surface noise also enables higher listening volume that comes without the audible nasties that have always been vinyl’s Achilles heel.

In the true sense of set it and forget it, this is the most user-friendly record cleaning system I have ever used. Is the ADS vinyl cleaner the answer to your analog prayers? If you have a large collection of new and/or used LPs, your investment already far exceeds the cost of ownership. The answer, then? A resounding yes! ●

#### Audio Desk System Vinyl Cleaner

MSRP: \$3895

#### MANUFACTURER

Audio Desk Systeme

#### CONTACT

audiodesksysteme.de (factory)  
ultrasystem.com (US importer)



# Effortless Performance

## The Pass XP-25 Phonostage

By Jacob Heilbrunn

# W

hen International Record Store Day came and went in April, it attracted a good deal of attention in the mainstream media. The *New York Times*, for example, devoted a piece to the resurgence of turntables. It was even written in a respectful fashion rather than suggesting a bunch of weirdoes is clinging to an obsolete contraption from the past (though, even if people were, it wouldn't necessarily be cause for shame).

The secret, in other words, is out. Vinyl ain't going nowhere. It's here to stay. As a result, not just LP manufacturers, but audio companies are going into overdrive to produce goods to satisfy a small albeit growing market. One such company is Pass Labs. Its eponymous name derives from fabled designer Nelson Pass, and it's now producing a phonostage called the XP-25, a unit designed by Wayne Colburn.





**The XP-25 represents a sonic breakthrough. Its combination of refinement and vanishingly low noise floor makes it a winner.**

Does the latter sound good? No. It sounds stellar. For \$10,600, it should sound excellent. Still the XP-25 represents a sonic breakthrough at that price level. Its combination of refinement and vanishingly low noise floor makes it a winner.

**Massive Dynamic**

To test the XP-25, I ran it extensively with my Continuum Caliburn turntable, which I've owned for almost five years, and my new reference cartridge, the Lyra Atlas, which claims an amazing ability to separate instrumental lines and possesses superb dynamics. It served as a great platform to assess the XP-25's performance. Pass has recently issued a number of new products, including a megawatt \$85,000 amplifier called Xs-300 that looks as though it has arc-welding capabilities. The XP-25, by contrast, is not in that price category. Nor does it appear particularly prepossessing. It comes in two fairly utilitarian-looking boxes. The first houses a sophisticated power supply; the second, the phonostage itself. The units are connected via a single computer cable, thin and extremely flexible. *(continued)*

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The XP-25 is a fully balanced design with both balanced and unbalanced outputs. If you own two turntables, then you're all set with the XP-25, which boasts two single-ended inputs. The XP-25 features three levels of gain: 53, 66, and 76dB. I opted for 66, which should prove more than ample for most systems, unless you're trying to blow your preamplifier to kingdom come. It also has a mute switch, a rumble filter, and separate knobs adjustments for capacitive loading of cartridges. All in all, a no-nonsense unit with just enough functionality to please most audiophiles.

If silence is golden, the XP-25 has definite bullion-like qualities. For one thing, it doesn't produce hiss or buzz. The black backgrounds are sensational. The lack of grit or noise allows the ear to relax on what amounts to a sonic

pillow. There's no hunching of the shoulders waiting for an aggressive treble transient to hit here, the kind that makes you wonder whether if it wouldn't be saner just to listen to the car radio rather than trying to dial in a high-end system.

Indeed, the XP-25 creates a blissful experience. Yup, it has plenty of pop and slam. But that's not really what the unit is about. Rather, it's about tranquility and nuance. Instruments just seem more present, to pop out in space more vividly when the backdrop is jet-black, as it is with the XP-25. The Pass is clearly a champion in the no-noise department. Via a Persuasions LP, I am particularly struck by the sense of space between the singers—it's possible to hear feet shuffling and other tiny auditory cues that enhance the sense of sonic realism.

*(continued)*

**The XP-25 is a fully balanced design with both balanced and unbalanced outputs. If you own two turntables, then you're all set with the XP-25, which boasts two single-ended inputs.**

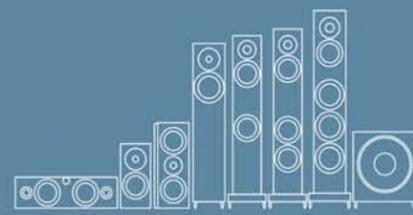
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Sure, it's a little hi-fi when you play gospel records in such a manner, but it sure can impress the heck out of your friends and neighbors, and it's good to have some fun with the system. This hobby is most emphatically not supposed to be about a bunch of audiophiles pretending to be white-coated lab technicians sitting in front of their stereos. Let it be, as the Beatles said.

### Strength in Details

Does the lack of noise also add a degree of finesse? To an extent. I listened very closely at a fairly low-volume setting to an Arkiv LP of Vivaldi's *Lute Concertos and Trios*. The XP-25's silence allows a particularly fine rendering in the slow movements, and where the tinkling of the harpsichord behind the lute and violin is barely audible, each note is clearly and finely rendered. So the Pass is very good at low-level detail retrieval.

Does the lack of tubes mean that its sound, as audiophiles are wont to say, is too "solid-state"? No. Intriguingly, the XP-25 sounds more tubey than some tubed units. Consider the recent remaster of Shelby Lynne's *Just a Little Lovin'*. On the cut "Anyone Who Had A Heart," her voice is smoother and more seductive than through some tubed units I have heard. How Pass pulls off this feat is an interesting question. Capacitors or wire or circuit design? I presume Pass would answer "all of the above." Whatever the technical response, the XP-25 definitely does not fall into the lean or astringent camp. Quite the contrary.

The smoothness of the XP-25 comes across most clearly on a wonderful remastering of trumpet great Lee Morgan's *The Procrastinator* [Music Matters]. On "Rio," which has a bossa-nova feel, I'm simply bowled over by the degree of finesse, filigree of detail, sheen of the cymbals. *(continued)*





It made me realize once more what a terrible loss Morgan's early death, at the hands of his aggrieved common-law wife, who shot him in February 1972 at the East Village nightclub Slugs, remains.

**Top of the Heap**

Despite its prowess, the XP-25 faces stiff competition. No, not at \$10k. At that price level, it becomes a matter of taste and preference. As stated above, I'm hard-pressed to think of a phono-stage that will surpass the XP-25's performance in its price region. Sure, move up into nosebleed territory and you can get more. For more money. My own Ypsilon phono-stage takes up the performance one more notch in terms of dimensionality and sinuous musical lines. But it also costs more than twice as much. For anyone owning a mega-buck phono-stage, the XP-25 is likely to give pause. Is it really necessary to spend more? Will there be a quantum leap in performance above the Pass? Nope.

Given the state of the hobby, the XP-25 represents a good value. It comes near the bleeding edge in performance, but its price—expensive by any reasonable measure—is not stratospheric, at least by current standards. Another plus is that, unlike some more exotic equipment, the Pass exudes reliability. Its build quality seems rock-solid. It's difficult to imagine anything going wrong with it. The model exudes the appearance of a piece of equipment that does nothing but sit there and play and play.

Anyone in the market for a high-end phono-stage should consider auditioning the XP-25. You may find yourself most impressed by what it does not do. I am.

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## Additional Comments

Jeff Dorgay

Pass is certainly popular here at *TONEAudio*.

Contributor Lawrence Devoe also uses the XP-25 in his reference system, and I will be keeping the XP-25 after it returns from Mr. Heilbrunn. I concur with Heilbrunn that there are still a few more molecules of analog performance to be mined, but nothing else wraps ease of use, versatility, and overall high performance into one package like the XP-25.

While the XP-25's performance is commensurate with the sticker price, analog enthusiasts that own turntables with multiple tonearms and/or removable headshells, and who are often prone to switching cartridges, will be in heaven. All the adjustments are right upfront and easy to read, making fine-tuning a snap.

Auditioning the XP-25 with about a dozen different cartridges, from the meager Shure M97 all the way up to the Lyra Atlas, is a treat. Nothing threw this phono-stage a curveball it couldn't hit. Turn it on and forget about it. It reaches full bloom after about three days of being continuously powered up. Those worried about their carbon footprint, rest assured: At .15/kwh, the XP-25 costs about \$2.50 per month to leave on. In these days of \$100 monthly cable bills, it's a small price to pay for sonic bliss. ●



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# From The Beginning

## VPI Classic 1 Turntable

By Jeff Dorgay

It's easy to compare turntables to vehicles, and for good reason: They share a related sense of implementation and involvement. Much like vehicles of the two- and four-wheeled persuasion, a turntable requires more knowledge and guardianship than just turning a key to achieve a rich experience.

Rather than like eye-catching European automobiles to which high-end turntables are often contrasted, the VPI Classic 1 is more akin to an unmarked mid-90s Ford Crown Victoria Police Interceptor, recently decommissioned and returned to service as a street car. Casual observation yields few clues to what lurks under the hood, but careful scrutiny reveals a very purposeful vehicle. Everything, including the engine and suspension, is calibrated for high-speed performance.

The VPI Classic 1 boasts analogous aspects. In today's world of superfly, bling-laden turntables, it's easy to pass by the Classic 1 from an aesthetics standpoint—just like every teenager that has sped right past an unmarked squad car. Don't be fooled by the basic wood trim and lack of plating. The Classic 1 is purpose-built. There's no fancy casework, external power supply, or exotic wiring. It doesn't have a dust cover or tonearm cable.



An output pod with RCA jacks and a grounding terminal lurk at the rear corner of the plinth. There's a quick-release connector, meaning tonearm wands are easily interchanged and cartridges effortlessly swapped. And since Lyra's Kleos and Kleos mono cartridges possess identical bodies and parameters, the switch between stereo to mono is a snap.

While it flies in the face of convention, the Classic 1 differs from VPI's other 'tables given that its AC synchronous motor is mounted to the plinth (rather than the motor housed in a separate enclosure). Thanks to careful mounting and fine-tuning, no vibration creeps into the presentation. Yes, the Classic 1 boasts a big sound. Al DiMeola, Paco de Lucia, and John McLaughlin's acoustic guitars seemingly appear out of nowhere as the stylus travels the grooves of ORG Music's recently remastered *A Night In San Francisco*. Wonderful guitar tones linger, applause swells from the soundstage, and the percussive thud of feet stamping on the stage leaps from the speakers.

### The Soul of a Much Bigger Turntable

The Classic 1's distinctiveness relates to its build and ability to extract musical soul from an LP in a way few under-\$10k record players can muster. I've unboxed too many \$3,000 turntables that my dog could chew to bits in a matter of seconds. VPI's robust construction puts any such fears to rest. The unit weighs 60 pounds, nearly a third of which is concentrated in the solid aluminum platter.

Playing through the new Audio Research REF Phono 2 SE, the Classic 1 ably cruises through recent Music Matters Blue Note remasters. Comparing the playback on "Scrapple From the Apple" (from Dexter Gordon's *Our Man In Paris*) between the Classic 1 fitted with the Kleos cartridge to Lyra's flagship mounted to my reference AVID Acutus Reference SP with TriPlanar arm reveals the Classic 1's ability to cover the basics—rhythmically and dynamically. Of course, the AVID/TP combination offers a larger dynamic swing, but the Classic 1

always captures the essence of the performance, with Gordon's tenor sax escaping out into the room in a manner it doesn't via lesser turntables.

In the context of a system comprised of the factory-rebuilt CJ MV-50 amplifier, Coffman Labs preamplifier, and Harbeth Compact 7ES-3s, the Classic 1 paints a larger musical picture than one might think could sprout from such diminutive speakers. The Classic 1's tonal body will thrill you when listening to vocal-dominant material. Whether you prefer Johnny Cash, Dusty Springfield, or Diamanda Galas, the 'table's weightlessness will leave you swearing you're listening to something with a much higher price tag.

Such advantages should keep classical and hard rock aficionados equally happy. A quick spin of the recent Black Keys LP demonstrates the Classic 1's capabilities. The grungy guitars, only part of a large noise ball on an entry-level 'table, now have well-defined space and texture. It feels as if a wall of

amplifiers is in the room. A recording that always feels too densely packed, Fear's self-titled album now offers more bloom. Singer Lee Ving's vocals are no longer drowned out by raging guitars on "Let's Have a War," and the saxophone lead on "New York's Alright if You Like Saxophones" is truly discernible.

Increasing the volume to near concert-hall levels reveals a total absence of acoustic feedback—especially impressive for a non-suspended turntable. With the volume control on the ARC REF 5SE at 70, the woofers of my GamuT S9s remain controlled, no matter the program material. Plus, the Classic 1 generates a prodigious soundfield in both dimensions. All of the twinkly bits on Jean Michel Jarre's *Equinoxe* float around like funnel clouds.

### What You Don't Get

The world's finest turntable/tonearm combinations require no sacrifices on the part of the listener. They feature enormous dynamics, a wide tonal palette, incredibly low noise floors, and virtually perfect speed accuracy. *(continued)*

**There's a quick-release connector, meaning tonearm wands are easily interchanged and cartridges effortlessly swapped. And since Lyra's Kleos and Kleos mono cartridges possess identical bodies and parameters, the switch between stereo to mono is a snap.**



**The Classic 1's strength stems from its balance. No single parameter is given priority, and because no area is deficient, the resulting blend allows you to concentrate on the music. It's a tough balance to achieve at any price.**

All are prerequisites if and when one is asked to spend crazy money on a record player. The Classic 1's strength stems from its balance. No single parameter is given priority, and because no area is deficient, the resulting blend allows you to concentrate on the music. It's a tough balance to achieve at any price.

No, you don't get any excess aesthetic touches. This is a record-playing machine, not a piece of fine jewelry. However, the product's honesty is refreshing. Founder Harry Weisfeld's son, Mat, emphasizes that VPI's business philosophy and attention to the bottom line are responsible for the Classic 1's amazing price. Not only is the Classic 1 made in America, all VPI turntable components are produced locally. "This keeps costs way down and minimizes the shipping expenses necessary to get parts to the factory," says Weisfeld. "My Dad always kept an eye on the bottom line, allowing us the ability to offer a great product at a fair price, so everyone can earn a living." The Classic 1 has the same 600RPM drive Motor as the Classic 2, as well as other key, bulk-purchased components. *(continued)*



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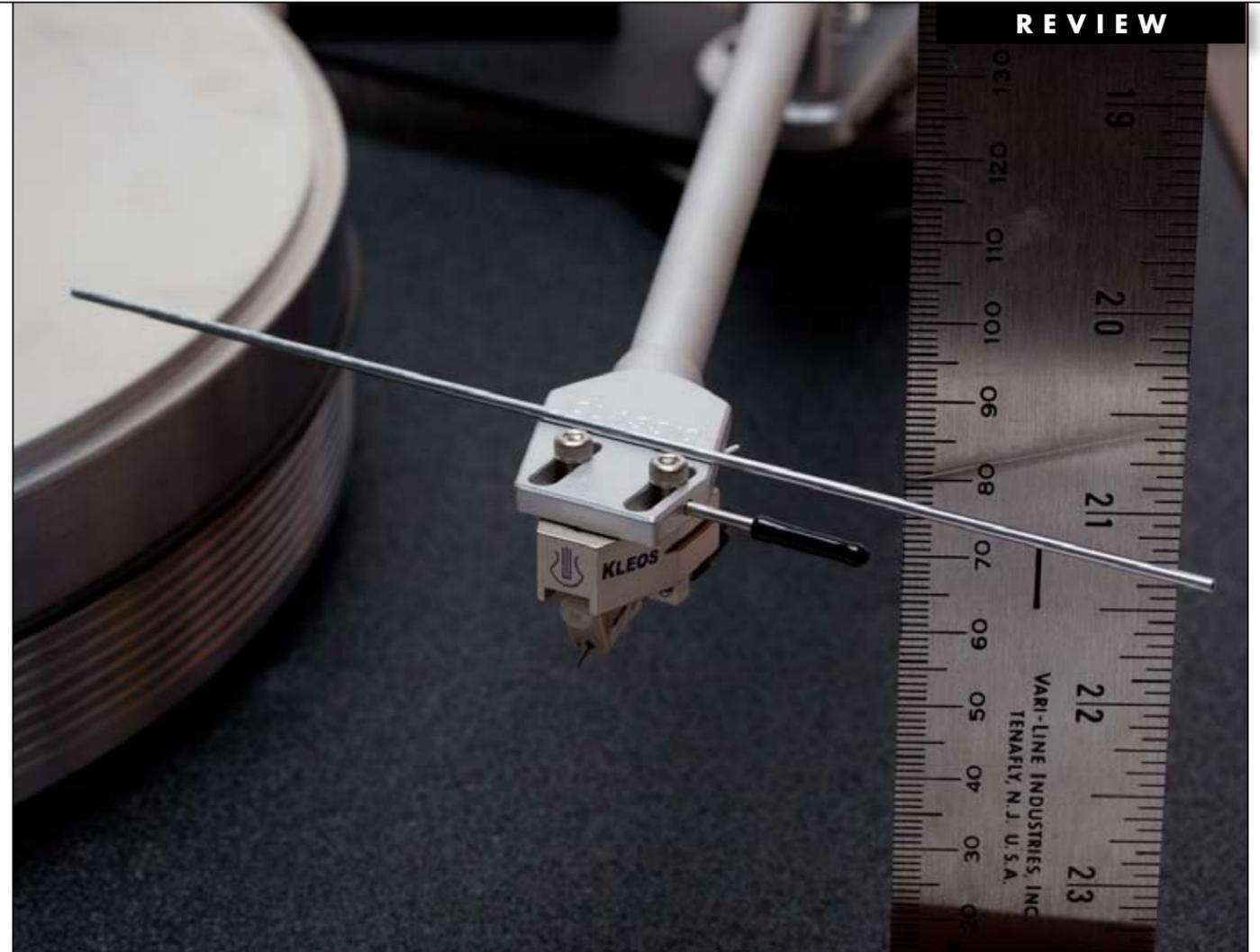


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**The Classic 2 provides the ability to set VTA (vertical tracking angle) on the fly.**

### Which Model?

VPI's new Classic 4, with two tonearms, is catnip to this analogaholic. While it is the ultimate expression of the Classic concept, the \$10k 'table isn't as stealthily priced as the entry-level Classic. Other models in the Classic lineup offer more performance and versatility, albeit at higher cost. The Classic 2 (\$3,495) provides the ability to set VTA (vertical tracking angle) on the fly, which needn't be a concern to those relatively monogamous with cartridges.

Thanks to a more massive plinth and the addition of VPI's Ring Clamp, HR-X weight, and 300RPM

motor, the almost twice-as-expensive Classic 3 (\$5,995) presents serious sonic upgrades over the 1 and 2. For better rigidity, the 3 also upgrades from aluminum to stainless the armtube on the JMW 10.5i tonearm. Additionally, the copper tonearm wire is upgraded to Nordost's legendary Valhalla.

Overwhelmed? Begin with the Classic 1 and just start playing records, dammit. The Classic range is fully upgradeable, so you can take a Classic 1 all the way to the Classic 4 level, should analog madness get the best of you.

*(continued)*



**Keeping Perspective**

Remember, analog is about flavor. The Classic 1 might not be for you, but it turns me on. And while I won't be putting my reference AVID decks on the auction block, listening to the Classic 1 is so enjoyable, it's easy to forget about high-zoot hardware. Some days you want to drive the Porsche, some days you want to drive the police car.

Listeners that don't want a harem of analog playthings, take note: Match the Classic 1 with a great phono-stage, and a solid cartridge (I suggest the Lyra Kleos), and relax. Price be damned, the Classic 1 is one of the most engaging turntables I've had the pleasure to use. For \$2,750, it's a steal. Sure, more performance can be had, but it will cost you at least \$5k-\$10k, whether or not you move to a different platform or upgrade within VPI's ranks.

The Classic 1 is highly deserving of our Exceptional Value Award. It exemplifies the concept. ●

**VPI Classic 1 Turntable**  
**MSRP: \$2,750**

**MANUFACTURER**  
 VPI Industries, Inc

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

**PERIPHERALS**

**Cartridges** Lyra Kleos, Kleos Mono and Titan i, Sumiko Pearwood and Palo Santos, Grado Statement 1, Dynavector DV-20xl, Rega Apheta

**Phonostages** ARC REF Phono 2 SE, ARC PH8, Manley Chinook

**Preamplifier** ARC REF 5 SE, Burmester 011

**Power Amplifier** ARC REF 150, Burmester 911 mk. 3, Coffman Labs PR-01

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# From the Web site

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## Pro-Ject Debut Carbon Turntable

\$399  
[www.sumikoaudio.net](http://www.sumikoaudio.net)

**V**inyl newcomers flocking to Pro-Ject's Debut turntable have another reason to celebrate. The company's Carbon model raises the bar with an Ortofon 2M Red cartridge and new carbon-fiber tonearm. And don't forget the cool color choices.

Easy setup seems tailor-made for budding vinyl enthusiasts. The cartridge is preinstalled, and a quick check of the alignment with my Feickert Analog tools reveals good accuracy, so you can roll with the factory setup. The rest of the process—fixing the belt, installing the platter, and adding the counterweight and anti-skate weight takes five minutes. Then you're ready to spin records. And that's what it's all about.

Read the full review here. ●

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

Legendary amplifier manufacturer Bob Carver returns with his latest crop of amplifiers. And this time, they're all vacuum-tube designs. Utilizing basic input tubes (12AX7, 12AT, and 6AL5) and six KT88s per channel, these monoblocks are rated at 200 watts per channel into eight ohms, 230 watts into four ohm loads, and 215 into the two ohm taps.

The compact VTA 180Ms sizzle, with a switch offering 20db of feedback in "Classic Amplifier" mode and only 11db in "Contemporary Amplifier" mode, thus allowing you to choose mellow or modern sound. Both are glorious. Hand-made with point to point wiring in the company's Lexington, Kentucky factory, these workhorses provide performance that far exceeds their cost and remain able to drive the toughest loads with ease. The Magnepan 1.7s and MartinLogan Summits don't even present a problem.

Of course, if 200 watts per channel still isn't enough, consider Carver's VTA 305M amplifiers, which offer another 100 watts per channel thanks to even beefier transformers that take full advantage of the KT120 tube's additional power capabilities.

Read the full review of the VTA 180M here. ●

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# Slummin'

By Jeff Dorgay

## Technics SL1300

eBay, \$99

**W**hen buying used automobiles, the description “needs nothing” usually means “piece of junk.” So why would it be any different when acquiring a secondhand turntable? This little beauty was advertised in “pretty good shape,” and the buyer had positive feedback. Yikes.

But who knows? Maybe there is a place where products bathed in cigarette smoke, complete with burns in the dust cover, translates as “pretty good shape.” Maybe we are just snooty audiophiles here.

While the shipper plastered the box with “Fragile” stickers, the ‘table was loosely wrapped with one layer of bubble wrap—the cheap, tiny sort—and thrown in a large box. The best part of the story? Even though this ‘table had bounced around all the way from Kentucky to Oregon, and arrived in a pile of pieces, the damn thing works just fine, a testament to Technics build quality.



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

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

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

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

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

The Cable Company: [www.thecableco.com](http://www.thecableco.com)

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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)

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Lyra: [www.lyraanalog.com](http://www.lyraanalog.com)

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

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

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

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

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