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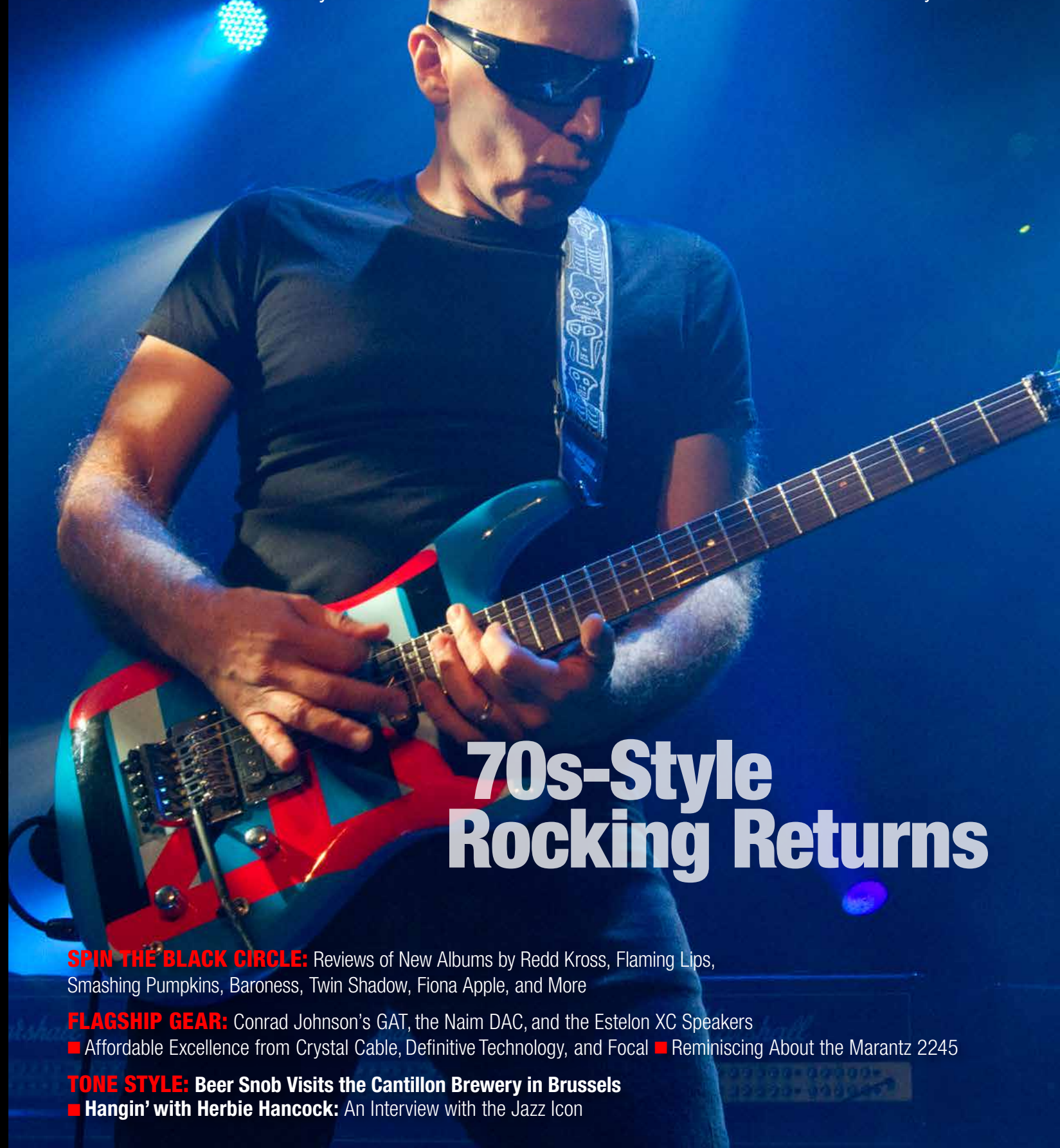
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# TONEAudio

Music.Gear.Style.

No.47 July 2012



## 70s-Style Rocking Returns

**SPIN THE BLACK CIRCLE:** Reviews of New Albums by Redd Kross, Flaming Lips, Smashing Pumpkins, Baroness, Twin Shadow, Fiona Apple, and More

**FLAGSHIP GEAR:** Conrad Johnson's GAT, the Naim DAC, and the Estelon XC Speakers  
■ Affordable Excellence from Crystal Cable, Definitive Technology, and Focal ■ Reminiscing About the Marantz 2245

**TONE STYLE:** Beer Snob Visits the Cantillon Brewery in Brussels  
■ Hangin' with Herbie Hancock: An Interview with the Jazz Icon





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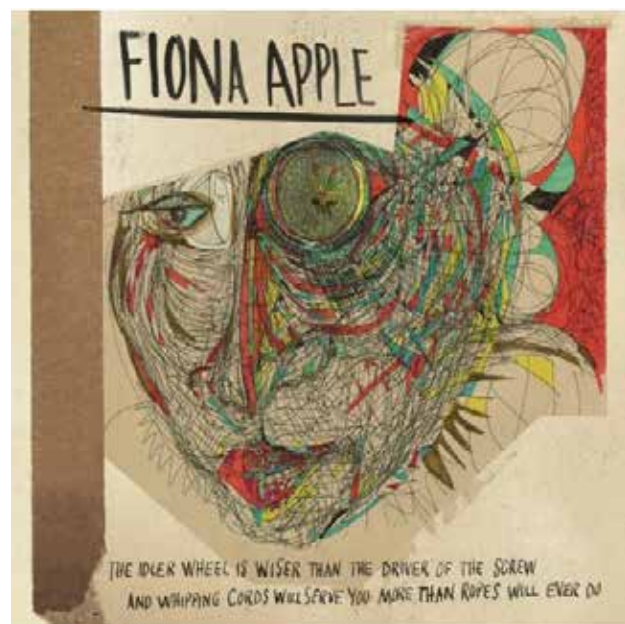


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# PUBLISHER'S LETTER

Many changes are happening behind the scenes at *TONEAudio*. We are adding Web space to broaden our coverage and ultimately assist you with a wider range of music and gear. We hope you will "pardon our dust" as we knock out some walls and add a few rooms, all prompted by reader interaction.

We are excited to announce a strategic partnership with John Darko, the creator of *Digital Audio Review*. A British ex-pat living in Australia, he will deliver a unique Aussie-filtered take on music and audio. And, since he's a music lover that won't hesitate to jump on a plane and fly half way around the world to see a great concert—Darko plans on joining Music Editor Bob Gendron and I for the ATP festival in New Jersey this fall—he embraces our music-first policy quite well.



Beginning next issue, frequent contributor Bailey S. Barnard will step up and become our gear and Style editor, drawing on his vast experience at *The Robb Report*. He's another music lover that's been known to pick up his guitar and sit in on a session, and of course, he will help us continue our search for interesting things that enhance the musical experience. Plus, he does a brilliant job on the Herbie Hancock interview featured on page 123 of this issue.

Mr. Gendron, who has served as the magazine's editor for more than a year, will remain Music Editor. He's voluntarily relinquishing some of his former duties to focus on other pursuits and free up some time so he can get back to writing more about records, concerts, and the like.

Also starting next issue, world-renowned audio journalist Ken Kessler assumes ownership of our "Old School" column as *TONEAudio*'s official audio historian. Having produced books on Quad, McIntosh, and KEF, Kessler brings a wider knowledge of audio's past than anyone. We will feature broader coverage of vintage gear in the months to come.

In case you haven't noticed, we're in the process of launching three more associated Web sites. Analogaholic is devoted to all-things analog, including various tape formats. MACRO is concerned with close-up sound—small speakers, amps, electronics, DACs, headphones, and the entire cross section of computer audio. And last but not least, our new 995 site seeks out the best high-value/low-priced components.

Yes, it's a busy summer here at *TONEAudio*. I hope you have a few minutes to spare in your schedule to flip through our expanded pages. And, should you be attending the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest this October 12-14, please stop by the *TONEAudio* Chill Out room. We'll be next door to VPI and bringing a mix of vintage and classic gear to spin favorite music and meet readers.



## AUDIOPHILE WHEEL of FORTUNE



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**Park West**

Chicago, Illinois

**May 10, 2012**

By Bob Gendron

Photos by Kaitlin FencI

# Justin Townes Earle

Justin Townes Earle's songs are preoccupied with location. Akin to the legendary folkies and blues troubadours that inspire his craft, the singer-songwriter recognizes the importance, believability, and weight that geographical particulars lend to narratives. While any tunesmith can conjure up fiction with imagined *mise en scene*, rarer are lyricists that draw from lived experiences, mistakes, and regrets—and leave them hanging, as if laundry out on a clothesline, for all to see.

Deflecting apparent shyness with mumbled remarks, humorous wit, and nervous tics, Earle embraced autobiographical detail and wanderer eclecticism at a near-capacity Park West during a performance that echoed storytelling traditions established at Chicago's long-gone Earl of Old Town club.





**“No Steve. He left when I was two,” Earle recalled as he recounted his upbringing, wounds still obviously raw.**

Outfitted in a sports coat, tie, and throwback bifocals, Earle kept his head on a swivel, never looking directly out at the crowd and constantly finding new positions in which to bend his neck and shoulders. Anxiety aside, he briefly addressed his infamous father, Steve, only because doing so made his mother appear even more tolerant. “No Steve. He left when I was two,” Earle recalled as he recounted his upbringing, wounds still obviously raw.

A roadhouse veteran, the 30-year-old performed several songs solo, assuming a minstrel capacity for the acoustic “They Killed John Henry” and channeling old-school Texas blues during Lightnin’ Hopkins’ “I Been Burning Bad Gasoline,” a pick-and-strummer loaded with clever sexual metaphors supported by the Tennessee native’s understatedly impressive guitar technique. Yet Earle’s fare took on deeper relevance when backed by a sturdy, organic, minimalist three-piece band—and also when prefaced by anecdotes and confessions.

“If I don’t think Woody Guthrie would do it, then I won’t do it,” he announced early on amidst the 95-minute set. Then again, it’s doubtful Guthrie ever brought as much trouble on himself in such a relatively short span as the former

drug and alcohol addict. Singing with a rye-mash drawl, Earle repeatedly addressed heartache and hurt, couching melancholic feelings amidst sweeping Memphis shuffles (“Look the Other Way”), woozy ballads (“Lower East Side”), slow-dance invitations (“Am I That Lonely Tonight”), and slinky country-folk (“Won’t Be the Last Time”). The latter closed with Earle’s voice stumbling in the manner one imagines the protagonist might when coming through the door after indulging in a few rounds to momentarily dull their pain.

Speaking as someone hoping to learn from his missteps and prevent further self-inflicted traumatic incidents, Earle admitted his weaknesses in choosing places to live (the hushed, hungover “Rogers Park” and jazzy “One More Night”) and making clean breaks with ex-mates (“Nothing’s Gonna Change the Way You Feel About Me Now,” “Anna”), punctuating these compositions with informative background introductions that added to his charisma and honesty.

No prelude framed “Harlem River Blues,” however, and none was needed. Graced with four-part harmonies, the upbeat gospel-drenched anthem came on as the sound of rebirth and renewal, reflecting the state of Earle himself.





**Arlene Schnitzer Hall**

Portland, Oregon

**June 3, 2012**Text and Photos by  
Jeff Dorgay

**M**erely uttering the word “supergroup” makes most devout rock fans cringe, given they realize greatness seldom springs from bands often formed more frequently by marketing departments than musicians sharing a common desire to play together. It’s also tough not to be polarized about Sammy Hagar. You love or hate him from his Van Hagar days, remember or forget about his Red Rocker era, or simply recall him as the frontman for Montrose.

While Hagar doesn’t write the world’s deepest lyrics, he always brings a full bottle of tequila to the party and unfailingly gives 110% onstage. Joined by Chickenfoot members Joe Satriani on lead guitar, Michael Anthony on bass, and Kenny Aronoff (filling in for Chad Smith, on tour with the Red Hot Chili Peppers) on drums, Hagar currently claims a perfect support cast to achieve his aims. He also remains somebody with whom you’d want to share a drink. Or two.

# Chickenfoot



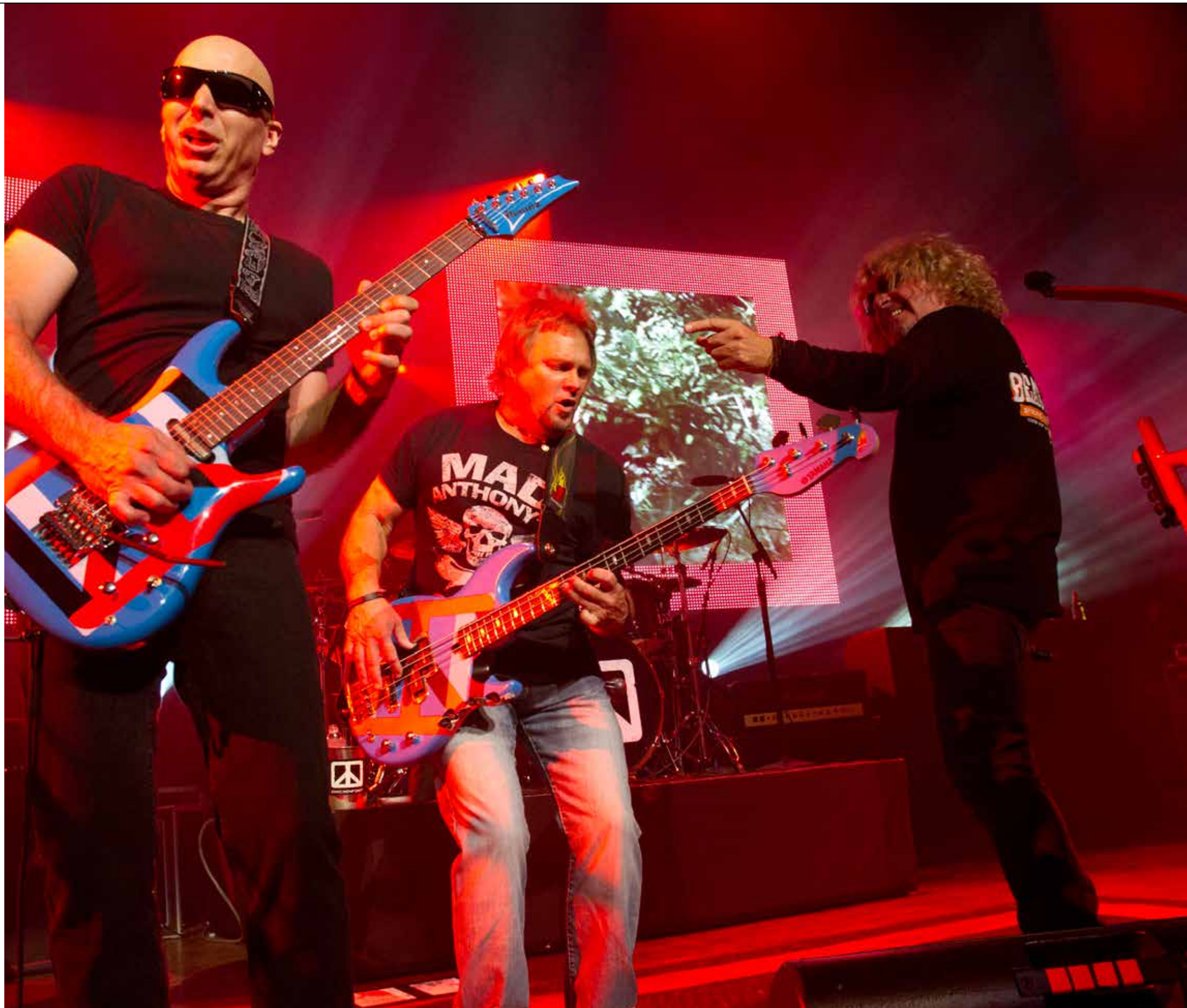


## LIVE MUSIC

Vide, fans from the VIP Meet and Greet clustered near the stage, where a woman told me she paid \$550 for the privilege and will do it again when the band plays Santa Barbara. “This is not like other meet and greets, where you see the band across the room. These guys make a point to hang out with you.”

Displaying visible electricity, Hagar immediately lit up the stage like a fully charged Tesla coil, cutting a big swath as he bounded from one side to the other. Yet the singer never hogged the spotlight. Such chemistry is the secret to Chickenfoot’s success; these guys genuinely seem to enjoy each other’s company. No one gets lost in extended noodling and even Satriani, a virtuoso that in the past remained content to stay close to his wall of Marshall amps, stepped up to the microphone with regular frequency to contribute backing vocals.

But the biggest surprise stemmed from witnessing the liberation of Anthony. No longer in the background, or looked upon as a step-child like when he was in Van Halen, he let loose with great bass riffs that were part rock, part fusion—and always heavy. His fingers ripped up and down the neck like those belonging to a lead guitarist. Unchained and giddy, he resembled a man recently let out of prison.



## LIVE MUSIC

Chickenfoot played at maximum intensity from start to finish, slowing only briefly for “Something Going Wrong” and the chance for Satriani to drag out his double neck. Before long, the tachometer resumed redline status on the band’s ode to NASCAR, “Turnin’ Left,” as Hagar and Anthony leaped off the drummer.

During the intro of “Last Temptation,” Hagar reflected on the recent passing of his manager as well as several other musicians that expired over last few months. He proclaimed he’s now approaching every show as if it’s his last.

The conviction is admirable. Hagar is almost 65, but doesn’t look a day over 40, and he belted out high notes as well as he did in his younger days. He’s no slouch on guitar, either. Sure, he only pulled out his red Les Paul for “Oh Yeah,” but it’s obvious he’s picked up a few tricks from having played with a number of rock’s top guitarists.

While the Rolling Stones once lamented the idea of playing “Satisfaction” when they were in their 40s, Hagar saved “Rock Candy” for the encore (dedicating it to fallen bandmate Ronnie Montrose) and relished every second of it. Perhaps his next bottling venture should be whatever keeps him looking this good. If so, he should sell a couple of cases to Mick and Keith. ●



# Hellfest 2012

Fires burned bright and hot at Hellfest 2012, an annual open-air music festival that unfolded over three days in mid-June in Clisson, France.



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FESTIVAL



Peace sells, but who's buying? Megadeth leader Dave Mustaine (corner right) pulled out the double-neck guitar as he and bandmate Chris Broderick (top) kicked out the jams.

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FESTIVAL

Gimme a cigarette: Missing only his trademark smoke, guitarist Slash, fresh off his Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction with Guns N' Roses, flashed Les Paul licks while playing new solo tunes and old favorites.





FESTIVAL

Aye, matey! Norwegian glam-punk band Turbonegro brought good-time noise and advertised the newest MAC eye-makeup line during a crazed set.



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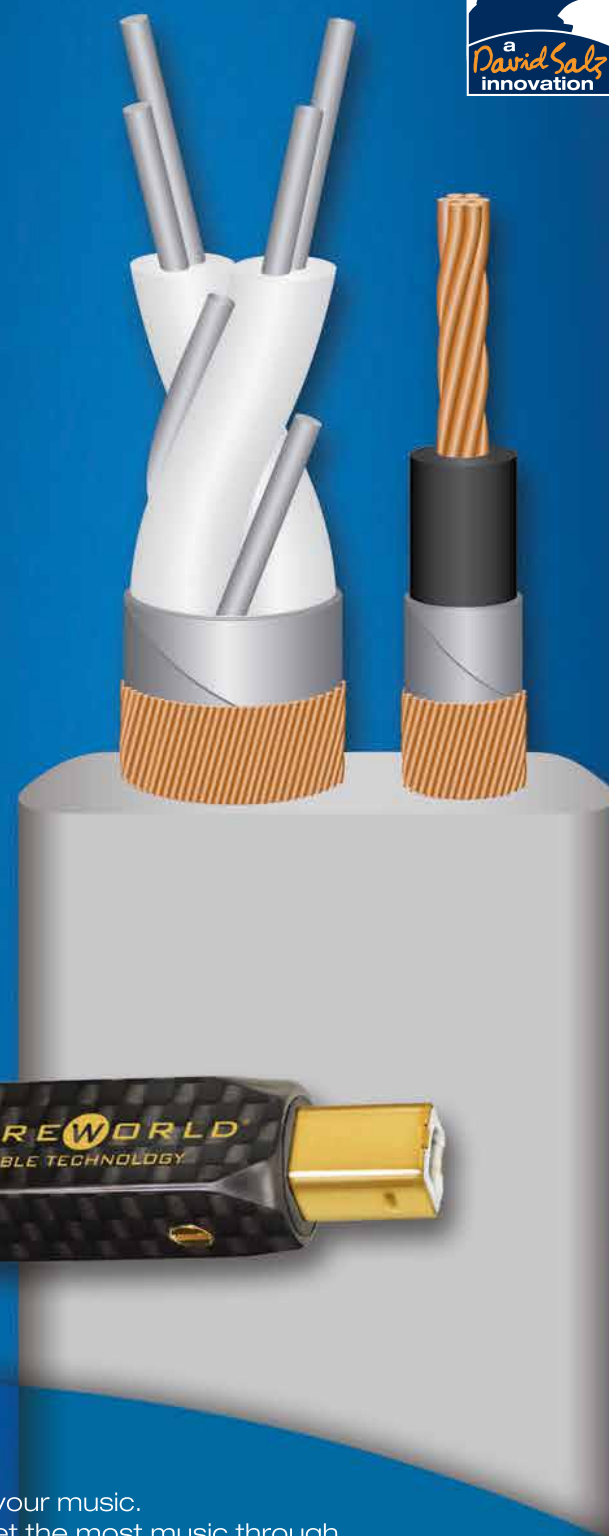
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FESTIVAL

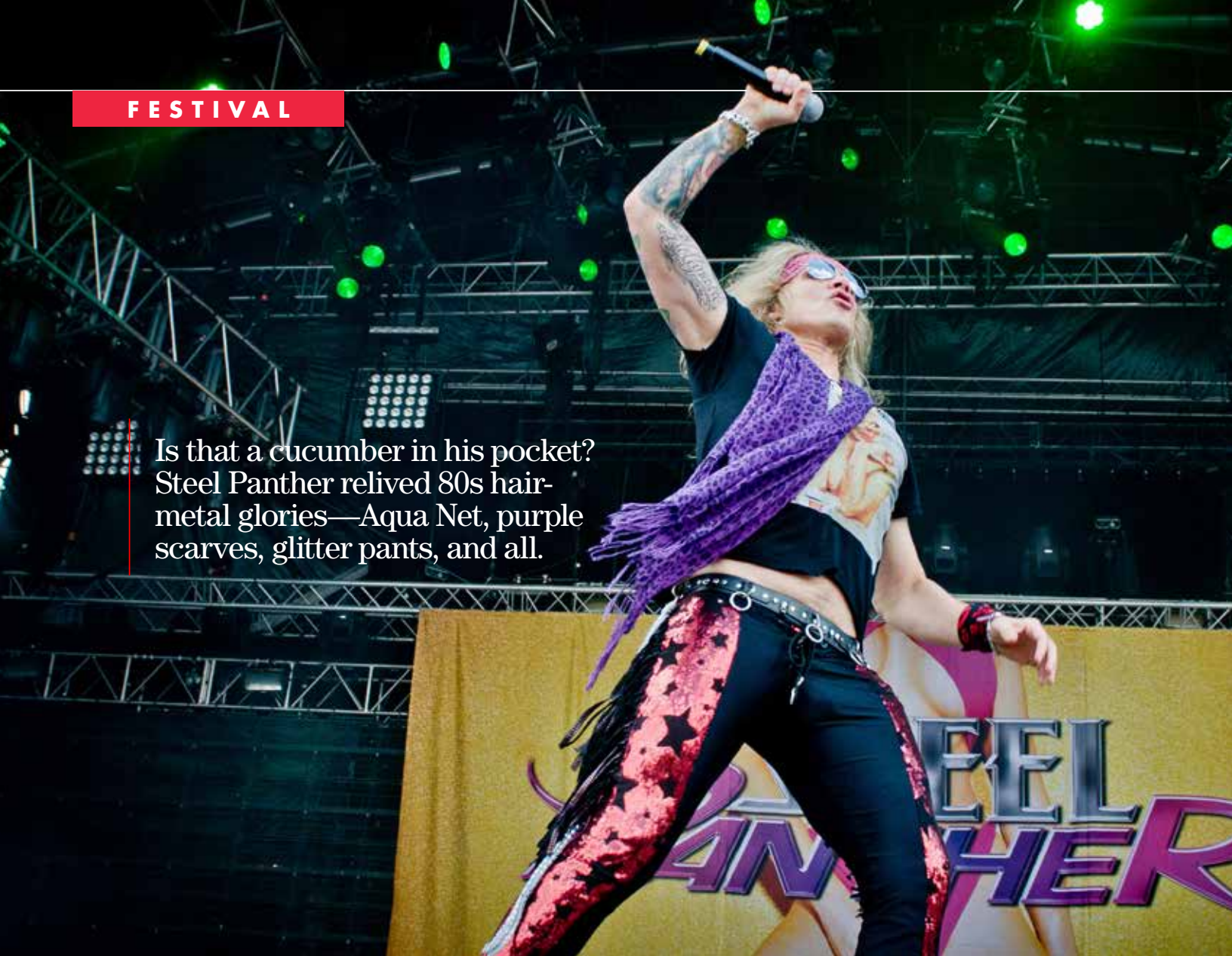
With a little help from their friends: Biohazard turned its set into a block party. What, you weren't invited?

*Biohazard*





Is that a cucumber in his pocket? Steel Panther relived 80s hair-metal glories—Aqua Net, purple scarves, glitter pants, and all.



Who knew they served beer in hell?

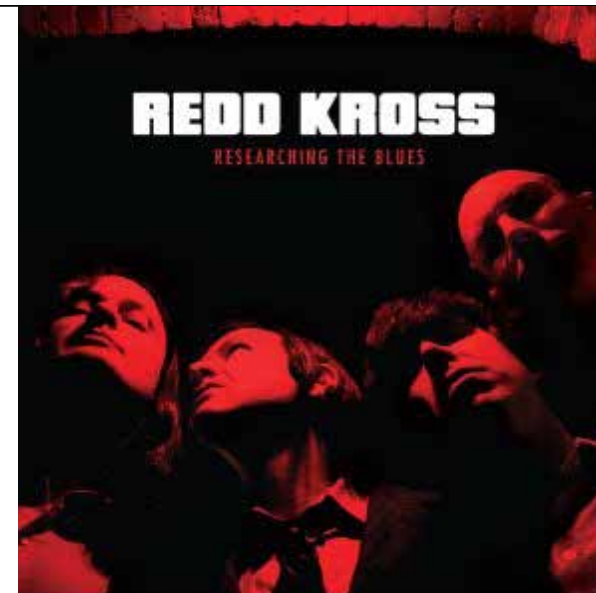
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# New Releases



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## Redd Kross

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**T**his summer, a band consisting of brothers, and one formed in the L.A. area in the 70s, has been cashing in on the reunion circuit. That band is not Redd Kross. As Van Halen rose to fame with increasingly technical songs, centering on topics that occasionally bordered on juvenile, brothers Steven and Jeff McDonald of Redd Kross were simply being juvenile.

With the risk of over-romanticizing the past, it's enough to simply state that the Los Angeles of Redd Kross was far removed from the one of celebrity excess plaguing the Sunset Strip. While bratty behavior may be a staple of most, if not all, youthful rock n' roll scenes, Redd Kross aligned itself with the early days of L.A. punk, where self-deprecation and cynicism took precedence over lusting and soloing. Long before Van Halen declared itself "Hot for Teacher," Redd Kross was too bored with the whole ritual to even notice. "I hate my school," Jeff shouted his voice hoarse in 1980, before he was old enough to vote.

More than three decades later, on Redd Kross' first album in 15 years, the cynicism is trained on more adult concerns. Call it age-appropriate disenchantment. "You're getting uglier, I'm getting uglier, we're getting uglier," Jeff sings on "Uglier," turning an aging not-so-gracefully mantra into a full-band sing-along, one complete with backing vocal woo-woos. Heck, "Stay Away From Downtown" is all old-man crankiness, with Jeff warning up top, "Remember, your life was once good." This isn't a band living in the past; instead, it's one haunted by it.

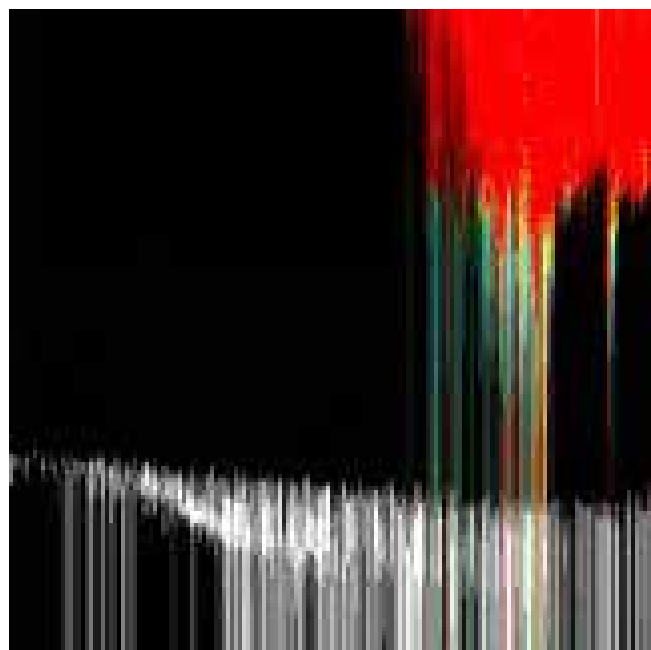
In fact, bitterness seems to be inversely related to a song's cheeriness. "One of the Good Ones" beckons with a shuffling beat and skip-to-work handclaps, all while the band expresses shock—shock!—that someone in its hometown doesn't have an ulterior motive. Later, sunny weather is little more than a pesky light that shines on Jeff's face in "Winter Blues," a snappy global-warming lament with brightly textured guitar work that echoes 70s-era George Harrison.

It all feels rather natural. As Redd Kross bounced around labels throughout the 80s and 90s, the band's sound gradually smoothed out, progressing from scrappy, how-fast-can-you-go snottiness to irresistibly melodic power-pop. *Researching the Blues*, surprisingly, falls somewhere in the middle, presenting a late-career Redd Kross that knows the importance of brevity—no song breaches the four-minute barrier—as well as the joy of a swooning, Beach Boys-inspired multi-part harmony ("Dracula's Daughter").

And, it's not all that far removed, in fact, from more recent singles from Superchunk, the tightly focused pop-punk band behind Redd Kross' current label, Merge Records. *Researching the Blues* also makes the case that Redd Kross accomplished one of the rarest of rock n' roll feats: growing up.

—**Todd Martens**





### The Flaming Lips

*The Flaming Lips and Heady Fwends*  
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**A**s the alt-generation's band of merry pranksters, the Flaming Lips have been afforded generous leniency regarding creative projects and maverick decisions. Not that earlier moves required much defense. For instance, the costumed animals that jump around onstage amidst glitter, confetti, and balloons evoke the Oklahoma collective's *joie de vivre*. Leader Wayne Coyne's unorthodox visual concoctions—ranging from fake blood dripping down his face to his UFO contraptions—contribute to the ensemble's *Wizard of Oz*-like sense of youthful imagination and pacifist, nonconformist rebellion.

The long-running group claims a similar history of mythical experimentalism in the studio, too, with the results often both mind-rattling and emotionally rewarding. The four-disc *Zaireeka*, designed to be played back simultaneously, or in various combinations wherein one disc abets another, is immersive do-it-yourself psychedelia at its finest—and the only such attempt of its kind from a big-name band. Weirdness, it appears, remains the only consistent and essential impetus behind the Lips' every move. Yet, for the last few years, some of the madcap antics seem at best forced and, at worst, unintentionally caricatural.

Credit (or blame) the commercial success of 2003's *Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots*—as well as the subsequent exposure made possible by the Lips' then-ubiquitous presence on destination-festival lineups. However ironic, mainstream acceptance apparently authorized for a limitless period the collective's license to do as it pleases. Coyne's carefree Twitter feeds—and his nearly 100,000 followers—only add to the sense that the band has crossed the fine line between cool and annoying. Now, the group looks as if it's embracing oddities just for the sake of looking unconventional, its maneuvers frequently silly and disposable compared to the past, when the bizarre methods stimulated a creative field that yielded joyous concerts and a string of exceptional albums. *(continued)*

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## MUSIC

increasingly impossible to consider seriously. No, the Lips have never subscribed to sternness or solemnity, yet their music, in spite of the peculiarities and humor, could always be appreciated as significant art.

Featuring standalone tracks with artists ranging from Yoko Ono to Lightning Bolt and Erykah Badu, this odds-and-sods collection barely passes muster as a curiosity item. Rather, it evokes what might happen if a corporate entity purchased control of an underground rave or independent nightclub from their original owners. The place and setting seem familiar, but the atmosphere and flavor have changed.

Oodles of trippy effects, bizarre noises, and logic-defying electronics are packed into the songs and aim to mystify the senses. But it all sounds and feels calculated, the experience a controlled attempt at fun and chaos, and a boring co-option of the authenticity and vision that mark early Lips works like *In a Priest Driven Ambulance*—efforts that despite their flaws, ooze character and personality. Somewhere, amidst a desire to keep calling attention to their strangeness and goofiness, the Lips lost the plot and their identity. A final reservation concerning the band's contemporary worth needs to be withheld until its forthcoming studio album—due in the fall, and its last under contract with Warner Bros.—yet if recent history is any indication, hope that Coyne and company hired a good editor. —**Bob Gendron**



©Photo by J. Michelle Martin

Preceded by the release of a seven-pound gummy-bear containing a flashdrive with four songs, several limited-edition tour-only EPs, and a ridiculous six-hour-long tune (only to be topped several months later by a 24-hour-long ditty), the collaborative *The Flaming Lips and Heady Fwends* arrives as the latest parody-inviting misfire from a band that's become





### Smashing Pumpkins

*Oceania*

EMI, CD or 2LP

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For years, Smashing Pumpkins frontman Billy Corgan—long an avowed fan of professional wrestling—has reveled in playing the heel. Over the last decade, the singer has feuded with former bandmates (most notably, former Pumpkins guitarist James Iha), musical collaborators (his Twitter spats with Courtney Love are borderline epic), and, during a particularly confrontational 2008 tour, his own fans.

In a phone interview last fall, the vocalist copped to harboring a massive chip on his shoulder, saying, “When I was young I wanted people to say, ‘Hey, you’re somebody.’”



This incessant need to prove himself to doubters has no doubt fueled much of Corgan’s musical exploration over the last ten-plus years, including a short-lived stint with the better-than-its-fate Zwan, a here-and-gone solo album, and even a *Weekend at Bernie’s*-like attempt at resurrecting the Pumpkins with drummer Jimmy Chamberlin for the 2007 snoozer *Zeitgeist*. With that in mind, it’s somewhat comforting that Corgan, 45, appears to have finally found a measure of peace on *Oceania*. “I’ll kiss anyone tonight,” he sings on “Violet Rays,” like a giddy teen tripping on ecstasy.

Throughout *Oceania*, the frontman, in the midst of penning a 900-page-plus “spiritual memoir,” sounds like he’s on some sort of religious quest. Songs touch on deities (“God right on! Krishna right on!” he cheerleads on “Quasar”), self-enlightenment (“The Chimera”), and the redemptive power of faith (“Inkless”). At times, Corgan comes across a bit too much like a new-age shaman. “Your stars align, and you let me and your heart win,” he proclaims on one tune. But more often than not, he sounds like a man still struggling to find answers of his own.

Corgan is joined on his search by a new band of travelers, including

guitarist Jeff Schroeder, drummer Mike Byrne, and bassist Nicole Florentino, who chips in with spectral vocal harmonies on a handful of tunes. Though the frontman has long been labeled a control freak, *Oceania* truly comes across like the product of a full-on band rather than the work of one man with an iron fist and limitless studio access. “Quasar” sets the tone, piling on thundering drums, Corgan’s nasal sneer, and agitated guitars that churn and swirl like stormy ocean waters. “The Chimera” sounds even more like vintage Pumpkins, opening with a churlish guitar riff that calls to mind *Siamese Dream*’s “Rocket.”

Elsewhere, Corgan and Co. pull back for the dreamy “Pale Horse,” toy with disco-pop on the proggy, pulsating “One Diamond One Heart,” and ease into stately rockers like “Pinwheels”—a tune that takes flight on airy strings, Florentino’s gorgeous backing vocals, and a guitar solo that drifts, circles, and swoops hawk-like above the fray. Still, it’s an earlier moment that resonates most strongly on the long-overdue comeback effort.

“It takes some life to find the light within,” sings a chastened Corgan on “The Chimera.” Consider *Oceania* the sound of a creative spark reignited. —**Andy Downing**



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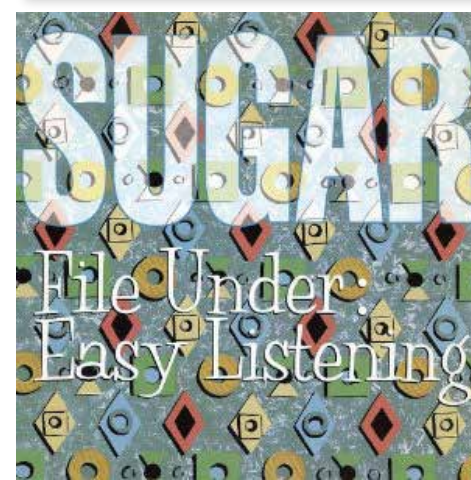
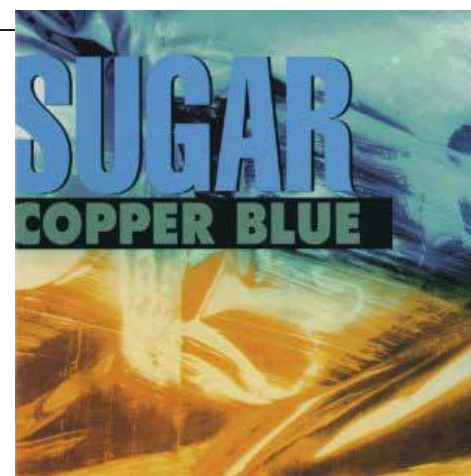
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#### Sugar

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**T**

he 90s are doing well of late.

Nostalgia is never really bad for business, but amongst prior decades penetrating modern pop culture, the aforementioned period is getting its moment. The 90s are there in IFC's "Portlandia," where the familiar and the recent are played for laughs, and they're there in reunions from the likes of Pavement and Soundgarden. And look at this year's lineup for the Coachella Valley Music & Arts Festival, as the spring Southern California event featured a host of 90s-made acts, including Jeff Magnum, Pulp, Mazzy Star, and Noel Gallagher.

That's a diverse array of artists and influences, but if one were to map the beginnings of the alt-rock era, one man's name would be at the top of the conversation: Bob Mould. His band Hüsker Dü predated all-things 90s, releasing a string of albums in the 80s that challenged listeners with a mix of furious noise and bubblegum pop. As relationships in that band crashed and burned, Mould re-emerged in the post-Nirvana era with the power trio Sugar.

#### MUSIC

Flanked by bassist David Barbe and drummer Malcolm Travis, Mould and Sugar's 1992 debut *Copper Blue* is a thesis on how to be tunefully assertive. Only one proper full-length followed, 1994's *File Under: Easy Listening*; both are now receiving the deluxe reissue treatment from Merge Records.

Irresistible moments abound. "If I Can't Change Your Mind" is as perfect a pop song as one could wish for, full of glistening, jangly guitars and young-love longing. "A Good Idea," also from *Copper Blue*, is more sinister, with Mould a silent witness to murder while the guitar and drums saw away at each other. Songs on *File Under: Easy Listening* are, broadly speaking, more expansive, from the sludgy ballad "Explode and Make Up" to the boomeranging melodies and harmonies of "Can't Help You Anymore."

As to whether or not the reissues are worth purchasing, Merge priced the sets low enough that long-time fans needn't stress. At about \$15 for the two-disc *File Under: Easy Listening* set, and \$18 for the three-disc *Copper Blue/Beaster* set, those who own the originals aren't being gouged. While the two live discs—one abets each studio album—may lean more toward the "for diehards-only" crowd, they more than adequately capture the controlled chaos of a Sugar show. Of note is the 1992 Chicago performance on the *Copper Blue* package, a gig recorded at Cabaret Metro that always feels on the verge of running off the rails.

More B-sides come stuffed onto the *File Under: Easy Listening* disc, and while most of these cuts have already been released on prior collections, it's nice to have many of these gems in one place. "Going Home" has grunge-era crunch and soda-fountain sweetness, while "In the Eyes of My Friends" boasts a swiftly direct vocal turn from Barbe. (continued)



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## MUSIC



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*Copper Blue* comes with a more stripped-down "If I Can't Change Your Mind," turning the tune into what feels like a long lost Byrds track. There's also the fan-favorite fist-pumper "Needle Hits E," something of alt-rock-era anomaly. It's unabashed about its desire to have a good time, and Mould isn't going to let his bumper friends bring him down. "I cherish the day," he sings, "when you say the things you feel."

The *Copper Blue* set is the first set casual listeners should target. The album on its own boasts more instantly grabbing hooks than its follow-up, and the six-track EP *Beaster* has only improved with age. While Mould hadn't shied away from the rough stuff in Hüsker Dü, the EP's 1993 arrival was a head-scratching departure from *Copper Blue*. It predated

Smashing Pumpkins' *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness* by two years, but the religious imagery, feedback, and schizophrenic tonal shifts do Billy Corgan proud.

It's arguable, however, that the most exciting aspect of these reissues isn't even heard anywhere on these discs. As Mould has been revisiting this material in concert, having performed *Copper Blue* front-to-back to commemorate the album's 20th anniversary, it has, Mould has said in interviews, reinvigorated his approach to power-pop—or, to quote Mould more directly, "aggressive pop."

The rather limited Sugar catalog paints a portrait of an artist that respects pop traditions, and understands that verse-chorus-verse isn't a formula but a tool. Whether the guitars ring and chime

like cymbals, or seem to constantly rev-up in an effort to lap their wielder, Sugar songs were always tightly focused and constantly aimed to soar. If wild, off-the-cuff, musical adventurousness marks the catalog of Hüsker Dü, then Sugar is the search for guitar-rock refinement.

On September 4, Mould will release the tongue-in-cheek titled *Silver Age*, 10 new tracks said to match the intensity of Sugar, and addressed with grown-up reflection. We can only hope, as these reissues will likely increase the craving for new Mould material. For whether it was in Hüsker Dü, Sugar, or his solo work, Mould has consistently attempted to build on the past rather than live in it. —**Todd Martens**



**S**pirituality has long inspired and informed music. Gospel, of course, is built upon the notion of praising a higher power. Traditional and modern blues references religious personas and deities, leaning heavily on taboo and temptation. Mainstream pop, whether George Harrison with *All Things Must Pass* or U2 on any of its earlier albums, incorporates god-related thoughts and scriptures into its messages. Jazz continues to pay homage to supreme beings with divine compositions and freedom-finding passages. And while largely overlooked by most media outlets, an entire subgenre—contemporary Christian—exists in alleged service of the lord.



**OM**  
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But in terms of sheer mysticism and ceremonial feel, few styles rank on par with Sufi and other assorted Indian music, whose devotional vibes transmit through intense singing and otherworldly instrumentation. Keeping its mysterious motivations a secret, OM fully embraces such Middle Eastern meditative properties on its enchanted *Advaitic Songs*, a creation bound to generate as many proposterous, hyperbolic references to drugs as member Al Cisneros' former band, Sleep. On this, the duo's fifth full-length, the "doom" and "stoner metal" labels don't apply.

Often evoking an extended prayer chant that takes place in a sun-beaten temple or hallowed

open space, the set completely deviates from Western conventions and finds metaphysical release by means of droning tambouras, sparse hand drums, distant guitars, holy incantations, and exotic percussion. Given that the album's title refers to a branch of Hindu philosophy that rejects separation between the self and universe, and considering Cisneros' history of psychedelic leanings, the arrangements' deliberative and sacred qualities don't come as a shock.

What does, in spite of the heavy and bottom-feeding "State of Non-Return"—the closest example here to metal, even as the arrival of classical strings turn the tune into a reflection on interstellar life forms—is the advanced level of

compositional vision and resonant detail. Undulating frequencies subtly course through a majority of the songs, turning slowly unfolding and progressively ominous tales like "Gethsemane" into a side-winding epic in which invocation, monasticism, and atmospherics amalgamate.

Numerous are the artists laying claim to out-there sonic hypnosis and transcendent aura. Few, however, achieve the incorporeal outsider highs and trance states OM reaches on *Advaitic Songs*, which demands to be listened to as an old-school record: In one sitting, free of distraction and interference, and when possible, on 45RPM vinyl, with grooves as deep as Death Valley. —**Bob Gendron**



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### Baroness

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Lyrically, much of Baroness' third album—the sprawling, double-disc *Yellow & Green*—finds the hard-rocking Atlanta quartet adrift in unfamiliar terrain. Throughout, frontman John Baizley rarely sounds in control of his own fate. “You lead the way, I’ll follow,” he sings on one tune. Then, on another: “I thought help was on the way.”

While Baizley's words sound born of chaos—life can be snatched away any moment and nothing can be done to stop it, they seemingly suggest—the music moves with almost surgical precision, bleeding from new-wave-inspired burners (“Little Things”) to epic prog-rock numbers that evoke Thin Lizzy doing its best Yes impression (“Back Where I Belong”). *(continued)*





The album is another evolutionary leap for the band, which lurched out of the primordial ooze with 2007's sludgy, doom-laden *Red Album*. By the release of 2009's *Blue Record* (were these album titles chosen purely to taunt the colorblind?), the crew was already walking upright, tempering its noise-rock side with more elaborate arrangements and a stronger melodic sensibility. With *Yellow & Green*, however, Baroness' metal roots are almost completely obscured, a transformation akin to the foundation of an ancient city paved over to make way for an emerging metropolis.

In this sense, the record is sure to have detractors—and there are definitely moments where the grand experiment falls short

(the scattershot, new-wave hell of "Psalms Alive" being one example). But more often than not, the group's ambition hits the mark.

Thematically, the *Yellow* disc appears anchored to the sea. It contains numerous mentions of jumping into the abyss, letting water fill your lungs, and witnessing ships set adrift on endless waters. The music, in turn, appears to moves like an ocean—unpredictably wild and foaming one minute (the churning "Cocainium") and calm and expansive the next (the eerily atmospheric "Twinkler").

The darker, softer *Green* disc, by contrast, ventures up into the foothills—"Take me away from the ocean," bellows Baizley on the pummeling pastoral rock of "Board Up the House"—and a handful of

the songs take on a folk-like air (particularly the bewitching "Mtns. (The Crown & Anchor)"). At times, music in this mellower second movement threatens to evaporate, particularly as the band eases into the rickety "Collapse." Fortunately, just when it sounds as if Baroness lowers itself into the grave for that final sleep, things roar back to life with the blistering "The Line Between."

"Walk the line between the righteous and the wicked," howls Baizley as drum volleys and twisting guitars whirl around him like shrapnel, "And tomorrow I'll be gone." Till then, the tune suggests, Baroness will be here to dispense artfully constructed carnage.

—**Andy Downing**

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### The Very Best

MTMTMK

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**C**larance Thomas still sits as a conservative, the Middle East remains embattled in turf wars, and sing-along anthems continue to serve as the backdrop for convertible rides, beach parties, and all things summer. Some things never change. Radio-friendly pop music expands and mutates no matter the season, but at no time does it feel more appropriate and integral than during the warmest months. Bright sunshine, outside activities, backyard barbeques, and slinky outfits seemingly demand fare that makes it easy for novices to dance and soars on the kind of elementary choruses committed to memory after just one listen.

While nothing on *MTMTMK* is likely to displace Carly Rae Jepsen's ubiquitous "Call Me Maybe" or Luke Bryan's country-lite "Drunk On You" as 2012's premier driving-with-the-top-down tracks, the second album by the Very Best doesn't suffer any shortage of sun-baked overtures. Moreover, on the addictive "We OK," the bi-continental collective receives an assist from Somalia-born star K'naan, whose own "Hurt Me Tomorrow" is getting a fair share of spins from what's left of the commercial dial. He's one of the nearly dozen guests contributing to a set that never stays in one place too long. Don't like what you're hearing at a given instant? Wait about 30

seconds. The sound and vibe will evolve.

Such games of sonic chess are apropos for a group that initially garnered attention after issuing a free mixtape that included collaborations with indie artists like M.I.A. and Santigold. An immediate hit with bloggers, *Esau Mwamwaya and Radioclit are the Very Best*—the self-referencing title reflective of the names of the Malawian singer and London-based production duo, respectively, originally involved in the band—established the ensemble as savvy manipulators and remodelers of primarily existing tunes. On its 2009 debut, *Warm Heart of Africa*,

Mwamwaya stepped to the fore as a formidable vocalist, a multi-lingual *chanteur* able to weave in and out of stylistic mazes whether the latter involve funk, kwaito, or hip-hop.

Distinctive for radiating an ebullient enthusiasm no matter the language of his words, Mwamwaya now casts his eye toward at pop radio—even though he's probably well aware the group's multicultural mélange of Afropop, dancehall, electropop, synthpop, and Europop is too sophisticated for mainstream formats. While the Very Best strays farther here from tradition than on previous efforts, tracks such as the thumping "I Wanna Go Away" and splashy "Come Alive" (complete with choir vocals) pogo with a contemporary vibrancy any big-shot producer would be lucky to concoct for his own clients. And in the hook-bulging "Kondaine," the Very Best claims an uplifting catch phrase ("You're walking on water/You're walking on air") and bright tilt that should put the song inside every soccer stadium north of the Mediterranean.

On occasion, the shifting percussive paradigms and rampant samples grow busy. The album-opening "Adani" establishes the Very Best's aptitude for blending disparate influences and juggling engrossing textures, yet the collision proves too much. Similarly, the breakout rap in "Mghetto" adds little more than unnecessary congestion. Minor annoyances aside, these hiccups expose the understated openness that permeates the rest of the album, wherein rhythms, refrains, and rave-ups collude on one heckuva summer bash. Just add white sand and volleyball net. —**Bob Gendron**



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## MUSIC



### Twin Shadow

*Confess*

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**T**hings lots of us agree upon: Batman is better in the hands of Christopher Nolan, “Friday Night Lights” will inspire tears, and Jimmy Fallon’s “Tebowie” is ridiculous, yes, but can we watch it again, please?

Fewer of us may also agree upon the following point, although the modern-day fact-checking machine that is Google will offer less evidence here than on the above points: The 80s were fine and all, but just as we don’t need *Rock of Ages*, we don’t need more synthpop bands.

Twin Shadow was first described to me thusly: “If you love the 80s, you’ll love this. Some songs are even reminiscent of Eddie Money.” The woman who said this didn’t asked to be quoted, so she is being kept anonymous. But she’s an authority on the matter. She’s an executive at Beggar’s Group, the label consortium releasing Twin Shadow’s second album.

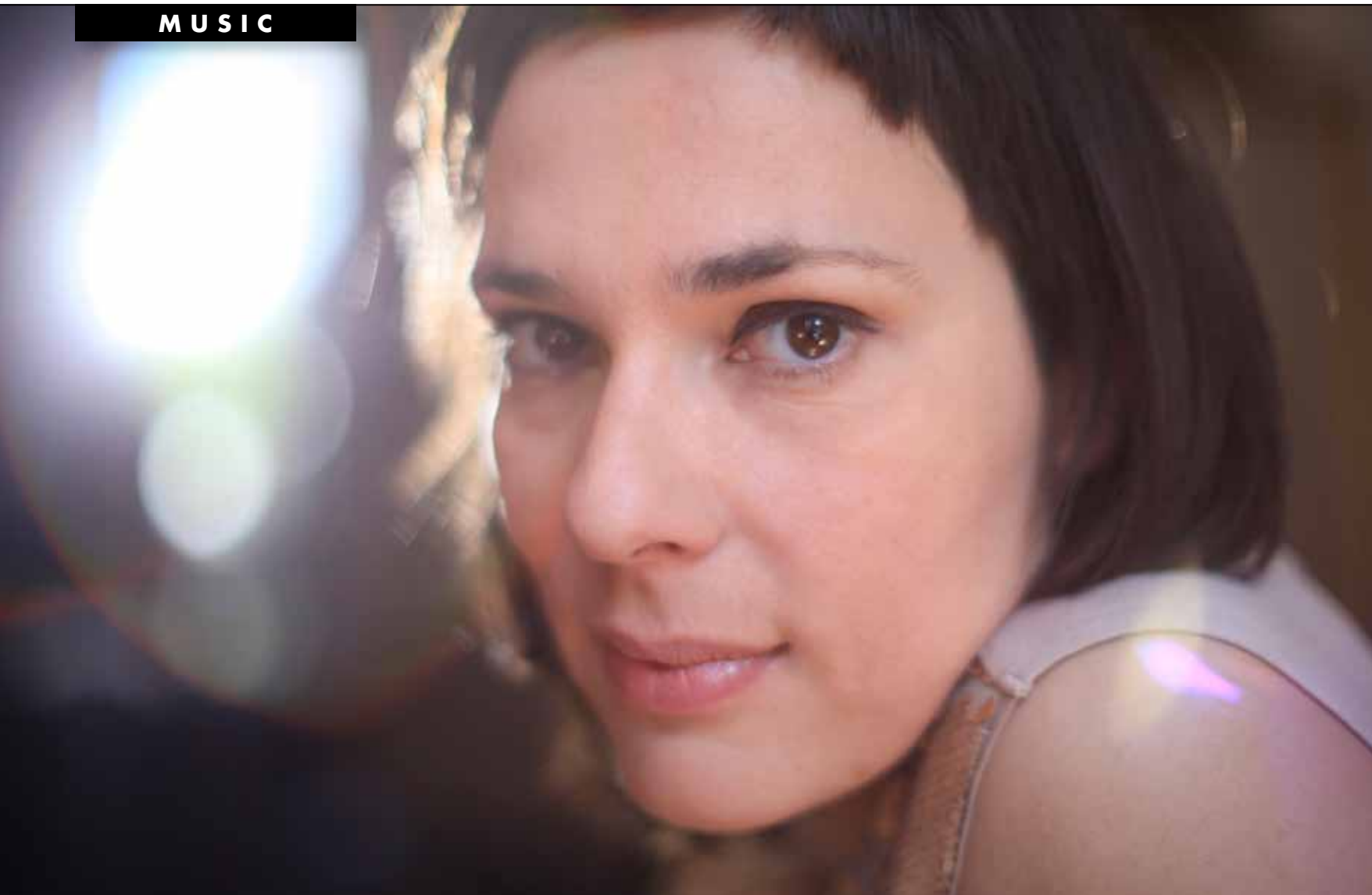
Her statement rang true, and if those 16 words of hers sound like an endorsement, stop reading. Twin Shadow, centered around Dominican/American George Lewis Jr., is your new favorite band. Skepticism, however, is allowed, especially when new-wavey keyboards are involved.

Yet *Confess* sees Twin Shadow transitioning from the full-on 80s revival that was 2010’s *Forget* to a rather respectable R&B-inspired outfit. Dreamy keyboard textures remain the primary root of every tune, and songs such as “Golden Light” open with nearly a minute of digitized atmospheres. Vocally, though, Lewis under-sings—he’s a calm, cool and less versatile Prince—and doing so shifts the focus to the soul that underlines each track.

“Five Seconds” would work as a montage in a John Hughes film. It’s an upbeat number that subtly shifts directions with each verse, adding stinging, Hall & Oates-like guitar soloing in one and furious strumming in the next. “Run My Heart” is a ballad at its most dramatic, with Lewis growing more and more frustrated at his inability to reignite a flame, while “Beg for the Night” frames longing with an orchestra of effects—squiggly synths, a “Beat It” guitar, and random earth-quaking rhythms. “I know it’s absurd to cherish every kiss,” Lewis sings, adding a dose of welcome self-awareness to his romantic soundtracks.

As the album progresses, Twin Shadow gets increasingly freaky and weird, ultimately having more in common with the torturous R&B of Drake pal The Weeknd than any prior decade. The beats in “I Don’t Care” sound more like growls than grooves, and what starts as Michael Jackson-esque glossiness devolves into a mess of tangled emotions. There’s a booty call that ends in tears, and all the characters are knowingly lying, making this one retro party that lingers long after the synthesizers are unplugged.  
—**Todd Martens**





©Photo by David Thayer

**L**aetitia Sadier's solo debut *The Trip* was written and recorded shortly after the suicide of her younger sister Noelle. While personal tragedy might have first inspired the longtime Stereolab frontwoman to go it alone, her sophomore album, *Silencio*, sounds driven by global issues.

The lush, cinematic opener "The Rule of the Game" borrows both its title and spirit from Jean Renoir's 1939 evisceration of upper-class French society, *The Rules of the Game*, and plays like a more refined response to the income disparity fueling the ongoing Occupy Wall Street movement. Atop shimmering cymbals, rumbling drums, and droning synths, Sadier sings of a ruling class that neglects responsibility, overindulges its children, and engages in cruel games.

On the Cure-ish "Auscultation to the Nation," the troublemakers get summoned by name to the front of the classroom. "Rating agencies, financial markets, and the G20s were not elected by the people," Sadier sings with cool detachment.

Though her political aims are admirable—and, really, it's hard to fault anyone calling out credit rating agencies, bankers, and the absurdly wealthy—the track is clumsy, burdened by sloganeering lyrics ("What do we care about these self-proclaimed authorities," she singzzzzzzzz...) that sound particularly clunky amidst the percolating new-wave beat.

Related fears creep in after spotting the title to "There Is a Price to Pay for Freedom (And It Isn't Security)," but the song projects a cool, lounge-y vibe, as though James Bond had been a TSA agent rather than a globetrotting man of mystery.

Other fare jettisons current events for more spiritual pursuits. A meditative peace pulsates through the dreamy "Find Me the Pulse of the Universe," which drifts on a soft patter of hand drums. Sadier constructs an electronic Zen garden on "Silent Spot," a sparse, delicate number awash in gently ping-pong synthesizers. "Between Earth and Heaven" walks a similar path, and

the singer turns to nature (trees are rooted in the ground but reach for the stars) to help explain spiritual ideals.

No matter the subject matter, the album is anchored by Sadier's serene voice, which somehow manages to project beauty even during moments when she sings about mankind's ugliest urges. Strange, then, that a recording so consumed with political and social failings would close with nearly two minutes of silence. Perhaps Sadier hopes other voices will rise up and fill the void. —**Andy Downing**

**Laetitia Sadier***Silencio*

Drag City, CD or LP

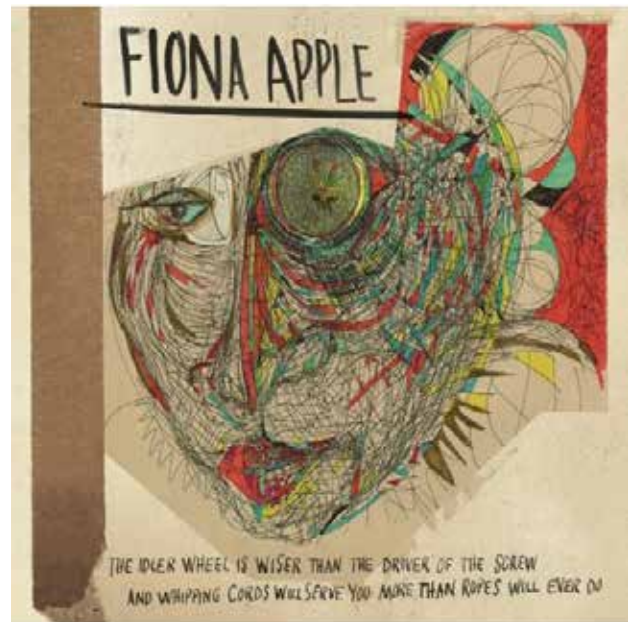
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Think of a relationship between two lovers. One, perhaps, that has seen better days, but is not as of yet a full-on disaster. Now picture the couple sitting at a dinner table in silence, as if it's a forced tradition that can't be avoided. "What? What are you thinking?" says one partner. "Nothing," says the other, defensively.

What that really means is nothing that can be easily articulated. But if it were possible, at such a moment, to peer into a mind, and apply music to the images and thoughts someone is having of this soon-to-be-dead relationship, it may very well sound exactly like Fiona Apple's *The Idler Wheel is Wiser than the Driver of the Screw and Whipping Cords Will Serve You More Than Ropes Will Ever Do*.

This is a claustrophobic, exhausting album, one meticulously illustrated with demented, idealism-gone-wrong lyrics and spare, stick-and-stones rhythms—so much so that it can be a difficult listen. When it comes to tension and emotional trauma, the Apple on *The Idler Wheel...* has few, if any, rivals.



### Fiona Apple

*The Idler Wheel is Wiser than the Driver of the Screw and Whipping Cords Will Serve You More Than Ropes Will Ever Do*  
Epic, CD or LP

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This, her first album in seven years, unfolds almost in slow motion. Tears "calcify in my tummy," she sings on "Left Alone," stretching her voice to paranoid heights while a piano melody unfolds like a Vaudeville horror show. Things get even more gruesome on "Regret," where Apple fills her spacious piano quivers with howls, all while envisioning "hot piss" coming out of her lover's mouth.

While she's released but four albums 16 years, Apple had slowly been bringing more orchestral flourishes to her music. Her last effort, 2005's *Extraordinary Machine*, is downright lush compared to the instrumental nakedness on *The Idler Wheel...*, in many ways a collaboration with multi-instrumentalist/producer Charley Drayton, a member of Keith Richards' side-project X-pensive Winos. Here, the two fashion a groove out of what sounds like a fight in the kitchen in "Anything We Want," and when Apple sings of wrestling with her brain in "Every Single Night," the song mirrors that tug-o-war, alternating between lullaby chimes and tribal pounding.

And what a head-trip of a battle this album constitutes. Sharks rip the vocalist half in "Werewolf," and an ex becomes the captain of a capsized ship in "Jonathan." So vivid is Apple's use of metaphor that when she sings of Coney Island in the latter tune, the moment proves striking. While the neighborhood brings to mind fanciful images of a bygone era, it's the rare lyric that references something tangible and real, a place that actually exists outside the minefield of her mind. —**Todd Martens**

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# Marantz 2245 Stereo Receiver

By Jerold O'Brien

My best friend bought this Marantz 2245 receiver in 1973 while serving in the US Navy. It was purchased along with a pair of JBL-L100s and a Dual turntable.

Traveling around the world with him during his tour of duty, this classic system finally settled in California and served him well until the late 90s, when it gave way to a modern home-theater system.







**In the receiver wars of the mid-70s, Marantz was a big player, and very successful in battles with Sony, Pioneer, Sansui, and Kenwood.**

He recently called and asked me if I wanted the receiver and speakers, along with an H/K Rabco ST-7 turntable. How could I resist? I fondly remember selling these things when they were new. In the receiver wars of the mid-70s, Marantz was a big player, and very successful in battles with Sony, Pioneer, Sansui, and Kenwood.

The 22XX series stands as Marantz's first serious foray into the receiver arena. The 2245 represented the mid-level model, and the little brother to the 2270. Still, the former touted more guts, better features, and a better tuner section than the entry-level 2230. It originally sold for \$449, a premium price compared to the Pioneer

SX-828 and Kenwood KR-5150. The Marantz also sounded good, offering a slightly warmer sonic presentation along with decidedly more elegant cosmetics that many enthusiasts favorably compared to those of McIntosh.

With the exception of a short service visit in the 1980s, during which it had several resistors replaced, this example is bone stock and without modifications. A little cosmetic cleanup brings its beauty back to life. Yep, this sucker is heavy, tipping the scales at just over 30 pounds. After removing the simulated wood-grain cabinet, a peek at the innards reveals a fairly large transformer and highly organized electrical layout.

To keep with this column's theme, a pair of Energy C2 bookshelf speakers and an iPod plugged into the AUX input served my initial listening tests. I pushed the power button for the first time with trepidation. Fortunately, no smoking transistors or loud bangs from aged capacitors—now well past their freshness date—interrupted my sessions. A simple test of the FM section with a dipole antenna shows the 2245 still capable of locking on to most of my favorite stations with healthy signal strength and low background noise. Admittedly, it's not on par with the era's best tuners, but it passes muster. *(continued)*



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**The somewhat warm and friendly tonal balance I remembered is back in full force—a good thing. It’s for this reason that Marantz receivers rank above other solid-state units from the same period.**

More pleasingly, the somewhat warm and friendly tonal balance I remembered is back in full force—a good thing. It’s for this reason that Marantz receivers rank above other solid-state units from the same period. Adding the JBL L-100s makes for an instant 70s party flashback. Considerable listening discloses a soft low-frequency presentation and lack of a coherent three-dimensional soundstage. But remember, none of us were even thinking about stuff like that back in the early 70s. We were just smoking weed and blasting Hendrix.

A Technics SL1200 turntable with Audio Technica AT-110e cartridge adds vinyl capability to this journey to the center of my mind. Here, bass stays soft, and dynamics somewhat limited, but there’s more resolution and the vintage system now possesses more of a three-dimensional soundfield than I initially recalled. You certainly can’t buy something this good for \$449 today, to say nothing of what this jewel would cost if adjusted for inflation.

A perfect-condition Marantz 2245 still fetches close to \$449, and one with minor cosmetic flaws sells for about \$100-\$150 less. Avoid bargain-basement models unless you happen to be in the right place at the right time and know you are stealing it.

Stay tuned to the *TONEAudio* blog. This gem is getting fully recapped and rewired. It should be fantastic. ●



# Hangin' with Herbie Hancock

By Bailey S. Barnard   Photos by Jeff Dorgay

It's a sunny Thursday in May. After having arrived eagerly early at the home of one of music's most influential living artists, *TONEAudio* publisher Jeff Dorgay and I bide our time at a nearby coffee shop. We head back to the two-story house, which seems understated compared to the rest of the neighborhood, located just north of Sunset Boulevard in Beverly Hills. Someone buzzes the gate open for us. As we both notice the SmartCar in the driveway, we enter what appears to be the side door and walk up the stairs to the media room, where a giant Sony 4K digital video projector is affixed to the ceiling. A Stewart Filmscreen hangs from the wall before it. Gold and platinum records adorn the adjacent wall.



Herbie Hancock enters the room. When I break the ice and tell him we were just admiring his collection, he says we should look at his awards case downstairs before we leave. Jeff comments that Pat Metheny once told him that his parents didn't take him seriously until he received his sixth Grammy. Hancock laughs in mild dismay.

"Look," he says. "For my folks, when they saw me on television—which was before joined Miles Davis' band, which was in 1963—that was all it took."

In the time since, Hancock has accumulated an extensive laundry list of accomplishments, both in the world of music and beyond. He has recorded more than 50 live and studio albums since making his debut with *Takin' Off* in 1962 at the age of just 22. Soon after, Davis brought him onboard to play piano with his famous quintet, and there, Hancock remained for five years, during which time he helped forge jazz fusion with such efforts as *Bitches Brew*. Several years later, his 1973 masterwork *Head Hunters* became the first jazz record to ever go platinum. Over his five-decade career, he has received 14 Grammys and an Oscar, which he won for his score to the 1986 film *'Round Midnight*, plus five MTV Awards and seven honorary doctorates. Few living artists have made such an impact on contemporary music. *(continued)*



Today, at 72, Hancock remains highly active in a number of music-related philanthropies. His roles include serving as the Los Angeles Philharmonic's Creative Chair For Jazz, the Institute Chairman of the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz, and a UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador. He continues to tour and record with some of the world's most talented musicians. Paying his success forward, Hancock is also responsible for bringing new talents to the forefront of jazz. In 1980, he produced trumpeter Wynton Marsalis' debut.

**“Pat was still a teenager,” Hancock recalls. “A friend of mine I called Mr. Kansas City told me, ‘You’ve got to go see this young musician, Pat—he’s a great guitar player.’ We walk in the door and there’s this guitar player. He’s sitting there and he looks up at me—and his mouth falls open. Now look who Pat Metheny is today.”**

About 10 years earlier, he met a young guitarist named Pat Metheny in Kansas City.

“Pat was still a teenager,” Hancock recalls. “He was working in this house with a band. A friend of mine I called Mr. Kansas City told me, ‘You’ve got to go see this young musician, Pat—he’s a great guitar player.’ So I go over there with him. We walk in the door and there’s this guitar player. He’s sitting there and he looks up at me—and his mouth falls open. Now look who Pat Metheny is today.”

Metheny is just one of Hancock's many accomplices. (The two recorded and toured together for the 1990 album *Parallel Realities*, along with drummer Jack

DeJohnette.) During the last 50 years, Hancock has played with anyone who is anyone in the jazz world, as well as some of today's most talented pop stars. He pauses as something on the wall catches his eye.

“You know what?” he says, walking over to it. “I hadn't seen this. This is the gold record for *The Imagine Project*. This just came while I was gone. I'm seeing it for the first time right here.”

The 2010 album *The Imagine Project* finds Hancock collaborating with a diverse group of musicians, including Pink, John Legend, Jeff Beck, Wayne Shorter, and Chaka Khan. The release, which received a Grammy for Best Pop Collaboration with Vocals, sold more than 500,000 copies. The subsequent framed gold record and award certificate arrived during Hancock's recent trip to China, where he was working with Chinese piano virtuoso Lang Lang.

“We're doing a record together,” Hancock says. “I'm kind of co-producing it and involved with putting the team together. He sees these superstars like Lady Gaga and Justin Timberlake, and he wants that, because he [doesn't have] tunnel vision about classical music. If you want to do a crossover record, you have to be involved with a whole new process. It's complicated and takes a lot of time. For me to make those crossover records, it takes at least a couple years.”

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Hancock is quick to recall the considerable popularity Lang Lang gained in China, noting the he has over seven million followers on the Chinese version of Twitter.

“It’s called Weibo. This guy on a plane ride over there hooked me up with it. I signed up for it about five weeks ago and I’ve already got 41,000 followers.”

Jeff mentions the fact that rapper and actor Ice-T’s two dogs, Spartacus and Maximus, have almost 40,000 followers on Twitter. Hancock gets a kick out of that and admits he only has 28,000. When asked what role technology products by the likes of Apple play in his everyday life, Hancock smiles.

“It’s more like, what role doesn’t it play?” he says. “I got all the iPhones on the first day they came out. I got all the iPads on the first day they came out. But with all those things, I don’t know how artists can manage a career and find time to Tweet constantly. Most of them are a lot younger than I am and it’s part of their lifestyle. But ever since this Weibo experience, I started doing it fairly recently myself on Twitter. I’m seeing now that this draws attention to the brand. But I’ve always been the guy who likes to be the first adopter. I got my first computer in 1979. It was an Apple II Plus—because it had 48K, rather than 32K, of memory.”



Hancock is proud of his newest toy, Sony’s \$25,000 VPL-VW1000ES digital video projector, which offers a 4K screen resolution. His film career began in 1966, when he recorded the soundtrack for Italian director Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Blowup*. He has recorded numerous other soundtracks since, and remains an ardent cinephile. (Hence, the top-notch projector.) He presses a button on a remote control to retract the film screen and reveal drawers and drawers of DVDs and Blu-rays. His SmartCar is another of his favorite playthings.

“I drive it everyday,” he says. “But inside the garage there’s a Ferrari F355 that I bought it in 1996. When I got the SmartCar, I didn’t drive that for about a year.”

While Hancock finds useful the new technologies in his everyday life, the relationship between his

music and technology isn’t necessarily symbiotic.

“As much as I love technology, I don’t want technology to control me. It’s very important that the technology isn’t what drives you. You have to be in the driver’s seat. You have to be the pilot of your life.”

Jeff asks him how he’s remained relevant for all these years.

“I’m always trying to reinvent myself,” Hancock replies, “except I don’t really look at it that way. From my perspective, it’s me wondering if what I have is put with something I don’t actually have, could the two things make a third thing. Basically, that’s led me to expanding my palette and the more I have in my palette, the more I have to choose from. And that just helps you open doors along the way.” *(continued)*

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Spirituality has also fueled the development of his music.

"I began practicing Buddhism in 1972," Hancock continues. "Around that time, I was really getting tired of playing that avant-garde music. I was feeling restless and feeling the need to be more tethered to the earth instead of just floating off in space. I mean, it was great. When it worked, it was unbelievable. When it didn't, it was like noise and irritating, and I was tired of that. It was though Buddhist chanting that I realized that I didn't want to do that anymore. I had been listening to Sly Stone and James Brown, and the idea of doing something kind of funky came to me—and that led to *Head Hunters*."

As if on cue, Hancock points out the aforementioned award case as we prepare to depart.

"You know," he adds, "people keep asking me how I'm still able to be viable at 72 years of age."

I love people and being able to share something with another human being is a priceless treasure. I learn from those experiences, because I'm always curious about stuff. That's how I've been shaping my life: combining my jazz roots with other forms of music. But for me, it all depends on my own determination and on my heart. Especially as a Buddhist, whatever I do for the greater good, that's what I'm always looking for. The most important thing is where I'm coming from. Me getting Album of the Year [for *River: The Joni Letters*] in 2008: What were the chances of that happening? They said the same thing every time I've had a record on the charts. It was like impossible, but it happened. I just continue to chant and continue to be open, so I can hopefully continue to maintain a youthful spirit. That's what it's all about." ●

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

**"You know," he adds, "people keep asking me how I'm still able to be viable at 72 years of age. I love people and being able to share something with another human being is a priceless treasure."**



# Audiophile Pressings

By Jeff Dorgay

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## The Best Coast

*The Only Place*

HD Tracks, 24/96 Download

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## The Best Coast

While you can read our full review of this album in Issue 46—Todd Martens does a fantastic job covering the feel of the record—I’m happy to report that the sound quality of the LP is very good. I’m even happier to squelch the thought that there’s “no good music being produced today” and that “it all sounds terrible.” Please, shut the hell up with that nonsense.

If you’re a Best Coast fan and have a system capable of 24/96 playback, this record stands as a perfect example of why stamping a slab of vinyl from a digital master isn’t always the way to go. When comparing the vinyl and hi-res download, the latter gets the nod for several reasons. First, the download sports a much stronger low end, which lends itself to the music’s foot-stomping vibe. Second, there’s a lot more space around lead singer Bethany Cosentino’s voice and dreamy, twangy guitars. The download is clearer from top to bottom with, dare I say it, a more analog feel.

Let’s hope HD Tracks comes up with more current records like this in its catalog.



## Billy Joel

**S**ure, some “Columbia crunchiness” pervades the upper registers. Yet Mobile Fidelity did an excellent job on this classic 70s album, part of its ongoing Billy Joel series.

The label unlocks more low-level detail on this record, which was horribly compressed for radio airplay. The opening track, “Movin’ Out,” feels slightly flat, but the remainder of the program possesses a more relaxed feel. By contrast, the standard-issue CD is horribly flat and harsh. Now, you can immediately hear the increased soundstage width; that on the original sounds like the band is trying to win one of those contests where they see how many people can stuff themselves inside a Volkswagen. This version sounds more like musicians playing in a real space.

Joel’s piano, too, sounds revitalized. Throughout, there’s more ambience to his playing. It now comes across as if he’s playing a big-boy piano, and the reverb on the vocal tracks is also evident. “Vienna” and “She’s Always a Woman” have newfound delicacy, and the 10cc-like backup singing on the title track reveals just how much craftsmanship actually got lost in the airwaves on the way to our car radios.

Whether *The Stranger* is a guilty pleasure or a timeworn friend, it sounds better than ever.



### Billy Joel

*The Stranger*

Mobile Fidelity, Hybrid SACD

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# Traffic

## Traffic

*John Barleycorn Must Die*  
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I'm uncertain sure where this version of *John Barleycorn Must Die* was sourced, but it certainly came nothing near an analog tape. It sounds decidedly flat and lifeless. A quick comparison to a pink Island original will have you running back to your turntable. And interestingly, even though this title commands a premium price—as do all 24/192 titles at HD Tracks—one of the songs is upsampled from 24/96. (Note: There's no skullduggery on the company's

part; HD Tracks makes it known in the album information section.)

However, even the recent Deluxe Edition CD remaster dances all over the high-res file in terms of instrument placement and soundfield size. The CD has the woodblock, flute, and triangle firmly planted to the left and right; on the hi-res file, the presentation is diffuse. Considering an excellent copy of the record can be had on vinyl for \$40-60, this download is not recommended.

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MUSIC

## The Band



### The Band

*Music From Big Pink*  
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The analog edition of this eminent rock recording follows Mobile Fidelity's successful SACD release of the same title and raises the bar even higher. A groundbreaking album that combines a wide range of styles and influences, it came after the Band toured with Bob Dylan and recorded *The Basement Tapes* (reviewed last issue).

TONEAudio collector Tom Caselli says the original black-label Capitol is an excellent original pressing. However, it is tough to find a copy that isn't warped. EMI's 100th Anniversary 180g pressing is rarer and equally good, but great-condition copies now command upwards of \$100.

Here, \$30 buys you a Super Big Gulp of extra creamy analog. Levon Helm's drumming, while somewhat subdued, is rich with texture in a way that few digital recordings manage to capture. Multi-part harmonies dominate and come alive across the soundstage, bringing us back to a time in recording history before massive overdubs became the norm. All of which explains why this record stands the test of time, earning the 34th spot on *Rolling Stone's* greatest albums of all-time list. ●



# Start With a Great Pair of Speakers

## Definitive Technology Studio Monitor 45 Loudspeakers

By Jeff Dorgay

**D**o you have a pair of speakers that have been with you since college? *TONEAudio* contributor Jerold O'Brien owns a pair of JBLs that have been through hell and back—moved all the way around the world since our tenure at the University of Wisconsin. But they are like a good luck charm to him. One afternoon when we were struggling to adjust the Kugelfischer injection on his BMW 2002tii, listening to Alice Cooper's *School's Out*, he laughed and said, "I still love those speakers. Lots of great memories."

Philosophers and self-help gurus like to say that getting started is 80% of the battle, and nowhere is this more true than beginning the daunting task of trying to assemble a hi-fi system for the first time. Sage advice says to pick a pair of speakers you like and build around them. After all, whether or not you agree with the concept that speakers most significantly shape the sound of your system, they certainly have the greatest impact on your decor. Chances are you'll be living with your speakers longer than you will a preamp or a receiver, so getting it right the first time constitutes a bonus.







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The inexpensive end of the audio spectrum never ceases to fascinate, only if because every design decision made on a \$400 pair of speakers like the Definitive Technology SM45s is so very critical. On many levels, some of the best work in audio is done in this price neighborhood, primarily because it's ultra-competitive. And much of it sounds dreadful if you're the least bit accustomed to the good stuff. Finding a great entry-level component feels like robbing a convenience store and getting away with the crime. It only seemed appropriate to play Jane's Addiction's "Been Caught Stealing" while un-boxing the SM45s.

#### It Can Be Done

The SM45s were one of the most exciting products I heard at the Consumer Electronics Show last January. Why? It's exactly the kind of product that gets people excited about making a hi-fi system part of their lives. Combined with a decent amplifier,

or perhaps a vintage receiver, one need only add an iPod to start rocking out.

These Definitive Technology models are tiny, only about 6 x 8 x 12, and can actually be used on a bookshelf. Yes, the concept got carried away in the 70s, eventually yielding speakers that were way too large to fit on even a library's vast bookshelf. While you can place these small speakers on such a surface, they produce much better results when mounted on 24-30-inch-tall stands, so that the tweeters are near ear level. Your task? Finding a placement option that balances with your decor, and the tradeoff between maximum bass reinforcement and midrange clarity. *(continued)*



FEATURE

# World-Class Budget Speakers—It's Not an Oxymoron

The SM45s present Kathleen Edwards' "House Full of Empty Rooms" from an honest tonal standpoint while capturing the breathiness and nuance the singer brings to the song, all the while doing a marvelous job of following the pace of the backing acoustic guitar. Admittedly, evident compression emerges when switching to Keel's *The Right To Rock* and dialing the volume way up on some Korn, Metallica, and Tool.

While the SM45s would play really loud without distortion or destruction, they need more bass grunt to really come alive at high volumes with harder stuff. Metalheads are advised to invest in DefTech's ProSub 800 or 1000 subwoofer (\$399 and \$499, respectively) to flesh out the system. Same thing goes for electronica fans. DJ Krush's *Strictly Turntablized* could use a bit more boom to get the message across. But remember, these are \$400 speakers. A pair, no less. Music with less-than-subterranean low notes is easily handled, and test tones reveal solid output to about 50hz. If you can, move the speakers about 18 inches from the wall to take advantage of room gain.

The SM45s possess more than enough resolution to easily discern qualitative differences between Mobile Fidelity's reissue of *KC and the Sunshine Band* on vinyl and the original CD. The nonexistent bass line in "Shake Your Booty" via CD comes through loud and clear when switching to LP, with the woofer cones really pulsing.

Avoiding the parlor tricks of goosing one part of the audio spectrum really makes the SM45s world-class budget speakers. They have incredible overall tonal balance. Playing solo female vocals or electronica excites the "wow" neurons in your brain, and most inex-



pensive speakers really suck when the playlist takes a turn towards acoustic fare.

Sure, it's fun blasting party tracks through the SM45s, and seizing upon the big sound-stage they throw. And, you can actually listen to music on these speakers. After hours of torturing them with metal and techno tracks, slowing the pace down to engage Keith Jarrett's *Keith Jarrett at the Blue Note: The Complete Recordings* proves a fantastic experience. Jarrett's piano is reproduced with an abundance of scale and texture. Along with the applause, his signature grunting hangs in the air, each in a separate layer. Even the stand-up bass is finely depicted, but the lowest overtones are absent.

Mixing it up with Miles, Coltrane, and other jazz legends reveals the same findings. Drums are full of dynamics, never plodding or obtuse. Tonality this good would be highly impressive for a \$1,000 pair of speakers. It's out of this world at this price.

## Keeping Pace with 2012

Yes, \$400 buys a smaller pair of speakers than it did in 1978. However, the value proposition that Definitive Technology's Studio Monitor 45s offer goes off the chart. A two-way system, the SM45 represents the smallest speaker in Def Tech's newest StudioMonitor series. With the grille off, the glossy front baffle looks smashing, revealing a 5.25-inch woofer and the same 1-inch dome tweeter featured

FEATURE

in the SM55 and SM65. The MDF cabinets are covered in a black vinyl rather than a fancy veneer—a necessary albeit completely acceptable compromise. These babies are still highly pleasing, and it's great to see that the extra few bucks that could have been spent on a fancier enclosure were instead put into sound-producing components.

Thanks to a 90db sensitivity rating, the SM45 works well with low-powered amplifiers and is equally at ease with solid-state, class D, or tube amplification. Our cache of vintage budget receivers from Pioneer, Nakamichi, and Sansui all turn in great performances with these speakers, confirming that an iPod owner could assemble a very capable system built around the SM45s for about \$600.

Whether you're just entering the world of hi-fi, or building a compact second system, a pair of SM45s is the best \$400 investment you'll ever make. These are speakers you'll still enjoy in your garage 30 years from now. And think of the cool memories that will go along with the journey. ●

## Definitive Technology Studio Monitor 45 Loudspeakers

MSRP: \$399/pair

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

*I like these speakers so much that I want you to have a pair. Definitive Technologies has agreed to give us three pairs of SM45s to pass on to our readers, so when you have a moment, head to [www.tonepublications.com/contest/](http://www.tonepublications.com/contest/) and follow the instructions. Perhaps you'll be one of our three lucky readers that wins a pair!*



# Jazz & Blues

By Jim Macnie

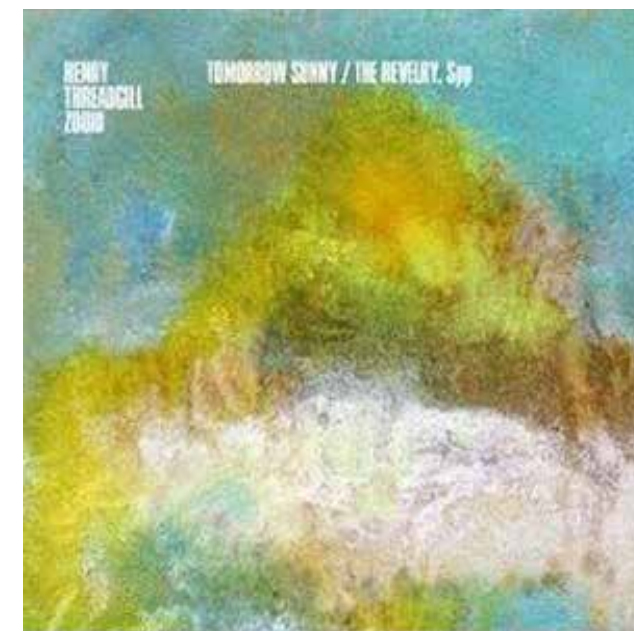


## Henry Threadgill

Henry Threadgill has never had a problem with making a stark canvass project a wealth of tension. His writing for Air's 1976 "Through a Keyhole, Darkly" uses nothing but flute, bass, and drums to mount a dramatic assault with a deeply poetic demeanor. So it's little wonder that the 68-year-old composer has found ways to refine such maneuvers with his larger ensembles. He's been writing for his Zooid sextet for well over a decade, and on *Tomorrow Sunny/The Revelry, Spp*, he waxes minimal. Time and again, this group invites silence to be its seventh member.

The strings are in ascendance here, and their pithy interactions can be arresting. "See The Blackbird Now" is a virtual chamber piece that operates in a hush. Christopher Hoffman's cello, Liberty Ellman's guitar, and Stomu Takeishi's bass guitar crabwalk around each other, blending shards of sound as they inch along. The risky tack underscores Threadgill's thorny eloquence and, as eruptions of dissonance arise, his eerie bass flute connects all the dots. Something similar happens on "Put On Keep/Frontispiece, Spp." Elliot Humberto Kavee provides a cymbal wash, Jose Davilla donates a few trombone urps, and the strings bond for provocative stealth.

Zooid takes its name from biology, and references a cell that busts spontaneous moves "independent of its parent organism." Threadgill's wily arrangements guide most of the action on this album, but even during the inverted syncopations of the more animated pieces ("Ambient Pressure Thereby" builds to an explosive lift-off), each member gets to have an equal say in sculpting the final product. Democracy through a keyhole, sparsely.

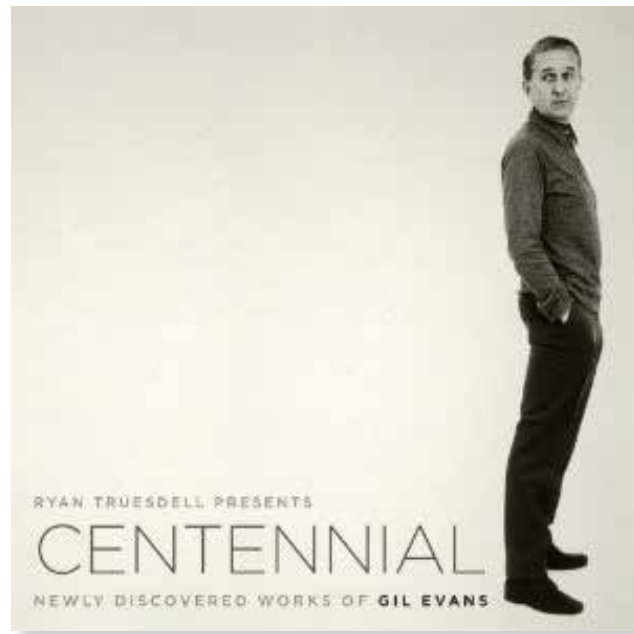


**Henry Threadgill Zooid**  
*Tomorrow Sunny/The Revelry, Spp*  
Pi, CD



## MUSIC

## Ryan Truesdell



**Ryan Truesdell Presents Centennial**  
*Newly Discovered Works of Gil Evans*  
 Artist Share, CD

Jazz repertory is full of options. Some interpreters take a classic piece and bend it, personalizing the texts with new designs. Others make a point of reveling in the original luster, marveling at the architectural essence.

Ryan Truesdell is in the latter camp with his elaborate nod to Gil Evans. Working as copyist for bandleader Maria Schneider, a devout Evans acolyte, Truesdell caught Evans fever and delved deeper into the revered composer/arranger's work, ultimately unearthing a handful of unrecorded scores. That's strong scholarship, but the joy the resultant music brings is even more important.

Evans, of course, is known for the poetry he brought to the fore on a flurry of Miles Davis collaborations, including 1960's *Sketches of Spain* (the pair's association began with the landmark *Birth of the Cool* sessions). His fare is marked by a lightness of timbre that somehow leaves room for a wealth of gravitas. The 10 tracks Truesdell displays have enough of an emotional arc to account for Evans' myriad approaches. The opening "Punjab" boasts a tabla, an air of mystery, and an open-ended feel. "How About You," a chart Evans used during his stint with Claude Thornhill's Orchestra in the 40s, is springy and grooving. The spin on Kurt Weill's "Barbara Song" is as seductive as music gets, with Joe Locke's vibraphone adding to the material's nuanced majesty. "Beg Your Pardon," one of three vocal tracks that nicely divide this lengthy program, is the oldest piece on the disc. It's a romantic ditty dressed in gorgeous swirls of brass and strings.

Truesdell's adherence to Evans' pen is nothing less than resolute. There are improvised moments, but the script is king. Zeal wafts through the music, behaving as if everyone's committed to nailing the innumerable subtleties. That's a winning tack, because unity is key to a big band's success.

As such buoyancy spins this 32-member ensemble towards eloquent heights, the collective's bonding becomes the music's background virtue. Gil would have respected that. ●

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# Major Moxie

Davone Audio Mojo Loudspeaker

By Steve Guttenberg

Let's face it: The big problem with most small speakers is that they sound small, unless they happen to be Davone Audio Mojos. How compact are they? Just twelve inches tall, yet the Mojos have a habit of repeatedly defying expectations. They project a soundstage nearly as big and spacious as that produced by my six-foot-tall Magnepan 3.7 panels.

For this, we can thank Davone's founder and former aeronautical engineer, Paul Schenkel. He'd been sending his US importer, Chris Sommovigo, a series of drawings for a proposed small-box monitor. But Sommovigo suggested something entirely different—a truncated cone speaker. Schenkel then experimented, revised, and ultimately hatched this nifty little omnidirectional speaker.





Mojos come sheathed in black, white, blue, green, or brown cloth, and a solid-wood dispersion cone sits directly over the up-firing 3" "full-range" driver (the cones are available in walnut, cherry, or maple). The 3" driver allegedly provides response out to 20kHz, so there is no crossover to a tweeter—or any sort of tweeter, for that matter. The speaker's entire output is omnidirectional, something that isn't even the case with most so-called omnis.

The Mojo has three rubber feet. There's a small bass port on its bottom, next to the binding posts and 5.25" woofer. The connectors' awkward placement doesn't leave room for thick audiophile cables or banana plugs, so skinny, flexible wires are mandatory. No, the Mojo is not all that efficient. But the 50 watts per channel supplied by Wadia's 151 PowerDAC desktop amp gets the job done.

Setup is super-easy, and since the Mojo is an omnidirectional speaker, "toe-in" isn't required. However, I recommend keeping the top of the speakers near the height of a seated listener's ears. Speaker stands aren't the best way to go. The Mojo wants to be on something with a bigger base. I used a pair of kitchen stools. In truth, the speakers will be equally happy resting on a desktop, credenza, dresser, or end table(s). Placement options are lifestyle-oriented, but moving the speakers out into the room opens up the sound, especially compared with near-wall placement results. *(continued)*





## tone style

Bass? This isn't the ideal speaker for dubstep, but the 5.25" woofer is smooth down to the high 50Hz range, and rolls off below that. I never lamented not pairing a sub with the Mojos, but adding one will only help. Upper treble is shelved down, so the Mojo lacks the clarity of, say, a Magnepan 1.7 panel speaker.

When contrasted with that belonging to direct-radiating box speakers, the Mojos' omnidirectional dispersion can sound recessed. On many (but not all) recordings, the soundstage is set back behind the plane of the speakers. Sure, you might assume that an omnidirectional speaker creates a diffuse sound cloud. But play a mono recording, and the Mojos develop a fairly tightly focused center image. With well-recorded stereo tunes, you might feel like the Mojos liberate the soundstage, especially when compared with most box speakers. *(continued)*

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- ✓ **Yes**, you can use it with your iPod or iPhone — optional Anthem MDX 1 dock coming soon;
- ✓ **Yes**, it's intuitive with user-friendly menus;
- ✓ **Yes**, ARC is included with every MRX.

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## TONE STYLE



Indeed, instead of putting the band in your room, the Mojos put you inside the recording venue. Take Janis Joplin's recently released *Live at the Carousel Ballroom 1968* CD. It may have an amateurish stereo mix, but even so, the Mojos cut loose the hippie-infused, psychedelic blues-rock in all its glory. The *MTV Unplugged Collection* disc is even better, with the Paul Simon, Rod Stewart, and Paul McCartney tracks eerily realistic.

The Davone Mojo is exactly the sort of speaker the high-end industry needs to make more of—and stat. It's small enough to appeal to non-audiophiles, and the sound is distinctive enough to knock out anyone who comes within spitting distance. Yes, it's that good! ●

**Davone Mojo Loudspeaker**  
**MSRP: \$2,300/pair**

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# IkyAudio Red Lobster Speakers

\$225/pair  
[www.ikyaudio.com](http://www.ikyaudio.com)

**D**esktop audio is the wild, wild West these days, as speakers in all shapes and sizes are popping up everywhere. Utilizing a magnesium full-range driver in a ported enclosure made from PVC pipe, and painted any number of bright colors, the Red Lobsters constitute great-sounding desk art.

Why have boring little square cubes when you can have these on your desk? They epitomize cool, and are supposed to ship with a 15-watt class D amplifier not included with our review samples. While these little speakers don't have a ton of bass, they do remarkably well if experienced in the close confines of a desk system and make a fine combination when paired with a small tube amplifier like the Mini Watt.

The Red Lobsters boast a very nicely defined high end and, thanks to the single-driver approach, the mid/vocal range sounds clean and natural. But best of all, they add a nice splash of color to your desk landscape.





# Mixtape Table

TBD

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

**G**earing up for his first full production run, Seattle artist Jeff Skierka combines his love for the analog tape with his respect for Charles and Ray Eames in creating the ultimate table for music lovers.

Skierka spent almost five years hand-building the prototype of this 12:1 replica of a cassette. The Mixtape Table has a 3/8" plexiglass top to prevent party spillage from getting inside the gigantic cassette, and while the model is made entirely from hardwood, a plywood edition will be available. Think of it like the difference between UDXLIs and regular UR90 cassettes.

We will feature a full interview with the artist and his plans for upcoming editions of the Mixtape Table. Who knows, maybe we can talk him into making some gigantic tape-reel tables, too?



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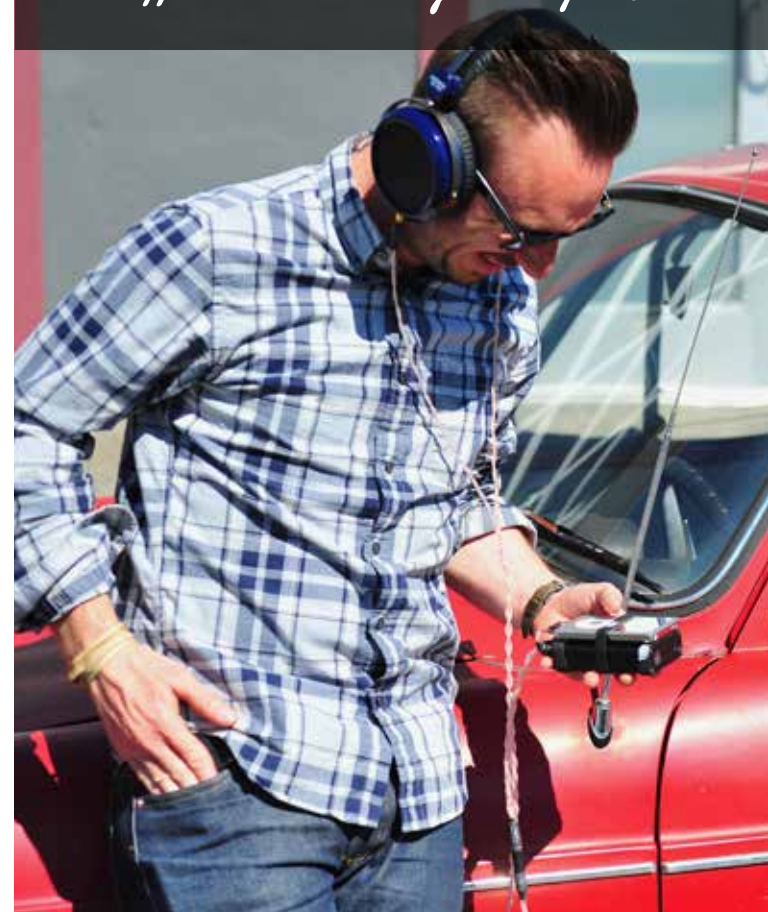
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# Thiel 3.7 “Burst” Speakers

TBD

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

**T**hirteen pairs of these very special Thiel 3.7 speakers have been produced with the “Burst” coat you see here. One for Les Paul, one for Jim Thiel, and one for Henry J., the owner of Gibson. The cabinets are made at the Gibson guitar factory, and the aluminum I.D. panels hand-signed by Les Paul at the Iridium in New York. That’s pretty hip. With Mr. Paul passing away before the project’s completion, eleven pairs remained, one of which has been donated to Gibson for a fall charity auction during its Music Rising event with U2’s the Edge.

The remaining ten pairs? They’ll be auctioned or sold in the future. So, if you’d like something really unique for your living room, please contact Dawn Cloyd at Thiel for details on how to try an obtain a pair.







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# Beer Snob

By Bob Gendron

*Life is too short to drink mediocre beer.*

## A Visit to Cantillon Brewery

Mecca for Traditional Lambics

Cobwebs coating the ceiling beams and strewn between oak barrels are the first clues to an unspoken albeit somewhat obvious tenet: The production that occurs at Cantillon could never happen in America. In the U.S., the Food and Drug Administration—or a similar organization charged with health inspections—would cite a brewery for bugs and uncleanly facilities, and demand the offending properties removed.

But at the last traditional brewery in Brussels, cobwebs are signs of wellness and they're never disturbed. As spiders eat harmful insects drawn to the summer fermentation process, they signal the inextricable link between the facility and nature (as well as the entangled relationship between lambics and nature). The pesticide-free approach benefits all involved, not the least of which is the beer drinker.



Revered by connoisseurs, the family-operated Cantillon brewery produces several of the most sought-after lambic beers in the world. In the States, a 75cl bottle can often sell for upwards of \$50 at a pub—if and when it can be located. The cost relates to both Cantillon's limited production (approximately 26,500 gallons are churned out each year on equipment dating from the 19th century) and the rarity of customary lambics.

Made via a medieval-derived technique called spontaneous fermentation, the style owes its existence to a stage in which the beverage gets exposed to native microorganisms such as airborne wild yeasts and bacteria exclusively found in the Senne valley. In the same way that spiders provide a natural defense, such organisms—which attach to barrels, casks, and walls—contribute stability to microbes and, hence, heavily impact the flavor. Such synergy also explains why lambics are primarily brewed between mid-October and early April, when cooler temperatures spur inoculation with regional airborne yeasts.

Lambic comes in several types, including faro, gueuze, kriek, and Framboise. The latter two are examples of fruit-flavored concoctions, sweeter and higher in sugar content than their cousins. Conventionally, lambics are gorgeously complex, tart, dry, and sour, and give off prominent tastes and notes associated with *Brettanomyces*, the most prominent and proprietary micro-organism in the ingredients. *(continued)*



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

— Michael Fremer, *Stereophile* (January 2011)

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Pulsare Phono Stage





At Cantillon, which doubles as the Gueuze Museum, visitors can sample varieties and purchase 37.5 or 75cl bottles. As rewarding as that experience proves, the self-guided tour that allows one to see the operation and machinery beats even the tasting opportunities. For a small fee, the curious can wander as long as they wish through the facilities, located in a fairly non-descript building a few blocks away from one of Brussels' major train stations.

Everything about Cantillon oozes old-world tradition, with even the walls and floors seemingly emitting fragrances detected in the beer. A mashing tun occupies the majority of real estate in the mashing room, where crushed cereals mix with warm water turned by a giant propeller. Additional filtration, and the use of 10,000 liters of hot water, extracts sugars and obtains wort, passed along into hop boilers. Cooked hops are collected in a container found in the corner space.

A separate area houses red-copper hop boilers and a crushing machine, and an airy attic-like expanse stores wheat, malted barley, and aged hops. Yet the brewery's signature piece resides in the cooling tun room. Here, in the center, sits a large red-copper vessel completely riveted without having ever been welded. While shallow, its surface accommodates 7500 liters of wort, and speeds up cooling via contact with air. Brewmasters can, to a certain extent, control humidity, temperature, and light via shutters located to the left and right of the basin. *(continued)*





## TONE STYLE



**Unlike most contemporary breweries that rely on stainless steel reservoirs, Cantillon employs oak and chestnut casks for fermentation.**

Unlike most contemporary breweries that rely on stainless steel reservoirs, Cantillon employs oak and chestnut casks for fermentation. The entire process takes approximately three years. Another year of waiting is required to yield finer products, including gueuze and krik. During this course, 20 percent of the liquid becomes lost to evaporation.

Posted explanations regarding the manufacture of individual lambic types, as well as visual cues concerning bottling and cellaring, reinforce the distinctiveness associated with Cantillon's premises and methods. Once a beer gets bottled, it's placed horizontally in the cellar for at least another six months, where a second fermentation, invoked by sugars, materializes. *(continued)*

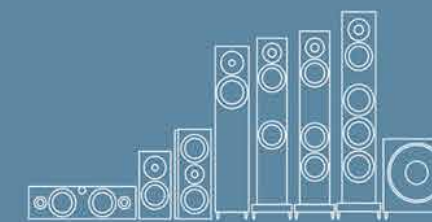
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STONE STYLE

Ideally, Cantillon strives to store 60,000 bottles at a time due to the refermentation process and desire for natural taste. Such painstaking and patient hands-on procedures account for the brewery's esteemed value among discerning beer drinkers.

Currently, unfettered by Belgian law in noting differences between “modern” and “traditional” lambics, several brewers sell low- and high-fermentation beer that's cheaper to make, needs just several weeks to produce, and involves sweetening and saturating by means of carbon dioxide. Synthetic flavors and syrups help facilitate a trend that counters Cantillon's respect for age-old practices and completely natural products. Once you've had the real article, there's no going back. ●



## FEATURE

# Focal Chorus 826W Loudspeaker

By Jeff Dorgay

If you've ever auditioned the Focal Grande Utopia EM loudspeakers, you know the breathtaking musical experience they provide, from the deepest bass note to the highest high, with a clarity that few other models can muster. Focal is one of the world's only speaker companies with a full research facility and manufacturing complex under one roof. All of the company's drivers are made in-house, accompanying all of the necessary research, design, and fabrication that go into every aspect of speaker design.

Audiophiles that inquired about the cost of the Grande Utopias were probably a little bit freaked out at the \$180,000 price tag. Fortunately, you don't have to spend that much money to get a great pair of speakers from Focal. The Chorus 826W retails for \$3,695 per pair and epitomizes how cutting-edge engineering and design get distilled into real-world products.





## FEATURE

**Visually and Audibly Exquisite**

Unboxing the 826Ws is a sensual experience. The black-lacquered finish is as smooth as glass, and the cabinet quality fantastic. Everything harmonizes with each other, and the “W” logo is engraved into the tweeter baffle. Fit and finish is better than expected at this price category, no doubt the result of utilizing a production facility trained in making the Utopia series. Because Focal also has pro and car audio divisions, it boasts incredible economies of scale that are the equivalent of a small speaker company that purchases off-the-shelf drivers from one place and cabinets from another in order to sell decent \$10-\$20k speakers. Few compete with Focal in this area.

The second I set the stylus down on Lynryd Skynyrd’s *Nuthin’ Fancy*, the track’s omnipresent opening amplifier hum instantly lets me know these speakers can rock. Courtesy of a 91.5db sensitivity rating, a 50- to 70-watt amplifier gets the job done with power to spare. For most of my listening sessions, the PrimaLuna Dialog Six monoblocks with EL-34 power were awesome. Unless I was blasting King Diamond, I took advantage of the Dialog’s even sweeter-sounding triode mode because of the 826W’s sensitivity.

An inverted dome tweeter is a Focal hallmark. However, the 800



## FEATURE

series uses a 1-inch aluminum/magnesium membrane whereas the Utopia system employs a beryllium dome that’s far more costly to produce. The tweeter in the 826W easily resolves ultra-fine musical detail, with low distortion and high speed. This Al/Mg tweeter is very special. Using techniques used in the development of the beryllium tweeter, Focal takes advantage of the light weight of aluminum—fusing the soft magnesium layer to dampen the dome, eliminating the harsh sound normally associated with a metal dome tweeter. And that speed feels a lot like a high-quality electrostatic speaker system with a massive soundstage. W versions of Chorus speakers also boast the same W composite material used in woofers of Utopia models. Where many speakers at this price rely on off-the-shelf drivers, Focal applies technology from its flagship models. The pair of 6.5-inch woofers is remarkably free of upper-bass coloration and lower-bass distortion.

Fans of well-defined imaging will be smitten with the 826W. The piano in the Allman Brothers’ “Ain’t Wastin’ Time No More” comes in way off to the right side of the sound field, as Duane Allman’s famous slide guitar snakes in from the right and both instruments blend in with the band. (continued)



## FEATURE

Everything on *Eat a Peach* sounds incredible. Small details abound: A drumstick clicked on the side of the kit here; tiny percussion bits there; and the sound of a guitar slide gently moved across a guitar neck while bongos float in the distance. Such resolution is often unavailable in under-\$10k speakers.

### At Ease Everywhere

The 826W is equally articulate at low volume; it is not a speaker that you need to blast in order to achieve musical engagement. Even at conversation levels, the speaker's virtues shine. A few of my audiophile buddies unfamiliar with Focal initially believed these speakers fetched much more than their list price.

Closely concentrating on Neil Young's *Harvest* reveals the intricacies the 826W produce, the experience easily rendering the superiority of the 24/192 version of the album. At the beginning of the title track, the piano swells up out of the background to meet the banjo, splendidly yielding an abundance of texture and tone.

A series of test tones reveals solid bass down to 40hz, with worthwhile output at 35hz. A quick romp through a series of discs with deep, low-frequency energy is highly enjoyable. More importantly, whether playing Pink Floyd, Snoop Dogg, or Mahler, the 826 exhibits control and plenty of low-frequency detail as well. The hard-hitting beats of Mr. Scruff's "SweetSmoke" provide sufficient, non-fatiguing gut punch when the volume gets cranked up to party levels.

(continued)



# PASS

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Defined Bass

Natural

Engaging

Flexible







Equally sublime dynamics come via the beginning of Led Zeppelin's "No Quarter," where neither the distorted bass line nor the pounding bass drum overpowers the other.

I even notice a few sonic bits on my favorite Doug and the Slugs album, *Cognac and Bologna*, I wasn't expecting. The texture in the tom fills and keyboard riffs are rousing. Rush's "The Trees" offers similar surprises, as the Canadian trio is presented with the grand scale it deserves even as the chirping birds at the beginning of the track are rendered in full color. Moving down in latitude from Canada to California calls for Van Halen. After about an hour of high-decibel use, and switching to the mighty Burmester 911mk.3, the Focals are no worse for the wear.

## Room Friendly

Occupying just an 11 1/8 x 14 3/4-inch footprint (282 x 375mm), the 826W physically parallels a pair of compact speakers on a pair of stands but adds the deeper bass response of a floorstander. The 826W's ported enclosure system is called "Powerflow," and includes one port on the front face of the speaker and another port that fires downward.

Don't forget to mount these speakers on their stands, or you will be sorely disappointed with bass performance. Oh, yeah: The stands also receive the Utopia treatment, as they're produced

from stylish cast aluminum and include threaded leveling spikes.

Once securely mounted, the 826W is a breeze to set up. The dual-port design seems to be less sensitive to room placement than many single-port speakers we've tried, and because these speakers are not terribly heavy at 56.8 pounds (25.8kg) each, shuffling them to their optimum position requires minimal effort.

## Award-Winning Performance

Of course, the 826Ws don't go as deep or play as loudly as the Grandes, but all of the attributes associated with the landmark latter speaker's attributes are represented: tonal purity, wideband frequency response, and high dynamic range coupled with excellent low-level detail retrieval.

The 826W's only potential drawback? The high resolution reveals shortcomings in the signal path more noticeably than most speakers at this price point. Its inverted dome tweeter is not harsh, but ultra-resolving. And, after spending a little time with the 826Ws, listeners with budget amplification will be shopping for a new amp.

Given that it incorporates so many features from Focal's top speaker systems, the 826W could be the best bang for the buck the company has yet produced. The model is more than worthy of our Exceptional Value Award for 2012. ●

**Focal Chorus 826W Loudspeaker**  
MSRP: \$3,695/pair

**MANUFACTURER**  
Focal-JMLab

**CONTACT**  
www.focal.com (Factory)  
www.audioplusservices.com  
(US and Canadian importer)





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Take the new Meridian Sooloos Media Core 200 for a spin, or bring your favorite analog record, as long as it's on vinyl or cassette. Our friends from VPI are supplying a turntable, and Echo Audio promises a cool cassette deck for mix tapes.

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## McIntosh MEN220 Processor

[www.mcintoshlabs.com](http://www.mcintoshlabs.com)  
\$4,000

While many audiophiles pooh-pooh the thought of inserting an equalizer into their system—even though many of these same listeners seem to be okay with five-figure cables that include massive EQ networks—the MEN220 is a modestly priced product that works brilliantly. Whether you use it as an equalizer, electronic crossover, or room-correction system, it's a veritable magic box. Thanks to licensing Lyngdorf Audio's ROOMPERFECT system, the MEN220 goes a long way to correct room-related problems.

Of course, it won't do everything, and there's still no substitute for an acoustically treated room. But as McIntosh Labs' Ron Cornelius likes to say, "The MEN220 will let you enjoy the way your speakers sound, back in the corner of the room where your wife wants them."

Watch for our full review next issue.



# Octave Jubilee Monoblock Amplifiers



www.octave.de  
\$69,000/pair

**We**'ve been smitten with past amplifiers that arrived from German manufacturer Octave. The company maintains a level of manufacturing excellence pursued by few others, along with a supreme understanding of what a great amplifier can achieve.

Utilizing eight 6550 power tubes per channel, the Jubilee monoblocks take full advantage of what Octave refers to as "modern pentode design" and work in concert with an overbuilt power supply and a precision biasing circuit to an amplifier. Combined, the unit redefines vacuum-tube capabilities. When your eyes are closed, you'll swear you are listening to a choice EL-34 amplifier—until you crank up the volume.

Our review of these singular amplifiers is in progress.

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## McIntosh C50 Preamplifier

www.mcintoshlabs.com  
\$6,500

**M**cIntosh always packs a lot of value into products, but outdoes itself with the C50 preamp. The model combines a USB DAC with a MM and MC phonostage and an eight-band programmable equalizer. Not to mention oodles of inputs, outputs, data ports, and of course, those glorious big, blue meters on the front panel.

A solid-state design, with the current generation of LED lighting: You can pretty much plug the C50 in, turn it on, forget about it for the next 30 years, and let your kids fight about who inherits it.

Our full review will be online soon.

*Benchmark*



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# Big Digital Building Blocks

## Naim DAC and 555PS Power Supply

By Earle Blanton and Jeff Dorgay

With the race on to build bigger, better, more powerful gear, Naim has entered the field with its first standalone DAC. In the past, the company took a closed-architecture approach to digital, with its players claiming neither a digital input nor output. One uses them the way they come from the factory; the only available upgrade is a larger power supply.

If you aren't familiar with Naim, it certainly follows a different approach than other manufacturers. In the case of its \$3,695 world-class DAC, performance upgrades come in the form of more robust, external power supplies. This strategy (also used with its SuperLine phonostage) works well in the sense that you buy the DAC once, getting digital decoding ability along with a top-range product's input and output flexibility—and the same tonality—for a reasonable price.

When more performance is needed, an external power supply is easily added. Enter the \$5,595 XPS and \$9,345 555PS. While the uninitiated might pause at the concept of an external power supply costing more than an actual component, we've been to this dance with Naim before, and the proof is in the listening.





The Naim DAC provides a great digital experience in standard form, but if you can make the jump, opt for the 555PS. Like every other Naim component into which we've plugged a massive power supply, it makes for a stunning experience. Once you hear it, you will never go back. For those that keep gear for long periods of time, it's reassuring to buy the DAC and know the job is done. When you get the itch to upgrade, adding a power supply is a simple task.

Regardless of output or file resolution, the Naim DAC plays flawlessly with every digital source we throw at it. No matter your digital arsenal, the user-friendly nit will improve its sound. While Naim would, of course, like to see you purchase one of its music servers, if you have someone else's server in your system, integrating the Naim DAC with a current setup shouldn't be an issue. In addition to the Naim HDX, we used the QSonix, Meridian Sooloos, Aurender, and Squeezebox servers with all file resolutions without a glitch.

The DAC proves equally compatible with a wide range of transports. The MSB universal transport works particularly well with the Naim DAC, allowing audiophiles invested in physical media of all types—SACD, DVD-Audio, or even Blu-ray—to play their files from one source. *(continued)*

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**The Naim DAC employs a plethora of inputs: a pair of RCA SPDIF, a pair of 75-ohm BNC inputs, and four toslink inputs.**

### Different Approach, Similar Sound

Even though the Naim DAC takes an alternative *modus operandi* to the digital decoding process, the company's CD555 uses old-school, 16 bit/44.1k architecture. The Naim DAC upsamples incoming data to 768khz, using a SHARC 40-bit floating point processor, which also handles the digital filtering. Audio data is then dumped into a RAM buffer before going to the actual DAC chips for D/A conversion. For a more in-depth overview of this process, download the Naim white paper here:

[naimaudio.com](http://naimaudio.com)

Such methodology is not necessary with the CD555 because it only plays 16 bit/44.1khz files from CD; remember, however, the Naim DAC is compatible with all high-resolution digital formats. Credit Naim's engineering staff for making the DAC/555PS combination sound nearly identical to the CD555. Under the hood, the models couldn't be more different.

The Naim DAC employs a plethora of inputs: a pair of RCA SPDIF, a pair of 75-ohm BNC inputs, and four toslink inputs. A USB port rests on the back and front panels; however, these inputs are not intended for direct connection to a computer. (continued)

## Where Have all the Good Stereos Gone?



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**Since the DAC is Apple compliant, you can use an iPod, iPhone, or iPad to stream music (up to 48kHz sampling rate) without the need for an external high-performance dock.**

And forget about balanced XLR/EBU or FireWire inputs. Naim believes that a computer via USB doesn't constitute an optimal way to transfer data to its DAC, so the USB input is for an external drive or memory stick. We found this handy when a friend brought over a few albums for a listening session.

Since the DAC is Apple compliant, you can use an iPod, iPhone, or iPad to stream music (up to 48kHz sampling rate) without the need for an external high-performance dock. Merely connect your iPod via the standard USB cord that goes to your charger, and experience the upgraded sound the

iPod possesses when you bypass the onboard DAC. Listeners with multiple iPods will find this method goes a long way towards enticing the rest of their family to share in the hi-fi system fun.

#### Standard and Super-Size

Listening sessions began with the Naim DAC by itself, and without the external power supply. The former exhibits the same character, or "house sound," that we've experienced with the other Naim players. We experimented with an iPod Touch, vintage Denon 3910, MSB universal transport, Naim HDX, and Sooloos music server, as well as a dCS Paganini transport.

By itself, the DAC proves highly competent and exhibits a very natural tonality. Naim gear always excels in the areas of musical pace and timing. However, that 555PS is like connecting an afterburner to the DAC. While tonality remains the same, dynamics take a major jump with the extra power. The rim shots in Lee Morgan's "Riggarmortes" from the *Tom Cat* XRCd are breathtaking. And when Morgan's trumpet enters, it punches through the mix with authority and more texture, the tune now sounding like a high-resolution file.

Bass weight and control also soar with the 555PS. Listening

to the classic electronica album, *Kruder and Dorfmeister, The K&D Sessions*, confirms these findings. "Bomb the Bass—Bug Powder Dust" features a deep, loose bass track that can easily get away from a modest system and overwhelm the diaphanous mix. The Naim combination paints a massive sonic landscape, simultaneously offering potent bass that shakes the listening room but never loses control.

#### More Power

Aside from reproducing music in a natural way—acoustic instruments played back through the Naim DAC/555PS possess the

right amount of texture and decay to convince you you're hearing the real thing—the 555PS produces a much larger soundstage. Cue up Frank Zappa's "Penguin in Bondage" from the live *Roxy & Elsewhere* album. Listening to only the DAC, Ruth Underwood's percussion effects are buried in the mix, and the CD feels somewhat compressed. Once the 555PS is engaged, room boundaries expand in all three dimensions, allowing Zappa and his cronies to reveal themselves in greater detail.

The additional dynamics that the 555PS brings to listening sessions are invaluable. *(continued)*



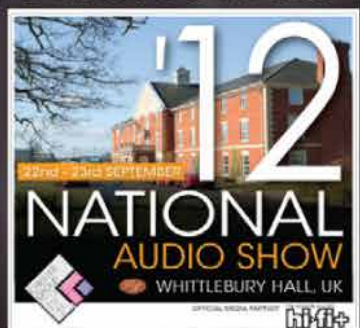
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As nicely as the Naim DAC/555PS combination renders top-notch recordings, the additional detail and overall listenability it brings to average-sounding records separates the pairing from lesser DACs. Music lovers whose interests venture beyond the same old audiophile standards will be delighted.

Indeed, after swapping the power supply in and out only a few times, I became convinced the NAIM DAC makes such a quantum leap with the 555PS. It's not to be missed. Sure, there are a few excellent DACs in the \$4,000 range, and while the Naim unit is highly capable on its own, the 555PS turns it into something special.

### You Might Forget About Your Turntable

If we were comparing the two DACs to phono cartridges, the Naim boasts a sound similar to that of a Koetsu Rosewood Signature Platinum: robust bass response, great stereo image, and a dash of warmth thrown in for good measure—a characteristic that never hurts digital media. In direct comparison to the similarly priced dCS Debussy, the dCS sounds more like a Lyra Titan i, with a shade more resolution and slightly more forward presentation.

For music lovers that want a digital source that is musical in the manner of an analog source, the Naim DAC/555PS is the way to roll. Also, if you are a CD555 owner that's a bit late coming to music servers, this DAC and power supply will provide a seamless experience. For these reasons, the Naim DAC/555PS combination receives our most enthusiastic recommendation. ●

### The Naim DAC/555PS Power Supply

**MSRP:** Naim DAC, \$3,695  
555PS Power supply, \$9,345

### MANUFACTURER

Naim Audio

### CONTACT

[www.naimaudio.com](http://www.naimaudio.com) (factory)  
[www.soundorg.com](http://www.soundorg.com) (US Importer)

### PERIPHERALS

**Preamplifiers** Conrad Johnson  
Act 2/Series 2, ARC REF 5SE,  
Burmester 011

**Power Amplifiers** McCormack  
DNA 750 monoblocks, Octave  
Jubilee Monoblocks, Pass XA200.5  
monoblocks, ARC REF 150,  
Burmester 911 mk.3

**Digital Sources** Naim HDX-SSD,  
Sooloos Control 15, MSB Universal  
Transport, dCS Paganini Transport

**Speakers** Magnepan 20.1, GamuT S9,  
B&W 802D, Sonus Faber Ellipsa SE

**Cable** Cardas Clear, Furutech  
Reference



# Conrad-Johnson GAT

**Iconic Manufacturer's Best Preamplifier Yet!**

By Jeff Dorgay

My journey with Conrad-Johnson preamplifiers goes all the way back to its original PV-1, purchased new in 1979. Over the last 33 years, I've tried a number of different preamplifiers, yet the CJ sound remains a favorite.

Loyal *TONEAudio* readers know that I've been using the ACT 2/Series Two preamplifier for many years as a reference component. Just like that PV-1, the ACT 2 has performed without as much as a burp—along with the company's Premier 350 power amplifier—for upwards of 20,000 hours. During a recent dinner with Lew Johnson, he and his partner, Bill Conrad, laughed and said, "You've probably spent more hours listening to the ACT 2 than we have. And we designed the damn thing."





**Produced in an edition of 250 units, each \$20,000 GAT has a small, stamped serial-number pad on the back face. It is also the ultimate in simplicity. Only one 6922 vacuum tube is utilized as a gain stage per channel.**

The ART 3 hit the scene a few years ago, and while I enjoyed listening to it in a few friends' systems, I was too content with the ACT 2 to let it go. However, the GAT is another story. When I visited the CJ factory last year, Johnson said, "I think we finally have something you'll want to trade your ACT 2 in on."

While CJ has always made all-vacuum-tube preamplifiers, the GAT marches to the beat of a different drum. Produced in an edition of 250 units, each \$20,000 GAT has a small, stamped serial-number pad on the back face. It is also the ultimate in simplicity. Only one 6922 vacuum tube is utilized as a gain stage per channel, and a low-noise FET transistor serves as an output gain buffer—an alternate approach from models employing the FET as the input stage. The combination works brilliantly, offering low noise and incredible low-level detail.

#### Under the Hood

Much has been said about the virtues of the proprietary Teflon CJD capacitors transforming CJ electronics from a slightly warm, mellifluous sound that this writer always finds enticing to a current sound that gives up none of the tonal richness from legacy designs, yet now possess a level of large- and small-scale dynamics—along with a transparency unattainable in previous preamplifiers. As they used to say at Weight Watchers, "All the satisfaction with none of the guilt."

The GAT is full of the aforementioned large capacitors, strategically placed in all critical functions. Those used in the power supply look like emergency road flares, and account for much of the GAT's explosive dynamics. The rest of the circuit board reveals premium parts; this isn't an overpriced pretty box. *(continued)*

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However, those massive Teflon capacitors take some time to sound their best. We have experienced the same trait with every component featuring a number of them in their design. Right out of the box, the GAT sounds a little flat and restricted—almost in a haze. But it's easy to pick up on the exquisite tonality that makes this preamplifier one of the world's finest.

The GAT exits the fog once 100 hours pass, and makes a substantial jump in clarity around the 300-hour mark. Should you be a jittery, impatient audiophile, resist the urge to abandon the GAT until you get at least 300 hours on the clock, or you will be sorry. Most of this “break-in” finishes at this point; you'll know it when you power it up and it just sounds a lot “bigger.” From that point forward, it continues to slightly improve over the next few hundred hours.

#### ACT, ART, or GAT?

The ACT, ART, and GAT all possess their own unique sonic signature, and each appeals to a different listener. The ACT 2 places you about five rows closer to the musical presentation than the ART 3, yet the latter claims more heft in the lowest register of the frequency spectrum, and possesses more tonal saturation as well. Keep in mind, these are not earth-shattering differences. It's more like the gradation between high-performance tires on a Porsche or Ferrari, but the preamplifiers do have their own unique flavor. Regardless of your choice of adjectives, these two models owe as much to the type of tube (four 6H30s in the ACT 2, ten 6922s in the ART) as their inherent circuit design.







Enter the GAT. Imagine an equal mixture of the ART and ACT's tonality, with greater dynamic ability and a lower noise floor. It's that basic. The GAT makes for a perfect match for both tubed and solid-state CJ power amplifiers, proving a great dance partner with all the amplifiers at my disposal.

#### Users Chime In

During the course of the review, a few GAT owners were kind enough to send me their impressions, and we've all drawn the same conclusion. Whether or not previous CJ owners, all agree that the GAT's price was "very reasonable" in comparison to other units they auditioned. One user called it a "relative steal."

The GAT's high-frequency refinement got the highest marks, with one of our respondents feeling the difference between

the GAT and ACT 2 isn't subtle. "It's as if CJ has brought back the magic midrange from the Premier 16LS and ART preamplifiers, yet carved away the syrupy part."

All concurred on the GAT's superior noise floor and, interestingly, the seven GAT owners/responders all commented on the quality of the stock CJ power cord. One reader summed it up succinctly, stating, "I've experimented with a number of power cords, and noticed a marginal improvement. But the stock CJ cord is tough to beat."

#### Serves the Music

High-performance audio components are like high-performance automobiles in the sense that they offer overpowering excellence in one area, yet lack in other fields that are even bested by modestly priced competitors. *(continued)*

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## REVIEW

While the GAT is almost equally good with all aspects of musical reproduction, it is the master at combining high resolution with a complete lack of grain or harshness.

Keith Jarrett's *Shostakovich: 24 Preludes and Fugues, Op. 87* instantly reveals the nuance, texture, and decay the GAT puts at your disposal. Leading and trailing edges of piano notes sound magnificent—almost fragile, not unlike the multicolored light reflection on a soap bubble floating in the air. Acoustic instruments portrayed via the GAT are incredibly realistic.

The GAT also excels in the pace department. The title cut of Frank Sinatra's *Nice and Easy* reveals the component's prowess, as it keeps Sinatra's vocals out in front of his orchestra while simultaneously painting a Cinemascope-esque soundstage behind him. At the end of the track, when he snaps his fingers, this bit of fleeting percussion makes it feel as if the man himself is standing about four feet in front of you—unbeatable.

Anja Garbarek's "Big Mouth" from *Smiling and Waving* illustrates how the GAT proves equally captivating with female vocals. In this case, Garbarek's highly over-processed vocals fill my listening room to the point where, at high volume, the doors need to be opened to let some of them out. Yet, at the same time, all of the cool percussion and electronic sounds hover in space. Crowded House's *Woodface* offers the same presentation. Even though it's another studio album full of processing, and an excellent example of "pinpoint imaging," the GAT bears fruit.

(continued)





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## REVIEW

**Conrad-Johnson GAT Preamplifier**  
**MSRP: \$20,000**

**MANUFACTURER**

conrad-johnson design, inc.

**CONTACT**

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

**PERIPHERALS**

**Analog Source** AVID Acutus  
Reference SP/TriPlanar/Lyra Atlas

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

**Phonostage** Vitus Audio MPP-201

**Power Amplifier** Conrad-Johnson  
Premier 350, Pass Labs XA200.5,  
Burmester 911 mk. 3, Octave Jubilee  
Monoblocks

**Speakers** Magnepan 3.7, GamuT S9

**Cable** Cardas Clear

The GAT will stun you with its massive soundstage and rock-solid imaging—no doubt because of the GAT's lightning transient speed and freedom from overhang. It stops and starts without going past the mark, providing fatigue-free sound, even after long listening sessions.

**Triumph Over Mediocrity**

Like any other preamplifier from the top of the mountain, the GAT breezes through pristine audiophile tracks. But those cues aren't what separate the best from pretty good. As fine as the GAT is with your best recordings, it will endear you with its ability to reveal more music than you thought possible from less-than-heavenly material.

Favorites from Elvis Costello, Bruce Springsteen, and Todd Rundgren (*A Wizard, A True Star* is especially nasty sounding) move up from the "terrible recording, but I love the music" to the "sounds pretty good" category. The Rundgren record is particularly splendid when played through the GAT: The bass foundation is better than I've ever heard it, and has a few more layers.

I can't put enough stress on the importance of these revelations when it comes to an expensive component. It's imperative that gear that costs as much as a decent car doesn't limit the user to five audiophile-approved recordings. This alone justifies the price for this reviewer. Grab a GAT before they are gone. ●





# Touch Me

## The Meitner MA-1 Digital to Analog Converter

By Steve Guttenberg

**E**d Meitner has a new DAC, the MA-1, and it's a doozy. Over the past 30-odd years, I've been lucky enough to meet a lot of high-end audio designers, but Meitner remains a special case. Our paths first crossed when I was working at a high-end store, Sound by Singer, in New York City. His mahogany-sheathed preamps and power amps were a good deal smaller than any other period electronics and sounded great with my Snell Type A speakers.

When I recently phoned him to catch up on old times and pepper him with questions about the MA-1, he was just as I remembered: A no-BS kind of guy. Most audio designers pay lip service to their love of music. He doesn't. Doing so would, in his words, "cloud the judgment," and, without hesitating, added, "Music is not my business. Sound is my business."

He's not lying. Meitner built an automated recording studio console in 1971 and designed 1-bit digital recording systems in the late 70s, a few years before the introduction of the CD. He also designed a fascinating velocity transducer speaker that rivaled the sound of the era's electrostatics. He was always working on something new and different, like his AT-2 turntable. The platter-less design only supported the label while the grooved portion "floated" in free air. The turntable claimed a uni-pivot arm, and the whole contraption rested on three massive cones. Most high-end engineers stick with one thing or another, but Meitner played with them all.

**ma 1 dac**  
mdat technology





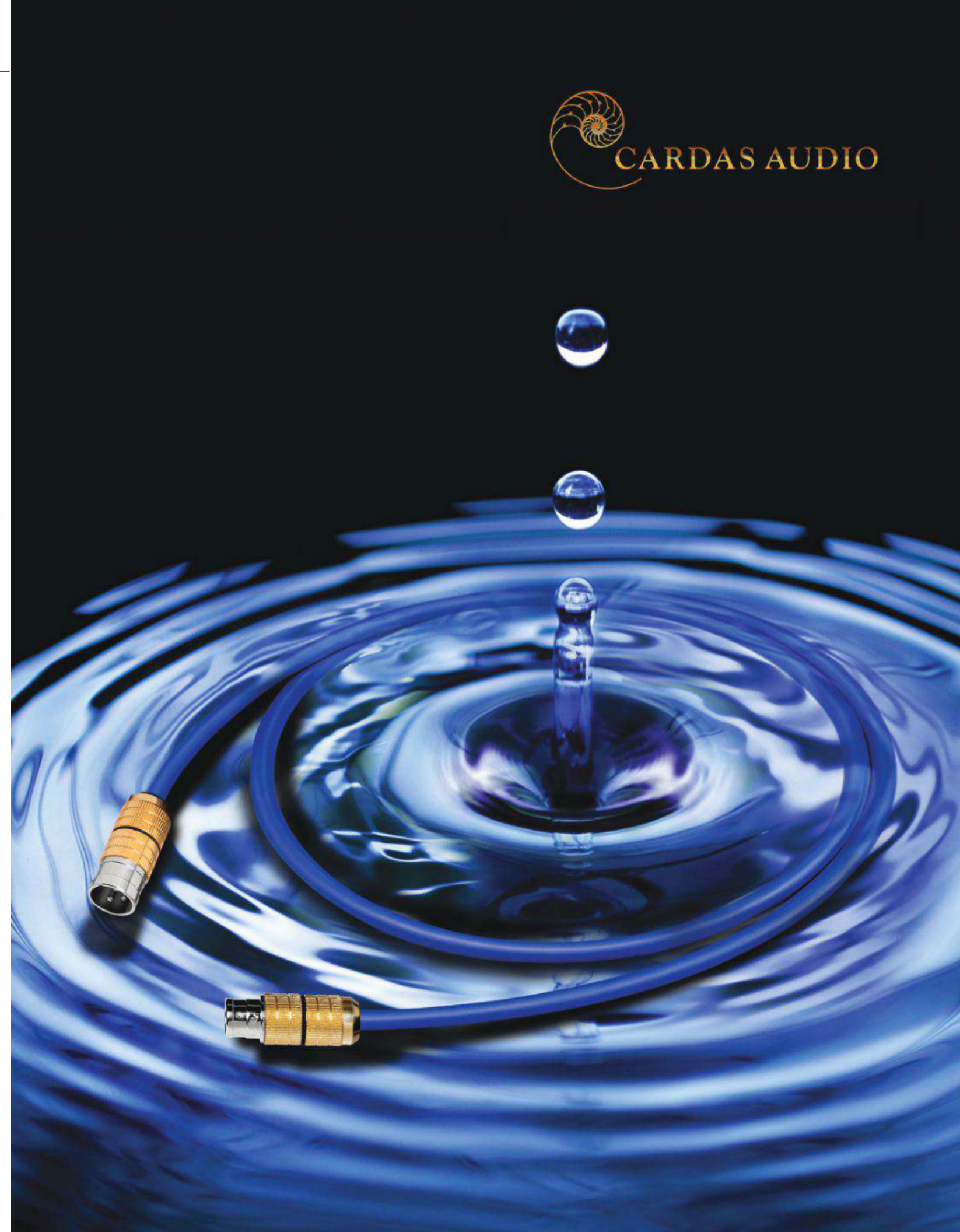
**EMM DACs all feature discrete converters fabricated from individual resistors, a remarkable feat given that most converters use DAC chipsets.**

### Discrete and Unique Features

The MA-1 is the first product from Meitner Audio, a new company running parallel to Meitner's EMM Labs, which continues to offer much more expensive components. EMM DACs all feature discrete converters fabricated from individual resistors, a remarkable feat given that most converters—including many competitors' more expensive models—use DAC chipsets.

Hence, I assumed the \$7,000 MA-1 would be built around a chip. Nope. Meitner steers clear of chips in all his DACs. He designs his own discrete DACs for myriad reasons, not the least of which is not having to worry about whether the chip manufacturer will stop making the part or change the spec.

In addition, most chip-based DACs are current-output devices. Meitner's discrete 1-bit DACs are voltage-output affairs. He explains that when a DAC outputs current, you have to add a stage to convert current to voltage and add filters. The MA-1 needs no such converters or separate filters. Meitner designs the converter and filter in one, fully balanced stage. When you roll your own, you get exactly what you want. *(continued)*





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## REVIEW

The unit also features Meitner's MDAT technology, which is similar to that in an upsampling DAC. Still, the latter can't reproduce a music transient without digital pre- or post-"ringing." Meitner's MDAT doesn't ring. Maybe that's why his DACs reduce the digital nature of CD sound. Yes, the MA-1 possesses an unmistakable analog flavor. It's highly resolved, but relaxed.

While other, more expensive DACs, like the \$17,489 MSB Technology Platinum Signature DAC IV (a discrete, chip-free DAC reviewed in these pages last year), are more transparent, the MA-1 makes for a loveable match with music. If the recording is harsh or grating, the MA-1 won't make it any less nasty. But when the recording is solid, you hear more of the good stuff.

Some credit for the presentation owes to the built-in Meitner Frequency Acquisition System, which instantly acquires the incoming signal, buffers it, and strips out jitter, whether or not the data stream is pure or anything but. From there, the signal runs through the Meitner Digital Audio Translator, which upsamples the zeros and ones to 5.6MHz—double the standard SACD sampling rate.

Visually, the MA-1's brushed aluminum panel looks clean and simple, with a row of six input selectors and LEDs that indicate sampling rates of 44.1, 48, 88.2, 96, 176.4, and 192kHz at word lengths up to 24 bits through all six inputs. *(continued)*





**Great digital gear sounds less digital, meaning there's less grain, glare, noise, and other assorted digital nasties. With the MA-1, I can close my eyes and feel the music. What a trip!**

Around back, you'll find two Toslink optical, two RCA coax, one AES-EBU XLR, and one USB asynchronous digital input, along with RCA and XLR analog outputs. There's also a RS-232 port for those with fancy home-automation systems, and another USB port for future software upgrades. The Canadian-made MA-1 comes with a small, credit-card-style remote that only changes inputs.

#### **Easygoing, Analog Warmth**

The MA-1 arrived when I was reviewing the Davone Ray speaker, and both had an easygoing character that doesn't shout "high-resolution"—or, in other terms, a presentation that sounds to me like live, non-amplified music. I did the bulk of listening with my reference Magnepan 3.7 speakers.

The analog warmth of older CDs, like Etta James' *The Definitive Collection*, comes through intact. In this sense, the MA-1 succeeds by doing less; it simply lets the music be. Yes, the richness in older recordings is hard to resist. It's part of the music's DNA, but not so easy to retrieve. The MA-1 does just that, however. I also compared the MA-1 with a \$7,995 Bricasti M1 DAC. There's not a huge difference, but the Meitner is a wee bit more relaxed, detailed, and transparent.

Great digital gear sounds less digital, meaning there's less grain, glare, noise, and other assorted digital nasties. Vide: Kinks guitarist Dave Davies recorded a killer live solo show at New York City's Bottom Line club in 1997, and the resulting CD, *Rock Bottom*, is a delight. I've seen more than a hundred shows at that club,

and this disc captures the place's vibe better than most. With the MA-1, I can close my eyes and feel the music. What a trip! I always sat at the tables directly in front of the stage, and the MA-1 nails that close-up perspective.

The Rolling Stones' *Tattoo You* isn't their worst-sounding recording, but it's the band's last great album. It hangs together better on the MA-1 than I would have thought possible. Where the overdone reverb usually puts me off, with the MA-1, it seamlessly envelops the group and sounds natural.

Playing back high-resolution 176-kHz/24-bit classical and jazz selections from the Reference Recordings *HRx Sampler 2011* DVD, the MA-1 dramatically opens the soundstage. Instruments reveal more full-bodied presence when compared to what's presented on CDs. *(continued)*



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## REVIEW

Moreover, the DVD's dynamic scale and low-level detailing are more fully developed.

There's also more inner detail and nuance in the high-resolution version of Paul Simon's *So Beautiful or So What*, which makes going back to the CD a letdown. I also have newfound respect for my Pass Labs electronics and Magnepan 3.7 speakers: they're even better than I thought. Such revelations are signs of greatness in any component, and the MA-1 is no exception to this rule. ●

**Meitner MA-1 DAC**  
MSRP: \$7,000

**MANUFACTURER**  
Meitner Audio

**CONTACT**  
www.meitner.com

### PERIPHERALS

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

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

**Electronics** Pass XP-20 preamp; Simaudio 310LP phono preamp; Bel Canto REF500s, Pass Labs XA100.5, and First Watt J2 power amps

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

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





# Small and Sexy

## Crystal Cable Micro Diamond Cables

By the *TONE*Audio Staff

The biggest issue audiophiles likely face concerns what to do with all the huge and unsightly cables connecting components together. Of course, a faction of audiophilia considers big, beefy cable *muy grande* macho. However, not everyone wants a massive cable loom lurking in a listening room, which often doubles as a living room.

Attending lectures from various cable manufacturers isn't much help. Most firms tend to justify their approach. Companies producing large cables try to convince you that a small diameter cable can't possibly work. Whatever. Physics aside, after spending a lot of time with the Micro Diamond interconnects and speaker cables plugged into a wide range of components and speakers, they not only work brilliantly, they are beautifully executed.

CrystalConnect Micro



Crystal Cable

01828





And yes, these actually are cables you'd want your friends to see. Packaged like fine jewelry, they arrive in velvet pouches and inside black boxes—elegantly understated and nicely done without costing a fortune. A one-meter pair of interconnects (RCA or XLR) retails for \$850, and is also available as a turntable cable with appropriate termination for \$1,000. A 2.5-meter speaker cable set costs \$2,950 in bananas or spades.

Crystal Cable director Gaby van der Kley works with the man behind Siltech cables and spent years touring the world as a concert pianist. She's definitely a designer that knows what instruments sound like.

### Going Against The Grain

Most audio cables on today's market utilize copper or silver conductors, and some are primarily one material with a coating of the other on top. Crystal Cable takes a disparate path, using gold along with a silver primary conductor. Yet the gold isn't for coating. Rather, it's almost impregnated in the silver to fill in molecular gaps in the 1.7mm conductor.

If I had a \$20 bill for every talk I've heard on cable size, geometry, and the like, I could probably retire. Those subscribing to the "bigger is better" school of thought claim a svelte cable can't deliver powerful bass response. But Micro Diamond cables are not bass deficient.

Beyond terrific audio performance, Micro Diamond speaker cables offer an interesting feature: scalability. Crystal Cable calls the ends "splitters," and they can be purchased with a number of different termination



options: standard spades or bananas, Furutech carbon spades, or bananas and bi-wired. You can also add another length of cable should you need to reroute your system down the road. Considering the low prices fetched by used cable, this strategy is an excellent way to future-proof your cable purchase and retain your investment.

### Listening Sessions

The toughest part of any cable evaluation is trying to determine the sound of the cable. In a perfect world, a cable would add no sonic signature to the signal passing through it. Predictably, some industry folk would have you think all wire sounds the same. However, we believe cable makes a difference in the overall sound of a system and should do no harm to the signal.

While many listeners use cable as the last step in fine-tuning a system—employing cables as tone controls—we view high-quality cable as the way to transfer as much of your system's performance from one component to another, and finally, to your loudspeakers. More than gross tonal changes, the main difference heard between second- and first-rate cable deals with reducing grain and increasing low-level detail retrieval, not unlike the qualities provided by an excellent power conditioner.

Auditioning Micro Diamond cables in three different systems—small, medium and super-size—achieved good results. The compact setup comprised a vintage CJ amp and preamp, Schiit Bifrost DAC, and pair of Martin-Logan Aeries i speakers cabled with various odds and ends. *(continued)*





The medium system consisted of a Simaudio 600i integrated amplifier, Wadia 121 DAC, and pair of Harbeth Compact 7-III ES speakers. The final stereo array (publisher Jeff Dorgay's standard reference system) involved Audio Research REF components, a dCS Paganini stack, and GamuT S9 speakers cabled with a mixture of Shunyata Aurora, Cardas Clear, and AudioQuest Sky cables.

A majority of acoustic recordings— selections heavy on piano, drums, and acoustic guitars— were played to quickly establish the cable's proprietary sonics. The latter are highly revealing, with an upfront presentation akin to listening to studio monitors in a near-field configuration. Given Ms. van der Kley's background, it comes as no surprise that piano reproduction via her cables feels sublime. Whether listening to Herbie Hancock or Beethoven, the instrument's complex attack and subtle overtones are always maintained and never become harsh or blurred.

If any of your components possess a tonal balance anywhere between neutral and warm/romantic/euphonic, you will be amazed at the additional detail the Micro Diamonds bring to your system's overall appeal. When utilized with the B&W 802 Diamonds, already a highly resolving speaker with the diamond tweeter and most solid state amplifiers is a presentation that is too forward for some. Still, *TONEAudio* counts a detail fanatic in its ranks that can never get enough resolution. He loved this combination. (continued)

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## REVIEW

The Micro Diamonds make the biggest improvement in an all-tube system, especially one that leans more towards warm tonality. With the Conrad Johnson PV-12 (recently rebuilt by CJ with CJD Teflon capacitors) and either the MV-50 (same treatment) or PrimaLuna Dialogue monoblocks, the Diamonds' ability to transfer every bit of information adds a spectacular level of inner detail to this system without compromising musicality in any way.

A similar result can be achieved via speakers ever so slightly on the warm side of neutral. Vide, Harbeth Compact 7s really come alive with Crystal Cables. The sound in our test speakers from Focal, Verity, GamuT, and Peak Consult (all fairly neutral) now boast a different disposition. There's more resolution, and it's musically satisfying. What more can one ask? ●

**Crystal Cable**  
**Micro Diamond Cables**

**MSRP:**

**Interconnect, 1m (\$850);**  
**Speaker, 2.5m (\$2,950)**

**MANUFACTURER**  
Crystal Cable

**CONTACT**

[www.crystalcable.com](http://www.crystalcable.com)  
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**Compact Elegance**

# Estelon XC Loudspeakers

By Jeff Dorgay

It's been a year and a half since we penned the world's first review of the Estelon XA speakers, the premier product from Alfred and Partners. Since then, the speaker lineup has expanded to five products, including models below and above the XA, not the least of which is the XC. The latter utilizes Accuton ceramic drivers. They're combined with designer Alfred Vassilkov's proprietary crossover designs and wrapped into a sexy enclosure shape, also unique to Estelon, which involves a marble-based composite material.

The XC's alluring design stops enclosure vibration cold. Between the distinctive composite material's high density and undulating shape, which eliminates standing waves and resonance, the XCs provide a striking clarity. You merely hear what the drivers are capable of producing—and the sound is indeed very, very good.



## REVIEW

The XC is designed for smaller rooms than its three larger siblings, yet the tonal quality is essentially the same. How? The XC employs the same 1.2-inch tweeter as the XA and X Centro, and the XC's smaller stand-mounted enclosure uses a pair of 7-inch drivers similar to the ones in the larger speakers.

Having just spent some quality time with the XAs at the Munich High End Show, my memory of the company's house sound is extremely fresh. These speakers boast incredibly low distortion; they have clarity reminiscent of a pair of full-range electrostatic speakers. Vide, the detail present on "The Seeker" from the Crash Test Dummies' *And God Shuffled His Feet* simply staggers. A huge soundstage extends well beyond the speakers, and the multiple overdubs are easily laid bare.

### Small Speakers, Big Sound

The tonal purity and low-level detail rendered by the XCs allow them to shine on any densely packed recording—electronic or acoustic. Brian Eno-like in nature, Dave Stewart's *Greetings From the Gutter* features endless layers of miniscule electronic sounds that hover out in front of the speakers and bounce off the walls in all directions. When the music is experienced through the XCs, a full-range electrostatic speaker comes to mind, confirming the precision of the XC's crossover network, even in the critical vocal range.

Throwing a piano-and-violin torture test at the XCs doesn't cause them to blush. "Poco Adagio," from the Jung Trio's *Dvorak Trio In F-Minor, Op.65*, features both instruments together. Despite the record's lack of bass, the XCs prove the equal of a massive full-range system, reproducing the record's width and height all the while keeping the three players perfectly separated in the recording space. Get this wrong and the violins become screechy. The XCs shine, especially near the end of the track, where passages become decidedly more *fortissimo*.



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## REVIEW

Using the XCs in medium- and small-sized rooms yields great results. Remember, all four Estelon models are designed to produce an almost identical sound in terms of quality, tone, and timbre. It's just that the smaller XC is optimized for rooms of lesser volume, and in which the large floorstanding model doesn't make sense.

The room gain from my small (11 x 17 foot) living room convinced me there's more than enough low-frequency extension to comfortably play any kind of music. Even bass-heavy tracks, like those from Mickey Hart's *Planet Drum*, enjoy enough weight to forgo the thought of a subwoofer. Unless you are trying to spin hip-hop discs at club level, the XC will impress. And while formidable in my dedicated listening room (16 x 25 feet), the XC lacks the last bit of the XA's dynamic punch, staying true to Estelon's design brief.

### Perfect Pace

The speakers' ability to keep musical pace intact is excellent. Of course, the freedom from coloration (both driver and box coloration) makes vocal recordings a thrill—whether it's the gravely warble of Elvis Costello or irreproachable tone of Ella Fitzgerald. The five-part harmonies on the Fairfield Four's *Standing In The Safety Zone* epitomizes the XC's capabilities at handling wide dynamic swings just as all five vocalists remain distinct from one another.

Low distortion is another of the model's outstanding virtues. (continued)



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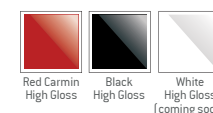
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## What Does \$1000 A Watt Sound Like? - Neil Gader

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.”

# VA

### manufacturer

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## REVIEW

Regardless of the music, these speakers return breathtaking clarity. Acoustic-music aficionados will be astonished at their tonal purity. Even the most densely packed test tracks are charming, suggesting that many of our recordings may not be as limited as we often suspect. We just need a bit more resolution to delineate the information contained within.

While the XC cannot play as loudly as the XA in a large room, the additional 2db of sensitivity (89db for the XA versus 91db for the XC) makes for a better range of amplification choices. The XA performs admirably with 45 watts per channel of vacuum-tube power, yet more power is always better. In contrast, the XC is well matched with amplifiers in the 50-75 watt range. It's even a charming partner, albeit at slightly lower levels, with Unison Research's 25-watts-per-channel S6 amplifier.

Looking for extremely high quality in a moderately sized space? The XC needs to be on your short list. You can start with modest amplification, and upgrade to the world's finest gear without needing to trade-in the XC on anything else.

### Immersive

Highly resolving without being discordant, the XCs put you right at the front of the presentation. My listening position in the main room is more intimate than with the XAs. The XCs work well about seven feet apart (tweeter center to tweeter center), and my listening position is eight feet back. *(continued)*





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## REVIEW

They produce an awesome soundstage in all three dimensions. It almost feels as if my couch is inside a gigantic pair of headphones!

Unless you need to reproduce the last bit of sub-40Hz bass at earthquake levels, the XC handles every kind of fare with equal aplomb—from electronica with SBTRKT and Fuel Box or heavy rock, ala Black Sabbath. The recently remastered CD of *Paranoid* is a treat when cranking the XCs to their limits on “Fairies Wear Boots.” There’s a wall of screaming guitars, but no exhaustion from the speakers. And the big beats in Fuel Box’s “One Day” do not detract from the vocal stylings or delicate percussion tracks laid over synthesizers.

Just like that of the XA, the XC’s slightly forward tonal balance—combined with its ability to resolve detail—needs to be considered when choosing the proper amplifier. These speakers will show off what your upward components can and cannot do. Naturally, your personal taste will determine amplification selection, as will any speaker capable of such high performance. If possible, audition the XCs with your amplifier.

### Setup Simplicity

The XCs are carefully packed in foam-lined flight cases, with integral stands. Ask a friend to help you unpack each of the 110-pound (49kg) speakers and move them to their initial spot in your listening room. From there, fine-tuning should be a cakewalk. Akin to an electrostatic speaker, careful attention to rake angle—easily adjustable with the spikes in the stands—and distance from the rear wall afford the best balance of low-frequency energy and image size.  
(continued)





Our test speakers arrived after logging plenty of hours, so they were immediately ready to go. My experience with the Accuton drivers in other speakers, as well as the XA, dictates that Estelon models need at least a few hundred hours to sound their best, especially in the low-frequency range. Their extremely low distortion triggers one other caveat: The ceramic drivers exhibit barely any cone breakup, so there's a small margin between driving them to distortion and driving them to damage. Fortunately, they play at high levels quite comfortably, so only the most overzealous users need worry.

Such small cautions aside, the Estelon XC provides fantastic performance in a compact shape. Suitable for most rooms, these speakers are highly revealing and make for an excellent cornerstone for a no-compromise system. Enthusiastically recommended. ●

**Estelon XC Loudspeakers**  
MSRP: \$22,900/pair (stands included)

#### MANUFACTURER

Alfred & Partners, Estonia

#### CONTACT

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

#### PERIPHERALS

**Analog Source** AVID Acutus Reference SP/ TriPlanar/ Lyra Atlas

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

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

**Power Amplifier** ARC REF 150, Burmester 911, Mk. 3, Pass XA200.5

**Cable** Cardas Clear

**Power** Running Springs Maxim, Dmitri

**Accessories** SRA Scuttle rack, Audio Desk Systeme Record Cleaner, Furutech DeMag and DeStat





# From the Web site

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



## Acurus A2002 Amplifier

\$2,495

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

**T**he legendary Acurus brand is back in action, and it's not a Chinese rebadge of former glory. Founded by a pair of Klipsch engineers that worked on the originals, Indy Audio Labs improves upon the old designs. And every bit of the A2002 is built here in the US, all the way down to the circuit board.

Featuring solid build quality and sound beyond what you'd expect for the asking price, the A2002 features all discrete components and produces 200 watts per channel.

● [Click here to read the full review.](#)

## Welcome to the Family

When you're born into the right family, some things are simply assured. When that family is Rega, that means the heritage and pedigree that comes from over 30 years of building some of the industry's most widely respected and beloved turntables, the beauty of a simple design that not only functions but outperforms expectations, and a price that leaves you with enough left over to buy a few more albums for your collection.

Enter the new RP6: incorporating Rega's new phenolic double brace technology and completely redesigned RB303 tonearm with stainless steel counterweight, it bears a definite resemblance to the acclaimed RP3. The RP6 offers a host of additional features, however, that set it apart from its sibling: an innovative two-piece glass flywheel platter sits atop a brand new aluminum subplatter assembly for improved speed stability, accuracy, and consistency, all while the platter (and therefore the vinyl) is presented to the stylus as flat as possible. It also includes Rega's 24V low-noise motor and redesigned TT-PSU outboard power supply with push-button speed control.

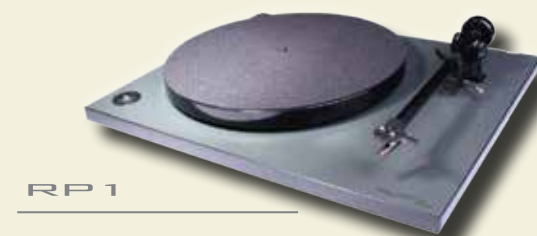
Available in four high-gloss finishes: Red, Green, White, and Black. \$1495 (without cartridge) or \$1990 with Exact cartridge pre-fitted.

**rega**

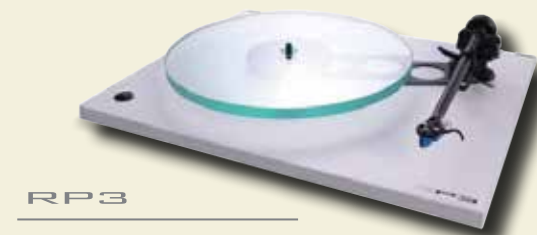
Exceptional hi-fi, designed and built in England since 1973.



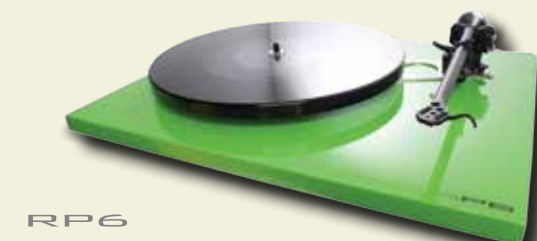
For information on your nearest US retailer, please contact The Sound Organisation: [info@soundorg.com](mailto:info@soundorg.com) • 972-234-0182



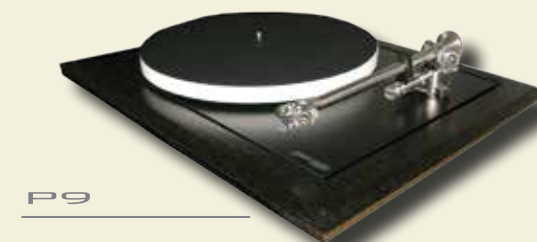
RP1



RP3



RP6



P9



RP78



# PrimaLuna®

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## Peak Consult Kepheus Speakers

\$110,000/pair  
[www.peak-consult.dk](http://www.peak-consult.dk)

Peak Consult is renowned for producing loudspeakers that sound as beautiful as they look. The company's newest model, Kepheus, keeps the Danish tradition intact. Weighing almost 350 pounds each, these massive babies are easy to drive. Their 90db sensitivity rating and gentle crossover network assures you can get room-filling sound with 30 watts per channel.

Moreover, the multilayer cabinets redefine "inert." They are audibly opaque, utterly unlike anything we've ever heard, and rely on a structure that is 1.5-3 inches thick. Each driver has its own isolated chamber.



- Read the rest of what makes these speakers so special here.



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New Micromega AS400



New Clearaudio Ovation

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Nordost Power/Signal Cables

Room-101

Micromega Electronics  
Anthony Gallo Loudspeakers  
Shunyata Power/Signal Cables



New Kef R Series



New Dynaudio Focus



Margules U280SC



New Simaudio Moon  
380D DAC/Streamer

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www.caudioshow.com

www.audiovisionsf.com



# Slummin'

By Jeff Dorgay



## Thorens TD-124 mk.1

eBay, \$900

**\$900** is usually out of the price range for Slummin' items, but considering this TD-124 had one owner and is in excellent condition, the cost is fairly low. As they are with vintage sports cars, cosmetics are often more important than mechanicals since the latter can be found, repaired, or replaced.

Everything is in order here, and the critical top platter straight and level. With fully restored versions of this 'table fetching between \$6,000-9,000, we'll be investigating just how well this example can be cleaned up into a daily driver without going overboard on the restoration. Stay tuned to the "projects" section of our Analogaholic Web site.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Furutech: [www.furutech.com](http://www.furutech.com)

German Physiks: [www.german-physiks.com](http://www.german-physiks.com)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Naim: [www.naimusa.com](http://www.naimusa.com)

Needle Doctor: [www.needledoctor.com](http://www.needledoctor.com)

Octave: [www.octaveaudio.de](http://www.octaveaudio.de)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Vitus Audio: [www.vitusaudio.com](http://www.vitusaudio.com)

Wadia: [www.wadia.com](http://www.wadia.com)

Wireworld: [www.wireworldcable.com](http://www.wireworldcable.com)

VPI: [www.vpiindustries.com](http://www.vpiindustries.com)

Zu Audio: [www.zuaudio.com](http://www.zuaudio.com)