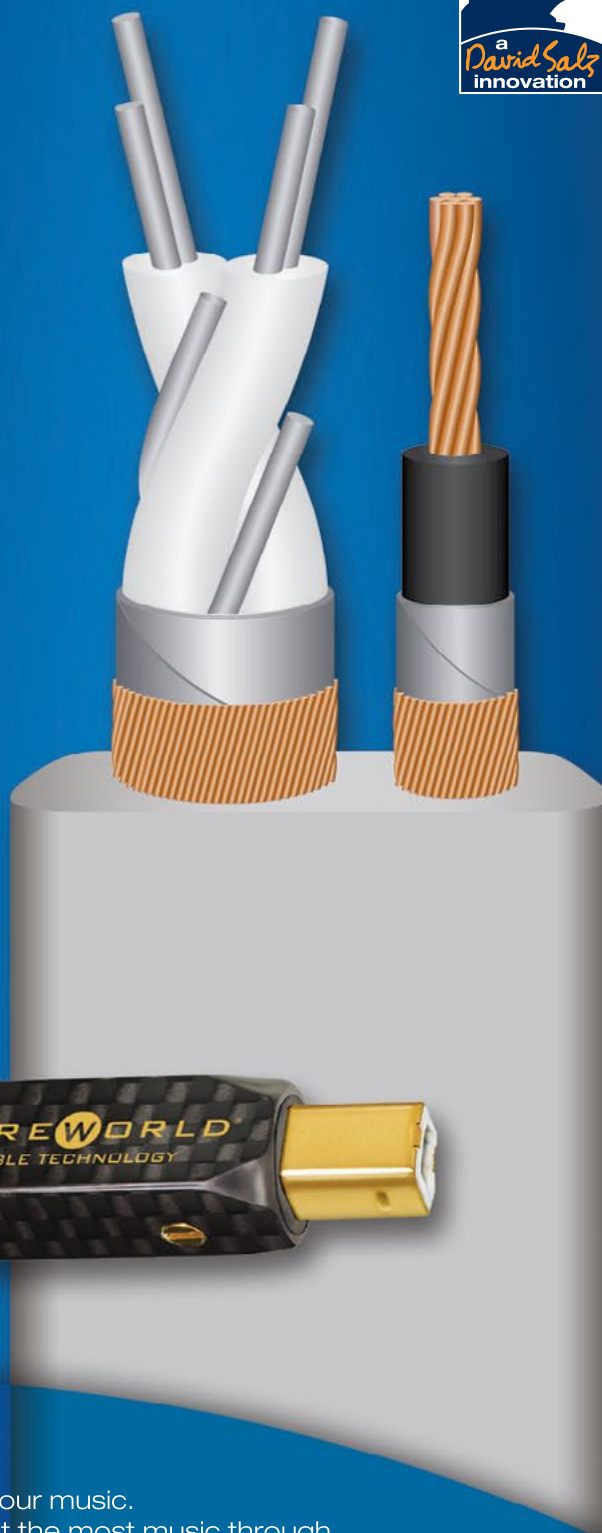


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No. 49 October 2012

## RUN TO THE HILLS

Iron Maiden Plays With Madness Onstage

**SPIN THE BLACK CIRCLE:** In-Depth Reviews of New LPs from Neil Young & Crazy Horse, Green Day, Aimee Mann, Cat Power, David Byrne & St. Vincent, and more

**Up In It:** The Afghan Whigs Prep for Fall Tour With Blowout Lollapalooza Afterparty Show

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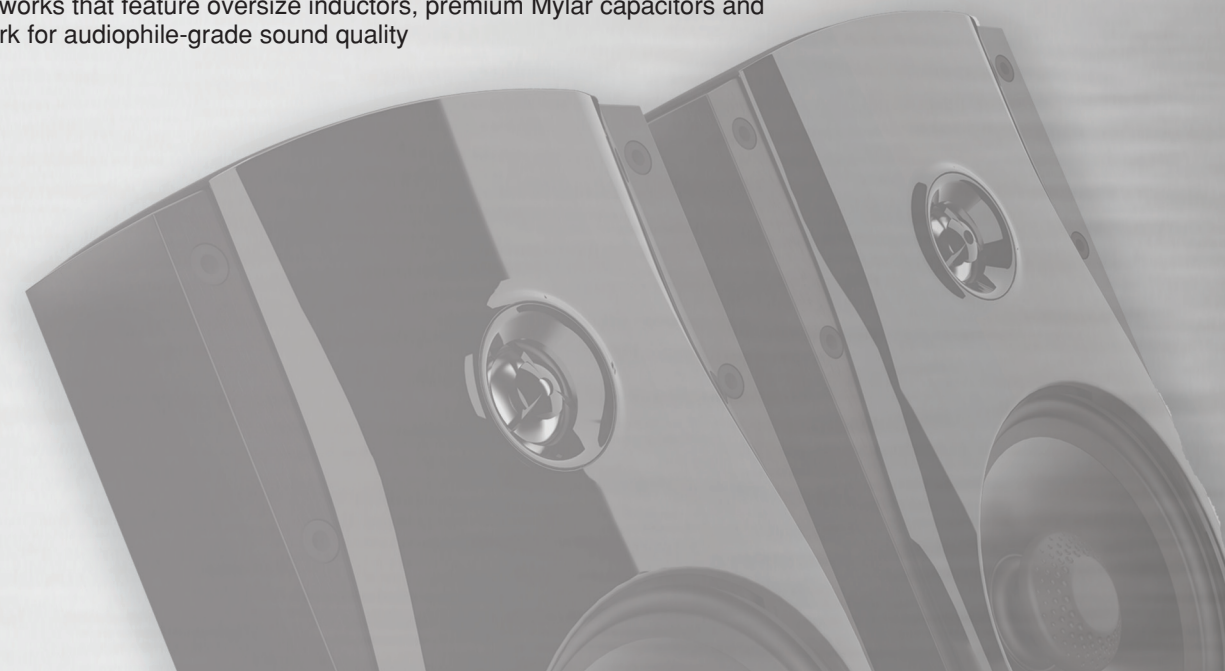
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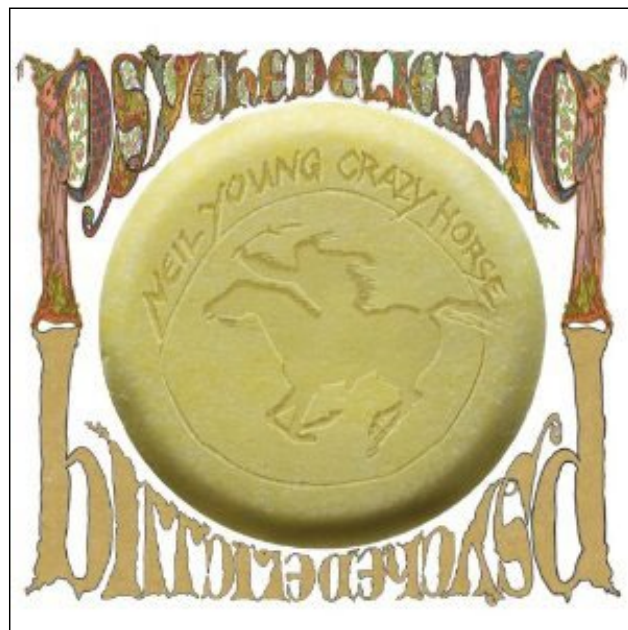
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(Chat between DragonFly digital-audio converter/preamp and a Music-Loving human.)



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# PUBLISHER'S LETTER

## The Great Divide

From an audiophile's perspective, this year's Rocky Mountain Audio Fest (RMAF) was a huge hit. Director Marjorie Baumert had a crack staff and operated a well-oiled machine. Participants were promptly and courteously treated, and plenty of signage and program books directed them in the right directions. Pokey elevators might've been the only bottleneck, but Baumert cannot be blamed for that. Most attendees—myself included—could stand to lose a few pounds anyway.

The show was equally well run when seen from an exhibitor's standpoint. Having shown at RMAF years ago, I've witnessed firsthand how it has evolved from a loose affair to a model of efficiency. The only other event at which I've exhibited that I've seen run as well is the Barrett-Jackson Collector Car Auction in Scottsdale, Arizona. Everything at this year's RMAF, from freight pickup at my door to printing the return shipping labels, appeared seamless and well-organized. Kudos to Panther Expedited Services for an outstanding job.

Personally, I came away satisfied. A full-page ad in the RMAF program guide, combined with push from the *TONEAudio* Facebook page, attracted a steady flow of traffic in my room from start to finish. Our guests enjoyed a vintage hi-fi vibe and flocked like sugar-eating locusts to the birthday cake served on Saturday afternoon. A number of readers even brought their own mix tapes and CDs, adding to the camaraderie. That's what it's all about.

But—and as Pee Wee Herman likes to say, "There's always a big but..."—these shows are barely reaching anyone beyond the graying audiophile crowd. While more rooms provided great sound than ever before, the age-old disconnect between converted fanatics and people largely unfamiliar with the hobby proliferated. One 26-year-old gentlemen, attending with an older audiophile friend, perfectly summed up the problem when I asked his honest opinion.

"Sure, this is cool. But it's basically a bunch of really expensive stuff that I can't afford, shown by a bunch of grumpy old men that wouldn't give me the time of day, playing [crappy] music I'm not into," he stated. "There was nothing here to tell my friends at home about, and I wouldn't do this again." Ouch. That's not what this industry can afford to hear.

Now, considering the recent buzz around headphones and personal audio, I figured at least the Can Jam event would have interested him. Yet, when pressed, he gave me a two-word, *Spinal Tap*-like review: "Nerd alert." Will the high end ever learn that music and equipment is supposed to be fun and not a recasting of the cast from an episode of "The Big Bang Theory"?

Burmester North America and Tweek Studio offered corrective steps by playing house music after hours on Saturday night, via a large system in the main atrium. However, the attempt left a number of Patricia Barber-loving audiophiles cold and confused. Again, that disconnect.

Granted, one man's opinion does not constitute judgment of an entire show. That said, if we are going to engage anyone beyond the traditional beard-tuggers, we are going to have explore methods that reach beyond what worked in the past. And yes, this means doing much more than re-Tweeting and Facebook-liking posts from magazines like *Pitchfork*.

There's never been more interest or excitement for music than there is today. With so much great gear on the market, I'd love to find the way to get more music lovers knowing about and enjoying the benefits a good system, whether they have a \$1000 or \$1 million budget. Please send me an email or a message on Facebook, and let me know what you think we can do to help. I'm all ears.





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# NEW CONTRIBUTORS

## John Darko

Since mid-2010, John Darko has been committing his experiences with digitally fronted audio systems to pixels by way of Digital Audio Review. An American trapped inside a British body, living in Sydney, Australia since 2002, he cares little if digital audio is better than vinyl (or not); the differences between DACs alone are of sufficient interest. John is very much an 'integrated amplifier and standmount speakers' guy—systems that work in small(er) living spaces, funded by small(er) budgets.

His first musical love remains David Byrne and Talking Heads. He has an aversion to the beige of audiophile music. "Your system shouldn't dictate the music you listen to" is a thought that wakes him daily. He does not dig Marvin Gaye or Melody Gardot. He loves the disconnect of IDM/techno and the humanity of Tom Waits.

Follow his additional thoughts at:  
**[www.digitalaudioreview.net.au](http://www.digitalaudioreview.net.au)**

## Monique Meadows

A graduate of the State University of New York with a degree in Art and a Journalism minor, Monique moved from her native Upstate New York to the Southwest desert and began a successful career in art direction and advertising in Phoenix. 33 years, three ad agencies and an extended post as Senior Art Director leading a corporate art team later, she is back on East coast soil, north of Boston, until someone hands her the keys to a chateau in the south of France.

Armed with a love of food, wines and travel, and a new understanding of her father's love of Bordeaux and Burgundy, Monique currently runs **The Clown**, a boutique fine wine shop in York, Maine. A freelance editorial and fine art photographer, she can be found seeking out the next great bistro.

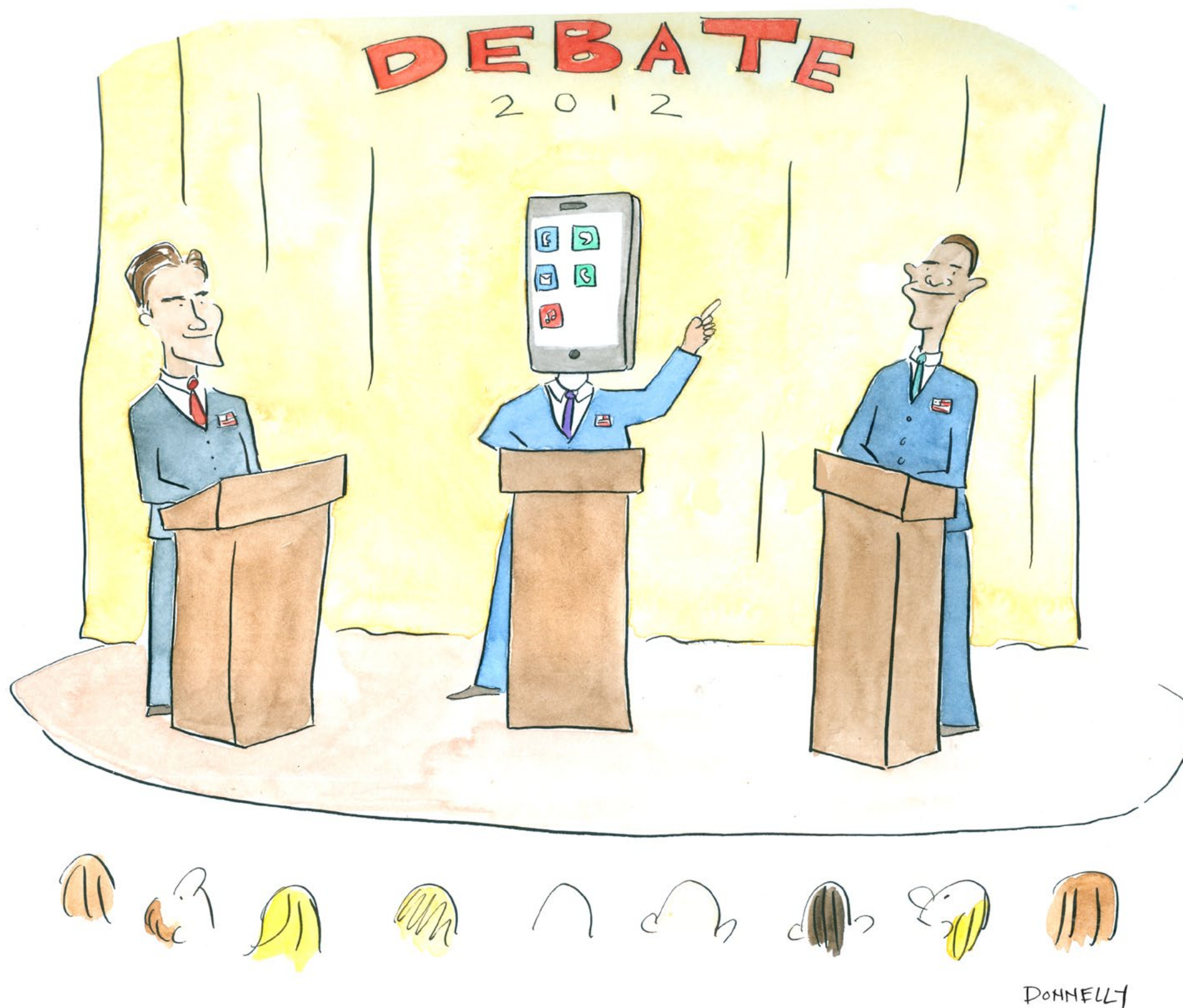
Her blog: **[zizins.blogspot.com](http://zizins.blogspot.com)**



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# Iron Maiden

**First Midwestern Bank  
Amphitheatre**

Tinley Park, Illinois

**July 5, 2012**

By Bob Gendron

Photos by John McMurtrie

**I**mages of ice floes and blueish glaciers on backdrops conjured an arctic environment as Iron Maiden lept onto the First Midwestern Bank Amphitheatre stage in Chicago for its full-blown revisitation of the 1988 “Seventh Son of a Seventh Son” tour, dubbed Maiden England. Alas, the subzero visions proved a wishful illusion. At the concert’s post-dusk start, the outside temperature stubbornly remained a sweltering 97 degrees. Dressed in a long coat, complete with tails, swashbuckling vocalist Bruce Dickinson looked as if he might drop from heat stroke, another casualty of the Midwest’s hottest summer on record.



Yet the animated frontman and his longtime mates soldiered on, literally and figuratively, continuing to pen additional passages to their resurgent career's second chapter that began once Dickinson rejoined the group in 1999 after a seven-year hiatus. In the ensuing decade, strong studio albums have accompanied jaunts that alternate between celebrating the past and staking ties to the present. On the nostalgia front, Maiden England follows on the heels of 2008-2009's "Somewhere Back in Time" tour, a precedent-setting global trek that paid homage to 1984-1985's "World Slavery" outing and also witnessed the English ensemble jetting from continent to continent on a 757 piloted by Dickinson.

While he no longer hits the peaks of the inhuman air-raid highs on favorites such as "Aces High," Dickinson still operates as if 20 years younger than his 54-year-old age, continually pointing his fingers, leaping over monitors, sprinting from side to side, and violently swaying his arms—physically embodying the dramatic contours of the band's storyline narratives and dynamic shifts. At times, he resembled Vincent Price at his most sinisterly self-aware, a good-natured narrator of the mystical and misunderstood, a recorder of human fears and flaws. His madman cackles and piercing screams added to the thespian feel, furthered by elaborate scenery and props.



**At times, Dickinson resembled Vincent Price at his most sinisterly self-aware, a good-natured narrator of the mystical and misunderstood, a recorder of human fears and flaws.**

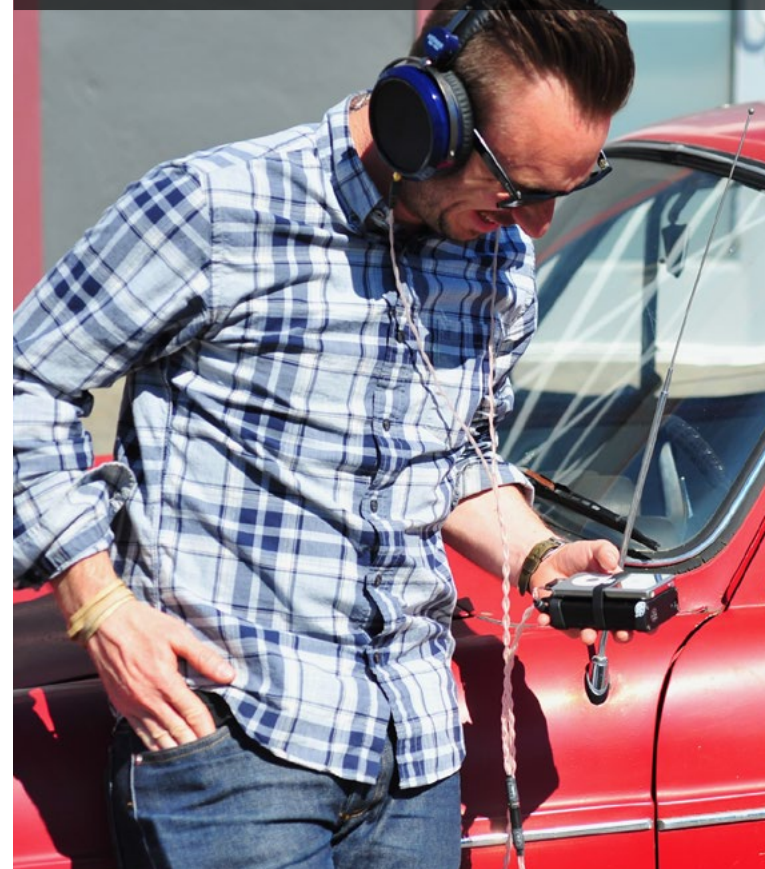
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**Performing three-decade-old standards with the knife-in-your-back urgency of a group fresh out of a dingy London neighborhood, Maiden displayed the facets of a rare veteran act that balanced fun and relevance, chemistry and creativity.**



Of course, fantasy symbolism, timely pyrotechnics, and animated reproductions of Eddie, the sextet's mascot, have played central roles in Maiden shows for decades. Whether they took the form of a giant, robotic, sword-wielding Eddie emerging to wreck havoc and duel with guitarist Janick Gers during a stampeding "Run to the Hills" or huge plumes of flames to reinforce the dark, back-alley terror of "Phantom of the Opera," visuals reinforced both the anthemic spectacle and musical theatricality.

Owing to its insistent energy and melodic penchant, Maiden never put the material at risk of becoming overshadowed by the sensory-triggering devices. Tethered by Steve Harris' aluminum-flavored bass lines, tunes claimed magnificent arches of forceful heft, feverish momentum, and swift harmony. Rather than distract, elaborate graphic presentations complemented morality-testing tales of conflict ("Trooper," "Afraid to Shoot Strangers"), observations on cycles of life and death ("2 Minutes to Midnight"), and visions of prophecy and fate ("Seventh Son of a Seventh Son," "Can I Play With Madness").

Pleased the size of the arena allowed it to offer fans the full stage show—Dickinson castigated Milwaukee, where the band played the previous night, for an under-sized facility that prevented Maiden from unveiling several surprises—the group matched arrangements with effects. Prog-rock flourishes, galloping tempos, participatory chants, and regal marches coexisted with dry-ice fog, eyes-glowing monsters, smoke bombs, and foreboding lighting.

In portraying a mechanical Eddie with its head of fire, and performing three-decade-old standards ("The Number of the Beast") with the knife-in-your-back urgency of a group fresh out of a dingy London neighborhood, Maiden displayed the facets of a rare veteran act that balanced fun and relevance, chemistry and creativity. The group appeared to enjoy other's company and spark imaginations with no less enthusiasm than it did back during Reagan's first term, when Dickinson sported a lion's mane of hair and zealots accused the band of Satanism.

Then again, some pursuits never grow stale, especially when life-size clairvoyant beasts that clutch a heart beating with alienesque offspring oversee the proceedings.





# FIONA APPLE

**Arlene Schnitzer Theater**  
Portland, Oregon

**July 26, 2012**

By Jeff Dorgay  
Photo by Amanda Hatfield

Fiona Apple's packed show at Portland's Schnitzer Theater got off to an auspicious start. The waif-like singer stormed the stage as if she were a lightning bolt striking the microphone stand, then profusely apologized for her tardiness. "I just got my fucking period and there was a mad search for tampons, so I'm sorry for the delay." No shrinking violet, she. The revelation made the opening "As Fast as You Can" even more appropriate.

Fresh from releasing her first new album in nearly seven years, Apple did not visit any of the recent material until she—and her quirks—had warmed up. Curling up like a ball on the stage at one moment, then racing out triumphantly towards the audience the next, her animated movements suggested a brilliant albeit unpredictable inner madness. Her voice in top form, Apple offered machine gun-like deliveries with barely a pause between the softest lyrics. Her most forceful screams of the evening arrived on "Tymps (The Sick in the Head Song)," summoning up her deepest-seeded ire and using the monthly hormonal rage to distinct advantage.

Exquisite as Apple's vocals were, her band's prowess—and its ability to keep up with the intense frontwoman's every move—put the concert over the top. While many songs featured slightly different arrangements in comparison to the studio versions, they retained the textural complexity that's long been a hallmark of Apple's work. Adding color and moodiness, guitarist Blake Mills frequently moved from producing dense fogs of Hendrix-like feedback to subtle, faint fretwork seconds later.

Akin to Prince, Apple took a fearless approach to her compositions, mixing and matching at will. Her work on the grand piano proved as deftly varied as her singing. She plunked away like a kindergartner discovering the instrument for the first time and spun discordant riffs reminiscent of King Crimson, all the while falling in and out of a trance-like state.

Much too soon, Apple wailed through "Not About Love" and, after a few false stops, the stage went dark. When the lights came up, Apple laughed and said, "I guess I better do an encore," ending the evening with a cover of Conway Twitty's "It's Only Make Believe." It represented one of the only instances of fantasy at an otherwise incredibly tangible show.





# The Afghan Whigs

**Metro**

Chicago, Illinois

**August 4, 2012**

By Bob Gendron

Photos by Chad Kamenshine

**G**reg Dulli promised beforehand that the Afghan Whigs' sold-out Lollapalooza afterparty show at Metro would be unlike any other thus far on the band's reunion tour. He wasn't lying. A day removed from playing a well-received albeit time-limited late-afternoon slot at the Chicago destination festival, the vocalist led his group through a full-on, two-hour revue-style spectacular that managed to equal—and in most cases, surpass—the ensemble's prior appearances at the club.

Given the Whigs' long history at the venue during their original tenure, which involved gigs before they signed to Sub Pop, matching the searing intensity of their 1993 *Gentlemen* date, self-flagellating drama of 1996's two-night stand for the *Black Love* jaunt, and the sweaty, multi-hour R&B affairs for the 1965 tour—a stint that witnessed Dulli enjoy the large backing band he'd always wanted—proved unthinkable. Then there's the challenge of a reformed band, cited by many critics during its heyday as one of the best live acts around, trying to avoid ruining its reputation with banal nostalgia and weakened performances.

But like nearly everything else on this evening, Herculean feats and unmitigated ambition seemed the order of business. Whether sheerly driven by Dulli's refusal to back down from a challenge or the collective desire to give Metro owner and longtime Whigs fan Joe Shanahan an early Christmas present in the form of one of the most memorable concerts his space has hosted in the past decade, the Whigs had much to prove, a clutch of musicians out to demonstrate why their cult following has forever championed their music—and their shows—as perspective-altering experiences. It was as if they'd never amicably broken up, as if the senselessly violent beating of Dulli by a Texas redneck that nearly killed him in late 1998 and, effectively, brought about the end of the Whigs less than a year later, never occurred.



Indeed, in securing backup vocalists Susan Marshall and Steve Meyers—the same personnel from the 1965 outing—as well as a second guitarist, additional backup vocalist, a multi-instrumentalist, and a three-piece horn section to flesh out the arrangements, the Whigs essentially picked up where they left off more than 13 years ago, only this time entertaining several generations of fans that heard mythological-sized stories about their prowess but which didn't catch them during the original run.

Differences between then and now? Dulli's voice is now even stronger, more confident, able to hit higher notes, and push with supreme conviction due to his having quit smoking and kicked addictions. The Whigs are even tighter, and came across as larger, courtesy of brassy rejoinders and powerhouse harmonies, both of which furthered the lusty temptation and soulful rhythms on dance-inviting songs such as "John the Baptist."

Not that the group relied on horns, which didn't even play half of the set. No, the in-the-pocket sway, blown-up guitar fills, bruising knock-out-punch hooks, and lyrical daggers largely arrived courtesy of Dulli, a completely slimmed-down and constantly smiling John Curley on bass, and the anonymous-shy guitarist Rick McCollum, whose subtle slide work injected primal, bluesy figures into the combustible mélange. His contributions allowed despair, loss, and painful truisms on "When We Two Parted" to sink in deeper. On the ferocious "Gentlemen," he and Dulli's guitars brawled, turning



**For the Whigs, salvation doesn't enter in the shape of a lover or prayer, but comes via the act of purging guilt and wrestling control from an adversary.**

the searing number into a battering ram for disgust, sickness, and deception all the while Dulli pointed to individuals in the crowd, dealing infection and scorn to the masses on a one-by-one basis.

Dressed sharply and looking svelte, the outspoken frontman lost none of his charisma, charm, or hypnotic command. "You can wonder what I'm thinking about your girlfriend while singing these songs," he teased, the consummate ladies man. "It's all good, I guarantee it." These smirking revelations jived with a suave persona that shuffled during the sexy come-ons of "66" (complete with a brief interlude of Prince's "Little Red Corvette"), assumed the role of a playboy for the kinky funk of "Neglected," and brought spurned anguish to a vicious "You My Flower."

For all the bluster, a pair of recently adopted covers—Frank Ocean's "Lovecrimes" and Marie Queenie Lyons' "See and Don't See"—registered the band's ability to take it all the way down, to channel vulnerability and dreary heartbreak, to lurk in dark shadows few dare to occupy. For the Whigs, salvation doesn't enter in the shape of a lover or prayer, but comes via the act of purging guilt and wrestling control from an adversary. Vide, the imaginary gospel angels that flew in for "Faded," personal catharsis magnified for public proportions, an arena-made epic that aptly concluded with refrains from "Purple Rain" to wash all the sinners clean. 1



FEATURE

# Quad ESL

By Ken Kessler

Expectations have changed over the decades. In the 21st century, we demand amplifiers that deliver copious amounts of power with ease. Loudspeakers? We insist on dynamic range unimagined in the 1950s—beyond even what the horns of the day could deliver. Levels? 100 dB+ capability is the minimum. Bass? We expect our sound systems to loosen brickwork. And yet a speaker that could do none of those things, let alone handle an amplifier willing to feed it 30 or more watts, remains a permanent fixture in every knowledgeable audiophile's Top 5 of the Greatest Components in History.



At least, it does for those who have heard the British marvel, even if they weren't around when the original Quad ESL went out of production in the early 1980s, to be replaced by the equally miraculous ESL63. But the Quad ESL—aka the '57 by its fans, if not by Quad itself—remains the milestone, despite the '63 reaching down lower and going louder.

One has to be in his or her early 70s to be able to recount the impact the Quad ESL had when it first appeared nearly a half-century ago. The finest speakers of the day—the still-with-us Klipschorn, the nascent AR range, the best of Tannoy—were and are fine performers, but the Quad did something that had nothing whatsoever to do with power handling, bass extension or maximum SPLs: It sounded *real*.

It remains, for many, the most natural-sounding speaker ever produced, a full-range electrostatic designed in the mono era, but which made the transition to the stereo era with such ease that there are those who today find it hard to better. My dear friend David Chesky, who knows a thing or three about recording, cherishes a pair he had rebuilt by one of the many specialist firms who keep the Quads alive long after the company itself stopped servicing them. They remain his standard, positioned next to a baby grand in his living room. I believe Art Dudley of *Stereophile* is a devotee. And the first time I met Gayle Sanders, the co-founder of MartinLogan, some 25 years ago, he told me that the Quad was his yardstick.

I certainly will never part with mine.



Styled to look like a room heater, the metal-grilled Quad, from about 80 Hz or 90 Hz on up, delivers neutrality that remains uncanny to ears that have learned to tolerate coloration, however minuscule or even euphonic. Many thousands of the 54,000 sold still survive, so one doesn't have to search far to hear them. Any collective of like-minded music fanatics will number at least one who has a pair. The experience is unforgettable.

Their influence, despite being a full-range electrostatic and therefore not something easy to imitate, is widespread. In addition to inspiring Sanders, they surely must have been in the back of the designers' minds when the Dahlquist DQ-10 was taking shape—and that's a dynamic speaker, not a panel. Mark Levinson used stacked pairs as the basis for his HQD, which employed a pair of Quads per channel, mounted vertically, with the sound augmented by a cone woofer and ribbon tweeter, a speaker one maven tells me has yet to be bettered. And if that's not enough, Quad 57s in quantity provided the sound in SME's Music Room, until their successor, the ESL 63, arrived.

Why? Because they can sound so open and transparent as to redefine neutrality in an audio context. They reveal all a system has to offer. The price you pay is in the lack of level and extension. But, as the designer Peter Walker always maintained, like Rolls-Royce and its horsepower figures, the performance was always "adequate."  
(continued)



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## FEATURE



As the first commercially and sonically successful full-range electrostatic loudspeaker, the Quad was so radical and so far ahead of its time that one must marvel at the perspicacity of many of the 1950s audio critics who recognised this from the outset—which is not to say that it was an immediate hit, certainly not at £52 each (or roughly £2,200/\$3,450 in today's money). But many embraced it, even though it was, in the context of the period, a freak.

Because the Quad ESL was unique, Walker recalled that, “It just competed against other loudspeakers, and it wasn't as loud, so

people who wanted to shake the windows didn't buy a Quad electrostatic speaker.” This affected sales, especially in the USA, where rooms were larger. But, as Walker also noted, “It wasn't very good with American high-powered amplifiers, which would just bust 'em, spark 'em to bits.”

When stereo arrived, it gave the Quad a boost, because it meant that the task of filling a room was shared by two speakers. For stereo, it proved a revelation, suffering less of a hot seat than most dynamic speakers. The performance was (and remains) so convincing, despite its bass and

level constraints, that the original ESL stayed in production until 1985, overlapping with the Quad 63 introduced in 1981.

Difficult to manufacture, easy to destroy with too much power, the Quad ESLs need the same gentle handling one would apply to driving a pre-WWII automobile. Used properly, with a mind-set appropriate to the era, the Quads will delight. I suppose one could buy multiple pairs, say six or eight panels per channel, if one was desperate to hear them delivering high levels, but a subwoofer à la the HJQD would still be required. *(continued)*



FEATURE

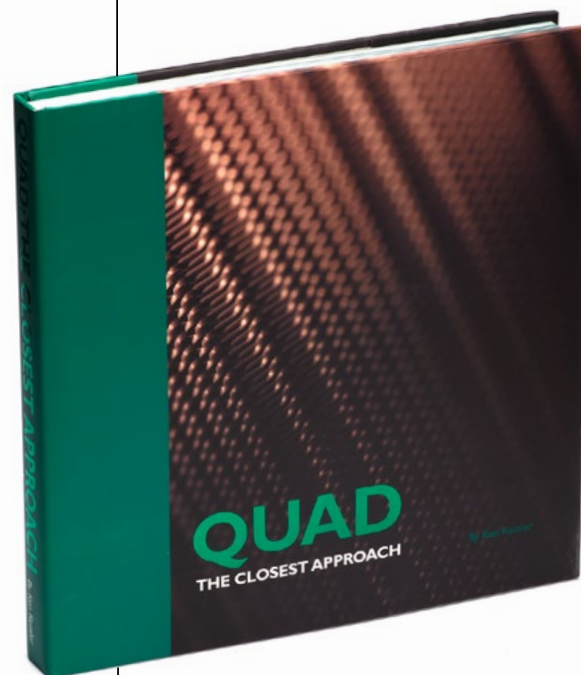
For people like Chesky, Dudley and a legion of devotees, a simple pair will do the trick. You just keep the levels down, and feed them something with which they synergize to perfection—better than the Quad IIs of the day are the Radford STA15s or STA25s. Set them a third of the way into the room. Close the door, sit in the apex of the triangle and play whatever you like, though Walker will be looking down from heaven with a scowl if it's anything other than unamplified classical music or maybe jazz.

In my experience, nothing matches them for vocals. The closest I've heard to their sense of realism are Apogee's Scintilla, the BBC LS3/5A and the Stax electrostatic speakers, especially the F81. The Quads deliver pinpoint imaging, and they truly "disappear" within the soundstage they recreate. The spread is so seamless that one is hard-pressed, with eyes closed, to locate them in the room. Treble is sweet, transients fleeting, textures palpable.

Even if you have no desire to own a pair, do try to hear them. If one were to create a list like those '50 Things To Do Before You Die,' then the Quad ESL 57 would figure on '50 Hi-Fi Components You Must Hear Before You Die'.

When asked in the 1990s how he would he have improved the speaker, Walker admitted that he was limited by the technology of the day, and that he did the best he could at the time. "Would I have made it bigger? Well, then it would have upset a whole lot of people who wanted a small speaker. Would I have made it smaller? No, because then you wouldn't have enough bass. It was roughly the right size."

Which is a typically understated, entirely English way of describing a frickin' masterpiece. ●



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**Original Price:**

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*Ken Kessler is the author of QUAD: The Closest Approach, the official history of the company.*

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# New Releases



## Neil Young and Crazy Horse

*Psychedelic Pill*

Warner Bros., 180g 3LP or CD

**N**eil Young and Crazy Horse's first new studio album of original material in nine years gives a symbolic middle finger to modern convention.

Its length is sprawling, its surrealist first song occupies more than 27 minutes of time, and its lyrical content casts aspersions on the present and embraces the past. It is the opposite of the digestible sound-byte fare dominant on the very FM radio band that once championed Young. It is a stubborn and curmudgeonly statement in no hurry to go anywhere, and feels nary an obligation to apologize for its imperfections. It is the unmistakable sound of an artist doing things on his own terms and caring not an iota if he doesn't make everyone happy. It is noisy, raw, loose, off-the-cuff, spontaneous, and blatantly out of step with what's often perceived as progress. It is alternatively indulgent and lean, nostalgic and contemporary, humorous and serious, unscripted and planned, frustrating and engaging, simple and complex. It is everything one might expect a get-back-into-the-shed Crazy Horse record should be, and then some, and is likely to irritate the listeners that doubt the performance abilities of Young's longtime garage-rock mates.

Approached on its own terms, *Psychedelic Pill* is also another master stroke from an icon who, nearing 67 years old, could sleepwalk through the remainder of his career rather than continue to take bold risks and potentially antagonize—even alienate. But Young has never been about playing it straight, and of late, whether on record or in print, he's rarely seemed more fiery or outspoken.

"When you hear my song now/You only get five percent/You used to get it all," Young laments on the opening "Driftin' Back," an aptly titled epic that nods in and out akin to a fever dream, and whose reflective themes resonate throughout the album. Coming on like a sonic tour of the Old West before settlement tamed the lands, the arrangement revels in spaciousness, with Crazy Horse's natural give and take contributing to a meditative vibe. Slow, droning exchanges occasionally threaten to stop, almost daring the listener to continue on the journey. Young's lyrics appear as if developed on the spot, as the tape rolls. The relaxed pace functions as a hallucinogenic, a drug conducive to Young what comes to his mind—just as if he were sitting on a couch in a shrink's office.

Conversational rhetoric in the form of recollections, comparisons, and memories consumes

*Psychedelic Pill*, in myriad ways the sonic accompaniment to Young's *Waging Heavy Peace*, a nonlinear autobiography/confessional tome as honest, freeform, creative, and unpredictable as any music book since Bob Dylan's *Chronicles Volume I*. Having initially mentioned the idea in "Drifting Back," Young returns to addressing his "inner rage" on the personal "Born In Ontario," a country-tinged ramble during which organs double as fugue-like horns and the narrator searches for roots, grounding, and understanding amidst perpetual change. Such elements have forever consumed Young, and in his refusal to settle—as well as welcoming of old cohorts to create catchy, vibe-based, fireplace-warm rock n' roll—these topics are as vital as they were when he invoked them more than four decades ago on "Old Man."

Only now, Young is the old man, a fact he not only recognizes but confronts via traipsing through emotions, ghosts, accomplishments, and shortcomings. The punchy, clever, and concise "Twisted Road" pays homage to Bob Dylan, the Grateful Dead, and Roy Orbison, with Young mentioning all by name and crediting their staggering influence on his life. It's one of the many extensions on *Psychedelic Pill* of the excellent "Days That Used to Be," a paean to bygone times and pals Young

and Crazy Horse cut on 1990's *Ragged Glory*. Yet, unlike so many records made during the last few years by aging artists in full-on look-back mode, *Psychedelic Pill* never preaches, offers grand pronouncements, elicits cheap sympathy, or lectures through rose-colored glasses. Rather, Young's chemistry with Crazy Horse arrests the senses.

The foursome anticipates each other's moves, responding to nuanced details and stoking mesmerizing grooves with guidance provided by what Young deems in *Waging Heavy Peace* as "the Spirit."

Such interactions, and the quartet's 43 years of playing together, combine to drive "She's Always Dancing" to a point where chords and harmonies conjure out-of-body experiences. The song is automatic, easygoing, liberated—the mental and physical states of the protagonist. Young also burrows into the minds of a longtime husband and wife on "Ramada Inn," a loping relationship tale whose developments, fates, and circumstances resonate with nonfictional veracity. (continued)

**Young's chemistry with Crazy Horse arrests the senses. The foursome anticipates each other's moves, responding to nuanced details and stoking mesmerizing grooves with guidance provided by what Young deems in *Waging Heavy Peace* as "the Spirit."**





©Photo by Julie Gardner

**Humility, time fading away, and the acknowledgement of rust's refusal to sleep have rarely sounded so genuine and passionate.**

It's this compassion—and Young's optimist-realist belief that love still conquers all—that makes his songwriting profoundly human and his guitar playing—its subtle growls and fluid distortion underscoring tension and uncertainty—the ultimate complementary poetic device. Once again, Young is bent on finding out what answers and advice the past's glowing embers can lend to comprehending the present and future. What he discovers isn't always comforting.

"I used to walk like a giant on the land," boom Young and Co. on the closing "Walk Like a Giant," a storming tsunami that earns its mastodon-referencing name and immediately stakes its claim as the biggest-sounding track Young and the Horse recorded since "Like a Hurricane" (in many ways its sibling). A whistled melody and huge, ribeye-thick rhythmic footprint underpin the anthemic arrangement. Young's moaning, grumbling riffs and the Horse's wordless doo-wop-style backing vocals dance hand-in-hand. The guitar solos find Young in hunkered-down position, bent over his instrument. Yet the ragged-and-torn condition of his vocals register equal impact.

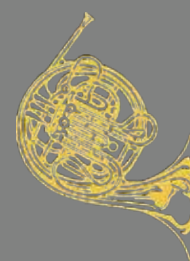
"Think about how close we came," he bellows, contemplating he and his friends' hippie dream to save the world and now, recognizing their diminished place in it. Humility, time fading away, and the acknowledgement of rust's refusal to sleep have rarely sounded so genuine and passionate. —**Bob Gendron**

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**G**reen Day fans may have seen this moment coming.

In the mid 90s, the trio cut a version of the Kinks' "Tired of Waiting for You." It was a B-side, originally found on the single for "Basket Case," one of the band's breakthrough hits from 1994's *Dookie*. An early single by the Kinks, the song captured the mix of longing, frustration, and boredom that Green Day so colorfully wrote about early in its career.

The Kinks' Davies brothers, however, were downright polite compared to Green Day's vocalist/guitarist Billie Joe Armstrong. The latter's lyrics, after all, cut quickly to the point ("When masturbation's lost its fun, you're...lonely"). But "Tired of Waiting" claims an underlying stop-dragging-me-around edge; its embrace by a bunch of snotty, suburban punks weaned on the Ramones and Screeching Weasel wasn't that crazy.



### Green Day

*¡Uno!*

Reprise Records, LP or CD

Green Day handled the song with reverence, taking it slow and singing it as elegantly as possible. It was also a bit of a message to Green Day followers: Someday, the band's three members seemed to be saying, we will be taking ourselves seriously. *¡Uno!* is Green Day's search for pop perfection, the sound of a band attempting—and failing on each and every track—to nail the pop sensibility of "Tired of Waiting for You."

Vide, the stop-and-start guitars of "Oh Love," as well as Armstrong's "heart on a noose" lyrics, are pretty much Top 40 pop-rock by the numbers. The suicide imagery is standard-issue false poetics, and it keeps the song on the line between anonymous and honest that everyone from Matchbox 20 to Justin Bieber so expertly walks. Likewise, "Nuclear Family"

is less about the changing face of the American suburbs and more an excuse for Armstrong to say he's going to "detonate," with the singer even going so far as to end the song in a "10, 9, 8, 7..." countdown. (Just imagine counting along in concert. Maybe it's fun.) Later on "Loss of Control," Armstrong at least admits his age, singing, "I'd rather go to a funeral than to this high-school reunion." Still, the lyric isn't funny or clever, just rather selfish (have you been to a funeral recently, Billie?).

Everything else aside, what really makes *¡Uno!* such a disaster isn't simply the fact that it's a rather boring pop record. No, what makes *¡Uno!* a disaster is simply the fact that this is the record Green Day opted to make in 2012. This isn't the first time Green Day took itself seriously. That occurred on 2004's *American Idiot*, and it was cause for rejoice. The increasingly midtempo throwaway pop songs on albums like 2000's *Warning* got jettisoned in favor of multi-part punk-rock suites that took aim at the year's political regime.

Green Day had stopped mimicking Brit-punk forebears the Clash in sound only. With *American Idiot*, and to a lesser extent with 2009's *21st Century Breakdown*, Green Day suddenly was a band willing to wrestle with current events. The closest Green Day gets to acknowledging America in 2012 is on "Kill the DJ," a confusingly violent song that places images of torture alongside present-day rave culture, all while sounding exactly like the Clash's stab at the punk-meets-disco of "Magnificent Seven."

When Green Day revealed it would release three albums between late 2012 and early 2013, right in the midst of America's election cycle, there was reason for excitement. Sure, no doubt there'd be filler. But

Green Day appeared to be taking its role as rock n' roll chroniclers of the news quite earnestly. Then came the Green Day-branded version of Angry Birds.

And then came Armstrong's mid-September meltdown at a Clear Channel festival in Las Vegas, which found Green Day sandwiched between Usher and Rihanna. When the band was given a shorter set than anticipated, Armstrong flipped. The swear words are omitted, but here's an example of his dialogue: "I've been around since...1980... 8 and you're going to give me one...minute? You gotta be...kidding me...I'm not...Justin Bieber."

Soon after came reports of Armstrong's struggles with substance abuse. It isn't making light of addiction to note Armstrong's onstage flip-out contains more fire, more humor, and more personality than anything on *¡Uno!*. Having listened to these 12 songs more than a dozen times each, I'm at a loss at being able to tell them apart, or find anything to compliment. "Let Yourself Go," perhaps, will sound fun at time-outs during NBA games, if that's the effect the band intended.

*¡Uno!* is simply rather ordinary. That's a shame, as *American Idiot*, and even *21st Century Breakdown*, are fights against all things bland and simple. Yet the bigger issue here is that Green Day suddenly seems to be at an identity crisis. Gone is the social commentary of its recent work, and in its place a collection of rock songs that, quite frankly, sound OK sandwiched between Usher and Rihanna. Armstrong's right, obviously. He is not Justin Bieber. So perhaps he should stop trying to compete with Bieber's contemporaries.

—**Todd Martens**

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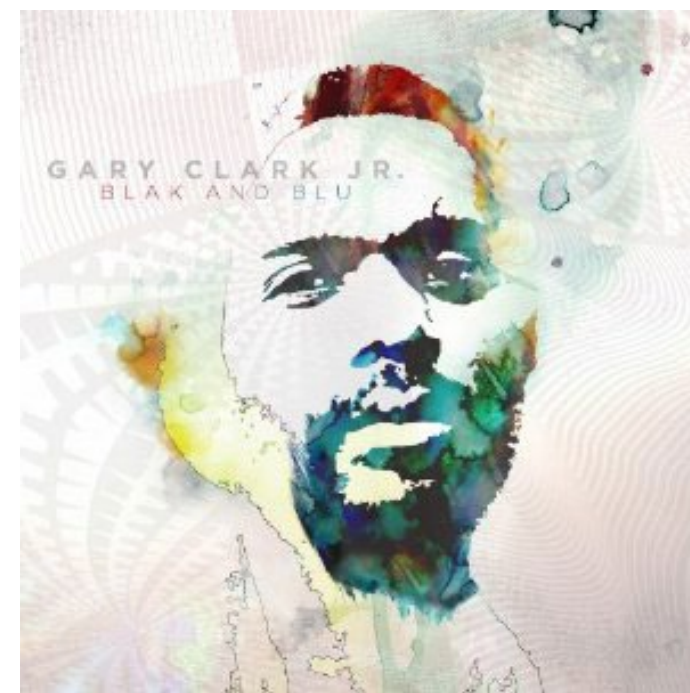
“I don’t believe in competition/Ain’t no one else like me around,” announces Gary Clark Jr., kicking off his major-label debut with one of the more brazen opening lines in memory. It’s not unusual to hear rap MCs or veteran musicians spout boldly confident remarks. And, given Clark is a newcomer, a little showmanship doesn’t hurt—entertainment has always involved some chivalrous fanfaronade. But when the boasting isn’t supported, the strategy backfires and the curtain pulled back, leading to frustration and disappointment.

Clark, however, backs up his oversized claim on a majority of *Blak & Blu*, routinely justifying recent praise from established stars (Jay-Z, Alicia Keys) and demonstrating that tireless touring—the 28-year-old appeared at practically every major North American music festival during the past 15 months—further honed his skills. The album will doubtlessly trigger myriad assertions crowning the Austin-based artist as the long-hoped-for rescuer of the blues. To be sure, Clark’s fuzz-drenched guitar playing more than lives up to the prerequisites. Yet any such proclamations will sell him short. He speaks languages beyond the blues, and whether fairly or not, the genre remains associated with the past. *Blak & Blu* is modern, and in certain places, futuristic.

The most obvious, convincing example of Clark’s forward-looking albeit roots-mindful approach develops during an inventive interpretation of Jimi Hendrix’s “Third Stone From the Sun.” He blends chicken-scratch riffs with turntable scratching all the while maximizing the guitar’s tonal decay, riding out single notes as a surfer does a giant wave until reaching the coda, when he turns and burns with searing lines. Here, and throughout a majority of the set, his gristly, muscular distortion works in tandem with a pristine command of space and tempo.

He splatters Delta mud on the steam-driven “When My Train Pulls In,” calling on wordless gospel refrains and percussive tambourines to flesh out the arrangement. His electrifying six strings howl like a buzzsaw during “Bright Lights,” a hypnotic song girded by ride cymbals and funky, get-down rhythms. When the star-making track concludes, diesel and dust are all that remain. Clark’s wall-of-sound droning scales even higher peaks on “Numb.” At one with a sea-sawing groove, Clark spits out notes as if he were shooting nails from a gun, and still, remains aware of the blazing organ in the background, another instrument alongside with which he maneuvers and twists.

Indeed, Clark seems eager to prove he’s comfortable with any diverse setting thrown his way, an ambition that ultimately stalls momentum and causes the otherwise impressive record to run about 20 minutes and four tunes too long. He’s at home fronting the equivalent of a swaggering, horn-stoked R&B band on “Ain’t Messin’ Around,” serving notice with a take-on-all-comers guitar solo and smartly allowing the song to boil down to its basics before revving up for a head-long finish.



### Gary Clark Jr.

*Blak & Blu*  
Warner Bros., CD

Attempts at inhabiting the roles of a sensitive soulful crooner are less credible. The issues haven’t anything to do with Clark’s smooth, appealing vocals; they relate to the material and execution. On the title track, hip-hop beats and strings qualify as contemporary, but Clark sounds like he’s reaching—and just another retro-flavored artist, not someone brimming with originality, personality, and flair. Vide, the unpersuasive “The Life,” which belongs on a Bruno Mars album, and forced air of “Things Are Changin’.”

Whether the idea of the label, a manager, or Clark himself, these crossover moves signal interruptions in focus. Fortunately, they’re brief, and don’t call into question any identity issues. “You gonna know my name by the end of the night,” the singer declares on “Bright Lights,” giving anyone within earshot damn good reasons they should. —**Bob Gendron**




**Aimee Mann**
*Charmer*

Superego Records, LP or CD


**Corin Tucker Band**
*Kill My Blues*

Kill Rock Stars, LP or CD

There's plenty of trouble in these two records. It's there on Corin Tucker Band's "Neskowin," where the dressed-to-impressed teenage girls brag that they enjoy "other toys, other faculties," and it shows up again on Aimee Mann's "Gumby," via a father with questionable intentions who gets chastised by Mann. "Don't call me," she sings, "call your daughter." Adolescence, it seems, never truly gets old.

The connections between veteran artists Mann and Tucker aren't direct. Both have guested on IFC's "Portlandia," which stars Tucker's Sleater-Kinney bandmate Carrie Brownstein. But that's about it. Musically, these days, Mann favors calm, cool, and curt, playing the role of a storyteller with a last line that lingers long after it's sung. Tucker still prefers it loud, with lyrics shouted and experimentation pertaining to a bluesier variety.

If the songs on these respective albums, each one essentially a character study, were turned into independent films, Mann's would be patient, with sharp dialogue and awkward pauses, whereas Tucker's would boast crude, documentary-like cuts. Yet it's rare to find two records with such grown-up perspectives, each a reflection on lessons learned from a vantage point that no longer has room for idealism.

Tucker immediately sings of aspirations she left in a drawer, daydreaming of the woman president who has yet to be elected in "Groundhog Day." Later, in "Joey," she wonders what happened to an old flame now that she and him are both grown up. The two cuts represent some of the slower offerings on *Kill My Blues*, but they're each tightly wound, with basement-heavy drums and melodic riffs countered with spindly webs of guitar notes.

On "Outgoing Message," connections are missed amidst gleaming keyboards, and the same instrument creates something far more troubling—and almost foreign—between the stops and starts of "Constance." The tune nearly veers into 60s psychedelics save for Tucker's self-assured guitar kicking it back into more familiar punk-rock territory, leaving only the uncomfortable imagery of an empty house in its wake.

Teenage girls are referenced numerous times throughout *Kill My Blues*, be it the windows-down, bang-up rock n' roll groove of "Neskowin" or wicked-witch intro of "None Like You," where Tucker goes so far as to sing, "come gather children." It soon gets less weird, thanks in part to the blast of guitars and sing-along "ba-bas." Still, throughout this song and the album, one senses Tucker is directing these songs toward someone younger.

The same feeling permeates each and every track of Mann's *Charmer*, which possesses a cleaner, more midtempo vibe—but no less of a thought-provoking center. *(continued)*

©Photo by Sheryl Nields





## MUSIC



©Photo by John Clark

**With all this adult anxiety around, it's no wonder that each artist simply cuts loose at one point.**

The title track arrives as one of the friskiest songs, and Mann lays out her thesis here, noting that “secretly, charmers feel like they’re frauds.” One song later, she gets to the heart of the matter. “I’ve joined the cue of people dead to you,” she confesses in “Disappeared,” wondering over echoing guitars how she lost a long-time friend.

Mann has more fun over the spacey synths, jingle-jangle cymbals, and “woo-woos” of “Crazytown,” the title of which stands for the place of residence for most of the women her male friends keep chasing. But hopefully, her single

friends will hear “Living a Lie,” a guitar-buzzing duet with the Shins’ James Mercer in which the lives of those coupled-up are far more lonely than those of folks on their own.

With all this adult anxiety around, it’s no wonder that each artist simply cuts loose at one point. Mann gives into studio effects on the catchy, sci-fi warfare of “Gamma Ray,” and Tucker writes a kiss-off to the ghost of her past in “No Bad News Tonight,” an old-fashioned two-minute jam on which she just wants everyone to stop overthinking. Talk about a life lesson worth trying to remember. —**Todd Martens**

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**Cat Power***Sun*

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**W**hile it's only been six years since Cat Power, a.k.a. Chan Marshall, released her last album of original material, *The Greatest*, it sounds like well over 60 years have passed. For the aforementioned effort, Marshall recruited musicians Leroy "Flick" Hodges and Mabon "Teenie" Hodges—the brothers who helped define Al Green's Hi Records sound back in the early 1970s—and set out for Memphis' Ardent Studios to record a warm, lush album steeped in vintage soul.

With *Sun*, the singer emerges from her time capsule and turns out an effort that sounds wholly modern, awash in bright, shimmering synths and stuttering drum machines. Indeed, it wouldn't be a surprise to hear rappers like Kanye West or Lil' Wayne spitting over a handful of these backing tracks on some future mixtape, which Marshall actually attempts on the closing "Peace and Love." She rhymes, "100,000 hits on the Internet/But that don't mean sheeeit," stretching out that final word like an indie-rock Clay Davis. It's a bold change of direction for Marshall, whose fragile, insular reputation (for years, her onstage meltdowns were depressingly standard fare) is miles removed from the music here.

The idea of brushing aside the past repeatedly surfaces throughout the album. On "3, 6, 9," a snappy tune built around strutting piano and layered, auto-tuned (!) vocals, she sings of shaking the "monkey from her back." Then, on "Human Being," a kinetic number driven by plucked acoustic guitar and shuffling drums, Marshall lays out what could be the record's central thesis, singing, "We all got rules we all have to break." And if this means auto-tuning her honeyed, cashmere sweater of a voice, well then, so be it. Moreover,

while past efforts are generally sparse, *Sun* is often dense and layered—even the vocals. At times, it sounds like a choir of Marshalls trade verses.

Highlights are numerous. Despite its title, the robotic "Silent Machine" is arguably the noisiest track, building to a wild, clattering finish. The vaguely Middle Eastern-sounding "Always On My Own," by contrast, arrives as a low-key spiritual tinged with atmospheric electronics. Best of all, however, is "Nothing But Time," an 11-minute epic Marshall reportedly penned for the teenage daughter of an ex. Here, atop a steady trickle of piano, the singer doles out motherly advice ("Never give away your body/Never give away your friends/Never give away what you always wanted/Never ever give in") in a warm, hypnotic voice, coming across like the world's most engaging life coach.

"Your world is just beginning," she coos as the song unwinds. "It's up to you to be like nobody." Listening to *Sun*, it's safe to say Marshall has taken her own advice.

—**Andy Downing**

**"Your world is just beginning," she coos as the song unwinds. "It's up to you to be like nobody." Listening to *Sun*, it's safe to say Marshall has taken her own advice.**



**T**here's a simple question asked throughout the opening track on *Love This Giant*, the years-in-the-works collaboration between Talking Heads principal David Byrne and Annie Clark, whose work under the St. Vincent moniker is sometimes abrasive, sometimes gorgeous, but always guaranteed to be eccentric. "Who's this?" Byrne chirps, delivering the lyric with surprised whimsy. The setting, however, shouldn't be all that unfamiliar to Byrne.

Clark may be just shy of half of Byrne's 60 years, but from the opening moments of this album, her odd guitar parts—the instrument arrives with as much fanfare as the horn sections that dot most of the 12 tracks—are placed comfortably within the confines of a latter-day Byrne. This is equally exciting and disappointing. She has a knack for dirtying up what could have been epic Disney symphonies; he has the uncanny ability to make the most worldly and childish of sounds come across as grown-up museum pieces. *Love This Giant* is largely a stroll through Byrne's gallery of sounds, with Clark having as much fun as possible with all the new trinkets at her disposal. *(continued)*



**David Byrne & St. Vincent**

*Love This Giant*

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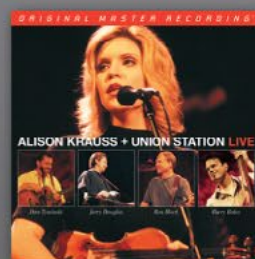
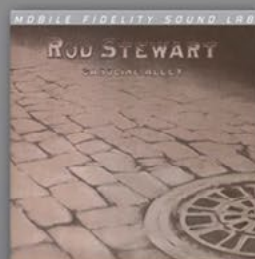
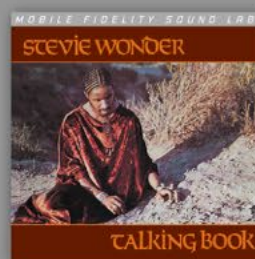


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“Weekend in the Dust” comes across as Clark leading a high-school marching band down a yellow brick road, and “Ice Age” finds Clark splicing and dicing her vocals and minor-key guitar work around the dusty, sputtering grooves of producer/rhythm ace John Congleton, Clark’s longtime collaborator—and an artist whose beats regularly toe the line between real and programmed. Both accentuate, with wide-eyed musical wonderment, brass parts that spin round and round like old wooden tops.

Byrne’s turns at lead are no less playful. “I Am an Ape” sounds concocted by an orchestra of toy-drumming monkeys, and “I Should Watch TV” is a trumpet-driven panic attack seemingly about being out of step with popular culture. It’s all quite a bit of fun, but also surprisingly cold, so much so that songs seem to have been cleaned with cans of pressurized air to ensure safe storage. That all makes sense, as Byrne’s most recent release is a live album recorded at Carnegie Hall. *Love This Giant* is fit for such a setting. This is experimentation built for polite applause rather than aural transcendence. One is simply left wishing for Byrne to have dressed down a bit, as the most collaborative of songs—“Lazarus,” for instance—truly cut loose.

Indeed, “Lazarus” may just be the best vocal performance of Clark’s career. She’s harmoniously pretty one second and aloofly distant the next. Byrne, meanwhile, seems to be gaining steam with each verse until he seems locked in a cat-and-mouse game with his trumpeters. It’s no more or less joyous than the rest of the album, but for once, this rather formal party breaks a much-needed sweat.

—Todd Martens

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**MUSIC**

Sugaring Season

Beth Orton



**Beth Orton**

*Sugaring Season*  
Anti-, LP or CD

**B**eth Orton doesn't often release albums. *Sugaring Season* is her first since 2006, and only her fifth in 16 years. Yet when an Orton set appears, there's a solid chance it will be the kind of work listeners not only want to hear, but wouldn't mind living in.

*Sugaring Season* most certainly fits that bill. The 10-track effort clocks in at less than 40 minutes, yet still unfolds with the natural, engrossingly languid pace of an autumnal sunset. Don't, however, confuse that with being comforting.

Orton's voice is something otherworldly, a fluttering, animal-like object that seems to circle in and around the melody, treating the latter as a light bulb. It's not always possible to discern what she's singing on a song such as "Drawn Chorus," on which she hurries up and stops around orbiting strings. The approach can, perhaps, equate to a make or break proposition for some listeners, yet it better suits her mature sound.  
(continued)





©Photo by Jo Meston Scott

**For an artist who once split the difference between folk-pop and electronic beats, *Sugaring Season* sees Orton working with musicians accomplished in jazz.**

For an artist who once split the difference between folk-pop and electronic beats, *Sugaring Season* sees Orton working with musicians accomplished in jazz. And it's here where she coasts around arrangements that feel increasingly freeform. The addition of strings and an orchestra can lead to devastatingly striking results. "Something More Beautiful" is the centerpiece in which verses are a slow-danced, acoustic-picked waltz, and the chorus captures grown-up emotional exhaustion. "When you feel too much," Orton sings, her voice suddenly crisply clear. Meanwhile, an electric guitar emerges from nowhere and violinists hit like dive-bombing vultures.

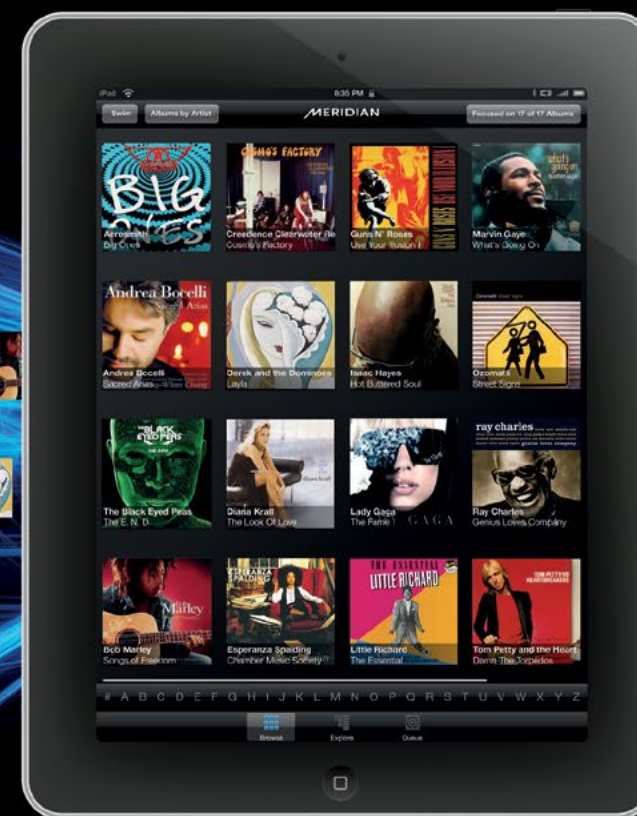
The electronic aspects of Orton's earlier career, too, are

still evident—they've just been given an organic makeover. The beat in "Candles," for instance, sounds as if it could start a campfire, and "See Through Blue" uses a jolly, animated piano to etch out a spaced-out groove. Still, with song titles like "Magpie," "Call Me Breeze," and "Last Leaves of Autumn," one can't shake the sensation that this is music born in a cabin, and the songs destined for late-night reflection.

"Mystery," for instance, sounds almost Gaelic in its sparseness, and the song's patiently strummed guitar and long-drawn out violin notes seem to indicate Orton's mission. This is an artist exploring, rather than offering, answers. —**Todd Martens**

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## Yeasayer

*Fragrant World*  
Secretly Canadian, 2LP or CD



If Darwin was still alive, it's reasonable to think he'd be studying Yeasayer instead of his beloved Galapagos Island finches. Evolution has been the lone constant for the Brooklyn-by-way-of-Baltimore trio since it first got together in 2007. The band's debut, *All Hour Cymbals*, flirts with art-damaged psychedelia, while its 2010 breakthrough conjures images of Tears for Fears via widescreen synthpop. Now, *Fragrant World* finds the band venturing further into the cosmos and experimenting with fragmented, futuristic R&B.

The songs are largely unstable, packed with jarring synthesizer textures, wobbly bass, and electronic drums that cut through the mix like railroad spikes driven into cold earth. Even the vocals are warped, distorted, and auto-tuned, sometimes coming on like Greek choruses of melodic androids.

Despite the alien sonic landscape, many songs are still rooted in human emotions. "Devil and the Deed" could pass for a millennial breakup tune, with guitarist Anand Wilder singing "I can't live without her" as the band locks into a dark, disco-etched groove. Similar themes surface in "Demon Road," a gurgling cut on which the mates fret about their romantic failures ("I've never been no good at bringing flowers") atop a gently throbbing backdrop of

electronic blips and beeps.

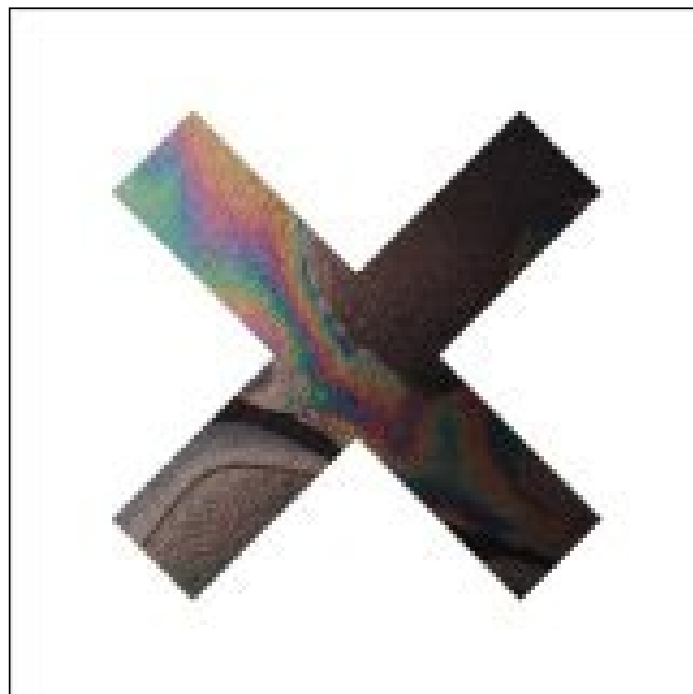
Last time around, many of Yeasayer's songs sounded born of an inherent sense things would ultimately be okay. "Your lows will have their complements of highs" promised singer/keyboardist Chris Keating on "Ambling Alp." This time around, much of that optimism has dissolved. "I wish that I could tell you that it's all alright," sings Keating on weirdly hypnotic album closer "Glass of the Microscope." "But in truth we're doomed."

"Longevity," a fractured mash-up of tip-toeing synths and crumbling drums that could pass for a Timbaland production, is the closest the band comes to its old, feel-good self. "Live in the moment," sings Keating, "Never count on longevity." Well, alright then. At times,

the band's digital soundscapes match this dire mood. "No Bones," for one, is cold and clinical, as though it somehow sprung to life completely untouched by human hands. Similar troubles mar "Reagan's Skelton," a soulless number that plays like an LCD Soundsystem throwaway.

Better is "Henrietta," a deeply weird, atmospheric tune that takes the true story of Henrietta Lacks (a 1951 cancer victim whose tumor cells were cultured to create cell lines for medical research) and spins it into a meditation on death and the afterlife. "Oh Henrietta," Keating sings, his voice auto-tuned 'til it practically gleams. "We can live on forever." Or at least long enough, one would hope, for audiences to catch up with the band's futuristic ways. —**Andy Downing**



**The xx**

*Coexist*  
Young Turks, LP or CD

**C**oexist, the second album from zealously minimalist U.K. act the xx, lists 11 songs, although it'd be easy to listen to this nearly 40-minute effort and mistake the whole collection as one extended piece of heady, existential relationship drama.

Members Romy Madley Croft and Oliver Sim are unlikely duet partners. Rarely, in fact, do they even sing together, or seem to display any signs that they are aware the other is present. "We used to be closer than this," the two sing on "Chains." She is breathy paranoia and Sim is vampire-broody. Beneath them, fractured minor-key guitars flirt with non-existence, and the tempo of the electronic rhythms seems to change on a whim.

A few years ago, the band's self-titled 2009 debut became an unlikely hit, thanks, in part, to one of the band's instrumentals scoring a ubiquitous commercial during the 2010 Winter Olympics. The xx's sleek electronics, as well as its mix of indie-rock guitars and R&B aching, gave it the feel of a modern soul record, one in the vein of Kanye West's *808s and Heartbreak*. Soon, the ensemble's producer, Jamie Smith, found himself working with the likes of Adele and Drake, and Rihanna was sampling the xx. How the band may respond to such sudden mainstream attention was the big question heading into *Coexist*. (continued)

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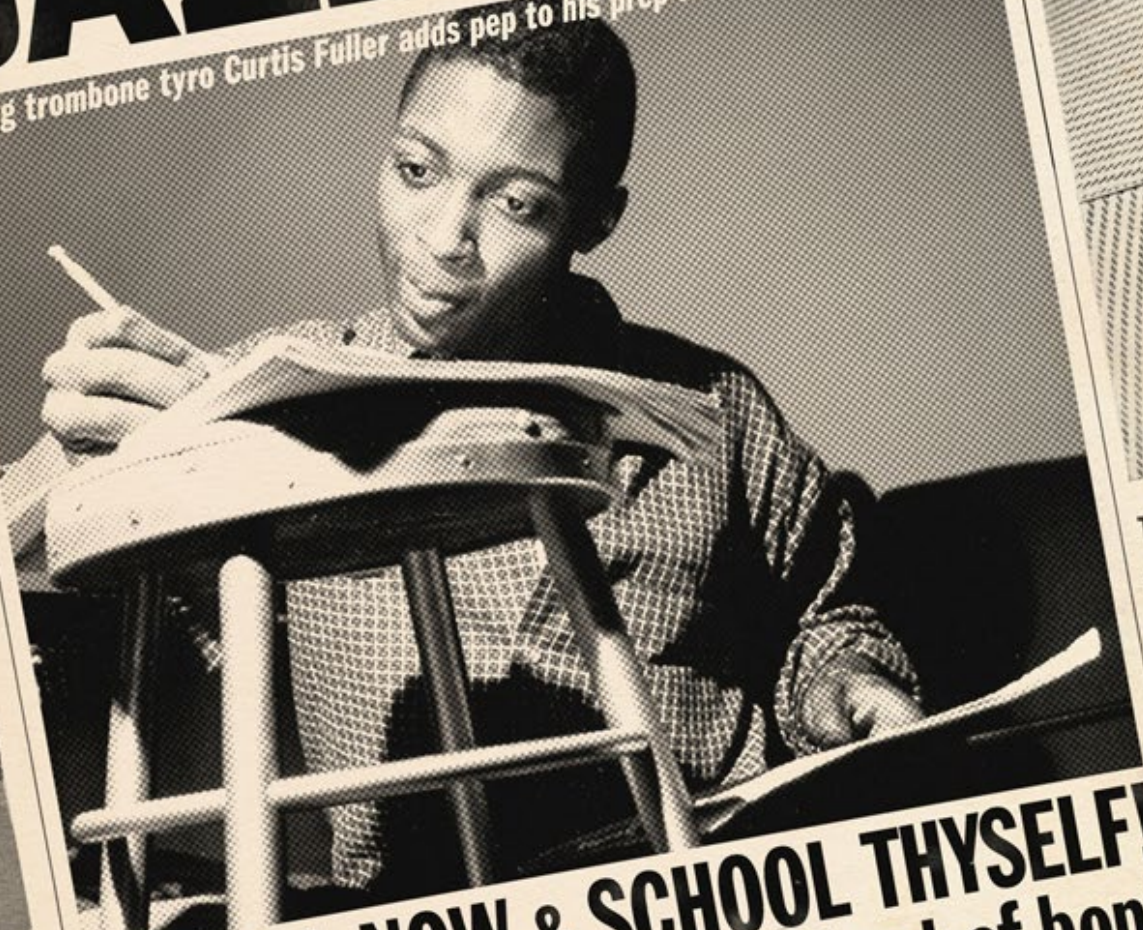
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## MUSIC

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**Coexist doesn't change the formula so much as make it even starker.**

Coexist doesn't change the formula so much as make it even starker. Melodic production flourishes arise here and there, and when the beats surface on a song like "Swept Away," they're startling. They're there one second and gone the next, like a rhythmic game of Whac-A-Mole.

The xx doesn't need to say much, and its compositions toy with listener perceptions. That is, the songs highlight not what's missing but what's been extracted, ensuring they hold true to their emotional core. "Reunion" sounds concocted underwater, with the sounds of steel drums heard somewhere on the surface and off in the distance. "Try" is even more alien. The song's siren-like synths become a heartache distress call, and Croft croons to a slow-dance groove that's just out of her reach. The strongest moments linger long after they've past. "Chains" features a repeat refrain, and says little else in just fewer than 3 minutes. The result is devastating—the love song duet at its quietest, thoughtful, and lonely.

Hotshot remixers may view these pieces as dares, since they seek to amplify the melodies buried in the atmospheres. Yet that would do the songs of Coexist a disservice, as they're odes to how difficult it can be for two people to communicate—uncomfortable silences and all.

—Todd Martens





©Photo by Pamela Littky

**Divine Fits**

*A Thing Called Divine Fits*  
Merge Records, LP or CD

**W**hen Divine Fits title a love song “My Love is Real,” it’s not really a love song at all. Oh, it sounds like a love song, all right. There’s a synthetic, handclap-friendly groove, references to being nervous, and disco flashes of groovy, colorful keyboards.

But Dan Boeckner signals his—and pretty much the band’s intentions—each time he delivers (pants, rather) the chorus. “My love is real,” sings Boeckner, delivering the line as if he’s between steps on a treadmill, “until it’s not.” And bam! There’s the band-aid, ripped right off, without warning. The Divine Fits are pop music, but pop music at its most abrupt.

The band is also an indie supergroup, at least if you travel in such circles as the Pitchfork Music Festival. Led by Boeckner and Britt Daniel upfront, Divine Fits is vocally (and on guitar/bass), part Wolf Parade/Handsome Furs and part Spoon. On drums is Sam Brown of punk act New Bomb Turks, and, relax, that’s as much of a history lesson as this review will give.

Just know that the band looks as it sounds. At a recent Los Angeles gig, Daniel and Boeckner essentially came onstage wearing ratty undershirts and tank tops.

Built too wiry thin to be toughs, they looked the type too happily shut-in to be concerned with fashion, and who count a night spent searching through record crates as socializing. Near show’s end, Divine Fits tackled Tom Petty & the Heartbreakers’ “You Got Lucky,” and the song’s stalker-cold keyboard, guitar release, and sawed-off vocals essentially served as a mission statement.

Yes, the keyboards of Alex Fischel give Divine Fits a vintage, 70s yesteryear feel, a sense of

time and place otherwise proudly lacking in the sparse, modernist arrangements. The shell of this 11-track album is barren, emotionless at times, but *A Thing Called Divine Fits* succeeds as a record of moments rather than a collective whole. Look past the folded arms, and each track has reasons to return. They’re there in the call-and-response bass of “What Gets You Alone,” which gets increasingly close to convulsing the song into a heart attack as it progresses, as well as the neon keyboard hum of “Baby

Get Worse,” which seems to stop the tune just short of the glorious chorus Boeckner and Daniel tortuously deny it.

Edges win out over smoothness. The panicked clicks and warm guitars of “For Your Heart,” for instance, or the percussive wind-ups of “Flaggin A Ride.” And desserts, such as in “Like Ice Cream,” aren’t treats, but hearts with which to be toyed. But the band revels in games, treating the songs as lean little puzzles, and letting the listener fill in the gaps. —**Todd Martens**



September 29: Kele of Bloc Party  
wrapping up their North American tour  
at The Vogue Theatre in Vancouver, BC.

*Photo by David Thai*





September 25: Saint Vitus captures the crowd in the Brooklyn, NY bar of the same name.

*Photo by Samantha Marble*



# A Small Surprise

## GoldenEar's Aon 3 Bookshelf Monitors

By Jeff Dorgay

**S**mall speakers and small rooms usually mean not much bass. A well-thought-out subwoofer will usually add LF content, but it also lightens your wallet. If you're looking to outfit a small listening space with a pair of compact speakers that combine the imaging of a mini monitor with bass you'd expect from a floorstander, try the Aon 3s from Maryland's GoldenEar.

The opening bass riff of Paul McCartney's "Let Me Roll It" immediately confirms that these speakers rock. The weight, texture and sheer growl of what is arguably one of the best-known bass lines in rock and roll forces you to take notice and, perhaps, search for the subwoofer in the room. But there isn't one. Taking advantage of room gain in room two (13 feet by 16 feet), the Aon 3s easily dip down to the upper 30-Hz range, with the ribbon tweeter offering a level of transparency that, along with the massive bass response, is something rarely heard—and even less rarely heard from a pair of speakers priced just under \$1,000.



## FEATURE

**Easy to Drive**

Tom Waits' "Don't Go Into That Barn" (from his *Real Gone* album) further confirms that these speakers have plenty of heft, as they easily handle the chorus of low-pitched grunts that linger in the background behind Waits' wailing. Keeping the mood heavy and dark, with Tool's *Undertow* album conveys just how much punishment these little speakers can take and still deliver the goods. The 20-watt-per-channel Carver Black Beauty was able to push the Aon 3s further than I expected. But, not wanting to blow a tweeter, I switched to my BAT VK-60 monoblocks and twisted the volume knob a *lot* further. Make no mistake: These speakers can rock with the best of them. The Aon 3s never miss a beat when Tool goes from slow motion into overdrive.

An 89-dB sensitivity rating and nominal 8-ohm impedance means the Aon3s work well with amplifiers great and small. The Conrad-Johnson MV-50C1 (recently updated at the factory with CJD Teflon caps throughout) with EL34 output tubes proves magnificent, providing just the right balance between midrange magic and dynamics, and offering up the most musical combination of the review sessions.

It's not that I didn't have great luck pairing the Aon 3s with solid-state electronics—amplifiers from Pass Labs, McIntosh and Channel Islands were all good matches—but my first experience with the GoldenEar speakers was with tube power in the living room of GoldenEar founder Sandy Gross. The experience, needless to say, really stuck with me. Even with a low-powered tube amplifier at a modest listening level, these speakers fill the room with a highly engaging sound.



## FEATURE

Tripping through Hawkwind's "L.S.D." feels so psychedelic and dimensional that a black light was in order. For those of you not familiar, the massive ball of sound on this track extends way beyond the speaker boundaries, with layer upon layer of synthesizers, sound effects and equally driving bass and drums occasionally infused with somewhat guttural vocal chantings. A little time spent with Can's *The Lost Tapes: 1968-1975* was equally mind-expanding, with multiple levels of distorted guitars that would blend together on a lesser speaker, but that are each easily discerned when played through the Aon 3s.

**Further Explorations**

While wacky electronic music doesn't reveal much about a speaker's ability to accurately reproduce music, it does disclose the speaker's presentation, dynamics and soundstage. Some speakers just sound *small*, but the Aon 3s do not fall victim to this. I make no bones about having the "big-speaker sound" as one of my hot buttons, and the Aon3s deliver.

Going up the audiophile hierarchy of needs (your order may be different)—knowing the Aon 3s can produce a soundstage much larger than their small size would suggest, along with sufficient weight and dynamics—the last mountain to scale is tonality. Not only do these speakers sound remarkably neutral for their modest price tag, they do a great job with male and female vocals, each of which presents a unique challenge.

The subtlety of female vocals can expose a speaker's inability to recreate micro dynamics. Patti Smith's recent album *Banga* creates a dreamy, surf-like, (dare I say happy) mood, closing with Smith taking on Neil Young's "After the Gold Rush." (continued)



## FEATURE

The end of the track has a chorus of young girls accompanying Smith as they sing “Look at Mother Nature on the run in the 21st century.” The Aon 3s keep the vocalists separate while brilliantly maintaining the pace of the track.

Rachel MacFarlane’s *Hayley Sings* provides more traditional yet sultry tunes. Her performance of “Makin’ Whoopee!” slides out of the speakers in a highly convincing manner, so those having a taste for more traditional female vocals will be very satisfied with the GoldenEar speakers. However, the female voice doesn’t tell the whole story. Typically, if there are problems with the crossover point or the drivers don’t meld properly, the additional body of male vocals fails to come through, so that vocalists like Tom Jones, Johnny Cash or Brad Roberts appear to lack bulk. Again, the Aon 3s do not suffer from this problem. The speakers splendidly reproduce Robert’s vocal on the *Crash Test Dummies’* album *Give Yourself a Hand*, as he goes from his trademark baritone to a new-found falsetto on this record.

### Back to the Lab

Perusing the spec sheet for the Aon 3s shows that these little speakers mean business. GoldenEar designed these puppies with a 7-inch woofer and a pair of side-firing passive radiators, allowing the Aon 3’s to move serious amounts of air.

The Aon 3s are a snap to set up. Listening to them in room two, with the Aon 3s about 7 feet from

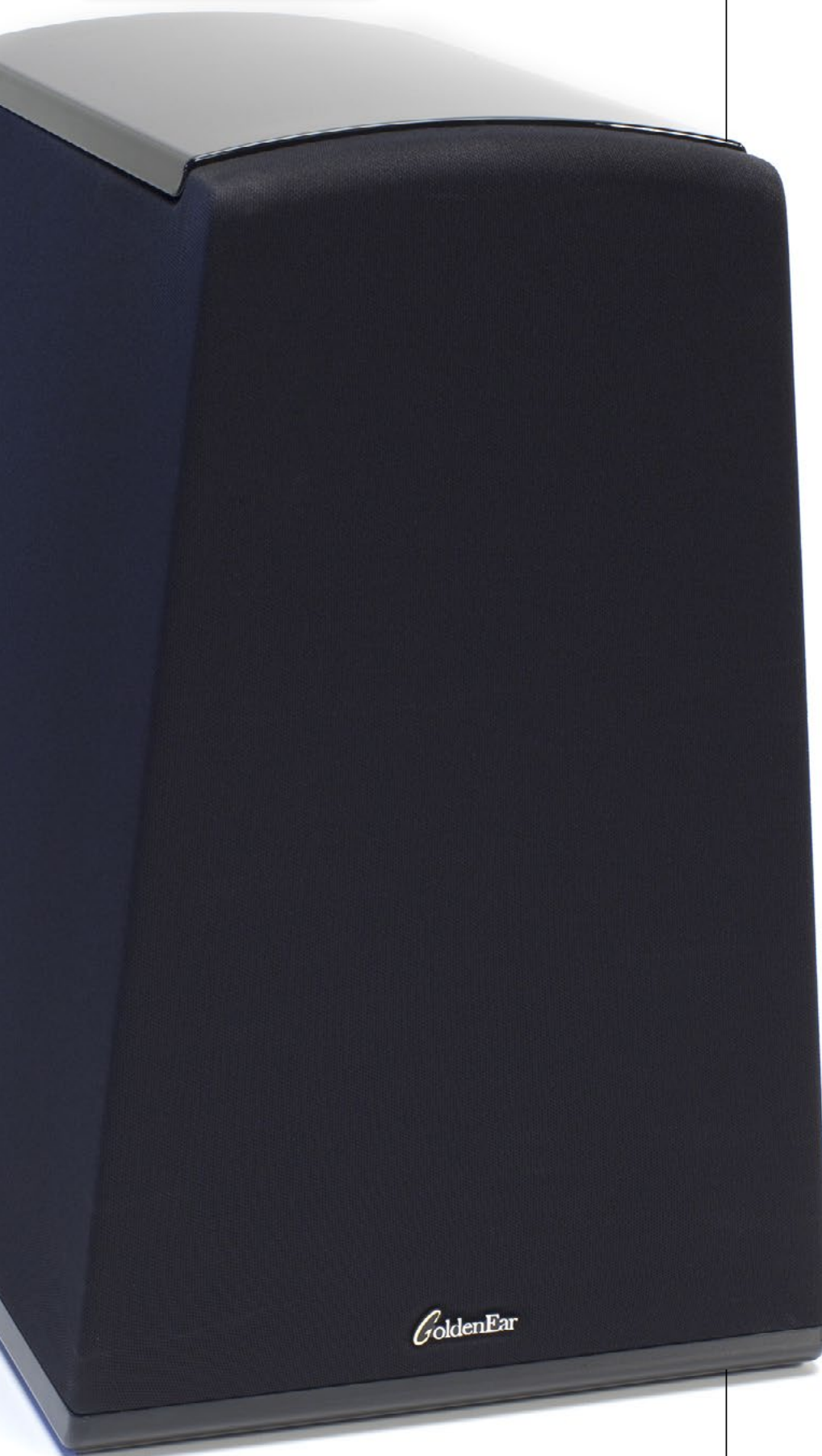
my listening chair and about 4 feet from the side and rear walls, provides the best balance of bass reinforcement and midrange clarity. Getting the tweeters as close to ear height as possible will provide the maximum soundstage in both dimensions. As with any small but high-quality speaker, the Aon 3s have the maximum room interface if you place them on a high-quality, high-density speaker stand and use some Blu Tack or similar compound to couple the speakers to the stands. Minor tweaks like this will pay huge dividends.

Thanks to the wide dispersion of the Aon 3s’ High-Velocity Folded Ribbon tweeter (and a GIK diffuser installed at the room’s first reflection point), no toe-in is needed, as these speakers have a naturally wide sweet spot. Unlike my favorite pair of panel speakers, the Aon 3s also have wide vertical dispersion, with the image suffering very little falloff when you rise from the listening chair, making these great speakers for listening to music with a lot of friends.

This is the same tweeter used in GoldenEar’s top-of-the-range Triton speakers, which provides multiple benefits. The obvious quality aspect of getting the flagship tweeter in a small package is great for those with smaller rooms and smaller budgets, but it also makes for a beautifully integrated sound, should you decide to incorporate a pair of Aon speakers into a multichannel system with Tritons as front speakers. *(continued)*







While GoldenEar has taken advantage of overseas assembly, it's still garbage-in, garbage-out if you can't design a great speaker. The secret sauce here is between the ears of Sandy Gross himself, who was one of the original partners in Polk Audio and Definitive Technology, so the amount of time he spent in the designer chair can't be dismissed. Knowing where to pound the nail is the key, and the Aon 3s certainly benefit from Gross' decades of speaker design and manufacturing experience.

The Aon 3s have a "truncated-pyramid" shape that improves sound quality by having no parallel cabinet walls, which provides a midrange and upper-bass response unfettered by cabinet resonance or reflections. Taking the high-value concept further, GoldenEar makes the cabinets from MDF and covers them on four sides with a tight-weave grille fabric, leaving the top and bottom surfaces bare except for the finish. Less money spent on the cabinet means more money for drivers and crossover components—yet another advantage for the GoldenEar speakers.

I've heard a lot of uninvolved loudspeakers in the \$1,000 range, but I'm happy to report that the GoldenEar Aon 3s are anything but. Construction is first-rate and the amount of music that these speakers reveal is nothing short of a miracle considering their size and price. Those looking to assemble a high-quality, high-value system should make a GoldenEar dealer their next destination. ●

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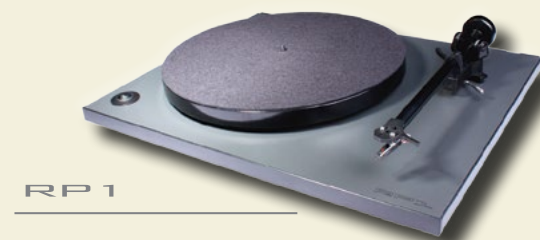
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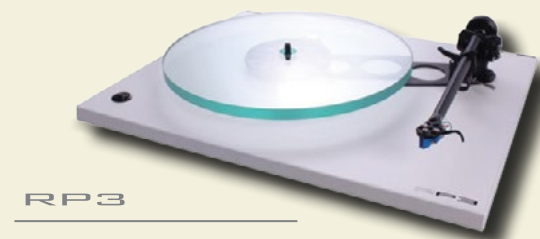
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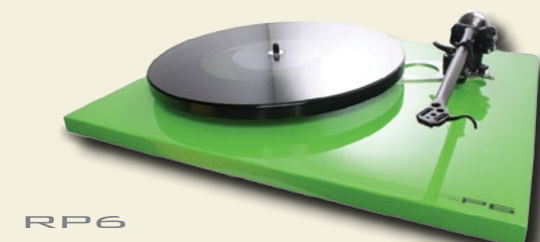
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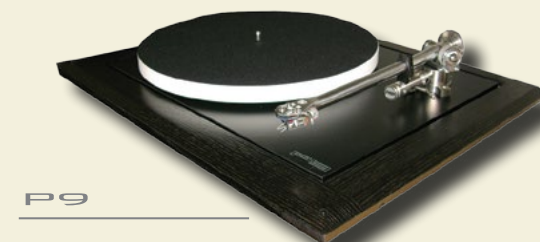
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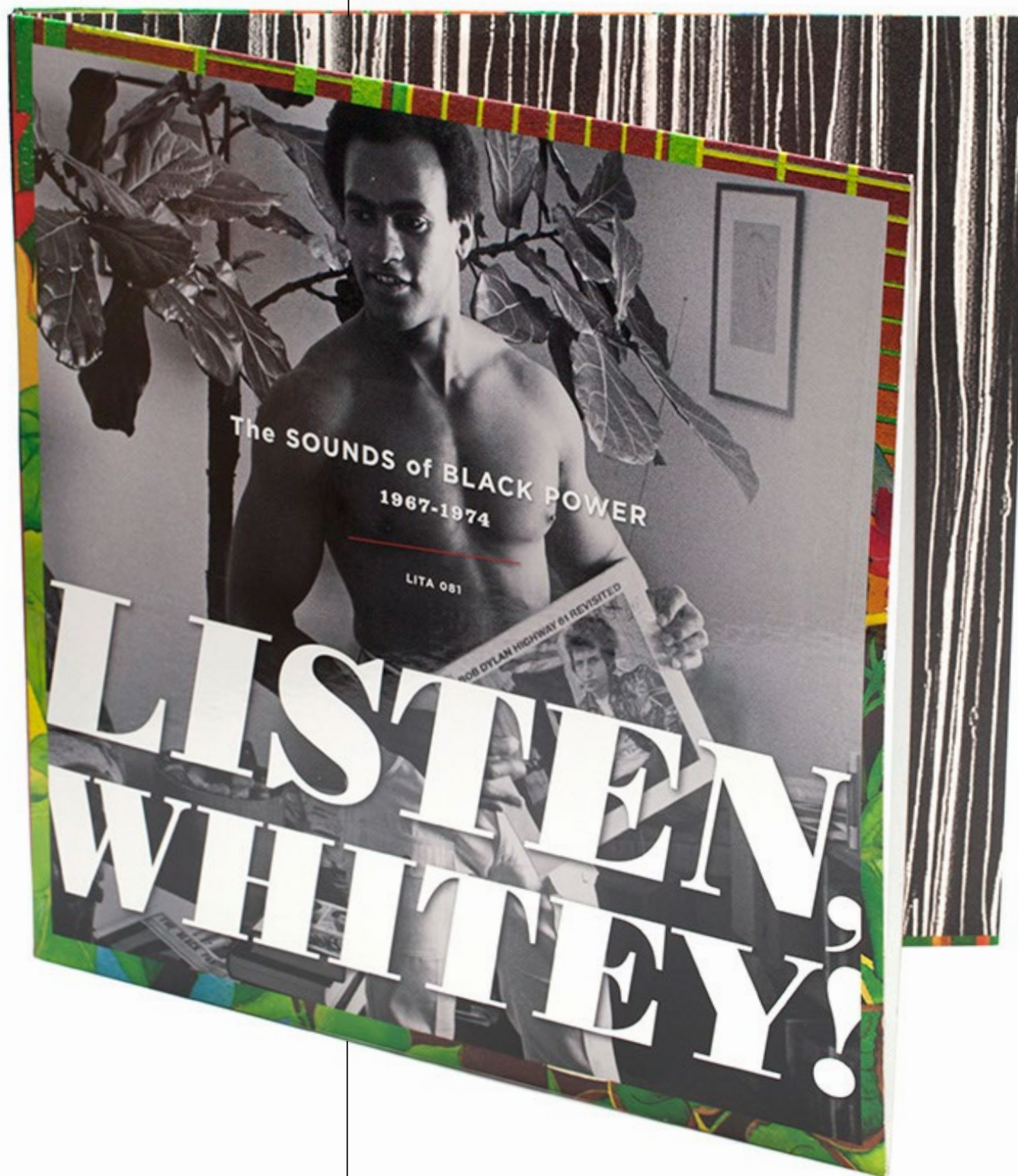
# Audiophile Pressings

By Jeff Dorgay

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***Listen, Whitey!***  
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Light in the Attic Records



*Listen, Whitey!* is the musical compilation to the book of the same title, written by Pat Thomas and produced by Fantagraphics Books. If the record intrigues you, the book contains 250 illustrations of albums and 45s I'm guessing you've probably never seen, all of which tell of the trials and tribulations that made this era such an incendiary period in US history.

Beginning with Shahid Quintet's "Invitation to Black Power," which sounds a lot like Gil Scott-Heron's "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised," we are given the basic hierarchy of how to get things done, perhaps in a somewhat stealthy matter, as the song asks, "How much black power can you hold in a can?"—referring to black unity in terms of gasoline bombs. This is serious shit. And it gets better as the four sides unfold.

While not an audiophile pressing per se, given many of the tracks on this two-record set have never seen the light of day on CD, or been remastered to LP, the overall sound quality is very good. Light in the Attic did a fantastic job at unearthing these treasures. Most importantly, there's unmistakable passion in this music, reminding us where we've been and just how far we still need to go.



# KISS



## Kiss

*Destroyer (Resurrected)*  
HD Tracks 24/96 download or Universal LP

**K**iss never brought the fervor of its live shows to the studio, but on its fourth album, *Destroyer*, the quartet came close. Six months after the legendary *Alive!*, the band is at the top of the world and at one of its highest creative peaks. All of the songs on *Destroyer* are solid, and the record delivered four memorable singles.

“Detroit Rock City” and “Flaming Youth” remained favorites for years to come, and “Shout it out Loud” took the place of “Rock and Roll All Nite” as the collective’s then-major anthem. The piano ballad “Beth” took everyone by surprise. For this budding audiophile, in 1976, *Destroyer* sounded much better on a pair of JBL L-100s than audiophile-approved Magnepans.

The new *Destroyer (Resurrected)* mix features producer Bob Ezrin back behind the console, adding here, embellishing there, with good results—until you read the phrase “digital copies of the original tapes” in the liner notes. Ugh. Word of the original tapes being remixed almost always spells disaster in the rock world, but here, Ezrin’s affection for the band is a work of art. This record might have even been bigger if these changes were employed the first time around. The effort is now certainly more epic. Isn’t that what Kiss is all about?

Forget the \$90 SACD released in 2010. It’s a marginal improvement over the original vinyl, still sounding flat and two-dimensional. And forget the new vinyl, mastered by Bob Ludwig for Universal. With barely more than half of each side of the LP devoted to musical information, you can guess what happened—compression. Epic fail. There’s no bass and it does not rock.

A quick comparison to the original pressing reveals that the new pressing has the same anemic dynamics and is slightly smoother on top. But zero dynamics means death to all that would otherwise rock. And that’s having played the vinyl through the Lyra Atlas cartridge and Qualia Indigo phonostage

via two massive Audio Research tube monoblocks. I guarantee it will suck on your system.

If you love Kiss, and you still don’t have the ability to listen to high-resolution digital, there’s no better reason than *Destroyer (Resurrected)* to invest in the technology. This is the way a rock record is supposed to sound: thundering bass, over-the-top dynamics, and a wall of guitars that sounds larger than life. And I’ve been there since the first tour.

Excitement builds on the HD Tracks version the second the car door slams in “Detroit Rock City.” The opening guitar riff sinks the hook into the listener, and is firmly set by the first chorus. Long-term members of the Kiss Army will either relish the *Resurrected* version or spurn it as blasphemous. However, if you’re in the former camp, the 24/96 rendition contains many surprises.

Guitar interplay between Paul Stanley and Ace Frehley is clearly delineated, as Stanley’s rhythm licks are no longer buried in the mix. The child in “King of the Night Time World” has its own space that stays separate from the rest of the band. Best of all, Gene Simmons’ bass playing not only has more pace, but the convincing weight it deserves. Also, the chorus on “Great Expectations” no longer sounds like it was recorded in a high-school bathroom. And that’s just side one. Another bonus? The alternate mix of “Sweet Pain.” Ezrin mentions “fixing something that has bothered him for decades.” I won’t spoil the surprise.

# Scorpions



## Scorpions

*Love at First Sting*  
Audio Fidelity  
24kt. CD

**J**oe Harley, one of the two men behind the wildly successful Music Matters Blue Note reissue series, once told me that “sometimes a touch of compression can be your friend, especially on a rock record.” Wiser words were never spoken. I couldn’t get this disc out of the Music Direct box fast enough: I love the Scorpions. And I remember the day I bought my original copy of *Love at First Sting* on CD. I blew the tweeters out of both of my Magnepans that day, because I just couldn’t play this record loud enough, even with a pair of Krell monoblocks on hand.

Back then, it was a badge of honor to see the words “Full Digital Recording” on the cover of a CD, because we thought that meant you were getting all of the good stuff. In many ways,

my original Mercury CD pressing of this record stands the test of time because it fucking rocks. Especially now that I have a system that won’t crap out when twisting the volume control way beyond what’s reasonable and prudent.

But the current Audio Fidelity disc doesn’t make the grade. The minute Herman The German stomps the kick-drum pedal down at the beginning of “Rock You Like a Hurricane,” the party is over before it begins. Sure, the new version is cleaner and there’s a bit more inner detail, allowing you to hear slightly more interplay between the Scorps’ two lead guitarists, but it doesn’t rock anymore. One of the best heavy rock records of all time now sounds like Steely Dan’s *Aja*. And that’s wrong.



# Tears For Fears

## Tears For Fears

*The Seeds of Love*

*Songs From the Big Chair*

Mobile Fidelity Silver Series LP



## *The Seeds of Love*

may not be Tears For Fears' biggest commercial success, but it's the most meticulously crafted album produced by the duo comprised of Roland Orzabal and Curt Smith. As well as it should be, having been made on a budget of one million pounds. Combining a wide range of musical styles, *The Seeds of Love* has a slower, more deliberate pace than its predecessor, *Songs From The Big Chair*.

The gold standard is the UK Fontana pressing, but the US version is not far behind in terms of clarity and bass slam. The extra low-level information captured on the former version shows off the delicate layers of the compositional elements in a most exquisite fashion. Of course, this comes at a premium, with pristine UK copies fetching up to \$75, and good-condition copies selling for about half that. The elusive Japanese vinyl appears on EBay and the like occasionally, and demands \$100 and up. The US version is equally tough to find in record stores, but can usually be located on various auction sites for \$15-\$40. Caveat emptor.

Mobile Fidelity performed commendably on this new edition, bringing the classic to market in perfect shape for \$22.95. The bottom end is well sorted and the hallmark MoFi quality is here in spades. Our test sample is flat, quiet, and centered, and features excellent reproduction of the original artwork.

As this is a Silver Label title, the original master is not guaranteed (as it is in the Original Master series), and the records are pressed on 140g vinyl. Direct comparison to UK and US originals reveal more smoothness in the upper registers, suggesting it was cut either from a high-resolution digital copy or perhaps a safety master. This trait is most evident in the quietest passages, such as the beginning of "Swords and Knives" and "Famous Last Words." The original vinyl sounds bigger, with more sparkle and clarity. Tunes with less dynamic range make it tougher to distinguish between the original and the remaster. So, unless you can be assured a perfect original, the Silver Label LP is the way to go. Grading these on a numerical scale, with a mint UK original at 100 and an immaculate US original 95, the Silver Label ranks 91. Pretty damn good.

*Songs From the Big Chair* equates to more of a toss-up. Utilizing a low-numbered US pressing for comparison, the Silver Label easily comes out on top in terms of a smoother high end, but the original has more low-frequency energy with bigger, punchier dynamics. The former sounds smoother, yet it's a bit veiled. I still prefer the original. As it's Tears for Fears' biggest-selling record, you can get a clean one for about six bucks if you look hard.



# Crosby, Stills and Nash

In 1977, CSN was ubiquitous, almost always accompanied by Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours* and *Hotel California* in everyone's record crate. Call it the Charles Barkley of AOR rock: If not for those other two records, CSN may just have been the monster album of the year, featuring a level of songwriting, focus, and attention to detail that would escape the group going forward.

Fans can rejoice anew. HD Tracks has thoroughly resurrected this classic. The company's version easily eclipses the original LP and dreadful 1995 CD remaster, both highly compressed. At higher volume levels, a little tape hiss comes through, but at a much lower level than the original; it's now anemic in comparison.

Of course, the congestion-free download means that Crosby, Stills and Nash's signature harmonies shine. The next biggest change for the better arrives via the massive bottom end; by comparison, the original seems rolled-off for AM airplay. Throughout, there is vast space, with a three-dimensional feel fully realized. You'll be looking for the surround-sound speakers. Vocal harmonies are distinct and feel considerably larger than life—a testament to the studio craftsmanship of the late 70s.

Lastly, every track is dynamic, with drums leaping from the speakers. Plus, the initial piano attacks explode. It only makes one wonder why HD Tracks didn't go all the way and release the album as a 24/192 download. It's obvious that the master is in excellent shape.

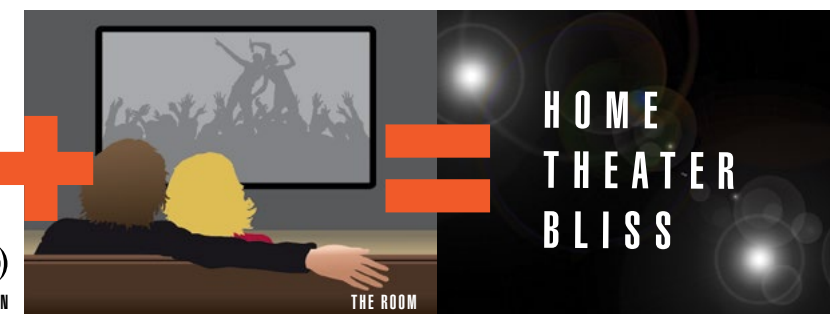


**Crosby, Stills and Nash**  
CSN  
HD Tracks 24/96 download

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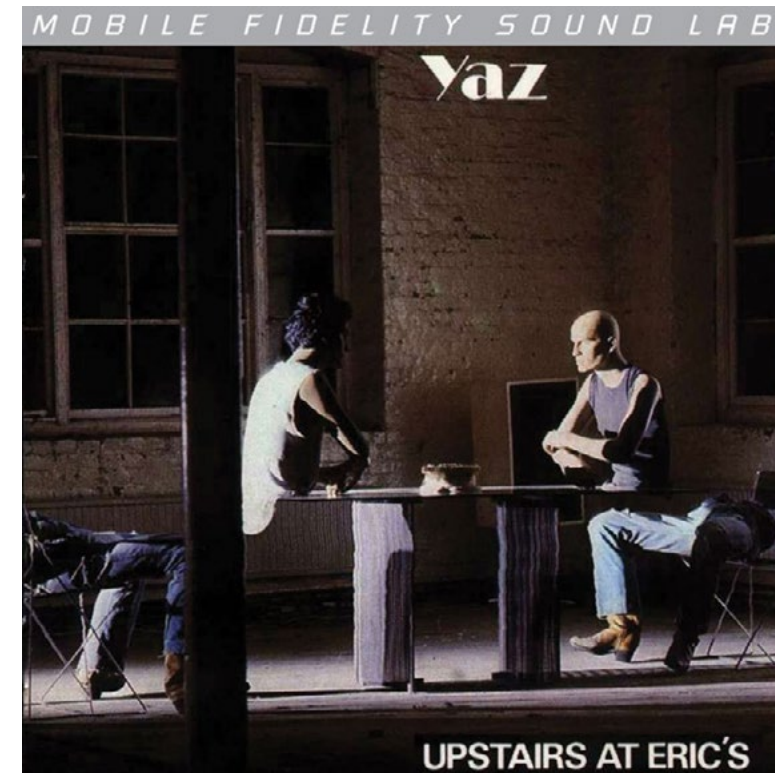
## YAZ

It was tough to turn on MTV in the fall of 1982 for more than 20 minutes and not see the video for Yaz's "Don't Go." The shoulder pads were big, with big hair to match, and Brit synthpop ruled the airwaves. Yaz members Alison Moyet and Vince Clarke would go their separate ways a year later, but they were two of the major architects of a sound that would influence many others.

Guilty pleasures confessed, an original copy of this record still lurks in my record collection, and the Mobile Fidelity reissue is superior in every way. First released on Mute Records, the original is downright harsh and trebly. What would you expect from a bunch of keyboards and drum machines?

The MoFi crew does an excellent job at giving this dancefloor classic a bit of air and extension, as well as an actual soundstage, spread across the speakers with much more substantial bass energy that matches the dynamics of the group's 45RPM maxi-singles. (Yeah, guilty again). These characteristics are particularly evident on "I Before E, Except After C," on which Moyet's bubbly giggling fills the room with presence. It's anemic on the original pressing.

Most importantly, we tip our hats to Mobile Fidelity for continuing to release fun records. If this era was part of the soundtrack of your life, this one's a must. ●

**Yaz**

*Upstairs at Eric's*  
Mobile Fidelity Silver Series, LP



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## The Sound of Music ... Everywhere

# Sonos Play:3

By Ben Fong-Torres

I love music and make my living off of that love, in print and on the air. But when it comes to audio quality, I'm tuned out. In the family room, I'm just fine with Boston Acoustic A60s in the bookshelves above the stereo—just two of them. 5.1 is 3.1 more than we need. And in my office, I make do with a pair of Bose Companions. Beyond what I hear from the computer, all I need, for both fun and work (my radio column in the San Francisco Chronicle) are my Delphi satellite tuner, a Logitech Internet tuner, and a Radiosophy HD, which serves as my AM/FM radio.

Back upstairs, Dianne and I did opt for speakers in the kitchen ceiling and in the living room—just a pair of smaller Bostons flanking a raised fireplace. But bedrooms, bathrooms and other areas had to make do with radios—or nothing at all. It wasn't exactly the sounds of silence, but close.

And that was fine by us. We don't need our iTunes and CD library wherever we go. So, when Thomas Meyer and Eric Nielsen, who work at Sonos, came calling, offering to let me try out a Play:3 system, I put them off. Sure, it sounded enticing: a wireless system "to bring almost all the music you could ever want - from every corner of the planet - to every room of your home," as Meyer put it. But I thought it'd be a headache setting up an around-the-house system. Nielsen assured me that it'd be painless. I hemmed and hawed some more (I'm on deadline for a book on Little Feat), and finally agreed to check it out for a possible item in my radio column.

I have, and here's the item. It's not a review—I'm hardly qualified to evaluate audio equipment—but a report on what it's like to expand the sound of music to...everywhere.



It's not all about high-end audio. It's about being able to hear just about anything you might want, whenever and wherever you want.

Back in the day—which is to say, when I was much younger—when I wanted to hear the radio or hi fi in different rooms around the house, I had to wire up speakers in each room—or, in fact, hire someone to do it for me. If I paid extra, I could get separate volume controls for each pair of speakers. Otherwise, the amp or tuner controlled everything. Now, of course, everything's wireless, and it can be as cheap as a Windows Media Player sending programming to computer speakers around the house—or as sophisticated as a Bose, Lync or Crestron whole-house system, running from \$2,000 to \$5,000 and up – way up.

Sitting comfortably below those numbers is the Sonos Play:3, which, basically, sends audio from online sources (Pandora, Stitcher, Spotify, Rhapsody, etc.), including thousands of Internet radio stations around the world, to wherever you place the Play:3, a speaker containing a pair of drivers and a tweeter. As a controller for what music goes to which room, you can use your smartphone, iPad or computer. An optional “Connect” device links Sonos to your sound system, so your original speakers don't go to waste. (Sonos has also introduced the “Sub,” which the company says boosts audio to super-sonic levels.)

Not being an audiophile, I don't know about that. And, not being handy, I'm not in sync with the many reviewers who've lauded Sonos' easy set-up. But, with help from my tech guy, Kevin Miller, I got my Play:3 system running. As it played, Miller exclaimed, “This is the kind of thing you used to have to pay \$6,000 for.”

So, what do you have to pay these days? About \$350 for the Play:3 and a bridge to connect to a router. Add \$100 for a heftier Play:5 speaker, and \$350 for “Connect.” Sonos has lots of options. It's best you go to its site (sonos.com). I'm here to say that for radio fans who want both terrestrial and Internet radio, plus their own music collection, to be available beyond where the computer or stereo system is, this is pretty cool. I especially enjoyed exploring TuneIn Radio and its instant access to some 60,000 stations around the world, from local faves to, say, a classical station in Greenland. (“Klassisk.”)

I'm on the great New Orleans station, WWOZ, right now, enjoying “The Kitchen Sink” and a segue from Taj Mahal to Kris Kristofferson. Upstairs, we have a San Salvador station (Laser Ingles) playing American hits. I can go to Sirius/XM and, later, my Little Feat channel on Pandora, or dig up any of 15 million tunes from MOG or RDIO, or a rare live cut on Wolfgang's Vault. I can play a radio aircheck I have stashed on iTunes. With the brand new DAR.fm app, I can record any of thousands of AM/FM (and BBC) shows and play them back on demand. And on Songza, I can find channels to match any mood or activity. Crazy.

Through an audio input in “Connect,” you can even transmit music from your CD player, turntable or new-fangled digital music player to the Play:3. And it all sounds good. As an actual audio authority, Terrence O'Brien of engadget, noted, “The Play:3 is more than adequate for casual listening. It's clear, loud, and punchy enough to start up a small dance party if need be.”

Even without guests bouncing around a parquet floor, you'll appreciate Sonos. It's not all about high-end audio. It's about being able to hear just about anything you might want, whenever and wherever you want. When Thomas Meyer, at

Sonos, first invited me to check out a system, he claimed that “our customers listen to twice as much music after they buy, and are borderline fanatical about their experience.” That didn't sound right to me, but time with Sonos has proven him right. I'm well over the borderline. And it's a good place to be. ●

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





# BDI Nora 8239

## Modern Cabinet Design

By Kevin Gallucci



We have all seen the media stands that Wal-Mart, IKEA and Target have to offer. Sometimes they don't look terrible, but they certainly aren't made to last. In fact, most of them will start drooping after a few years, because they weren't designed to bear heavy loads. I wish I had a picture of the stand I bought for my plasma TV in the early 2000s—it looked like a banana with a TV balanced on it. Like most people, I believe in getting bang for my buck, so I tend to find myself looking at furniture like Ethan Allen, Pottery Barn and Restoration Hardware. These companies make some decent-looking media stands, but they simply weren't designed to work with a living room that is based around technology.



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



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**TONE STYLE**



BDI is a contemporary-furniture designer whose products merge form and function. One of its newest creations, the Nora 8239 home-theater stand and cabinet, goes well beyond anything you'll find at Wall-Mart or Pottery Barn, with material options that include natural walnut, black gloss and white gloss. For the Nora, BDI uses a “bookmatch” technique, which means that its individual pieces are made from the same cut of wood, so that the wood grains match. The Nora can support a lot of weight: The top surface holds as much as 200 pounds, while each shelf holds anywhere from 50 to 75 pounds.

The glass doors on the front of the Nora do a great job of concealing internal components (if you're so inclined to do such a thing) and the swinging etched-glass doors close softly to keep you from accidentally slamming

them. If you're like me and live in an old house with slanted floors, you'll love the fact that this stand has integrated levelers. For audio junkies, you will really appreciate that this stand is also well ventilated, with slots that allow air to flow through the stand, which helps keep components cool. It also has hidden wheels that make it a breeze to move.

The Nora easily accommodates my receiver, Blu-ray player, PlayStation 3, DIRECTV box, power conditioner, center-channel speaker, and integrated amplifier, while keeping them nicely concealed. And if the Nora doesn't suit your specific needs, BDI offers a wide variety of home-theater stands and cabinets, as well as plenty of modular solutions, plus tables, chairs, bookshelves and more.

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





## Solidsteel WS-5 Turntable Shelf

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**W**hether you are having issues with a wiggly floor or would like to accommodate another turntable in your listening room, the Solidsteel WS-5 is a great way to get the job done. Its 19.5 x 16.25 inch shelf will work with all but the most humugous turntables and it has a claimed weight capacity of 130 pounds. Remember to try and get at least one solid bolt into a wall stud and use heavy duty (100 pound) anchors on the other two. Allen screws combined with tiny cones under the shelf allow for fine tuning shelf height so that your table is perfectly level.

# A m a d i s

Every company has a story to tell about its beginnings, a rationale for existing in the ever-more-crowded space we call high-end audio. Yet so relatively few can lay claim to building endearing products that stand the test of time.

In its humble beginnings nearly 20 years ago, Verity Audio cleverly defined its reason for existence through the choice of name for its very first product: Parsifal. As Wagner's Parsifal sought and defended the mythical Holy Grail, Verity's Parsifal has inspired and delighted thousands and has pushed its designers in pursuit of our Holy Grail: **musical truth**.

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TONE STYLE

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## Sieveking Omega Headphone Stand

\$179

**P**erhaps the world's most beautiful headphone stand is also the most expensive. But for those of you with primo phones, what better way to show them off on the Omega stands? Available in five colors from fairly dark, to the light maple featured here, this stand is slightly smaller than the average head, so that very little pressure is put on the headband assembly. We haven't found a set of phones that don't look great on the Omega stand, and they also feature a soft flannel pouch that will cover both the stand and phones to avoid dust buildup. But what's the point of that?

# PASS

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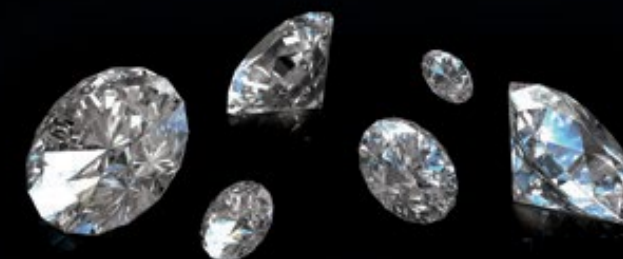
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# TheWino

By Monique Meadows

This was a summer filled with spectacular wines: bright whites brimming with citrus, mineral and tropical fruits to go with seafood, or Malbecs and red blends to go with barbecued meats, or even Rosés on a summer afternoon. But just when you think the weather couldn't get any more seductive than it often is on a summer evening, autumn moves in.

The first tinge of wood smoke weaves through the air and the light changes, as do thoughts of deeper wines, and the scents and flavors that come with them. I could spend hours enjoying just the nose of such wines before even tasting what waits within the glass. These can exhibit a wide range of scents, including plum, dark cherry, blackberry, pepper, earth, leather, smoke, bacon or maple. Of course, no discussion of wine can be far from thoughts of culinary whim, especially in the fall, when soups, stews, roasted meats and root vegetables take center stage.

One of my favorite customer moments last fall happened when three men in their late twenties walked into my shop towards the end of the day. While perhaps a bit suspicious looking compared to my usual customers—with unshaven faces, dusty boots, river shirts, cargo pants and flannel—they nonetheless appeared quite focused on the task at hand. Were they true wine patrons or three guys with a truck full of ammo and an escape plan? My mind raced for a split second before they introduced themselves as two chefs and a friend returning from a grueling daylong hike. Their next quest was to find a bottle of Côtes du Rhône to accompany a Boeuf Bourguignon.

As you may find yourself in similar wining-and-dining situations this fall, I've selected four wines—from France, Italy, California and Spain, all price at \$20 or less per bottle—that pair well with all that defines this time of year.





# 2011 Domaine de L'Harmas Côtes du Rhône

Southern Rhône Valley, France \$15

When I think fall wines, I think bistro wines from France's Rhône Valley, which gets its name from the famous river that winds from the Swiss Alps to Southern France. The region is home to such lauded appellations as Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Gigondas and Vacqueyras, where varietals including Syrah, Grenache, Mourvedre, Cinsault and Carignan truly shine. Domaine L'Harmas is a small family operation run by Patrik and Nathalie Fabre in northern Châteauneuf, near Beaucastel. This lovely Côtes du Rhône, which is second only to Châteauneuf-du-Pape, is a blend of old-vine Grenache and Syrah and hails from a single vineyard. The wine is aged in oak for a year or more, while the average age of the vines is about 50 years. Ned Swain, representing Domaine L'Harmas in Maine, described the wine's 2005 vintage so well. "This is a complex wine with smoke, black pepper, autumn leaves, roasted meat, leather, and cherry and cranberry fruit," he notes. "Mature tannins round out this approachable wine that's really worthy of the moniker 'baby Châteauneuf-du-Pape.'"



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2009 Zaccagnini

# Il Vino Dal Tralcetto

Montepulciano d'Abruzzo, Italy \$18

Before you even open the bottle and taste this pure Italian gem, the bottle's packaging will captivate you. With a hand-lettered label and twine wrapped around the bottle, the design itself commands attention on the shelf and at the table. This offering is from the mountains of Italy's Abruzzo region, and made from the Montepulciano grape. Proprietor Marcello Zaccagnini and winemaker Concezio Marulli create a Montepulciano d'Abruzzo a step above others—and do so at a fantastic price. Aromas of vibrant plum and blackberry lead to ripe berry, with touches of leather, herb and spice on the palate. Try this Italian red with pasta with sausage or roast lamb.



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## 2008 Terre Rouge Tête-à-Tête

Sierra Foothills, California \$17

W inemaker Bill Easton earned his the nickname. “The Rhône Ranger,” as he’s called, works magic with Rhône varietals in California’s Sierra Foothills, such that he’s considered a pioneer at turning French grapes in California wine—hence the Terre Rouge winery’s motto: “Where the Rhône Valley meets the Sierra Nevada.” The name Terre Rouge (or Red Earth) is a nod to the vermillion-colored soil of the Sierra Foothills region. Tête-à-Tête is a very alluring blend of Mediterranean varietals: Syrah, Mourvèdre and Grenache. It drinks similarly to wines from French appellation Côtes-du-Rhône Villages, with beautiful depth of flavor and texture. The blend is aged for 16 months in French-oak barrels and displays notes of rich fruit, nicely balanced oak, as well as spicy meats and smoke. Bill Easton puts his family name on the winery’s non-Rhône varietals wines, such as the Easton Amador County Zinfandel, which is one of the more elegant Zinfandels on the market.

TONE STYLE





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## 2008 Celler Malondro Besllum

Montsant, Spain \$18

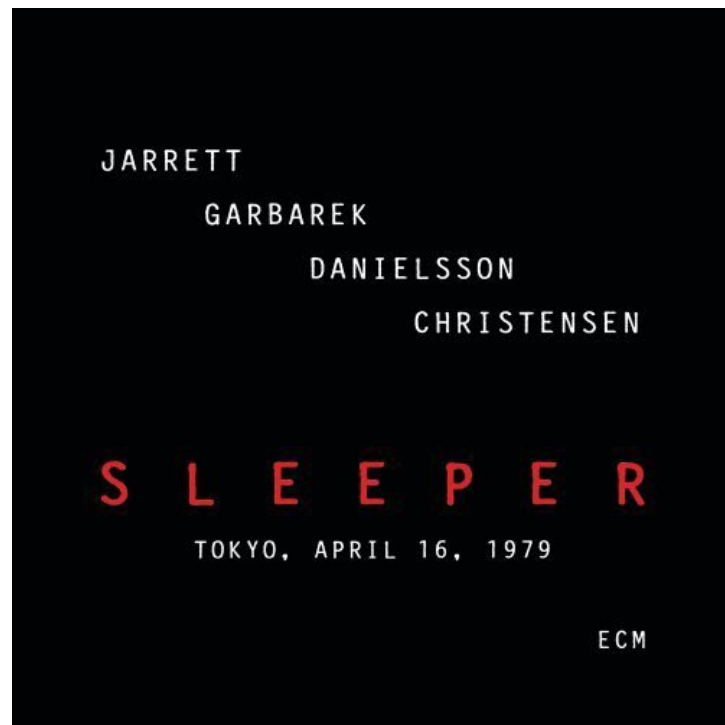
Cellar Molandro is a small bodega located in Cornudella del Montsant, the highest village in the appellation of Montsant, which is located in northeastern Spain. Joan Carles Estivill is the third-generation member of his family tending to the family's vineyards. Estivill's winemaker is young Ramon Valls. The wine, named Besllum, which loosely translates to "a ray of bright light coming through a small opening in a dark background," is a blend of Grenache and Carignan grapes, with a small amount of Syrah. It is aged in new French-Allier-oak barrels for 16 months. The wine garnered a 93-point score from Robert Parker's *Wine Advocate*. The publication's Jay Miller describes Besllum as having "an alluring bouquet of wood smoke, exotic spices, incense, lavender, blueberry and black cherry. In the glass," he says, "it displays opulence, loads of sweet fruit, and outstanding volume." I would call that a glass of autumn. ●





# Jazz & Blues

By Jim Macnie



## Keith Jarrett

*Sleeper*  
ECM, 2CD



©Photo by Terje Mosnes

## Keith Jarrett

**K**eith Jarrett's so-called American quartet—meaning the ensemble of bassist Charlie Haden, drummer Paul Motian, and saxophonist Dewey Redman led by the esteemed pianist during the early-mid 70s—has never lacked for accolades. But of late, musicians and critics alike have intently heralded its work. Rightfully so: The foursome's vitality is unique, boasting lyricism, agility, and a particularly earthy quality marked by Redman's natural gruffness.

In comparison, the pianist's European quartet of saxophonist Jan Garbarek, bassist Palle Danielsson, and drummer Jon Christensen feels a bit more prim. Overlapping in activity by several years, the bands have similar designs but different approaches. Everything seems comparatively reserved on luminous titles such as Euro 4's *Belonging* and *My Song*. *Sleeper*, a double-disc live affair fresh from the ECM vaults, eradicates that "prim" designation, and proves the band is closer to its rambunctious American cousins than conventional wisdom has had us believe.

Recorded during the same live 1979 date as the previously issued *Personal Mountains*, this new album is a cleverly contoured ride that suggests the rhythm sections of both outfits are of equal clout, supplying their colleagues with non-stop ardor that nudges Jarrett and Garbarek to unexpected levels of frenzy.

Maybe "frenzy" is too strong a term, but even in its quiet moments, *Sleeper* is rife with exuberance. Christensen's kinetic pummel, the leader's percussive trills, Garbarek's fierce attack—the album's signature trait is momentum,

and the vivid audio mix makes the action that much more animated. It's one of those dates where you agree with Jarrett's occasional "ohhhhhhh" interjections because you can definitely hear the fervor he celebrates.

Putting interplay front and center while delivering a parade of delectable melodies, *Sleeper* is a marvel of commotion. And given the title of the sideways funk opus that is "Chant Of The Soil," yes, it might be just as earthy as some of the discs made by Jarrett's U.S. team.





**Dave King**  
*I've Been Ringing You*  
 Sunnyside, CD

## Dave King

Piano trio fans that spent any time with last spring's superb *Sunrise*, by Masabumi Kikuchi, probably like to be wooed by music with a sense of mystery. One of the record's many attractions stem from the unpredictable nature of the band's lines. A steady stream of soft curlicues and bobbing pulses unite, and the slightest of gestures serves as a "solo." The aging Japanese pianist is a master of nuance, and *Sunrise* is as subtle as it was seductive.

Now, the autumn has a disc to bookend Kikuchi's triumph. Dave King plays drums for The Bad Plus, and in doing so, tasks himself to drive the popular jazz piano trio's often-aggressive pieces. The Bad Plus adores dramatic flourish, and one of King's strongest suits is the judicious aggression he brings to performances. He is a momentum machine.

(continued)

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MUSIC

But *I've Been Ringing You*, made with pianist Bill Carrothers and bassist Billy Peterson, takes the opposite tack. It's a program of sketches. The music inches along in a rather abstract manner, and glows with demure radiance that becomes more and more attractive with each listen.

The tunes are standard fare, yet this exercise in trad repertory is imbued with a sly strategy of making the melodies feel as if they're constantly dissolving. You're able to hum along with Cole Porter's "So In Love" even as its theme consistently flickers in and out of earshot. The essence of "Summer Serenade" is there to be absorbed, but it gets an African vibe that prioritizes the heartbeat designs of King's tom-tom thwacks. Along the way, silence becomes paramount.

Carrothers is unafraid of letting a note linger or allowing negative space to act in his behalf. Peterson's slippery lines provide an ever-shifting bottom that boasts a poetic touch. His sense of description relies on the power of hinting at things. And then there's King himself.

Like a cagey combo of Keith Moon and Paul Motian, the drummer steadily tickles his instrument with subdued finesse. This trio's approach is built on poise and implication, and as "This Nearly Was Mine" drifts by, the essence of the band's approach crystallizes. King's decision to offer the slightest of taps on his cymbals becomes a sage choice that speaks volumes.



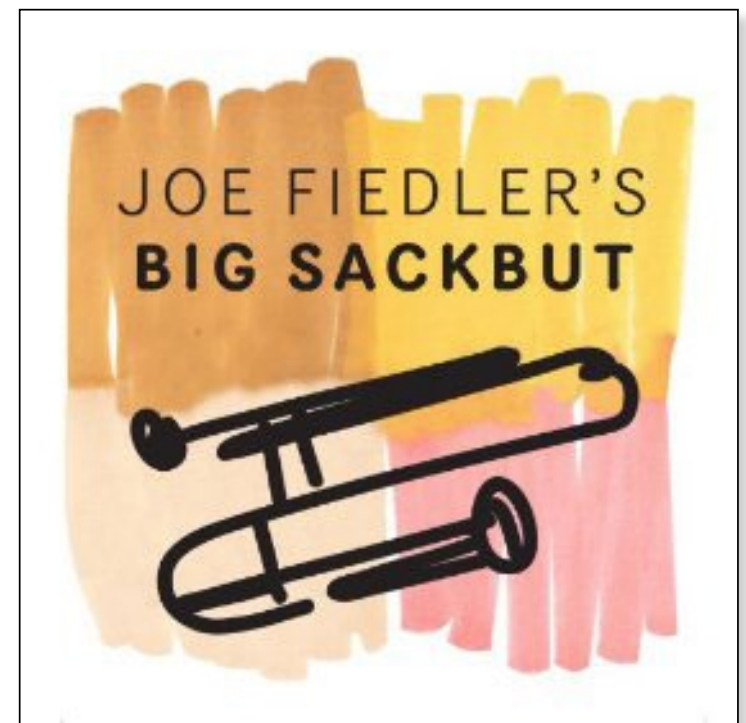


spent a good chunk of the summer reveling in the rollick of Ray Anderson's Pocket Brass Band. The virtuoso trombonist helms a four-piece outfit that adds sousaphone, trumpet, and drums to his own horn, and on *Sweet Chicago Suite*, it gets raucous with some simple structures. There's plenty of New Orleans in the music; the chatter of polyphony spends a good time in the sun. Brass ensembles can really smack you around when they hit the red zone.

They can also stroke you a bit. Joe Fiedler's Sackbut is a brass-only group that blends three trombones and a tuba. The ensemble's debut contains sufficient oomph, but rather than go for the Crescent City parade vibe, it puts harmony and swoop upfront. With slide maestros Josh Roseman and Ryan Keberle uniting with bottom man Marcus Rojas, the whirl of sound is reminiscent of the World Saxophone Quartet's *Revue* rather than the Dirty Dozen Brass Band's sublime stomp.



©Photo by Rob Cardillo



### Joe Fiedler's Big Sackbut

*Joe Fiedler's Big Sackbut*  
Yellow Sound, CD

This makes the program a bit meatier. There's syncopation in "The Crab," and blues motifs occasionally arise. Nonetheless, from the opening section of "Don Pullen" to the eerie glide of Sun Ra's "A Call For All Demons," Fiedler make a case for smooth alignment rather than R&B shouting.

A stalwart of the NYC salsa scene, the leader is capable of virtuosic maneuvers. On the new disc, a graceful percolation defines one of Fiedler's favorite tunes from the aforementioned scene, Willie Colon's "Calle Luna, Calle Sol." Rojas keeps the band bouncing and his partners go on a perpetual romp. Previous trio albums like *Sacred Chrome Orb* underscore Fiedler's agility and chops, and both are displayed here. Moves on "Mixed Bag" and "Blabber And Smoke" are thoroughly impressive. But, ultimately, coordination sits highest on Fiedler's agenda. Most of Sackbut's action feels like a blend, not a battle.



# TERJE RYPDAL ODYSSEY IN STUDIO & IN CONCERT

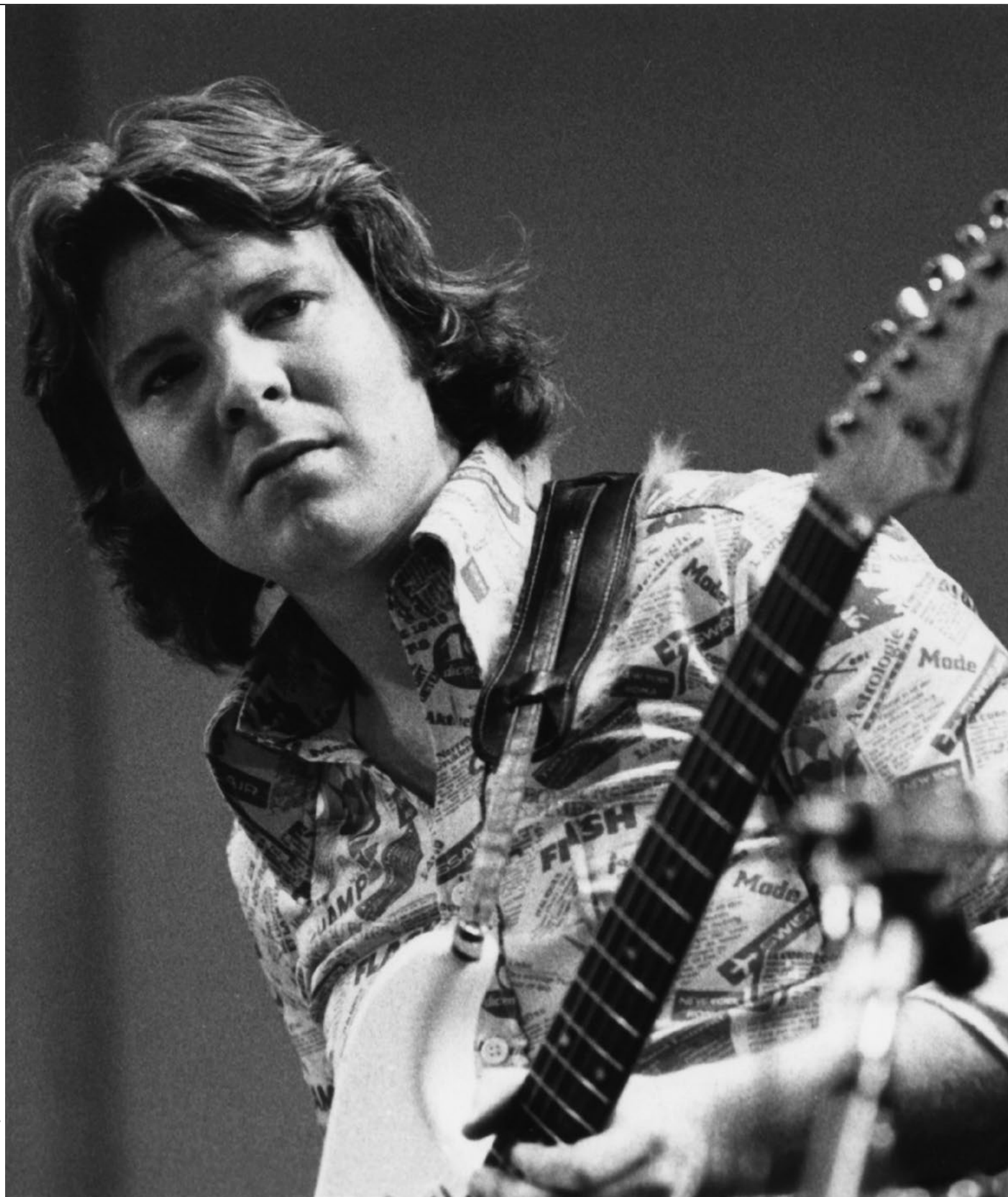
ECM

## Terje Rypdal

*Odyssey In Studio & In Concert*  
ECM, 3CD box set

have vivid memories of being frustrated by Terje Rypdal's early ECM work when it was first released in the 1970s. The Norwegian guitarist's use of extended pieces is alluring, and the textures he utilizes to populate such canvases are culled from provocative forebears like Jimi Hendrix, Larry Coryell, and John McLaughlin.

©Photo by Roberto Masotti



But there was something histrionic about Rypdal's approach. Records such as *What Comes After* and *Odyssey* had an orchestral scale often filled with the perpetual wail of the leader's instrument. In his liner notes to this new three-disc collection of work by the guitarist's Odyssey band, John Kelman calls Rypdal's tone "ice-edged." True enough. Both bleak and exultant, pieces like "Adagio" are spacey micro-symphonies that are as chilly as they are unique. In the early days, I was on the fence about how emotionally compelling I found it all.

The arrival of this box re-piqued my interest and, 35 years on, Rypdal's music speaks to me with more heart than I first recognized. Enclosed is the full double album of *Odyssey*, with the initially un-included and subsequently rarified track "Rolling Stone," which lives up its legendary status by forging a slippery union between Miles Davis' homages to Duke Ellington ("He Love Him Madly") and Jack Johnson ("Yesternow"). The long tones of that guitar wail I mention above are indeed red-blooded; it's rather unmistakable when you hear all these tracks together. Coming after the trombone musings of Torbjorn Sunde on "Ballade," Rypdal's fierce pining is gripping stuff.

So are the seven pieces that comprise the *Unfinished Highballs* disc that rounds out this release. It's the Odyssey quartet in cahoots with the Swedish Radio Jazz Group, a 15-piece orchestra that provides Rypdal with a chance to truly test his composing/arranging chops. Recorded in '76 and released here for the first time, it's an engaging session that incorporates notions from the work of Bernard Herrmann, Gil Evans, and George Russell (one of the guitarist's first employers). The swirl of "Scarlet Mistress" is where Rypdal hits his peak, that howl of his taking on a good deal of élan, and wisely sharing the turf with some truly colorful backdrops. ●



# OPERA'S SECONDA

By Jerold O'Brien

**F**or those of you unfamiliar with Opera Loudspeakers, let us enlighten you. Opera is the “other guy” making high-quality speakers in Italy. The Seconda is the middle model in the company’s Classica line of reasonably priced speakers. Compared to \$4,995 for Opera’s Callas speakers and \$9,995 for its Grand Callas—and considering the quality of the Seconda speakers—\$3,995 is indeed a reasonable price to pay for this level of quality.

The Classica line features a leatherette covering rather than the real thing to help shave a few bucks off the price point. Opera, like a number of luxury carmakers, is able to pull this off so tastefully that the fit and finish will fool all but the fussiest connoisseur. Our review pair of Secondas arrived finished in a striking high-gloss white lacquer, which is becoming increasingly popular in Europe and making a comeback here in the U.S. The sides are made from real wood, with the front and rear baffles, MDF.



FEATURE

These speakers are no lightweights: They tip the scales at an even 100 pounds apiece. They offer nicely finished binding posts that allow for easy bi-wiring, and the company provides spikes for the bottom front of the speaker, as well as a spiked outrigger arrangement at the bottom rear to add stability and make it easier to set the rake angle.

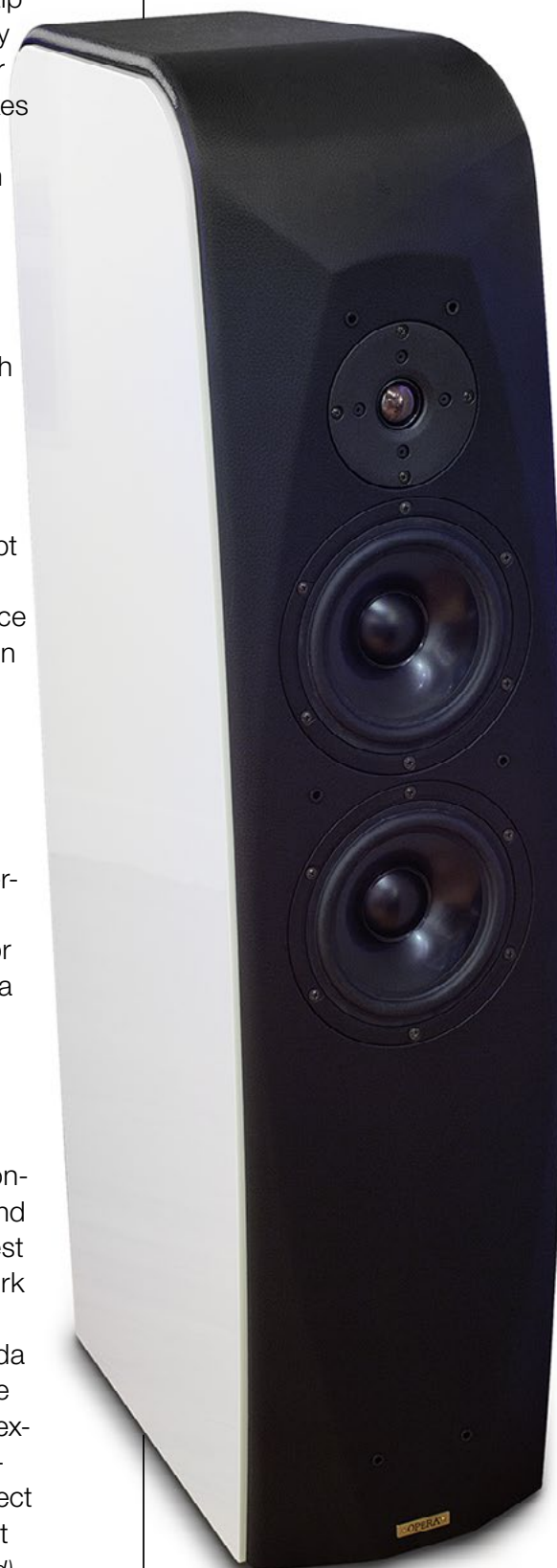
**An Unconventional Approach**

Two 7-inch aluminum cone woofers and a 1-inch silk dome tweeter sourced from Scan-Speak lurk behind the black grilles, which are easily removed. If you have no prying paws around, I suggest enjoying the beauty of the Secondas sans grille. While most competing products opt for a ported design, the Seconda has a sealed enclosure, which makes for a gentler impedance curve—a definite plus when used in conjunction with a tube amplifier. (Opera's sister company, Unison Research, just so happens to excel at producing tube amplifiers.)

The crossover point of the Seconda is a commendably low 2,200 Hz, with a second-order slope. It also maintains good off-axis performance and high overall levels of coherence. Eschewing the ubiquitous curved side panel for a baffle that is curved and angled, the Seconda minimizes unwanted cabinet reflections, which helps lessen interference with the front baffle.

**Wait For It**

Slightly tight and bright out of the box, the Seconda reveals its charms after about 200 hours—and the effort is well worth the wait. I would suggest letting them play every day when you go to work and, after a week, you will be rewarded with a pleasant surprise. Once broken in, the Seconda exhibits a clear, open and lively character in the midrange, with a high-frequency range that is extended and smooth at the same time. Those familiar with traditional Italian speakers might expect a kind of laid-back and mellow presentation, but this is not the case with the Seconda. *(continued)*



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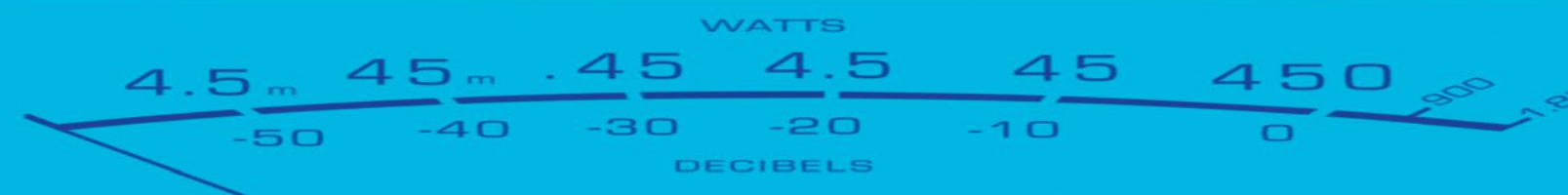
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## FEATURE

The sealed-box design yields a very even, gradual and protracted bass response, free from the usual impedance hiccup that can plague the tuning frequency of a standard vented enclosure. This proves to be a wonderful counterbalance to the high-frequency extension of the tweeter. The dual aluminum midrange drivers offer quick responses, which helps eliminate any inclination of a slow or bloated low end.

Everything about this speaker's design bodes well for the music lover. It possesses a sensitivity of 89 dB and a 4-ohm nominal impedance, which means you only really need 35 to 50 watts of juice to adequately drive each channel. Pairing the Secondas with the Unison Research S6 integrated amp borrowed from our publisher for this review made for an excellent combination that was the definition of musicality. I equally enjoyed the speakers when driving them with 100 watts per channel of solid-state power from my Class A Coda amplifier.

### At Ease with Any Material

Dynamic classic-rock titles like *Led Zeppelin II*, Taste's recently remastered *On the Boards* and Jefferson Airplane's *Bless Its Pointed Little Head* all favored the big solid-state sound, especially at high volumes. The speaker's sealed cabinets yield a visceral presentation: Drums come alive and the electric bass has a convincing wallop, with no loss of texture.



But the Seconda isn't only about getting down with classic rock. Teeing up some great CD recordings from the recent past tells a lot about this speaker's ability to accurately portray large classical ensembles and intimate jazz groups in realistic scale.

During a listening session of drummer Peter Erskine's jazz trio on *Live At Rocco*, the Seconda captures the wide-open ambience of the venue. You can easily discern all of the audience noises, such as clinking glasses and soft whispers. Soft brush strokes on cymbals have the appropriate shimmer and decay, while the upright bass's sinewy plucked strings resonate with strength. Another great live recording, *Tonic* from Medeski, Martin & Wood, treats the listener to that same wide-open room sound. On the track "Buster Rides Again" Billy Martin hammers away vigorously with his funky timekeeping, which the Secondas put right in the middle of the soundstage.

As for the bass prowess of these speakers, Alberto Iglesias' soundtrack to the film *Todo Sobre Mi Madre*—a beautiful score, full of deep-bass lines—accentuates the Secondas' ability to handle the lowest notes with ease. The score's short track "Le Faltaba la Mitad," a mix of massed strings and haunting bass, feels as if it migrated from a Dead Can Dance album. Here, the Secondas easily keep the pace solid, even at high levels, without distortion or soundtrack collapse. (continued)





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## FEATURE

At the same time, the sparse percussion gently dances throughout the soundfield unaffected—a very impressive feat for speakers at this price point.

Reference Recordings' *Mephisto* & Co. showcases the Minnesota Orchestra in full song. On this recording, the classic Mussorgsky piece "Night on Bald Mountain" perfectly illustrates the ability of these speakers to go instantly from loud to soft. Playing perhaps louder than is prudent, with my Coda amp delivering the goods, the piece builds to crescendo, all the while maintaining the orchestra's three-dimensional space. The Seconda portrays the big stuff faithfully and then backs off beautifully to capture the softer passages featuring flute and piccolo. Reference Recordings' *Symphonic Dances* by Rachmaninoff reveals the speaker's ability to render size and scale, at the same time casting a spotlight on how well the dual 7-inch woofers are able to start and stop without any overhang or fatigue.

Just as I was ready to wind up the review and begin packing the Secondas to send to their next appointment, *Bob Dylan's Greatest Hits* from Audio Fidelity arrived. Again, I was reminded of the wonderful midrange that these speakers offer. Dylan's voice is eerily realistic and squarely in the room on "Blowin' in The Wind," on which I found the decay of both his voice and harp utterly captivating. The speakers also handle male and female vocals with equal ease, so those partaking more of the latter will be equally smitten. A quick spin of Shelby Lynne's *Just A Little Lovin'* (courtesy of the Acoustic Sounds' remaster) is incredibly vibrant and realistic.

I thoroughly enjoyed the time spent with the Opera Secondas. While these may not be the first name on the tip of your tongue when searching for your next pair of speakers, they are worth seeking out and even more worthy of an extended audition. They bring a number of design elements together: a large sealed enclosure, quality drivers, elegant cosmetics and outstanding in-room performance. And, at a relatively affordable \$3,995 a pair, they offer incredible value, ranking highly on the wife-acceptance factor and also delivering great performance for the price. If you're looking for something other than the usual fare, and in the mood for something different, these Italian wonders are certainly worth a listen. ●

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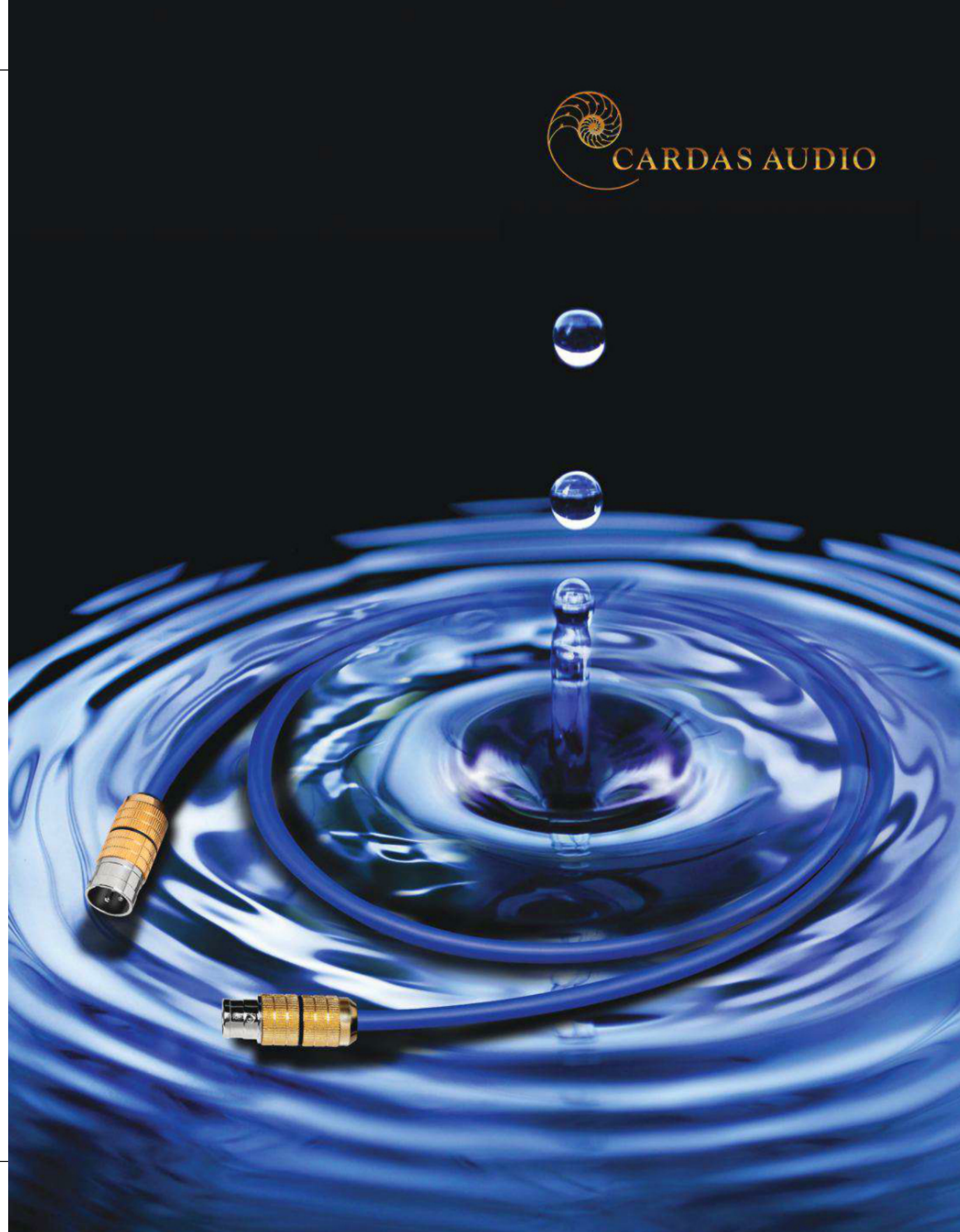




## Kef R-300

\$1,800/pair [www.kef.com](http://www.kef.com)

**W**ith full-line speaker manufacturers, it's often easy to overlook the middle series. Customers on a budget go for the entry level models while the more well-heeled performance seekers tend to go for top of the line gear. In KEF's case that would be a mistake for many buyers seeking big bang for the buck performance. This R-300 is a three-way stand mount model offering a lot more of what one would find in KEF Reference products than could be expected at this \$1,800/pr. price point. There's a whole lot of excellent sound to be had from these rather innocuous looking boxes. Trickle down technology works wonders here folks.







## Magico S5

\$28,600/pair [www.magico.net](http://www.magico.net)

Perhaps the yin to Sonus faber's yang, the Magico S5 is also brilliantly conceived and constructed, yet it's sensuous curves are carved from billet aluminum instead of wood, and covered in bright colors. The S5's design brief has more in common with a Formula 1 race car than a pair of speakers from the golden age of hifi, and the high tech approach pays off in spades.

The design works on every level: the S5s 89 dB sensitivity and ease by which it can be driven (with everything from a 20 watt per channel tube amplifier, to massive solid state monoblocks) makes for a speaker that can handle anything thrown at it musically. Your toughest choice will be what cool color to have Magico put on your pair. Review and interview with Magico's creator, Alon Wolf in process.

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— Michael Fremer, Stereophile, June 2011

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— Erick Lichte, Stereophile, July 2012



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PREVIEW

## Sonus faber Aida

\$125,000/pair

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

[www.sumikoaudio.net](http://www.sumikoaudio.net)

Where high technology, old world craftsmanship and impeccable Italian style intersect, is where you'll find the Sonus faber Aida. A direct descendant of the technology exercise that became "The Sonus faber speaker," (of which only 30 pairs were produced) the Aida is the new flagship of the Sonus faber lineup.

This 3 1/2 way speaker system features its own "Infra Woofer," which takes the LF response down solidly to 20hz and is adjustable to the speakers environment, along with the additional rear-firing midrange and tweeter.

The Aida is shaping up to be the most exciting speaker we have ever reviewed at TONEAudio, and will be gracing our December cover.





# Wadia 121 Decoding Computer

Far Beyond Expectation

By Jeff Dorgay



FEATURE

With a number of stratospherically priced DACs on the market, it's exciting to see DACs priced between \$1,000 and \$1,500 offering so much performance. Reminiscent of the horsepower wars of the 1960s, it seems that every time a new standard of DAC performance is reached the bar is raised even higher. This time, Wadia—a company known for decades for its innovations in the realm of digital audio and, more recently, for its game-changing 170i iPod dock—delivers world-class sound at a very affordable price tag with its new 121 Decoding Computer.

Much like phonostages, you can purchase an outboard DAC for a couple hundred dollars and it's a great way to embrace computer audio. Outboard DACs can also serve as an upgrade to a budget CD transport. Jumping to the \$500 level brings more musicality and the ability to play high-res files, but going to the next level (the aforementioned \$1,000-to-\$1,500 range) is very exciting and, in the opinion of this reviewer, where the game gets seriously intriguing. Combining a computer source and a great \$1,500 DAC with your choice of high-performance playback software (like Pure Music, Amarra or one of the other current favorites) puts you in close proximity to what would have cost \$10,000 two years ago.

Having used Wadia gear as a personal reference for years, I was excited to hear the company's new S7i digital player during a recent visit to Sumiko's sound room in Berkeley, California. Immersed in the sound of the \$200,000-per-pair "The Sonus faber" speakers and two towers of six REL G-1 subwoofers, driven by

Pass Labs monoblocks, I felt in familiar territory. Yet, when I commented on how great the S7i sounded, I was instantly corrected. "That's the new 121," a Sumiko representative informed me. So, in the context of a major six-figure system, the 121 playing 16-bit/44.1-kHz files via a computer sounded *damn* good.

Imagine an S7i with no disc drawer, shrunk down to Barbie-Dream-House size. That's the 121—in general. It does use an external wall-wart supply, but that's the only place Wadia really scrimped on the design. I'm sure making a super-high-zoot external supply would wring more performance out of the 121, but then it would probably cost twice as much. Expensive power supply or not, the 121 is a serious DAC—or, as Wadia calls it, a digital decoding computer—which quickly becomes apparent when perusing its front and back panels. Rather than work with the same chipsets used in many other DACs, the 121 uses Wadia's patented DigiMaster circuitry to upsample the incoming digital data to a 32-bit, 1.40-MHz bitstream.



All inputs accommodate up to 24-bit/192-kHz data and the USB input is asynchronous.

Wadia also built a headphone amplifier into the 121, with a 1/4-inch jack on the front panel. Running the gamut of headphones at my disposal from Grado, AKG, Sennheiser and Audioze proved enjoyable. The 121 easily passes muster as a first-rate headphone amplifier. It also makes a perfect system for playing music from portable devices when paired with Wadia's 170i or 171i iPod dock. The 121's small footprint makes it an easy fit on a desktop next to your computer or on a nightstand for after hours listening.

But what really separates the 121 from the rest of the comparably priced herd is its 32-bit digital volume control, making this a true digital preamplifier, not just a DAC with an attenuator slapped on the end of the output stage. Wadia includes a full-function remote to complete the package.

The 121 is a perfect example of the dividends reaped when a company building top-shelf products applies its expertise to something at this level. "We incorporated as much functionality as we could into the 121," notes Wadia's John Schaffer. "We didn't want to just put a few DAC chips on the board and slap a Wadia badge on the front."

#### Back at the Mothership

It's tough to argue with the performance heard at Sumiko, as the system was one of the best I've heard, but it's always good to audition gear in familiar surroundings. Plugged into my main reference system, comparing it directly to the Wadia 381i that I've owned for some time now, reveals the difference between the big box and the 121.

While it is unfair to compare the 121 to the \$10K 381i, it's fascinating to witness how much performance Wadia *has* been able to squeeze into this diminutive box, which is the exact same size as the 170i and 171i iPod docks. (continued)



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When listening closely to the finger snaps in Giant Giant Sand's "Ready or Not" (from the *Tucson* album) it is clear that the 381i delivers greater amounts of air and a longer-lasting decay, but the 121 handles the tonality amazingly well, while also presenting a big soundstage. When listening casually to less-than-stellar program material, and not directly in the sweet spot, it's easy to confuse the 121 for something much more expensive.

The 121 validates itself instantly when listening to how it delivers classical or acoustic music. Spinning Itzhak Perlman's *Live in the Fiddler's House* instantly reveals this DAC's ability to convincingly render the violin. You can hear Perlman gently fingering the violin, with way more texture than you would expect at this price point and with ample air and decay. It's easy to forget what you are missing until switching to the 381i. Yet, once switching back from the big-bucks DAC, the 121 continues to satisfy. And this is in the context of a

six-figure system, made up of all Audio Research reference components.

Placing the 121 in a system comprised of appropriately priced components—a PrimaLuna ProLogue Premium integrated amplifier and a pair of Vienna Acoustics Mozart speakers—is the right move. High-resolution digital files via a MacBook Air and Amarra software meet or exceed the musicality delivered by similarly priced turntables on hand.

Blasting through a series of Blue Note XRCDs uncovers the same level of tonality: Drums have the proper amount of attack and the standup bass is weighty as well as defined. Wynton Kelly's piano on Hank Mobley's *Soul Station* floats in between the speakers, defined in its own space. It's not so much the jump between the \$10K DAC and the 121 that's tough to swallow; it's going back to a budget DAC after listening to the 121 that proves there's just no music in the inexpensive stuff—no life, no air, etc. *(continued)*

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### Compare and Contrast

The fairest comparisons for the 121 are the amazing Rega DAC for \$995 and the Benchmark DAC1 USB at \$1,195, especially given that the Benchmark can be used as a preamplifier. It features a volume control (albeit an analog volume control, where the 121's volume control operates in the digital domain) and headphone output. All three DACs can handle 24-bit/192-kHz files. Although neither DAC adds romance or sterility to the sound, the Rega has a slightly warmer, more romantic sound, while the Benchmark is straight-up—it's a great "just the facts, ma'am" kind of DAC.

The 121 is closer to the Benchmark in tonality than the Rega, and each will appeal to a certain listener, but the Wadia's edge is three-fold: It has the widest dynamic range, more low-level-detail retrieval and more weight in the LF spectrum than the other two—again, very similar to my 381i. Having lived with Wadia digital players for many years, I can tell you that the big, dynamic, weighty feel that Wadia DACs produce is easily recognizable—which is also the case with the 121.

In terms of connectivity, the TOSLINK input provided a slightly less-resolving presentation than the others, though it was still impressive and handy, should you have an older CD player that you would like to perk up. A vintage Sony ES player, only having a TOSLINK output, showed a marked improvement via the digital output and the 121. Comparing USB, SPDIF and the AES/EBU connections via 24/192 tracks, courtesy of the Aurender S10 server, revealed no anomalies between connections. This plethora of inputs makes it easy to switch

between a transport, music server and digital files on an iPod/iPhone via a Wadia dock—which makes the 121 perfect for the digital music lover with multiple sources.

### All You Need

As great as the 121 performs in DAC mode, it's the perfect hub for your music system. The DigiMaster volume control is effective and sonically transparent, all the way down to the lowest range. If there was some degradation of the original signal, we weren't hearing it when I assembled the troops for a listening session.

Thanks to TOSLINK, BNC, RCA, AES/EBU and an asynchronous USB input, there are no limitations to what the 121 can use as a source. We achieved excellent results using a Mac mini and MacBook Air, both running the latest version of Amarra; Wadia's own 171i dock with an iPhone 4S; and an old Pioneer CD player as a transport. The only thing keeping the 121 from appealing universally is its lack of a single analog input, which Benchmark incorporated into its highest-end version of the DAC1 PRE. Including a single analog input gives someone wanting to integrate analog into their system the option to use the 121 as a full-function preamplifier. For now, the 121 performs this task perfectly in an all-digital system.

The 121 does have fully balanced analog outputs that handle long cable lengths admirably. The 121 has no problem with a 20-foot length of AVID SCT cable running from the rack to a bevy of awaiting power amplifiers. Even terminating the amplifier end of the cable, with a Cardas balanced-to-RCA adaptor, was no problem. *(continued)*



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We paired the 121 with at least a dozen amplifiers, including tube, solid-state and class-D, and they all work equally well in terms of frequency range and drive. However, this tube-lover favors the 121 with a number of low-power vacuum-tube amplifiers when using it strictly as a preamplifier. Personal bias admitted, a touch of tubeyness goes a long way with digital sources.

Paired with the 121, the updated Conrad-Johnson MV50 tube power amplifier and Dynaudio Confidence C1 II speakers make for a fantastic, all-digital system, with more than enough resolution to easily discern between Red Book and high-resolution digital files, and compare various Amarra settings. The 121 was no slouch driving the mighty Burmester 911 power amplifier directly; though, at this level, I did prefer having an active preamplifier in the signal path. The bottom line: With the 121, we have a \$1,295 DAC that can hang with some pretty expensive company.

This is why we've determined that the Wadia 121 is more than worthy of one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2012. Whether seeking a high performance DAC or a fully functioning digital preamplifier to build your system around, your search is over.

**The Wadia 121**  
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## FEATURE

# M2TECH hiFace Two

Text and Photos by John Darko



## The Scene

A lot can happen in two years in the world of digital audio. Back in early 2010, USB-to-S/PDIF converters for the masses were a bleeding-edge concern. Italy's M2TECH changed all that when it introduced the hiFace, a \$185 digital-audio interface not much larger than a standard USB thumb drive. This nifty little device transforms one's computer into a digital-audio transport by giving users a simple and seamless way to deliver high-resolution music files from their computer to their playback system. With the advent of the original hiFace, M2TECH effectively brought the benefits of USB data clocking out from the cold and into hands of computer audiophiles everywhere.

Since then, the hiFace's existence has been more than justified. The sonic performance of most budget USB DACs doesn't even come close to that of the hiFace, when feeding it a steady S/PDIF diet. A comparison between many models offering a direct USB connection and the hiFace will unmask the direct USB as relatively lifeless and anemic. This is often the reason that newcomers to digital audio complain that their incoming computer rig doesn't compete with their outgoing CD player. We call this jitter: timing errors in the digital data flow that, in this instance, aren't corrected by the USB DAC—sometimes the USB DAC itself is what introduces these timing errors.

A few DAC manufacturers, including Lenehan Audio, Metrum Acoustics, Eastern Electric, have

wised up to the inherent weaknesses of more-vanilla USB receiver chips and are now employing M2TECH's USB technology in their newer models. Meanwhile, the number of USB-to-S/PDIF converters coming to market has expanded considerably in the past two years: Anedio, April Music, Bel Canto, Channel Islands Audio, Halide Design, Human Audio, KingRex, Lindemann, Musical Fidelity, Quad, SotM and Wave-length Audio now all offer models around the \$500 mark. M2TECH itself also offers an Evo version of the hiFace (\$499) that can be tricked out with optional battery PSU (\$499) and master clock (\$499)—but purchasing all three of those units puts you in the financial territory of Empirical Audio's beastly \$1,299 Off-Ramp USB DAC.

The original hiFace's wide user base can likely be attributed to its agreeable retail price. But clocking devices are as important as the DAC itself, particularly at the budget end of the DAC market, where sophisticated jitter-rejection circuits (found at the high-end) are precluded by the manufacturer's intended street price. Adding a \$1,500 USB converter to a \$500 DAC might not make intuitive sense to many people—adding a \$200 device does.

USB-to-S/PDIF converters don't just convert one digital-transfer protocol to another. They seek to better clock the data and thus minimize jitter. Some take an axe to the detrimental effects of EMI/RFI by deploying improved power-supply regulation and galvanic isolation. *(continued)*



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As 2010 tipped over into 2011, I recall the audible improvements brought by the original hiFace as being small: a shade more definition here, a little more soundstage focus there. It wasn't until Ireland's John Kenny infused the hiFace with battery power that this reviewer really sat up and took notice. Exposure to the Audiophileo1 and Audiophileo2 drove the need for a USB converter home, took it inside and made it a nice cup of tea.

Another annoyance with the original hiFace was its need for proprietary drivers, which introduced a small lag into the audio-playback chain that meant video would run slightly out of sync with audio and dialogue running through the hiFace. This was a deal-breaker for some users.

M2TECH has eliminated this issue with the hiFace Two. Based around an XMOS receiver chip, it complies with USB Audio Class 2.0 (UAC2) and therefore works with native-mode USB audio drivers. This allows plug-and-play operation for Windows, OS X and Linux operating systems. (As it's not UAC2-compliant, Windows requires additional drivers to handle anything above 24/96.) Like its predecessor, the new hiFace Two parses data up to 24/192 with each sample rate family—44.1/88.2/176.4 and 48/96/192—which is handled by its own oscillator.

For the hiFace Two, M2TECH has moved the shell cover from white to black, held the recommended retail price at \$185 (dropping the price of the original unit to \$150) and made coaxial and BNC models available.

### The Setup

The thumb-drive sized unit is 10 cm long and suspends somewhat precariously when plugged into a vertically situated USB port on the back of a Mac mini. The connection to a MacBook Air's horizontal USB port allows one's shelf or desk to better support the hiFace Two's 50-gram weight (as well as the additional weight of the coaxial cable). That said, neither host computer dropped audio due to physical conditions. Even the Mac mini held fast during the review period.

### The Sound

Experience has taught me that one of the key signs of jitter minimization is bass propulsion and definition. Tonally, if a straight USB feed into the Audio-gd NFB-2.1 is a watercolor and the Audiophileo is a portrait in oil, the hiFace Two paints somewhere between the two. That's commensurate with its pricing, as it'll run you less than half the cost of the Audiophileo2 (\$579). You get what you pay for and you pay for what you get.

Listening to this new model is reminiscent of spending a week or two with Musical Fidelity's original V-LINK: a small improvement over the USB implementation found in the Peachtree iNova, but not as musically emphatic or engaging as Philip Gruebel's little grey box. The Audiophileo also scores another point over *all* the competition by negating the need for (and expense of) a digital coaxial cable.

Once you accept the halfway-house nature of the hiFace Two solution, the fun begins. Meandering



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through Leonard Cohen's much-underrated 2001 "comeback" album, *Ten New Songs*, a sense of player space is more apparent with the new M2TECH device than without. Better clocking (i.e. less jitter) takes the listener deeper into the music. Even at this less-expensive end of the USB-converter market, improvements can be heard in terms of micro-dynamics and vitality—Cohen's aging croak simply sounds more human.

Switching to something of an edgier '80s mastering job with R.E.M.'s *Green* exposed an over-enthusiastic lower treble in brighter systems. This was easily dialed back, thanks to Hannes Fricke's adjustable tweeter gain on his WLM La Scala floorstanders, but the titanium dome tweeter in a pair of (vintage) Celestion Ditton 11 required a more creative solution.

### The Splitter Cable and the Battery

Elijah Audio's \$105 BPM (battery-powered module) splits the input to any USB device such that data and power are fed independently. The BPM cable nixes the 5-volt host computer feed and only allows the data to reach the piggybacking hiFace. For this review, I hooked the BPM's 20-cm tail into KingRex's rechargeable U Power Li-on battery module (\$189).

Sonically, this amended hiFace setup took the music a step backwards into a pool of warm water, eradicating that lower-treble glare. In the context of digital-audio tweaks, this one rated as substantial—so much so that I had a friend stop by to corroborate my findings. *(continued)*



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He agreed that the BPM/U Power appendage massaged the tense shoulders from VCMG's bleepy *Aftermaths* EP and Depeche Mode's *Violator*.

### The Wrap

Hearing the benefits of adding battery power to the hiFace Two, it's easy to see how John Kenny arrived at doing the same for his all-in-one solution. So, with the cost of these modifications running past the \$400 mark, why wouldn't you just opt for his roughly \$420 JKSPDIF USB-to-S/PDIF battery-powered converter?

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Two reasons: Linux compatibility and audio lag. The former will be of keen interest to Squeezebox Touch users who have installed the Enhanced Digital Output app, which it turns the USB input on the rear into a digital-audio output. But that's a story for another day...

For the cash-strapped computer audiophile the hiFace Two is a suitably priced intermediary that will wipe away some *jitter* between your PC/Mac and budget DAC. ●

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# The Sound of Silence

Simaudio MOON 810LP  
Dual-Mono Phono Preamplifier

By Jacob Heilbrunn

Some audio components aspire to wow you right out of the box. They deliver thumping bass with frightening ease and highs so crystalline you wonder what details your previous piece of equipment masked.

Initially, this effect can seem transcendent. But sometimes it inspires a nagging doubt about whether the gear truly offers the goods or if it has merely duped you with overemphasized frequency responses or other anomalies that have mysteriously captured your attention, only to become distracting or overbearing in the long run.

Other components impress in a different, subtler way—with a certain quiet authority that doesn't attempt to raise its voice or shout and rant. Such performance is implicit and doesn't require the boisterous pomp and circumstance of equipment that has to slap you in the face in order to get your attention.







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## REVIEW

The Simaudio MOON 810LP Dual-Mono Phono Pre-amplifier falls into the latter camp. It's not just quiet; it's dead silent, even tomb-like. It's also amazingly simple to operate. Just plug in the power cord, push the lone button on the faceplate, adjust a few loading features and you're ready to go in less than five minutes. But that's not the whole story. After all, hi-fi isn't about convenience.

Still, I wasn't really sure what to expect when I received the unit. What would distinguish the MOON 810LP, I wondered? A number of nifty phono stages have passed through my system over the past year, including the Pass Labs XP-25, and each has had its own set

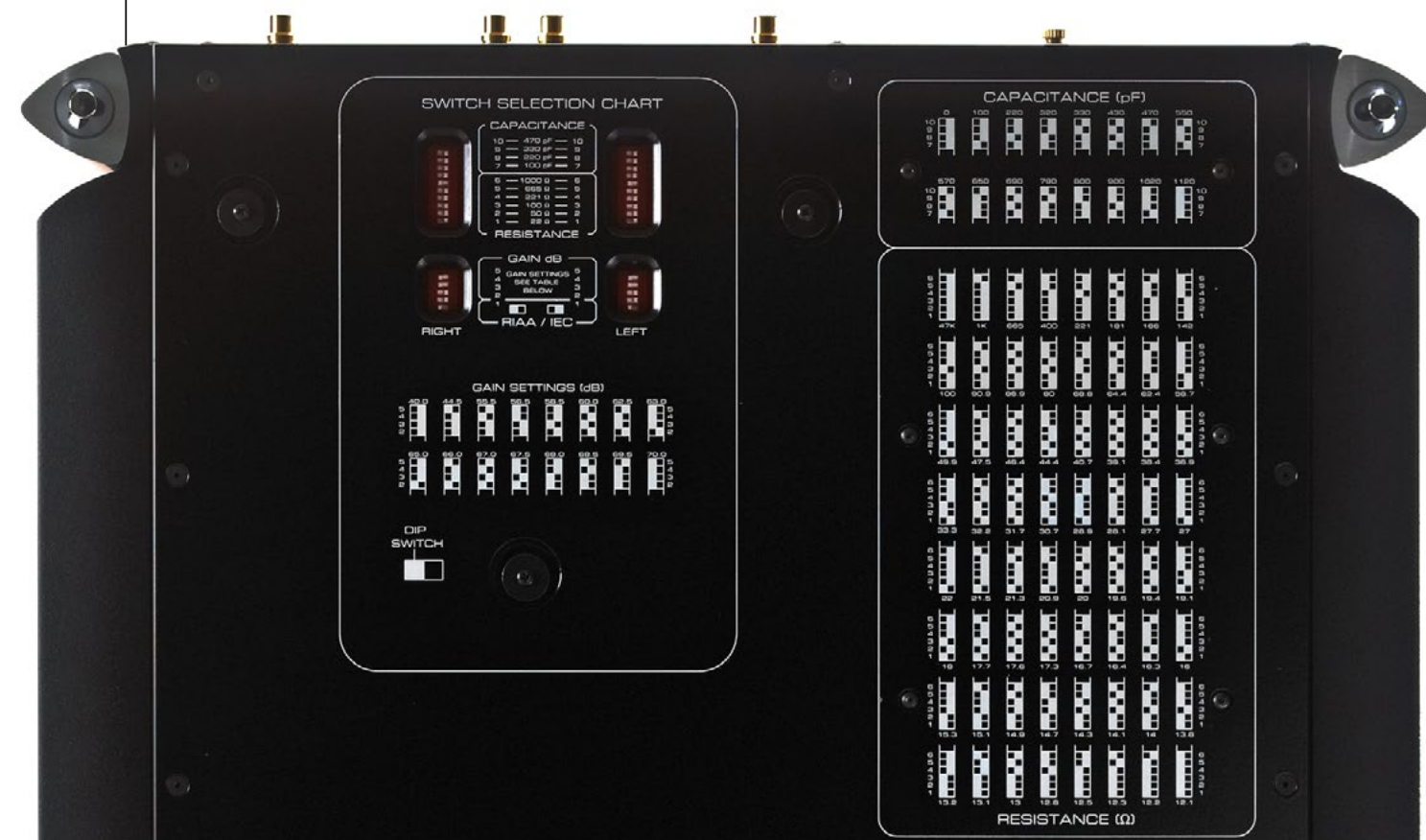
of virtues. But, of the solid-state units I've reviewed, the MOON 810LP possesses an absence of noise that is most enticing.

### Entering the Silent Void

The technical prowess exhibited by Sim with this preamp did not surprise me: The company is on a roll, having produced a series of new products that offer exceptional performance at reasonable prices. Sure, anyone can achieve superior performance by pumping endless R&D dollars and cost-is-no-object componentry into a piece of equipment. But is it really worth it? In the case of the MOON 810LP, Sim has gone to great lengths to create a product that can go head-to-

head with those from the likes of Boulder and other manufacturers producing stratospherically priced solid-state units.

Part of the MOON Evolution series, the 810LP boasts switchable capacitance and impedance load settings, which makes fine-tuning the MM or MC cartridge paired with the unit a bit easier. This preamp also allows users to set the load level at any of 16 steps, from 40 dB up to a whopping 70 dB. Users mandate these settings by flicking the various small switches located underneath the unit. For this review, I used the Lyra Atlas cartridge, so I ended up setting the 810LP's gain at 66 dB, a healthy level by any measure. *(continued)*







The adjustability of these settings, however, is not what accounts for the low noise of the unit, which measures -150 dB at 1 volt of input power, according to Sim. A portion of the 810LP's quiet operation can be attributed to its formidable power supply, which offers some 40,000 uF of capacitance and is located within the main chassis but housed in an isolated enclosure made out of satin-coated 14-gauge steel. Sim mounts the audio circuit board on a five-point gel-based floating suspension. While the phono stage has balanced circuitry, it can also be run single-ended. By and large, balanced operation will run quieter than single-ended, but single-ended sometimes can be perceived as possessing a little more punch.

With some preamps, it takes a little time to figure out their sonic trademarks. There was no such problem with the Sim, once powered up for 24 hours. As soon as the needle is dropped, it becomes quite apparent that the Sim likes to boogie. For example, on the recently issued Acoustic Sounds LP of Shelby Lynne's album *Just A Little Lovin'*, the dynamism and jet-black backgrounds prove overwhelming. Was I stacking the deck a little by choosing this album? Sure. The production values are awesome—a tribute to Chad Kassem's indefatigable zeal to produce the best when it comes to LPs. But the Sim brings a sense of placidity to the table, an unruffled evenness, with each note unhurried, as Lynne's voice trails off into the ether—and the decays seem to reverberate almost endlessly. The brush and cymbal work, too, were pellucid. And I, as a result, was transfixed.

Lest *TONEAudio* readers think

I only spun fancy new pressings for this review, please rest assured that I also listened to an old warhorse: Debussy's "Iberia" captured on a Living Stereo pressing with legendary conductor Fritz Reiner, whose fanatic precision and attention to detail come across beautifully on the LP. Once again, the MOON 810LP stands out. This time I was most impressed with the way the low noise floor exposed the inner detail of the orchestra, which would have been submerged when played through a lesser phonostage.

It was as though the aperture of a camera had been adjusted—suddenly there was new clarity. In a sense, it became easier to listen to the music. The listener needn't exert such effort, as the music was simply present, without struggling to emerge through a faint haze. The fog had lifted, as a dealer put it to me years ago when I was listening to an upgraded Linn LP-12 versus an older version. With the MOON 810LP, there is a lot of fog lifting.

Similarly, on a superb recording of Stephane Grappelli and Barney Kessel from Black Lion Records, the interplay between the violin and guitar is as vivid as I've heard it. The absence of noise helps close the noise-floor gap between CDs and LPs. Say what you want about digital sound—and I think it's nuts to dismiss it—one of its strengths is that there is, essentially, no audible noise during playback, which helps endow the musical reproduction with a true sense of realism. Sure, when you attend a live classical concert, you hear the screeching of chairs, the neighbor next to you reaching for a lozenge, or the snoring of a bored patron—or, at a rock concert, a shouting crowd.

(continued)



But the one thing you don't hear is distortion. When listening to live music, there's no barrier between you and the sound being produced, just air vibrations traveling toward your ear canal. Now that ain't happening in your listening room, no matter how festooned with dampening foam it might be. The whole shebang—power chords, amplifiers and preamplifiers, cables, loudspeakers—amounts to a barrier between you and the real thing. But one of the goals of audio reproduction is to move one step further toward the real thing—to *reproduce* it, if you will—which is what the MOON 810LP does with the utmost simplicity and clarity.

### The Benefits of Being a Little Too Quiet

Now, you may ask, what *doesn't* the MOON 810LP do? A comparison with the Ypsilon VPS 100, a transformer-coupled tube-driven phonostage hailing from Greece, proved instructive. After listening to André Previn's incredibly pristine 1974 recording of *Lieutenant Kijé* on an EMI pressing, I switched the input on my Ypsilon preamplifier to the Sim, which revealed a completely different world. The MOON 810LP acquits itself so admirably that its great strengths are immediately apparent: low noise and a matter-of-fact sense of control. It has a certain clarity that is difficult to surpass. On the other hand, it does not offer as much detail, dynamics or ambience as the much pricier Ypsilon. With the Sim, there simply was not as much air around the instruments, such that the size

of the hall in which the recording was taken seemed to shrink. But the comparison is not really a fair one. With its separate step-up transformer, the Ypsilon clocks in at around \$32,000. And a solid-state preamplifier, almost by definition, is going to have different sonic traits than one filled with vacuum tubes.

Regardless, at its price of \$12,000—which is not inconsiderable, but not at the nosebleed level, either—the Sim offers sensational performance, which proves that that true fidelity can be enjoyed at prices that are steep but not prohibitive. Already, even before packing it up, I'm feeling a little wistful at the very thought of parting with the Sim. And, unfortunately, I can't really justify purchasing another phonostage. When it's gone I'll undoubtedly long for the Sim's fundamental ability to efface noise, rendering the music in real-time and thus coming closer to the sound of a master tape.

This phonostage will not allow you to take a walk on the wild side. Its mantra is control. It never loses its composure, never becomes shrill, never allows a hint of noise to emerge. It subordinates everything to fidelity to the LP. My guess is that it measures ruler flat. I also suspect that, given the care that went into manufacturing the 810LP, it will prove very reliable, which is no small matter. If you're looking for a preamp that will impart the music with that eerily magical glow or bump up the mid-bass response, then search elsewhere. But if you're searching for a top-notch solid-state unit that is true to the music, then auditioning the Sim is a must.

### Timing.

That difficult to measure but impossible to miss element of musical reproduction that causes us to tap our toes and nod our heads as we groove to a really tight bass line.

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DALI Sound Principles: because music that doesn't move you is hardly music at all.



ZENSOR 7



IN ADMIRATION OF MUSIC



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## Additional Listening

By Jeff Dorgay

Having put the MOON 810LP through its paces before sending it to Jacob, I was highly impressed with this purist design. Being a car guy, it reminded me of the original Lotus Elise Type 25 Special Editions that were sent to the US intended for club-racing purposes only and that were 500 pounds lighter than the current Elise. In essence, the Type 25 SE eliminated everything that took away from the car's performance. The MOON 810LP takes a similar approach to audio reproduction: It offers only one input, minimal switching (all out of the circuit path) and no remote or fluorescent display to introduce noise or distortion. While I must admit to enjoying the performance of my ARC REF Phono 2, which also has these features—and found that having to jostle the Sim around to change gain and loading slightly inconvenient—most people aren't swapping cartridges as often as I do. Audiophiles that zero in on a single cartridge and table combination will only have to do this on rare occasion when using the Sim.

Many have asked me to make the obvious yet unfair comparison between the \$12,000 MOON 810LP and the \$60,000 Vitus MPP-201, the latter of which has been one of my reference components for the better part of the year. Much like Jacob's experience with the Ypsilon, the Vitus offers extreme levels of performance, with slightly more dynamic slam and even further insight into a recording than the MOON 810LP. *(continued)*



However, the line of diminishing returns is *definitely* crossed here. The MOON 810LP got me so close to the MPP with enough money left over to buy a nice pre-owned Lotus Elise that I can't see why anyone not possessing unlimited funds would go the extra mile for the Vitus. (It should be noted that I don't possess unlimited funds; I'm just a little nuts, which helps explain why I drive a Fiat instead of a Lotus.) Comparing the MOON 810LP with similarly priced phonostages is more realistic and more revealing. Comparing 24 bit/192khz samples of tracks captured from the Boulder 1008 or the ASR Basis (both roughly \$12,000) to those captured from ARC's REF Phono 2 and Phono 2SE proves that the folks at Simaudio in Montreal have indeed done their homework.

### Winning the Quiet Game

There is no clear cut "winner," if you will, because each of the aforementioned units offers excellent performance and each caters to a different user. The ARC offers a bit more reach-out-and-touch-it midrange, as you might expect from tubes. And its two inputs (each user-assignable via remote) lend themselves more to the vinyl enthusiast with more than one turntable and cartridge at his or her disposal. The Boulder also has two inputs, but it is the least easily adjustable of the group, requiring users to dig out the soldering iron to make changes. But the Boulder has perhaps the most bass slam of the group, though it is a bit drier through the mid-band than the others.



**If you are a music lover that does not suffer the need for constant change and is loyal to a single cartridge, the MOON 810LP should be at the top of your list.**

Keep in mind that much of this can be minimized by choice of cartridge, phono cable and overall system balance.

The MOON 810LP, being the most neutral, will fit in the widest range of systems. And, as much as I love vacuum tubes, I hate replacing them, especially when this can often bring unexpected results. The MOON 810LP will sit quietly on your equipment rack and offer analog enjoyment for decades.

It also delivers tonal accuracy as well as tonal contrast, no doubt a result of its nonexistent noise floor. While we don't perform measurements here, when comparing the MOON 810LP to the MPP with identical turntable/arm/cartridge setups, our listening panel felt the MOON 810LP was the equal of the Vitus, if not a bit quieter. There's an additional socket on the rear panel of the Sim marked "DC Power," which suggests that Simaudio may have an external power supply in the works. I can only imagine the jump in performance that would give this preamp.

And, if you are a music lover that does not suffer the need for constant change and is loyal to a single cartridge, the MOON 810LP should be at the top of your list. It offers class-leading performance and -olid build quality. For a further insight into this process, read our article on page 168, as we visit the Simaudio factory. ●

**Simaudio Moon 810LP  
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# A VISIT TO SIMAUDIO

By Jeff Dorgay

Perhaps the most important thing you need to know about Simaudio is that, while the entire company has only one person in its service department, he's not terribly busy. When I compare Sim's service guy, Mark Catalfamo, to the famous Maytag repairman, he laughs and points out that two thirds of the "repair" work executed on his test bench is just to confirm the performance of various review units that have been returned from around the world.

"We need to be sure that everything is still up to spec," he says, "and that there has been no physical damage."

This confirms that breakdowns with Simaudio gear is a rarity, precisely the reason the company offers a 10-year warranty on all of its products. You don't stay in business for thirty-plus years if you're mired in constant repair issues. Yet, should the need for service ever occur, the company has a substantial parts inventory on hand.

"We don't have metal casework parts for all of our oldest models anymore," says Costa Koulisakis, the company's VP of Sales and Marketing. "But we do have electrical parts—resistors, capacitors, transistors, etcetera—on hand to repair or refurbish practically everything we've ever made."



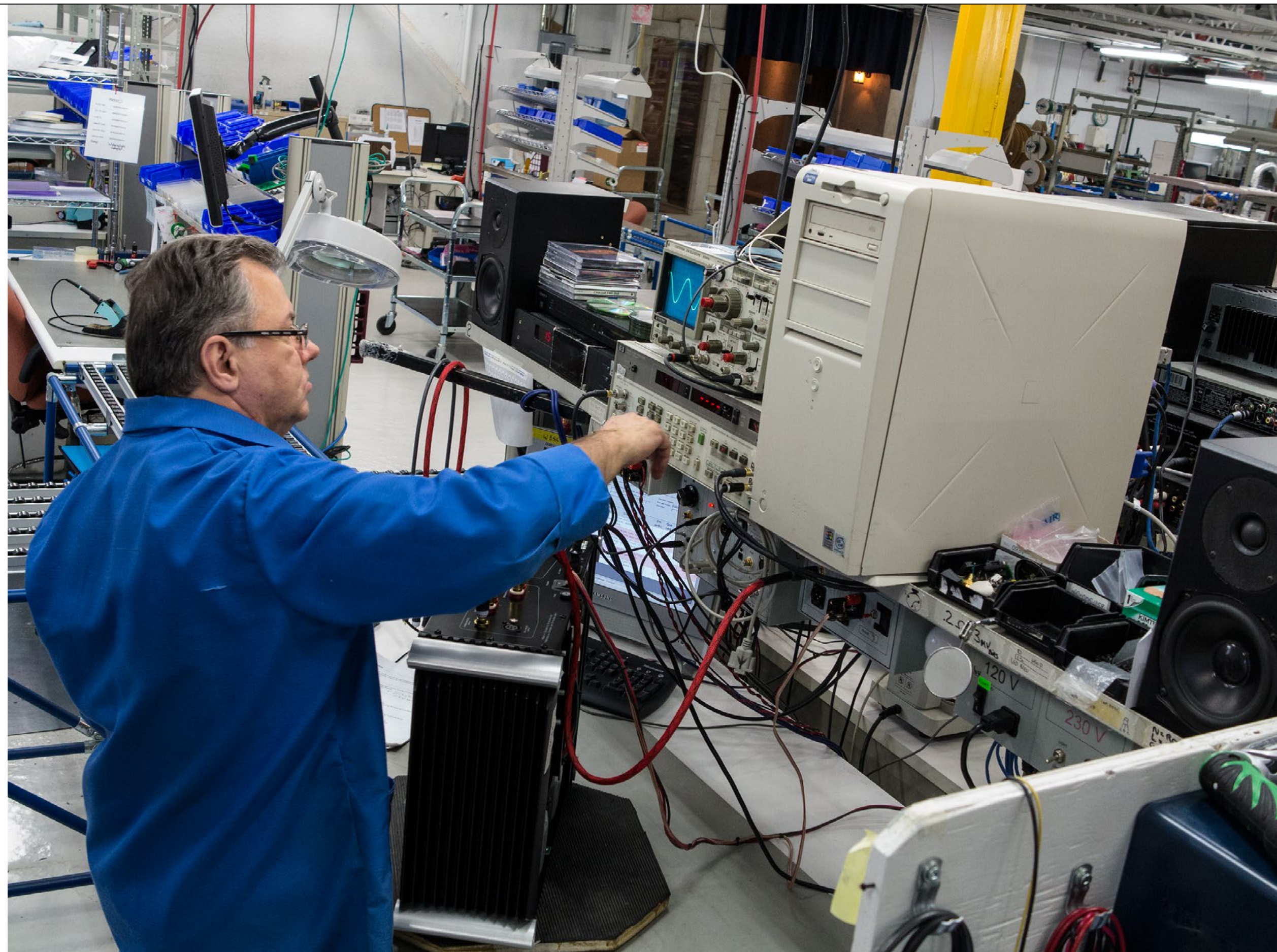
## FACTORY TOUR

This is something to strongly consider when making a purchase decision. As additional evidenced, a cursory look at the secondary market reveals few Simaudio components for sale—and when you do find a pre-owned Sim unit, it commands a high price. We at TONE have a number of Simaudio products in service as staff-member reference components, not to mention friends and family members who have enjoyed long, trouble-free relationships with their gear. Koulisakis goes on to note that his customers are the same way. “We tend to get customers for life,” he says. “When they buy an amplifier, the old one is often moved to another room for a second system.”

### Proudly Made in Canada

Simaudio has been in business since 1980 and has been running under the guidance of its current CEO, Jean Poulin, since 1993. He is responsible for the company’s growth in recent years, having expanded the Sim product line, made major circuitry upgrades and upgraded the casework to the world-class design those components now enjoy. All of this, he says, has regrettably kept him too busy to play his piano located upstairs at the company’s headquarters, just to the left of the main listening room. “Once the move is complete I am hoping to find a bit more time to play,” Poulin says with a smile.

Every day, Poulin hangs his hat on the fact that, as more and more of the audio industry’s manufacturing heads to China, every aspect of Simaudio products is realized in Canada, either in the company’s factory or within a very tight radius. The company has just moved into its current facility, which is just over 45,000 square feet and home to 42 employees. It is more than just a factory, however: In addition to all of the component-production facilities, it includes two state-of-the-art listening rooms and a performance space. Sim has made great effort to keep the building as green as possible, going so far as to grow strawberries on the roof!

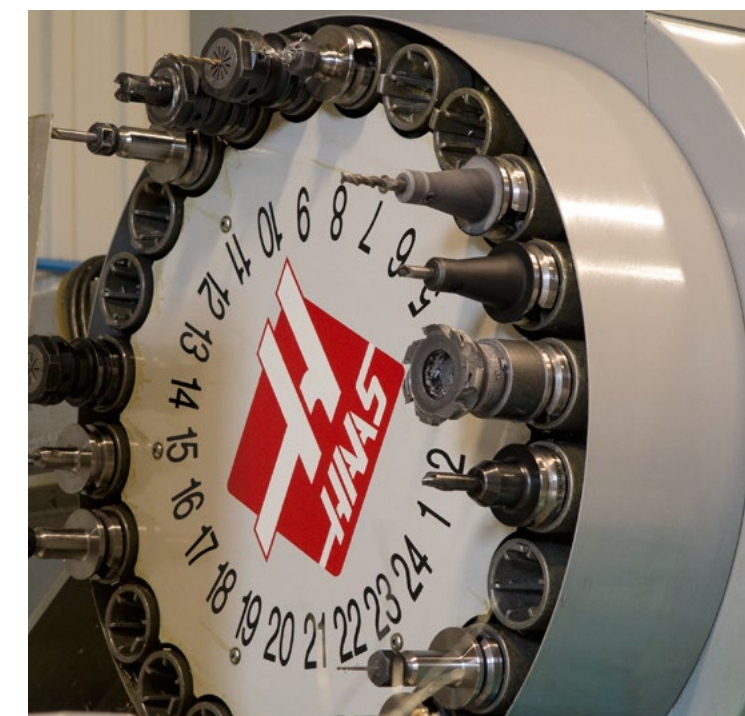






As far as audio parts go, the original extrusions that become product faceplates and heat sinks are produced near the Sim factory, but machined to their final forms at the company's five-axis Haas CNC work center. Going through the machine shop reveals a second, four-axis machine nearby. Boards are stuffed only a few blocks away from the Sim facility, with all testing completed on Sim's factory floor. The company even takes an artisan approach with its front and rear product panels, which are silk-screened one at a time in an area of the shop dedicated to this process. And to bust a common audiophile myth, the exquisite casework of a Simaudio product does not constitute a majority of its final price, thanks to having it everything produced in-house.

The design team at Simaudio feels that this high-quality casework adds to the finished product in more ways than one. The billet-aluminum enclosures minimize vibration, which results in better performance, but there remains a stringent eye on quality and pride of ownership. Simaudio uses 6063-T5 aluminum, which is not as hard as 6061-T6 aircraft-grade aluminum, but that is superior in appearance, since it can be more finely finished.







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Koulisakis is quick to point out that, while the T6 aluminum has a higher tensile strength than the T5 they use, it is actually detrimental to the sound, because the extra stiffness makes it ring much more. “The T5 aluminum is very stable and provides a surface that is easy to machine, anodize and brush,” he says, also noting that any Simaudio piece you buy today will maintain its attractive look, without any fading or discoloration.

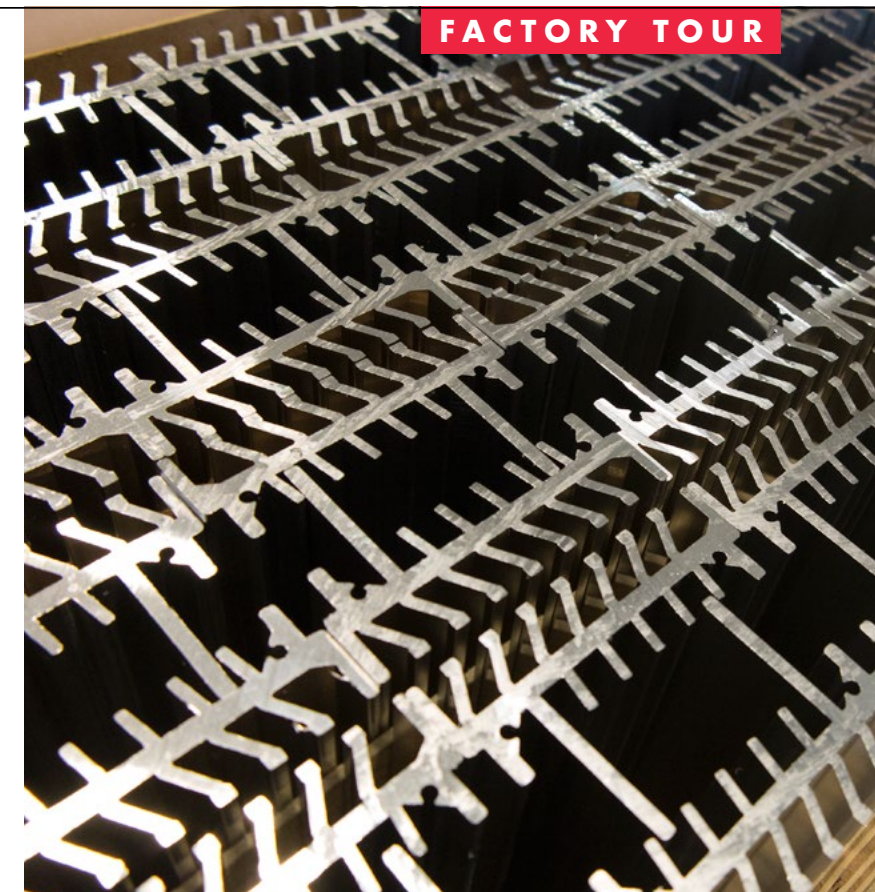
### The Difference is in the Details

The vibe at the Simaudio factory is relaxed, right down to the desk in the reception room, which has been custom-machined to look like the face plates on Sim’s gear, right down to the blue LED in the center—a nice touch. Many of the company’s employees have been there longer than 15 years, which is another key to product success and low failure rates.

While many of the engineering changes made over the years were to refine sonic performance, others were made in the name of reliability. The most noticeable of these changes is that Sim now produces its own CD transport for the 650D and 750D DACs.

Upon close inspection, it’s easy to see that a number of parts inside Simaudio components are completely custom-made. Simaudio’s Marketing Manager Lionel Goodfield points out that the output transistors used in the company’s power amplifiers are also custom-made, in batches of 100,000, specifically for Simaudio. “Once here, we sort and match these transistors to an even tighter tolerance for use in our amplifiers,” he says. “It adds a few extra steps, but insures quality and product uniformity.”

Power transformers are also custom-made by a small firm nearby, for which Simaudio is the main customer. “Jean’s background was in power supply and transformer design,” says Goodfield of Sim’s CEO, “so it was easy to design something unique to Simaudio. Not having to rely on off-the-shelf parts has made it easier for us to achieve the low noise floor of our designs.”



FACTORY TOUR







### By Music Lovers for Music Lovers

As mentioned earlier, there are two separate listening rooms at the Simaudio HQ: one about 20 feet by 30 feet and one about 20 feet by 15 feet, both of which help the staff simulate how Sim's products will be used by customers. With about a dozen speakers queued up in the entryway from Dynaudio, Thiel, MartinLogan, Wilson and others, it is obvious that the company makes every effort to be sure that its products work well with as many different varieties of speakers as it is practical to keep around.

During my visit, the second room was not quite finished, but the main room is most certainly a testament to what great gear can sound like when properly set up. Here, Sim's latest 850P Dual-Mono Reference Preamplifier, a pair of its 880M Mono Reference Power Amplifiers, the 810LP phonostage and the 750D DAC/CD Transport were driving a pair of Dynaudio Confidence C1 II speakers. As a C1 owner, I came away with a new appreciation for not only how much the room

contributes to the overall sound of a system, but also how much more sound lurks in a pair of great speakers when premium electronics are supporting them. The equal level of resolution, tonal purity and ease this system provides again underscores how much care with which Sim builds its components.

This attention to detail is perhaps what best defines Simaudio's approach to audio-product manufacturing. The company's designers, engineers and factory workers make some of the world's finest-sounding gear. But it is Simaudio's attention to the minutest of details—not only in its manufacturing but also in its pursuit of a level of reliability that keeps its products performing at their best long after the sale—that gives the company's components true heirloom value. And, after a visit to the factory in Montreal, it is quite apparent that these guys love music, which takes the company's gear beyond manufacturing. ●

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





# *Vienna Acoustics Mozart SE*

## **Mega Sound, Mini Stature**

By Jeff Dorgay





Vienna Acoustics takes pride in doing things somewhat differently than the rest of the pack. Most manufacturers refer to their SE models as “special editions,” yet the new Mozart is a “Symphony Edition.” A nice touch. Also, whereas many speakers utilize a ring radiator or metallic dome of some sort, Vienna chooses a 1.1-inch silk dome tweeter, produced to the company’s specs in the Scan-Speak factory.

“We kept the front faceplate from a standard Scan-Speak tweeter to keep cost down,” says Kevin Wolff, Vienna Acoustics’ International Sales Director. “But inside, it’s all different. We pushed for a handful of design changes to make this tweeter really special.” And special it is. The tweeter is the same one used in the \$6,500-per-pair Beethoven Concert Grand speakers and, like those pricier models, the \$3,500 Mozart SEs redefine “sweet spot.”

A visit from Wolff underlines just how good these speakers are and how critical it is to fine-tune speaker placement. The Mozarts sound great right out of the box, but 20 minutes of careful fine-tuning takes them from great to sublime. Think, for a minute, how your car’s ride is affected with one tire underinflated. The crisp steering response you’re used to is diminished, but a quick trip to the air pump makes a substantial difference, making things right again. It’s the same with speaker placement. Once the Mozart’s are right, they disappear in the room like a great pair of mini monitors, but with a much more robust LF response. *(continued)*



**The Mozarts sound great right out of the box, but 20 minutes of careful fine-tuning takes them from great to sublime.**



Satisfied that things are performing properly, we audition a number of different tracks. At the end of our listening session, the MoFi LP of Marvin Gaye's *Let's Get it On* makes its way to the turntable and Wolff smiles. The Mozarts definitely have the juju, revealing the magic of the Lyra Atlas cartridge—quite impressive for any speaker, but even more so considering their reasonable price.

### Comfortable Playing Everything

The ultra-wide stereo effect of Lou Donaldson's *LD+3* immediately captivates, accentuating the improved sound of the Audio Wave remaster, as well as the timbral accuracy that the Mozart SEs bring to the presentation. While we can blather on about cross-over slopes and the like, suffice it to say that everything works together brilliantly—in seconds you forget such tedious technical details and concentrate on the music. Gene Harris' piano sounds wonderful and Donaldson's sax commands the soundstage. The Mozart's simply let the music shine through, leaving you to just enjoy rather than analyze.

Students of PRaT (Pace, Rhythm and Timing) will be instantly smitten with the Mozart SEs. Changing the pace from classic Blue Note jazz to the title track of Frank Zappa's *Jazz From Hell* is equally fascinating. The Mozart SEs do not miss a lick of Zappa's rapid time changes and dissonant textures. Donald Fagen's new release, *Sunken Condos*, provides a calm middle ground. The highly textured and stylized studio recording illustrates how well the Mozart SEs effortlessly keep everything sorted. *(continued)*



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Don Henley's "Not Enough Love in the World," from his album *Building the Perfect Beast*, is similarly rendered. This slightly compressed, over-processed and totally '80s classic divulges new treasures. Henley's voice has major depth, combined with layer upon layer of synthesizers—you can almost feel someone bending the pitch wheel on that Yamaha DX7. Leaving this '80s genre for some heavier tunes proves an important point about the Mozarts: They give a riveting performance of less-than-primo recordings, an important consideration for those of us living in the real world.

U2's *Rattle and Hum* has to be one of the most poorly recorded live albums in history. But, when cranking up "All Along the Watchtower" to what *has* to be the Mozarts' breaking point (the meters on the ARC REF 250's pushing close to the "caution" zone), the speakers handle it effortlessly, proving that these are not speakers limited to only a handful of audiophile-approved pressings. In the midst of this gigantic ball of midrange, you can distinctly pick out the Edge's backup vocals over the distorted guitars and throttling bass line. The Mozarts are clearly just as comfortable playing it casual or formal.

The review wouldn't be complete without playing a bit of the music for which these speakers are named—and Kathleen Battle performing "Motet; Exsultate, Jubilate, K.165" (from *Kathleen Battle Sings Mozart*) adequately fits the bill. Battle's pure soprano gently fills the soundstage, going rapidly up and down the scale. Here, speakers lacking the Mozarts' transient speed would blur horribly. Again, the Mozarts maintain the pace perfectly with complex fare, even at low volumes. The speakers realistically reproduce the violins while still giving more than enough weight to the orchestra.



Moving into a heavier and more-modern realm of musical selections, I was impressed with the level of bass output of the two 6.5-inch drivers. A long playlist of electronica and hip-hop tracks proves that these speakers are only limited by the accompanying amplifiers' power reserve. Deadmau5' "Right This Second" from the *4x4=12* album goes down very deep, forcing the Mozart SEs to move a serious amount of air, which they handle impeccably. Before bouncing back to Daft Punk, a quick interlude of Pink Floyd, Genesis and Mickey Hart confirms the speakers' major bass output.

Labeled a 2.5-way system, the speakers are equipped with two woofers, which handle the deepest bass tones and combine the speed of smaller drivers but have the output of a single larger one. The lower driver gently rolls off as frequencies rise, offering the pinpoint imaging and low upper-bass coloration of a mini monitor.

### Beautiful Inside and Out

Relying on gentle crossover slopes and wideband drivers, the Mozart SEs achieve a 90-dB sensitivity rating and are tremendously easy to drive. Crossover capacitors are matched to 1% tolerance and the inductors to .7%. You'd expect this kind of fanaticism in a \$20,000 pair of speakers, but it's unheard of in a \$3,500 pair. "We only know how to build a speaker one way," Wolff says with a smile, as way of explanation.

The cabinets of these beauties are equally sumptuous yet understated. The radius on the front baffle is hand-finished—the piano-black finish puts the paint job of an S-Class Mercedes to shame. The binding posts are unique to Vienna Acoustics, and they're not those dreadful plastic-coated binding items that so many manufacturers have adopted. *(continued)*



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— Jeff Dorgay, *Tone Audio*, April 2012



Even the front grille takes a different approach: The crease down the middle helps to channel tweeter energy, in "all but the most critical listening situations," according to the company.

The drivers are VA's own design, assembled at the Scan-Speak factory, and it's worth noting that the woofers show an equal level of obsession on behalf of the manufacturer. The company utilizes its own X3P composite, which can vary in consistency to the intended application, so these are far from being off-the-shelf polypropylene cones. The transparent cone used for the Mozarts has become a VA design cue, blending visually into the design of the black speakers.

This extreme attention to detail reminds me of when Porsche introduced the first water-cooled 911. Comedian and freelance Porsche spokesperson Jerry Seinfeld commented on the "density of thought" that goes into the manufacturing of Porsche automobiles. Similarly, in sea of mass-produced speaker systems, the Mozart SEs exude quality, regardless of how far you dissect them.

Sure, the bigger VA speakers play louder and go deeper, but the sonic quality of these speakers is tremendous for \$3,500. The Mozarts prove a phenomenal match for the new Primare I22 integrated DAC/amplifier that Wolff happens to have on hand. (A full review of that piece of gear is in the works.) At \$2,499, the Primare is an awesome match to the Mozarts, as are the various other reasonably priced amplifiers we have at our disposal. Yet, when connected to a full complement of ARC reference components, the speakers deliver even greater performance, well beyond what you'd expect for \$3,500 a pair. (continued)





## REVIEW

### Pick Your Finish

You can get your own pair of Mozart SEs in Rosewood, Maple, Cherry or the Piano Black that our review sample arrived in. For an additional charge, a stunning Piano White is also available. The beautiful finishes of these speakers serve to remind that, in a world where a \$20,000 price tag is more common than not, it's refreshing to find a pair of \$3,500 speakers that are built with the same level of care and attention to detail as those with a five-figure price tag.

The Vienna Acoustics Mozart SEs combine musical accuracy with dynamic ability in a compact and stylish package. They are not only worthy of one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2012, they are one of the best speaker values this writer has encountered in a long time. ●

**The Vienna Acoustics  
Mozart SE loudspeakers**

#### MSRP

\$3,500/pair (cherry and piano black)

\$3,850 (rosewood and piano white)

#### MANUFACTURER

[www.vienna-acoustics.com](http://www.vienna-acoustics.com)

#### PERIPHERALS

**Analog Source** VPI Classic 1/Lyra Kleos

**Preamplifier** ARC REF 5SE

**Phonostage** ARC REF Phono 2SE

**Power Amplifier** ARC REF 250 monoblocks, Pass XA200.5 monoblocks, Pass Aleph 3, Prima Luna Dialogue 6 monoblocks, Carver VTM20, Primare I22 (integrated)

**Digital Source** dCS Paganini, Wadia 121, Sooloos Control 15, Aurender S10, Wadia 171 w/iPod Touch

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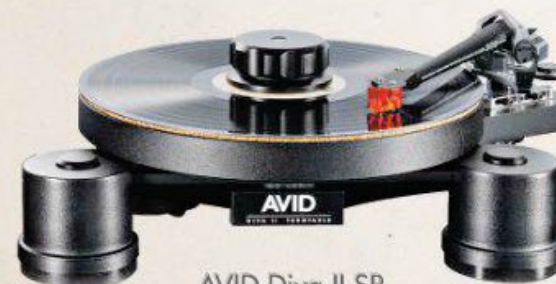
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Marantz TT-15



VPI Traveler



# The Missing Piece

## REL's Gibraltar G-2

By Jeff Dorgay

A recurring theme in country music and, perhaps, in life is that you never realize what you've got until it's gone. Truer words were never spoken

in the world of audiophilia when it comes to reproducing bass.

However, a subwoofer can drive you to madness, much like a high-maintenance romantic interest. When it's right, you're giddy with delight and things couldn't be better, but when it's wrong, all you do is focus on said partner's shortcomings—and, eventually, you both go your separate ways.





Having spent the last 20 years on and off the bus with a wide variety of subwoofers, I can highly recommend the REL G-2 for any number of reasons. Perhaps this subwoofer's greatest selling point, however, is that it comes with a remote. My enthusiasm regarding this feature doesn't (necessarily) speak to my inability to escape my listening chair's gravitational pull; it is more to comment that having this wireless device in my hand satiates the nagging voice at the back of my mind that is always just *slightly* dissatisfied with the subwoofer settings. The REL G-2 eliminates that stress completely by providing just the right amount of low-frequency (or LF) reinforcement right at your fingertips.

The G-2 is also easy to set up—that is, it's as easy to set up as a 90-pound anything can be. Thus, I suggest that even our more-muscular readers enlist help when moving the G-2, because it's just big and awkwardly shaped enough to be a little tough for one person to lift. Many users may even decide that incorporating a few of these subs into their system is necessary. In this case, you should enlist the aid of an installer or, at the very least, a handful of burly buddies.

Sumiko Audio, the importer of REF subwoofers in Berkeley, CA, has a sizeable showcase of three G-1s flanking either side of Sonus faber's celebrated flagship loudspeakers (dubbed simply "The Sonus faber"). The audio experience this system provides is understandably impressive. The LF performance is effortless, all encompassing and seamlessly integrated with the main speakers. The bass swells up from the performance with an ease that suggests a major paradigm shift in how the lowest musical notes should be handled.

Priced at \$3,495, the G-2 is slightly smaller in stature and reach than the larger G-1, priced at \$4,495. The G-2 uses a long-throw 10-inch woofer with a carbon-fiber cone and a 450-watt onboard amplifier, whereas the G-1 uses a 600-watt amplifier to drive its 12-inch woofer. Down only 6 dB at 18 Hz, the G-2 should provide enough bass grunt for most users, either by itself or as a pair, but it can also be stacked and used as part of an array. *(continued)*



## POWER TRIO

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

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HANDMADE IN GERMANY



## Major Differences

REL manages the lower frequencies differently than other manufacturers—and does so with excellent result. While the company offers line-level RCA inputs, these should be used only as a last resort. The supplied Neutrik speakON connector utilizes a high-level connection that goes directly to your power amplifier's speaker outputs. The sub's high impedance does not affect loading of the main speakers, thus allowing the character of your amplifier's sound to carry forward into the subwoofer. Consulting the instruction manual and using my preamplifier's outputs to drive the G-2 still results in decent sound, but the speakON is what you want. When switching power amplifiers, from the Audio Research REF 150 to the Burmester 911 to the Pass Labs Aleph 3, I noticed a slight disconnect between main speakers and subwoofer. However, during all of this, the bass reproduction did not change in character, even with these three very different amplifiers via the RCAs. Moving to the provided speakON input revealed the variations between amplifiers more easily, with a more seamless blend between the main speakers.

Those wanting to use the G-2, or multiple G-2s, in a multichannel system will be happy to find that the sub can accommodate the .1/LFE signal from your processor of choice. It also has a unique grounding circuit to work with class-D amplifiers or monoblock power amps. All of this is clearly outlined in the well-written manual.

Though it adds cost and complexity, the G-1 and G-2 both use MOSFET class-AB amplifiers with massive power supplies instead of the class-D amplifiers found in many other subwoofers. REL claims that its subs to have

**Those wanting to use the G-2, or multiple G-2s, in a multichannel system will be happy to find that the sub can accommodate the .1/LFE signal from your processor of choice.**

the fastest crossover filter networks, with a rise time of only 4 milliseconds. I'm firmly convinced that these features, along with an additional filter with a gentle slope that removes content above 250 Hz, contribute to the level of fine detail that the G-2 offers.

REL prefers corner loading for the G-2, and that's where I've had the best luck with the company's subs in the past—so why mess with good results? And this is where that nifty little remote control comes in handy. As I said, fine-tuning a subwoofer, no matter what brand and by what method you choose, can make your hair fall out. Like me, I'm sure you have your favorite tracks with deep-bass information that you use to audition any speaker, regardless of whether it has a subwoofer or not.

Now, as much as I dislike Jennifer Warnes' "Ballad of the Runaway Horse," I've always seen various Sumiko employees use this track to optimize speakers to great success, so when in Rome... While this track certainly impressed, even Romans like to party, so I moved on to something with a little more oomph for my review of the G-2. With the best balance of weight and speed achieved, "Kill Everybody" from electronics master Skrillex blew me out of my listening chair—just like the guy in the Maxell ad from the 1980s. The G-2 gives new meaning to the term "room lock." Should Jennifer Warnes or a real-time analyzer not be your cup of tea, a series of test tones (like those from the early *Stereophile* test discs) simplify the process. As you go down the frequency range, the transition from main speakers should appear at the same level. It should also be difficult, if not impossible, to discern the location of the subwoofer when using just your ears. (*continued*)



# Wadia Digital *Emerge From the Darkness*

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REVIEW



Controlling this from your listening position dramatically reduces setup time, allowing you to remain planted in the same spot while making quick, small changes without having to psyche yourself out with aural memory tricks. But best of all, the remote allows you to fine-tune on the fly. No matter how great the G-2 sounds with Jennifer Warnes (or whatever bass track you use), it needs to be bumped up a touch up for Skynryd's album *Nuthin' Fancy*, and then way back down for the latest Cat Power release, *Sun*. The LED indicator at the bottom of the G-2 lets you know the sub's level, frequency and phase (0 or 180 degrees). This makes up for the tiny though stylish type on the remote. If you have kids or inquisitive friends, be sure to use the settings lock feature.

Fortunately, you're usually never more than a

click or two away on the level control and, depending on your main speakers, the crossover frequency can even benefit from a nudge. This is what takes the G-2 from merely great to awesome, and the more time you spend with the G-2, you'll notice a more immersive experience at modest listening levels.

## Carry That Weight

The G-2 performs well with a wide range of speaker systems; but, in keeping with the REL philosophy of a sub-bass system with the sub augmenting the deepest frequencies, it is not intended to be part of a sub/sat system. However, it still performs incredibly well throwing said suggestion to the wind, dialing the crossover frequency up to the 50-to-60-Hz range and using it with stand-mount monitors, or even ESLs. *(continued)*



## REVIEW

Crossed over at 30 Hz or below, it's virtually impossible to identify the G-2 in the room, but it does start to lose a bit of its stealthiness when crossed over at a significantly higher point. You will probably need a pair of G-2s if you need to operate your system this way. Fortunately, the G-2 has more than enough speed to keep up with any speaker you pair it with.

As good as the G-2 works with small speakers or panels, a full-range speaker system allows the G-2 to reach its full potential. Crossover frequency now lowered to 27 Hz (adjustable in 1-Hz increments) the \$3,495 G-2 brings the \$22,900 Elipsa SE speakers eerily close in sound to that of the \$45,000 Sonus faber Stradivaris. Even the GamuT S9s, which are only down 3 dB at 18 Hz, open up with the G-2—and I now find myself dreaming of six of these!

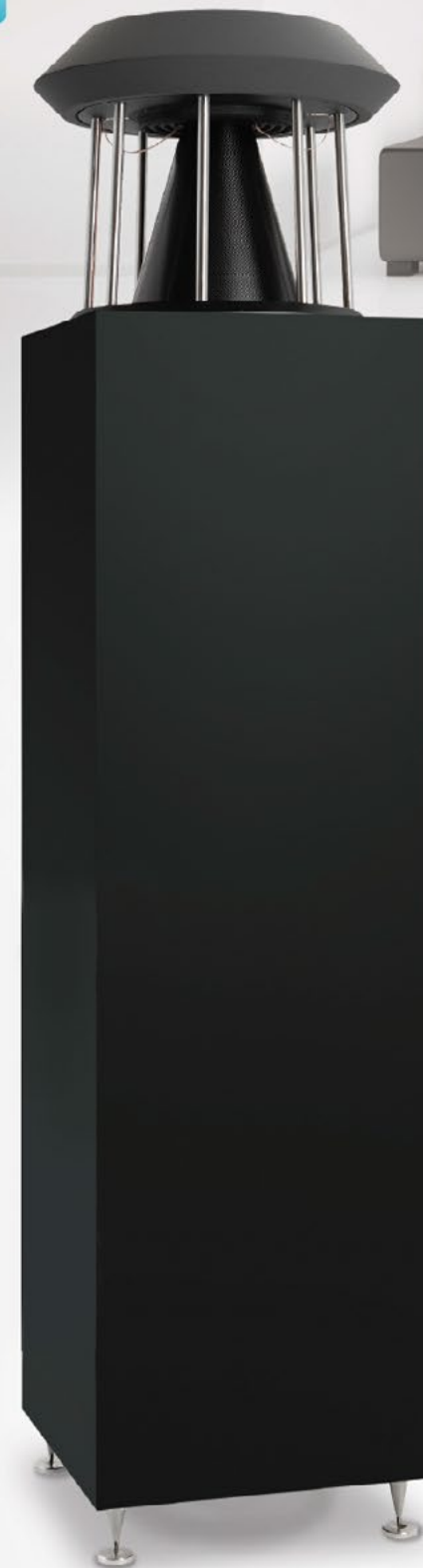
### Midrange Augmentation

Properly installed, the G-2 feels practically invisible, as it should, adding low-frequency reinforcement to the main speakers. And there remains an equal benefit through the mid-band, which REL likes to refer to as "The REL effect." You'll know you have the G-2 set just right when turning it on makes the side walls in your listening room disappear and when even musical selections with minimal low-bass content spread out across the sound-stage with a bigger and broader effect than before.

Using the sub in this mode, only bringing up the deepest frequencies, helps convey spatial cues present in the recording space. Even string quartets or acoustic music with no major LF content open up and breathe, with my listening room feeling much bigger than it is. I think the fourth dimension is deep bass, and the REL G-2 does it right. *(continued)*

**As good as the G-2 works with small speakers or panels, a full-range speaker system allows the G-2 to reach its full potential.**

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The DDD driver's excellent dynamics let the music breathe, bringing out the emotion and excitement of the performance and its excellent phase linearity ensures that the tonal colors of voices and instruments are naturally reproduced.

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For more information on the Unlimited Mk II, or any of our models, please contact us.



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Sampling familiar tunes, the wood block in Tom Petty's "A Face in the Crowd" is now four feet in front of my face, where it was back in line with the speakers when the G-2 level is set back to zero. Annie Lennox's background vocals in "No More I Love You's" appear way off center and down almost at floor level. One-note bass is a thing of the past with the G-2. Jaco Pastorius' fretless bass line in Joni Mitchell's "Jericho," from her album *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*, comes through with the healthy dose of speed and overtones that made him famous. Regardless of musical program, there was nothing that did not benefit from having the G-2 in the system.

### Don't Abuse the Power

The REL G-2 works equally well in both of my listening rooms—my main room is 16 feet by 25 feet; my second room is 13 feet by 16 feet—but, like any addictive substance, one has to resist the urge to overindulge. For the first few days, it was fun to play a lot of Deadmau5, Skrillex and, of course, the artist formerly known as Snoop Dogg (who now calls himself Snoop Lion). As soon as I found new weak spots in my walls, I got used to the G-2 and prudence became more the rule than the exception.

Having auditioned many subwoofers over the years, the REL G-2 is now at the top of my overachievers list and is featured as a TOP TONE component in issue 48. If you'd like to unlock your system's full potential, you should audition one—or maybe six! ●

**The REL G-2 Sub-Bass System**  
MSRP: \$3,495

### MANUFACTURER

REL  
[rel.net](http://rel.net)

Available through Sumiko Audio  
[www.sumikoaudio.net](http://www.sumikoaudio.net)

### PERIPHERALS

**Analog Source** AMG V-12 turntable/Lyra Kleos cartridge

**Digital Source** dCS Paganini system, Sooloos Control 15, Aurender S10

**Preamplifier** Burmester 011

**Power Amplifier** Burmester 911 mk.II

**Phonostage** Zesto Andros

**Speakers** Acoustat 1+1, Dynaudio Confidence C1 II

**Cable** AudioQuest Sky IC, AudioQuest

**Power** Audience aR6-Tss

**Accessories** GIK room treatments, Audio Desk Systeme RCM, Furutech DeMag and DeStat







# A Three-Letter Word For Fun MAD

By Jeff Dorgay

If I had to make a bet, I'd put my money on the Brits taking the prize for understatement. Unpacking the 1920 loudspeakers from British manufacturer MAD (for "My Audio Design"), it's tough not to have an internal dialog that goes something like, "Two and a half grand for these? They *are* mad!" But, looking past the relatively simple-looking box speakers, one soon notices gorgeously mitered corners and an exceptional attention to detail paid on behalf of the craftsmen behind these. Hmmm. Some understated British artistry, perhaps? I take the necessary photos and roll the speakers into listening room two, which, at 13 feet by 16 feet, is perhaps even a bit on the large side for a pair of small speakers—truly mini-monitors, in this case. The next thought that comes to mind is "LS3/5a clone," until I turn the speaker around and see a rear-facing port.



At “approximately \$2,500 per pair,” as MAD does not have a US distributor yet, the 1920s are towards the high end of the price scale for this category. Their obvious competitors are the KEF LS50 (\$1,499/pair), which we haven’t reviewed yet; the Harbeth P3ESR (\$2,200/pair); and the Stirling Broadcast LS3/5a V2 (\$1,999/pair). A mint pair of original LS3/5a speakers can command up to \$2,000 per pair. While the originals do have a certain vintage charm, they are notably woolly sounding in the world of 21st-century monitors.

A mini-monitor, properly optimized in a small room, is one of audio’s guilty pleasures. Paired with a great amplifier, these speakers will provide ample bass *quantity* and well-above-average bass *quality*, going a long way to convince you that you won’t ever need a subwoofer. But don’t forgo good stands, as they are essential to getting the maximum output from the 1920s. Just place these on a pair of high-mass stands (sand filled Sound Anchors are my choice) after applying your favorite sticky substance to couple the speakers to said stands, and expect to be wowed.

### Jumping Right In

My audition of 1920s begins with the Zombies’ classic, “Time of the Season.” What better way to audition a British speaker than with some of the best of the British Invasion? Immediately, the spatial characteristics of these speakers reveal a massive soundstage in the small room, with things clearly delineated and with solid bass—and *rock-solid* pace. The added dynamics of the original mono record is an absolute blast with these speakers. Rod Argent’s keys leap from the speakers. When mated to the Conrad Johnson MV-50C1 power amplifier, the 1920s confirm the manufacturer’s spec sheet: These little speakers are incredibly easy to drive. Even the 20-watt-per-channel Carver Black Magic amplifier has no problem playing these speakers to maddening levels. (Pardon the pun.)



Ry Cooder’s light touch on the acoustic guitar at the beginning of “The Very Thing That Will Make You Rich (Makes Me Poor),” from the *Bop Till You Drop* album, hovers just above the speakers, with Cooder well out in front of them. Cat Power’s “Nothin’ But Time,” from *Sun*, her current album, has a more modern feel, laden with weighty synth bass riffs, again allowing the 1920s to sound so much larger than they seem capable. Closing your eyes to concentrate on the presentation, it’s easy to think you are listening to much bigger speakers, only to open your eyes and find this pair of tiny audio morsels before you. An equally spacious presentation is had with Little Village’s “Don’t Think About Her When You’re Trying to Drive.”

### Tonality + Dynamics = Bliss

The performance of the 1920s is especially excellent during playback of a slew of acoustic standards. But, while the speakers are not as rolled-off sounding on the top end as either the Harbeths or the vintage LS3/5as on hand, they are not quite as extended as the Penaudio Cenya or Dynaudio Confidence C1 IIs that I have here for comparison. (To be fair, the Cenyas and C1 IIs are considerably more expensive.) With the 1920s, it’s a nice, gentle roll-off, which will not be noticed on all but the best audiophile recordings and that, more often than not, goes a long way at making digital files and budget solid-state amplifiers considerably more listenable.

The only time I found the tonal characteristic of the 1920s a bit too soft for my taste was when using certain vintage tube amplifiers. With the Dynaco ST-70 or Harman Kardon A500 integrated amp, for example, even digital files come across as slightly dull. But, having drawn that line in the sand, the combination of vintage tube amplification and 320-Kb/sec MP3 files sounds much better than it has a right to.

All things considered, the extra efficiency, slam and bass weight are what separate the MAD 1920s from their comparably priced brethren. You won’t mistake these for a pair of floorstanders, but they open up and breathe so much more than the other small speakers we’ve experienced at this price level. While the Harbeth and Stirlings both present a benign enough load to drive with a 20-watt amplifier, they are still rated in the range of 83 to 84 dB—which means that a low-power amp can’t deliver the dynamic peaks like it can with a speaker rated at 90 dB.

### Crazy Imaging

If you are new to the small British monitor thing, the sonic image that the 1920s present will spoil almost everything else for you. From the first tap of the hi-hat on the title track to Donovan’s *Mellow Yellow*, the term “pinpoint imaging” takes on a new meaning, especially if you dim the lights just a bit to keep your eyes from sending visual information to your brain that might otherwise distract processing power from your auditory nerves. (continued)



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## REVIEW

Donovan sounds as if he's singing just in front of your face, with his overdubs floating in a sea of handclaps and horns. And the separation between the flute and the oboe in "Jennifer, Juniper" is magnificent.

Maybe it's the stunning imaging that these old studio records present, or perhaps it's the strong British heritage thing, but I just kept going back for more British Invasion records to play on these speakers. I swear I was having flashbacks during Donovan's "Hurdy Gurdy Man." But then, a brief detour spent on a number of Duran Duran and Thompson Twins tracks from the '80s transitioned me back to the 21st century—and it was still good.

On the deep-bass side of the musical universe, Dungen and Dr. Dre are both off the menu at all but modest levels. You can only cheat physics so far, and the 1920s pull off a major sonic feat already. But heavy rock and hip-hop are simply not a match for these speakers, should you really want to crank it up. But I'm guessing that, if this stuff happens to be at the top of your music menu, you're not looking at mini-monitors anyway. To use an old audiophile cliché, the 1920s are mostly guilty of omission. They remind me of a first-generation VW Golf GTI or Mazda MX5—they're tons of fun to drive between 20 and 80 mph, which is where we're stuck living most of the time. But if you have a modest amplifier, a medium- to small-sized room and few pipe-organ records in your collection, you won't even know what you're missing.

### Smart is the New Sexy

A quick visual once-over of the 1920s and you might just pass them by.



While the small box is well executed, these aren't head-turners. But inside it's a completely different story—an abundance of high-grade audiophile parts lurk: ultra-pure silver internal wiring on the tweeter, plus point-to-point wiring with equally zooty copper wire. Best of all, these are hand assembled in the UK, with all components hand tested and matched before the construction process begins.

Don't think of the MAD 1920 as a clone of the LS3/5a, nor as an update or replacement for it. It will just raise your dander. But do pay close attention to them—they are sleepers. And don't let the understated box fool you. These speakers are the new standard for small monitors.

### The MAD 1920 loudspeakers

**MSRP: £1,500**  
**(US pricing, TBD, approx \$2,500)**

### PERIPHERALS

**Preamplifier** Burmester 011

**Power Amplifier** Conrad Johnson MV-50C1, Pass Aleph 3, Carver Black Magic 20.

**Analog Source** Rega RP6/Exact, SME 10/Sumiko Blackbird

**Digital Source** Sooloos Control 15, Aurender S10, Light Harmonic DAC

**Cable** Cardas Clear

**Accessories** GIK Room Treatments, Audience aR6-TSS Power Line Conditioner, Furutech DeMag and DeStat, Audio Desk Systeme RCM





# The KEF Blades

## A Sneak Peek

By Jeff Dorgay

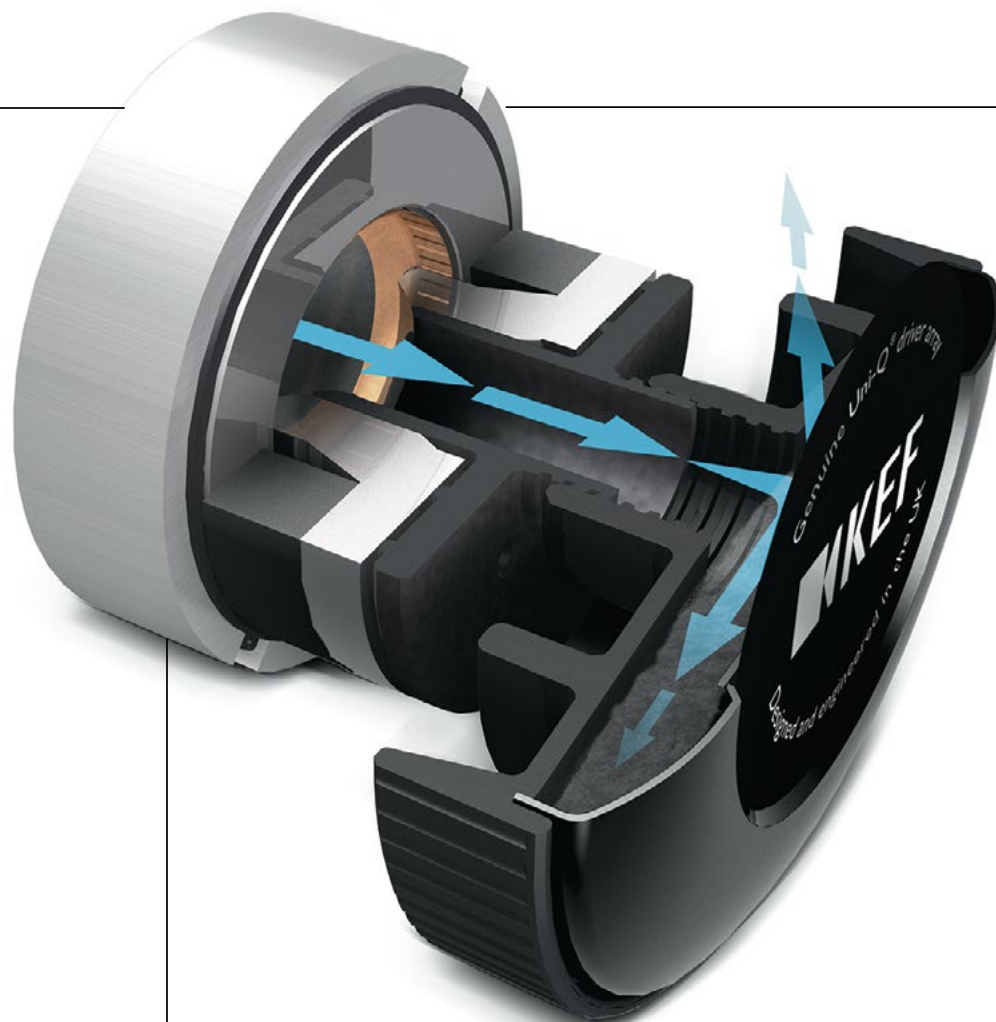
Sometimes the mountain comes to you, sometime you must go to the mountain. The KEF Blade speakers proved to be the latter. With a highly successful launch at this years CES, and numerous showings around the US, it appeared that the Blades are too popular to get into the review channel. Fortunately, a pair landed not terribly far away from the TONE offices, at Audio Vision San Francisco.

Owners Randy Johnson and Antonio Long offered the use of their showroom for a full day of listening, and while normally I would pooh pooh this type of arrangement to conduct a review, their listening room is almost exactly the same shape and dimension as my own and the Blades were to be powered by a stack of 500 series Naim gear and CD player – all stuff I’m intimately familiar with.

So while this won’t be a full, in depth review, it is more than a sneak peek.



# REVIEW



## More than a sexy shape

Beginning with the first Fleet Foxes album, it is instantly apparent that the Blades throw a massive soundstage and disappear in the room easily. I suspect this has much to do with their narrow front baffle that curves away from the 5-inch Uni-Q driver, featuring a concentrically mounted 1-inch dome tweeter directly in the center of the mid-range to minimize front panel diffraction effects.

The four 9-inch bass drivers are mounted on each of the sweeping cabinet sides. The low frequencies appear as if they emanate directly from the center of the cabinet, all coming straight from the Uni-Q. An excellent marriage of physics and aesthetics, resulting in

a level of coherence feeling more like a panel design than a speaker with individual cone drivers.

While the spec sheet indicates a -3db point of 40hz (-6db at 28hz), the Blades muster serious grunt when listening to the Supreme Beings of Leisure's *11i* album. The second track of the album has a lot of percussion buried deeply in the mix that is often left unrevealed by lesser speakers, yet the Blades give a superlative performance—reinforcing the concept that high resolution does not have to equal a harsh and fatiguing presentation.

Instantly the Blades lock the pace of the music in place, with a rock solid foundation, featuring tons of texture in the lower

# REVIEW

frequencies, never sacrificing the delicacy of the upper registers as the density of the mix increases. Moving to Meshell Ndegocello's *Plantation Lullabys*, the bongos in track five are transfixed in the air, slightly above head height as she raps through the piece, her voice full of body, attack and anger.

Changing the mood, Gato Barbieri's sultry *Last Tango In Paris* soundtrack reveals how well the Blades handle more delicate music, keeping the strings from being lost in the driving saxophone solos that punctuate the record. Yim Yames *A Tribute To...* puts a magnifying glass on the flagship KEF's flair at capturing the leading and trailing edges of transients without fatigue or overhang. (continued)

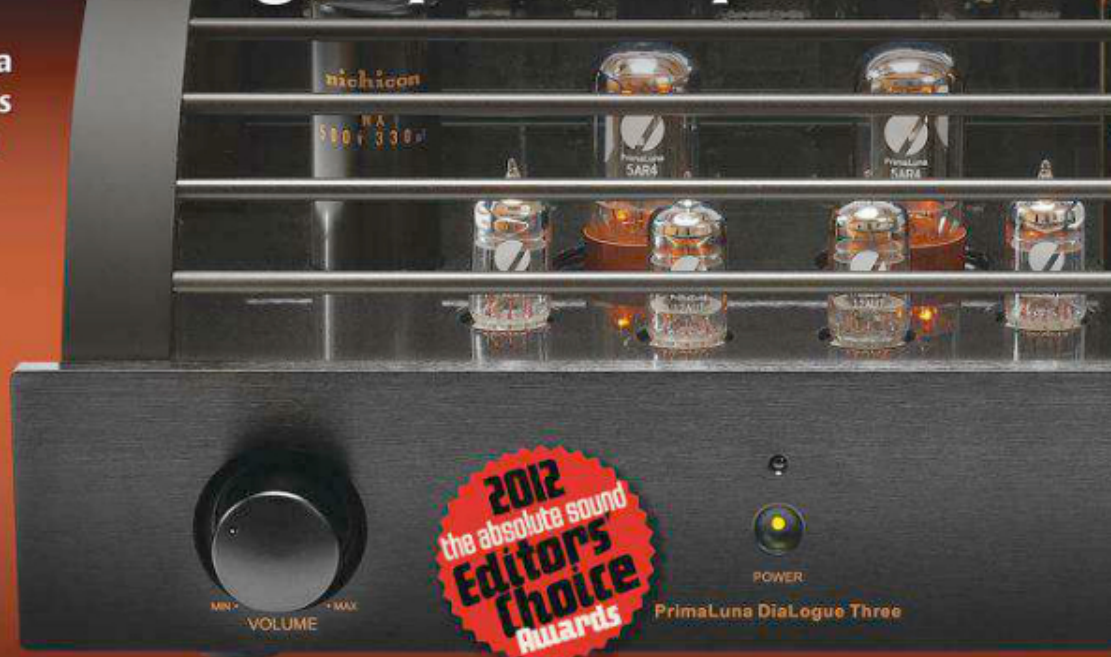
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## REVIEW

The album's acoustic guitars have a speed and immediacy that convince you that you are getting perilously close to the real thing. The music in this record expands and contracts with ease—filling the room one second, dropping to barely a whisper the next, fading with a delicately smooth gradation, yet never quite fading all the way to black.

### Uncanny Realism

Yet, unlike your favorite ESL, the Blades have a *wide* sweet spot. This is a pair of speakers that three people sitting on a big, comfy couch can all enjoy. Even sitting on the floor, well off-axis to one side of the listening field, the Blades still provide an involving experience. When party guests fill your listening room, there isn't a bad seat in the house.

As I see the guys duck out of the showroom with a customer, I push the system as far as the Naim amplifiers can go with Audioslave's first, self-titled album, backing off just before I melt the 150 watt per channel monoblocks into the floor, then torturing them even further with Mudhoney's *Superfuzz Bigmuff*. This wall of compression pins my ears back, coming through with all of the excitement I've felt seeing the band live. Those who really like to rock, might consider getting some even bigger amplifiers, but for most, 50–150 watts per channel will do nicely,

thanks to the 90db/1 watt sensitivity rating and relative ease by which these speakers are driven.

### Awesome, But Not a Cheap Date

The KEF Blades have an MSRP of \$29,995 per pair and are available in a wide range of incredibly cool colors in addition to the basic black emblazoning my review samples. I think the amorphous shape begs for a bright color (like the awesomely bright lime green or orange I've seen them in) but basic black is pretty cool too.

The gentleman at AVSF had done all the heavy lifting, with the speakers perfectly placed about 12 feet apart with a slight toe in, so I felt no need to mess with success. When we get the Blades for a full review, we will be sure to explore a wider range of cabling and amplification, to see if there are any rocks in the road. For now my impression of these speakers is highly positive, and they provide a level of musical enjoyment in line with their asking price. ●

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# 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.



## Micromega AS-400

\$4,595 [www.micromega-hifi.com](http://www.micromega-hifi.com)

It's an integrated amp. It's a streamer. It's all of the above, and it has an MM phonostage. The AS-400 from French manufacturer Micromega can truly be your household's entertainment hub—just add a turntable and your favorite speakers. (Those not needing the capabilities of the AS-400's onboard AirPlay-ready AirDream module can order Micromega's IA-400 for a thousand bucks less.)

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WEB REVIEW



## Meridian M6 Speakers

\$9,000/pair

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

While Meridian has always been at the forefront of DSP loudspeakers, its past offerings have tended to feature a look that is highly sculpted but that remains somewhat traditional. The M6 takes something of a new direction for the iconic English brand. The speaker sports a more stylish, futuristic shape with a minimal footprint—less than a foot in diameter—but it can still pack a punch: Its two-way bass-reflex design delivers as many as 250 watts per channel.

The speakers reach their source with nothing more than a few Meridian SpeakerLink cables, though simple RJ-45 cable will do in a pinch. Just plug these babies into one of Meridian's digital processors or players—or, for the best combination, link the speakers up with one of Meridian's digital-media systems (formerly branded with the Sooloos name).

Great sound matched with high style and ultimate simplicity has never been easier. You can read the full review [here](#)



# Slummin'

By Jeff Dorgay

**T**hough I normally pride myself on finding items in the \$5-to-\$100 range for this column, this issue's Slummin' finds are considerably more expensive than what my usual dumpster-dog finds—but there is a method to my madness. With the below items, I've begun attempting to recreate the first stereo system I ever heard, when I was 13 years old—and I now have two pieces of the puzzle.

Stay tuned, for in the near future we'll be turning back the clock to 1973, when my adventures in stereo first began.



## Sansui 771 Receiver

EBay, \$159

**A**gain, \$30 bucks will get you one of these at a garage sale—though it will be full of cigarette burns, with bent knobs and a dimly lit front panel. This one is not only factory-fresh, but the previous owner was also in possession of its owner's manual, original patch cords and the *coolio* circuit diagram, which sort of looks like a placemat. He even had the original warranty card.

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## JBL L26 Speakers

\$400/pair

After researching these for a few years, I've found a wide variation out on the web, which sellers want premium prices for, but that, in most cases, appear to be junk. Trashed cabinets, worn woofers and punctured tweeters are the order of the day, and these babies are heavy, so count on at least \$100 to \$150 to ship a pair across the country.

Fortunately, "JBL Scott," a friend that restores JBL speakers and specializes in the L100 (more on him in the future) called with just the thing to satisfy my quest. "Dude," he said excitedly the instant I picked up the phone. "These look like the day they came out of the box in 1974." I'd heard that before; but, as you can see from the photo, JBL Scott wasn't blowing smoke—these are nearly perfect and well worth the \$400.



## 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)

Soul Custom: [www.soulcustom.com](http://www.soulcustom.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)