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Music.Gear.Style. No.53 March 2013

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**New Music:** Richard Thompson, Emmylou Harris, Wayne Hancock, and More  
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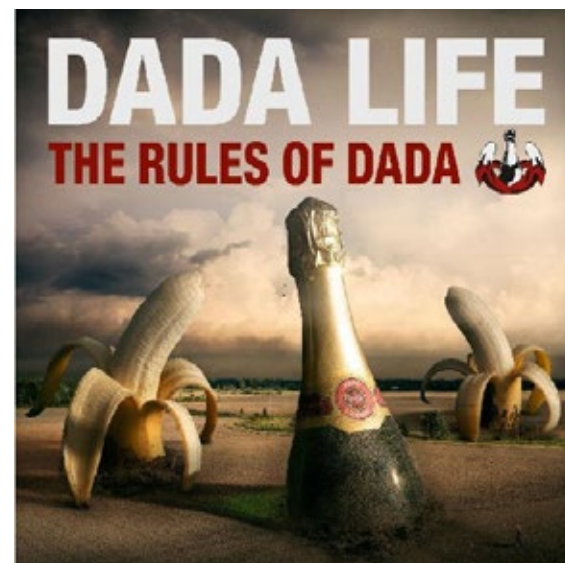


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## PUBLISHER'S LETTER

**I**t's been a busy New Year, and I hope you've all settled in and have been keeping your New Year's resolutions. I'd like to thank those of you who have joined our online community on Facebook. We are now the web's most "liked" audio publication!

This is thanks to major efforts by our gear editor, Bailey Barnard, our main headphone contributor, Michael Liang, and the handful of our advertisers that have helped us pull together some fun giveaways—a trend that will continue as we go forward. I hope these giveaways will help those of you lucky enough to win one of our prizes enjoy your music a little more in the months to come. For everyone else, we'll keep bringing you new music and gear in every issue.

For me, the best part of our growing online community is interacting with so many of our readers on a daily basis, and I appreciate the fact that you're all keeping it civil. With so many flame wars erupting on the various Internet forums, I'm striving to keep the *TONEAudio* Facebook page a friendly place to hang out. If you want to argue about the merits of double-blind testing or why cables don't matter, or insist on taking a poke at our counterparts on the staffs of other magazines, we will show you the door pretty quickly. Life's too short to bicker about things like that.

One topic that always creates a heated discussion is the cost of audio gear near the stratosphere, and this issue is chock-full of really high-priced amplifiers, including exceptional examples from Boulder, Burmester, Simaudio and Pass Labs. After spending time with the biggest, best and most expensive amplifiers these manufacturers can create, I'm spellbound by just how great recorded music *can* sound. As many of you know, I'm equally smitten with high-performance cars and motorcycles, worlds in which there's a pet saying: "How fast can you afford to go?"

Today, great components exist at all levels, but the amplifiers reviewed here are truly special products that reproduce music at a level beyond anything I've experienced. I realize that most of you aren't in the market for a \$205,000 pair of monoblocks, but part of our mission is to find great gear in every segment of the spectrum.

We've got some great music for you to peruse in this issue, as well. We recently added a couple of new writers, who will be covering country and classical music, and have brought back our Club Mix column to celebrate electronica, ambient and EDM.

Thank you again for reading.

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# NEW CONTRIBUTORS

## Chrissie Dickinson

**C**hrissie Dickinson is an award-winning writer and musician based in Chicago. A former editor of the *Journal of Country Music*, her work has appeared in numerous publications, including the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Washington Post*, and the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. Her essays have appeared in several books, notably *Ring of Fire: The Johnny Cash Reader*. She was a guitarist, songwriter and vocalist in the all-girl punk band Sally's Dream. She is currently working on a series of her punk-folk songs as music videos.

## Connor Willemssen

**C**onnor Willemssen has loved all things audio since he can remember. At age six his childhood bedroom featured an impressive array of "speakers"—all created from construction paper and magic markers. Now a chemistry major at the University of Oregon, he can be found soldering together crossovers and cutting cross-braces for his hobby of speaker building or frequenting the northwest's electronic dance music scene in his free time.

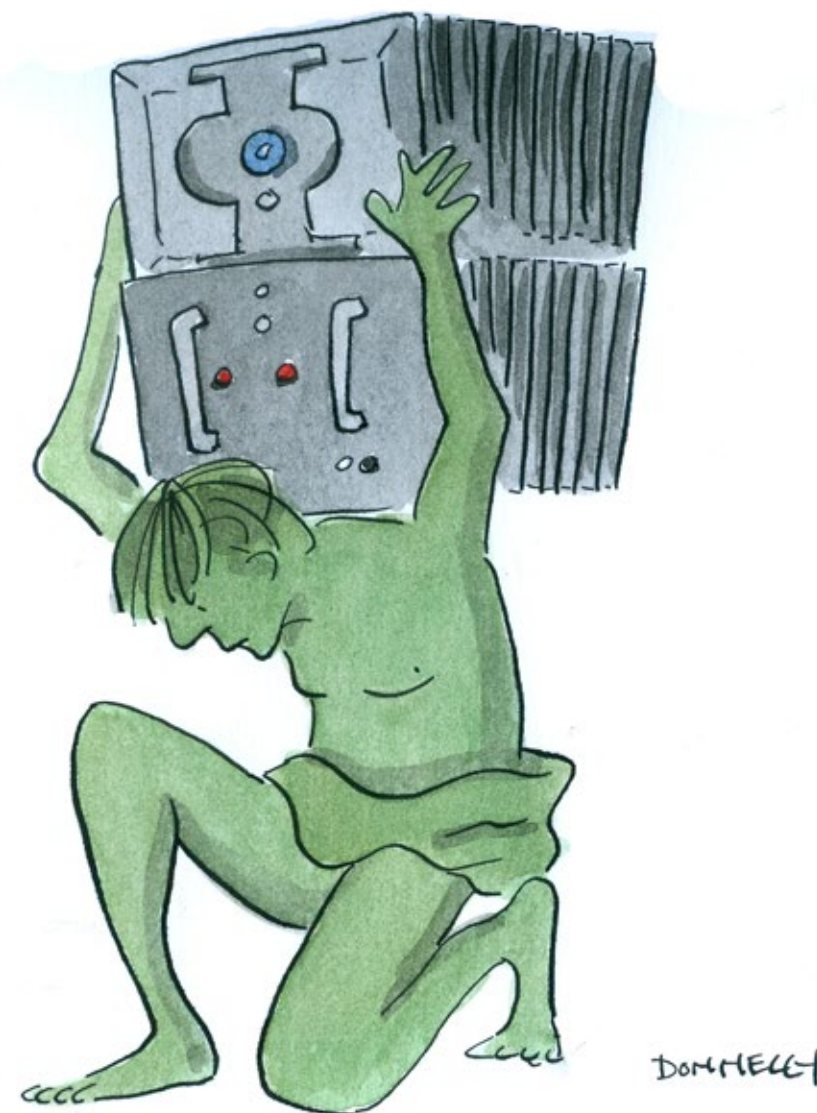
While he loves the sound of a good turntable, Connor has always maintained an exclusively computer-audio system, and has no idea where he would store a record library in his apartment. Dubstep, electro-house, and trance play alongside classic rock and an occasional piano concerto on his system, but any good music goes and nary will an audiophile test recording be heard.



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PART THREE

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# David Byrne & St. Vincent

## State Theatre

Sydney, Australia

January 18, 2013

By John Darko

David Byrne has always looked older. Now 60, he just looks old. The herky-jerky persona has been supplanted by an elegant shuffle whilst his little-boy-lost-at-the-zoo voice is the same as it ever was. At this stage, his receiving a sharp injection of youth via the presence of Annie Clark (aka St Vincent) constitutes a smart move. Their *Love This Giant* long-player is playful, witty, and fun. You can't say that about many Byrne solo records.

Taking the record on the road, Byrne and Clark chose support from a ten-piece band predominantly comprised of horn players. Alternating between lead and support roles, neither dominates the proceedings.







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Still, it's a joy to witness Clark's physical presence mainlining the Byrne of yesteryear. Picture the mechanical twitch of a malfunctioning marionette. As if on cue, team-played "Who" gives way to the Clark-led "Weekend In The Dust," which, in turn, naturalizes the transition to St. Vincent's "Save Me From What I Want."

"I made a record with Annie Clark and this may explain why things sound as they do," announced Byrne, tentatively explaining the absence of nostalgia. Of course, the latter is never far from reach. An elegant and beatific take on Talking Heads' "This Must Be The Place" draws a smattering of audience members out of their seats. A workaday take on Byrne's "Like Humans Do" is less successful. Ditto "Lazy". Stripped of its four-four kick and electronic pads, the tune doesn't translate.

The neat choreography fares better. Accidents are a deliberate hallmark of Byrne's oeuvre, and the show's playfulness

with shadows and faux-spontaneity recalls *Stop Making Sense*. The Clark-led "Ice Age" sees the remainder of the band play while laying down, eventually rising to its feet as the song comes to a boil.

It's almost as if David Byrne is handing over the baton to his younger teammate; this is Clark's show to steal. She explains how she's truly humbled and excited to be playing alongside the former Talking Heads frontman. Yes, the declaration might be nothing more than tidy and polite showbiz management, but it's sincere.

About that nostalgia: No other Talking Heads numbers emerge until the first encore. "Burning Down The House" witnesses the horn section let fly with full bombast. Strange, but not a stranger. And the closing "Road To Nowhere" sounds utterly glorious. While keeping his wild-eyed stare of confusion facing forward, Byrne's ongoing self re-invention continually digs up fresh joy from old songs.



# Leni Stern

**The Camelia Lounge**

Portland, Oregon

**February 7, 2013**

By Jeff Dorgay

W

hile finishing the  
soundcheck in the  
intimate atmosphere

of Portland's Camelia Lounge, Leni Stern lit up the stage with her broad smile as she focused on last-minute pedal adjustments, asked for more bass in her vocal mix, and nodded as the levels became correct. When asked about the lack of the usual set list, she laughed, responding, "I just go with the groove of the room. Every audience is different. It would be so unfair to give this crowd the same performance I delivered last night somewhere else." Her congeniality was a sign of things to come.





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At the start of the show, she immediately broke into a series of tunes from her current album, *Smoke, No Fire*, while brandishing a well-worn Stratocaster played with an intensity and delicate touch owing to Jeff Beck's influence. She also plucked feverishly on the N'goni, an instrument she described as the "precursor to the banjo," providing fusion on multiple levels. Plugged into her Fender amplifier, it became a bridge between ancient and modern technologies. Most of her songs are sung in a combination of English and the Malian of her bandmates, Mamadou Ba (bass) and Alioune Faye (percussion)—an interesting combination for a Munich-born guitarist currently hailing from New York City.

Each member was given ample time to stretch out, and in the longest jam of the evening, Ba wrestled his massive five-string bass during a full-on shred mode. Stern's tasteful playing consistently delivered exactly what each song required. At times, she crept up on the bass and percussion; at other intervals, she went straight to the forefront of a song, awash in tone and distortion.

While identified more as a jazz guitarist, Stern took many stylistic turns, including her pursuit of a prog-like groove that evoked vintage Return to Forever. She moved deftly through walls of tonal color, feeling as if the notes couldn't escape the fretboard fast enough, only to decelerate to barely a whisper on the following

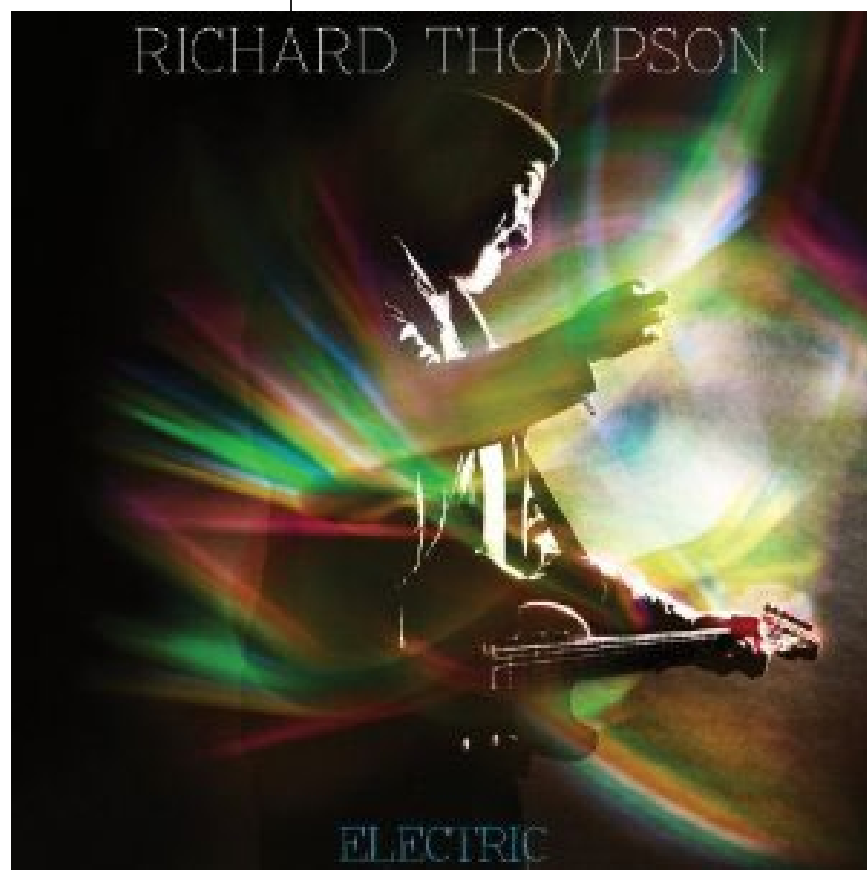
passage. This, all the while wringing more sound out of a solitary Fender Custom cabinet than seemed humanly possible.

Near the end of the set, Stern again traversed the gap between the diverse cultures in which she lives with "Winter," again singing half of the song in each language. She explained that it was an interesting song to write, "Because my two African friends really don't know winter." Now they do. ●





# New Releases



**Richard Thompson**  
*Electric*  
 New West, 2LP or CD

**D**uring the course of a 45-year professional career that began with Fairport Convention, Richard Thompson logged several impressive creative stretches, not least of which is a mid-70s stint that yielded a trio of exceptional albums with former life partner Linda Thompson. While the English native's wry well never ran dry, he stumbled in the mid-80s and throughout a majority of the 90s, when his songwriting suffered from unevenness and his over-produced albums wallowed in mediocrity. Then irony struck.

In a turn of events the clever Thompson surely must appreciate, Capitol Records kick-started his muse by dropping him from its roster at the turn of the century. He responded by launching his own imprint and, building off of 1999's thematic *Mock Tudor*, returned to his stripped-down roots. Always more comfortable as a cult favorite than a major-label artist under pressure to log a hit, Thompson hasn't erred in the past decade. He's currently in the midst of a splendid resurgence punctuated by 2003's wondrous *The Old Kit Bag* and 2010's superb *Dream Attic*. The melodically astute *Electric*, his New West debut, extends the hitting streak.

Pairing with drummer Michael Jerome and bassist Taras Prodaniuk in a trio setting, and fielding select contributions from producer/guitarist Buddy Miller and fiddler Stuart Duncan—as well as harmony vocal assistance—Thompson keeps the tunes lean and elegant, adhering to an economy of scale that government agencies would do well to employ in these times of budget crises.

While he maintains the ability to blow away most any other living guitarist via his tone, fluidness, control, expressiveness, and feel, Thompson doesn't waste a note or give a thought to showiness. Akin to an engrossing author that recognizes it's harder albeit more rewarding to pen meaningful short passages than rambling long-form statements, he makes every word and phrase matter.

Understatement remains one of Thompson's greatest assets. Built on folk-rock foundations, *Electric* spans acoustic to amplified arrangements, vitriolic to sympathetic moods, and observational to reflective perspectives—all the while never calling attention to any single characteristic. Miller knows well enough to take a hands-off approach, preserving a live feel that reinforces Thompson's natural instrumentalism and lyrical contrasts. As is his trademark, the singer relays life's romantic follies, paradoxical conflicts, and sage revelations with periscopic distance, minute detail, and uncanny accuracy. *(continued)*



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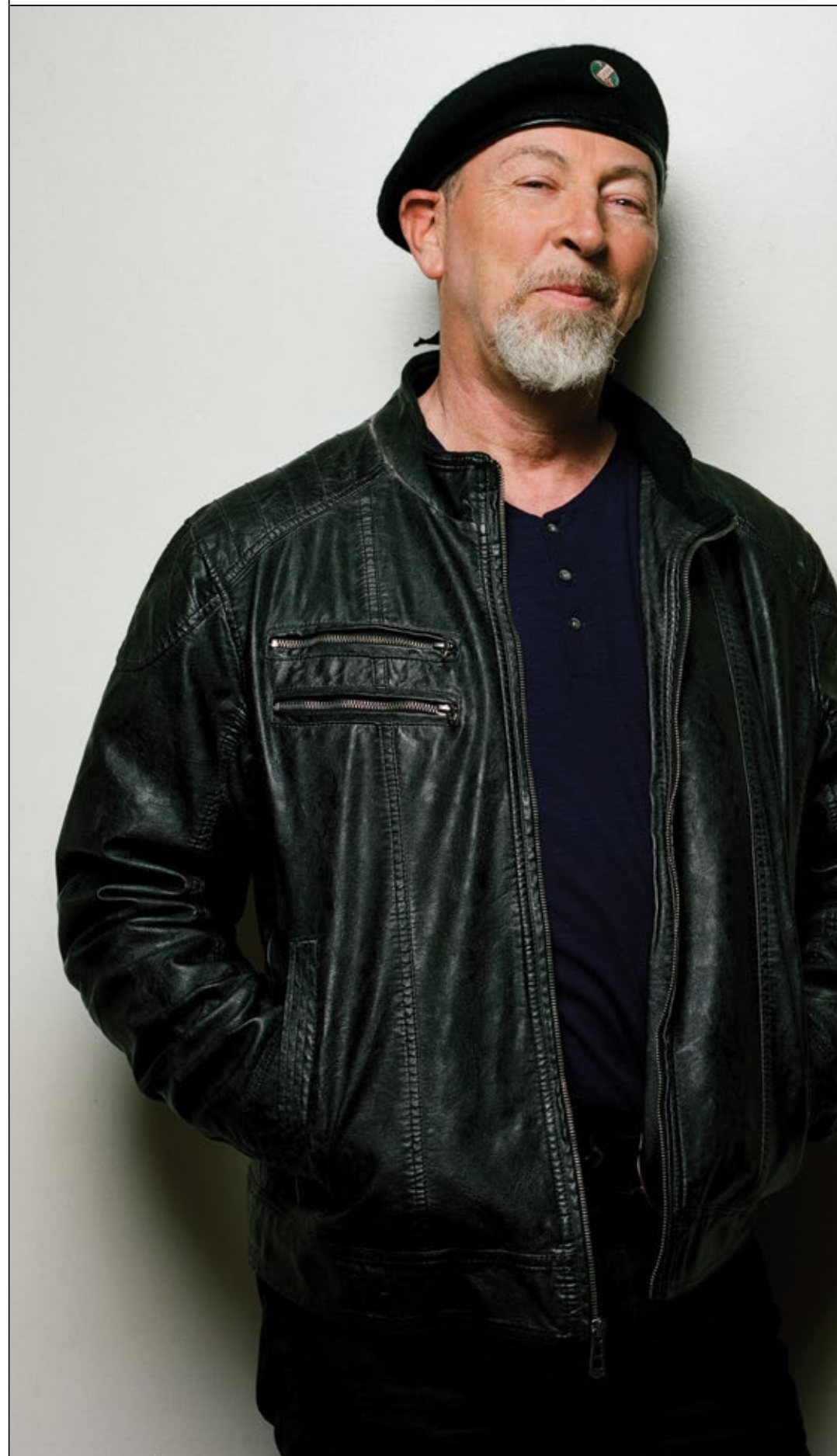
## MUSIC

Possessing an acerbic wit and double-edged esprit any savvy attorney would envy, Thompson sketches his protagonists with broad strokes and often eviscerates the line between hero and villain as to better allow his lacerating humor play tricks. He seemingly embraces and skewers a lust-filled old man on a stomping “Stoney Ground” and simultaneously curses and thanks an adversary on the subtly gorgeous “My Enemy.” For the poignant “Another Small Thing In Her Favour,” a brilliantly insightful (and waggish) reading into emotional wreckage and lingering bitterness wrought by failed long-term relationships, he occupies neutral ground as a one-upped cuckold.

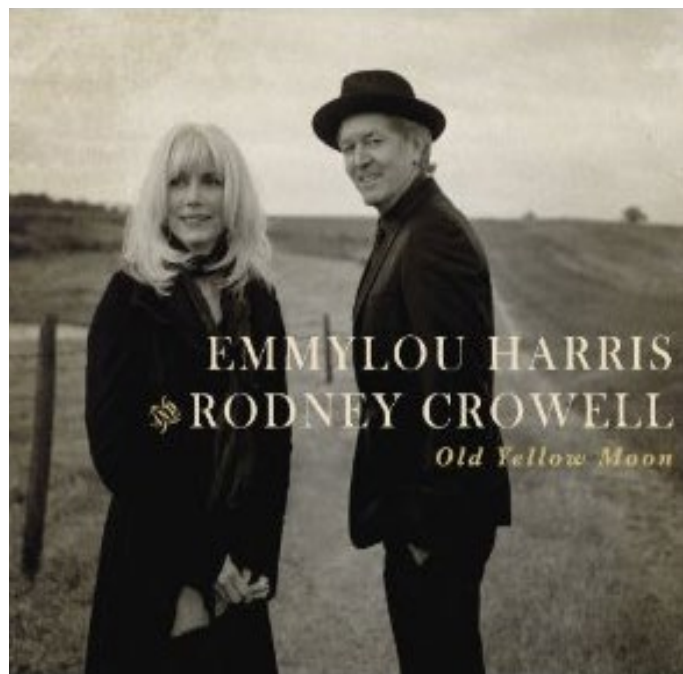
Indeed, while Thompson cuts rivals with a sharp blade (“Good Things Happen to Bad People,” “Sally B”) and pulls the knife out slowly, his tender moments indicate that, in spite of obviousness jadedness and cynicism, a flawed albeit sentimental humanism lies underneath the surface.

“I’ve had wives and I’ve treated them badly/And maybe a lover or two,” Thompson sincerely confesses on a waltzing “Saving the Good Stuff for You,” sounding as surprised as anyone that somebody tamed his troublesome ways. Providing anyone has the fortitude to use it in such a role, the country-styled ballad is destined to be the most honest wedding song ever written. —**Bob Gendron**

©Photo by Pamela Littky







### Emmylou Harris and Rodney Crowell

*Old Yellow Moon*

Nonesuch Records, CD

**O**ld *Yellow Moon* marks the first time Emmylou Harris and Rodney Crowell have officially collaborated on an entire album. But make no mistake: These two know each other courtesy of the wayback machine.

They first met in the 1970s, when Harris was launching out as a solo artist after the death of her mentor Gram Parsons. Crowell was an up-and-coming songsmith that eventually landed in Harris' legendary Hot Band. He went on to success as a solo artist and songwriter. She went on to a coronation as the queen of alternative country. Both are genuinely distinctive singers. His tenor is crackly and emotive. Her soprano is delicate at its core and ragged around the edges.



©Photo by David McClister

The bond between these artists feels familiar, intimate, casual, and second nature. As a whole, *Old Yellow Moon* sounds like a wonderfully rambling musical conversation between two old friends. Crowell wrote four tunes; the rest stem from other songwriters. The end result: A well-rounded musical mix that focuses on love (mostly lost) and youth (mostly gone).

Harris and Crowell go smartly uptempo on Kris Kristofferson's sly, snapping "Chase the Feeling." They get funky on the snaky blues "Black Caffeine." The gently swinging "Hanging Up My Heart" rides a loping beat and crying steel. These numbers are nestled beside more quietly lacerating material, including the rueful "Open Season" and rootsy chamber pop of Patty Scialfa's "Spanish Dancer."

"Back When We Were Beautiful," written by Matraca Berg, one of the finest modern country songwriters in Nashville, comes on as the *tour de force*. The song's protagonist is an older woman grappling with the realities of aging. For anyone dealing with the often surreal and painful aspects of growing older, this tune is startling in its raw vocalization of dark internal fears: "I hate it when they say/I'm aging gracefully/I fight it every day/I guess they never see/I don't like this at all/What's happening to me?"

Here, Harris' voice cracks with vulnerability, her delivery brave, bereft, forlorn. Crowell joins her, his vocals entwining with hers for a true cry of the heart. It's a haunting interpretation, the two singers alternately expressing anxiety and acceptance. Given that Harris and Crowell are aging themselves, it's one of the most fearless pop music performances in recent memory.

Not all the tracks on *Old Yellow Moon* rise to the heart-wrenching stature of "Back When We Were Beautiful." Then again, if they did, this album might be too wounding to bear.  
—**Chrissie Dickinson**

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MUSIC



**Dawn McCarthy & Bonnie "Prince" Billy**  
*What the Brothers Sang*  
Drag City, LP or CD

Even today, a half a decade later, the songs of the Everly Brothers still sound like magic. Whether it's the unmistakable, sweep-you-off-your-feet harmonies or always-pristine production—even the group's saddest songs sound born not in the studio but in a candy shop—the Everly Brothers endure. And perhaps it could even be argued today that the collective is unjustly overlooked, arriving just before the more exciting British Invasion of the 60s and now forever tied to *Top Gun*.

Seeing the hypnotizing effect the Everly Brothers had on her children, West Coast folk-pop artist Dawn McCarthy has said she was inspired to more deeply revisit the act's catalog. The result, *What the Brothers Sang*, is her latest collaboration with Bonnie "Prince" Billy, otherwise known as Will Oldham, a long-cherished singer/songwriter voice of the independent community. *(continued)*





©Photo by Lindsey Rome

**McCarthy and Billy, by and large, distance themselves from the Everly arrangements by opting for an earthier, back-porch approach. This is reverence at its most casual.**

The 13 songs here aren't necessarily the obvious ones. "Omaha," a loving, homesick ode to the Midwest, is a particularly choice find, as is the torch ballad "What Am I Living For." A number of Everly songwriters are represented, including Felice and Boudleaux Bryant (the string-adorned lullaby "Devoted to You"), Tony Romeo (the nostalgic prance of "Milk Train"), and Gerry Goffin and Carole King (the swaying, mystical country ditty "You're Just What I Was Looking for Today").

McCarthy and Billy, by and large, distance themselves from the Everly arrangements by opting for an earthier, back-porch approach. Still, they stop short from completely reworking the songs. The one exception comes courtesy of the borderline psychedelic folk of "My Little Yellow Bird," which plays out like a twisted children's tune. Yet the emphasis here remains on simplifying rather than adorning. The orchestral rhythm & blues of the Everly's "Somebody Help Me," for instance, becomes a roots rocker at its most direct. This is reverence at its most casual. —**Todd Martens**

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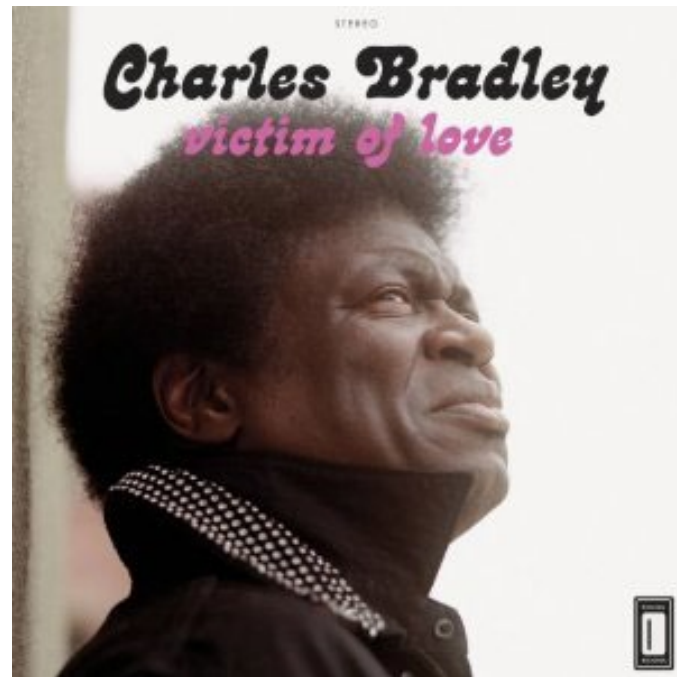
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- 1 cup - Zu Audio DL-103 phono cartridge
- 1 cup - K&K Audio Premium MC step-up.
- 1 cup - Mapleshade Scott 222.

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p.s. For a little extra kick add a **Roland Sands Cafe Racer**.





### Charles Bradley

*Victim of Love*

Dunham Records, LP or CD

“been through so many changes,” sings Charles Bradley near the close of his sophomore album, *Victim of Love*. “But somehow I hold on.”

What the Florida-born soul man describes as “changes,” most people would term tragedies. Large swaths of his biography sound like they could have been culled from the pages of a Charles Dickens novel. As a teenager, Bradley spent years living on the streets of New York City, splitting his time between subway cars and various flophouses. Shortly thereafter, he joined Job Corps, a vocational program initiated by Lyndon Johnson, and traveled coast-to-coast working as a short-order cook. In his spare time, he took on gigs as a James Brown impersonator, only landing a deal with Daptone Records after label founder Gabriel Roth caught his routine at Brooklyn’s now-defunct Tar-Heel Lounge in the early 2000s.



©Photo by Darren Bastecky

Rather than celebrating, however, Bradley found himself coping with the brutal murder of his brother—a life-altering event he described to me in graphic detail in a 2012 interview, saying, “When they shot him, they shot him with a hollow point bullet... and his head exploded like a tomato.”

These hardships inform much of the 64-year-old singer’s long-in-the-works debut, *No Time For Dreaming*, a smoldering set that condenses a lifetime of hurt into a dozen tear-stained tracks. The personal nature of his breakthrough likely had many wondering what Bradley would do for an encore. Midway through *Victim of Love*, the soul man poses the very question to himself, singing,

“Where do we go from here?”

At its core, the singer’s sophomore effort is far more optimistic. True, Bradley remains plagued by the usual heartaches and pains, but this time around, his troubles seem more commonplace and far less debilitating. On the album-opening “Strictly Reserved For You,” for one, he moans about escaping the all-consuming crush of city life, sounding like a man who’s spent a little too much time packed like a sardine on a standing-room-only A train.

Indeed, even when those more monumental storms arise—Bradley bemoans society’s seemingly endless downward spiral on “Hurricane,” a vaguely psychedelic cut drenched in triumphant soul horns—they tend

to be short lived. He follows the outburst with “Through the Storm,” a pleasant, morning-after-the-down-pour cut that doubles as a heartfelt thanks to those who stood by him in his times of need. “When the world gives you love,” he sings, “It frees your soul.” On the title track, a sighing ballad colored in gentle acoustic strumming, this love sounds closer than ever (“I woke up this morning, I felt your love beside me”).

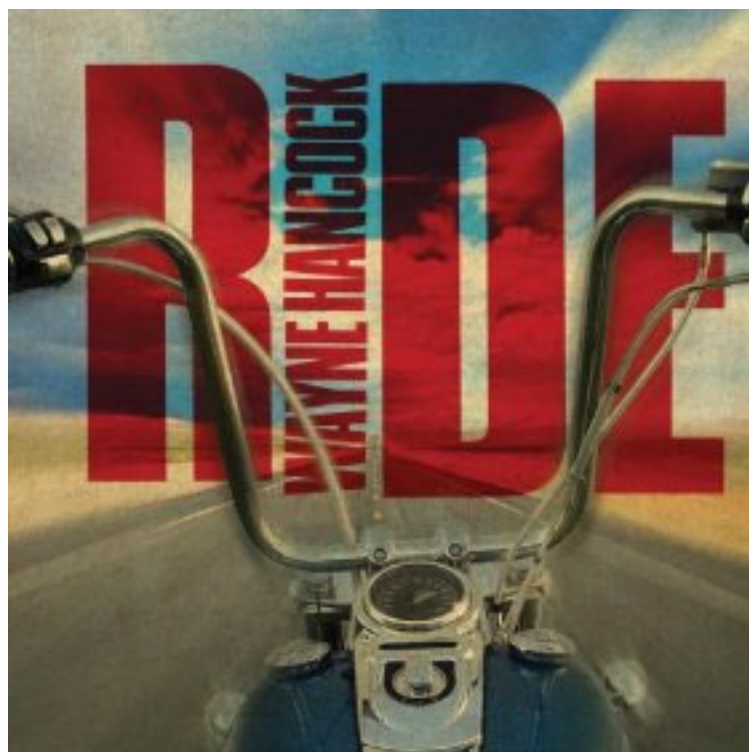
But while the vocalist appears to have finally found some long-overdue peace in his own life, the music on *Victim of Love* remains restless and unsteady. Songs are dense with ecstatic horns, buzzing guitars (dig the psych-drenched solo that knifes through “Strictly Reserved For

You”), and echo-laden vocals. It’s a welcome change, to be sure, and the more muscular grooves pack a deeper wallop than almost anything on his debut.

Last time around, illumination only arrived in the form of great conflagrations (witness “The World (Is Going Up In Flames)”). Not so here. “My brothers, my sisters,” Bradley rasps like a would-be preacher on “Where Do We Go From Here,” a searing cut that could almost pass for the Temptations at their most psychedelic, “It’s time to make this world a brighter place for the generation to come.” Consider this stunning album Bradley’s first stride towards that more promising future.

—Andy Downing




**Wayne Hancock**
*Ride*

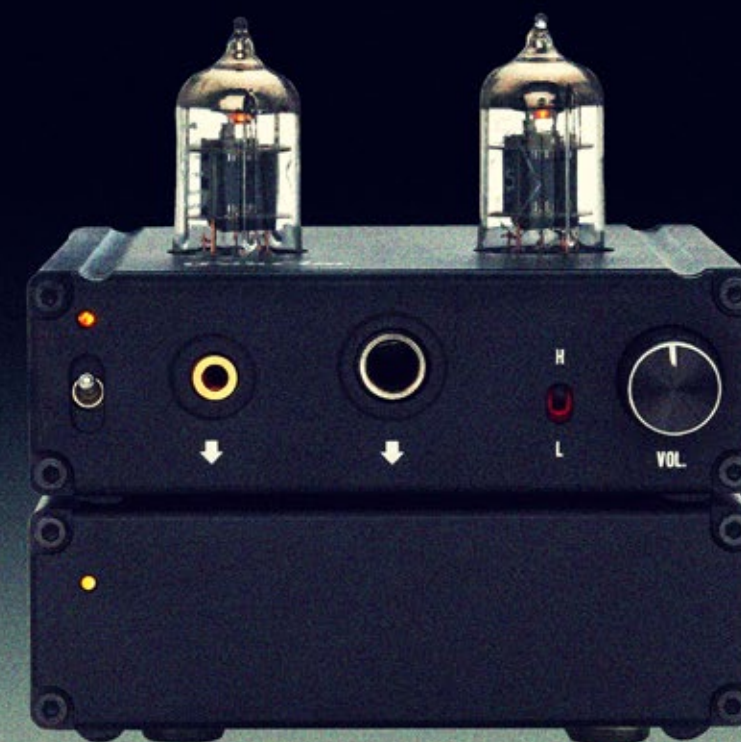
Bloodshot Records, LP or CD

**T**here have always been ghosts in Wayne “The Train” Hancock’s music. Ever since his debut in 1995 as a rough-cut neo-traditionalist, the fiery Texan has channeled artists from country’s golden age. Those late kindred spirits have included western swing king Bob Wills, honky-tonk legend Ernest Tubb, and hillbilly boogie pioneers the Maddox Brothers and Rose.

But most of all, the great Hank Williams, Sr. hovers over Hancock’s music, a streak that extends to his latest release, *Ride*. Indeed, there are times when Hancock’s astringent twang bears a striking similarity to country’s most famous lovesick blues boy.

*Ride* is Hancock’s eighth record and fifth for Chicago’s insurgent country label, Bloodshot Records. It marks a welcome return for the road warrior that checked into rehab for substance addiction in 2011 and is now back on tour and working towards a life of sobriety. *(continued)*

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## MUSIC

He sounds refreshed and ready to rock, charging out of the gate on the title track, a raw and primitive piece of rock n' roll. Hancock, a singer and rhythm guitarist, wrote all the tunes here but one. His crew is considerable, with long-time co-producer and Texas legend Lloyd Maines (also the father of Dixie Chick Natalie Maines) joining ace backing players Bob Stafford on electric guitar and trombone, Zack Sapunor on upright bass, Eddie Rivers on steel guitar, and Eddie Biebel and Tjarko Jeen on electric guitars. He is generous with his shout-outs on record, name-checking his players ala Bob Wills.

Over the years, he's learned a lot in the club scene about what makes an audience dance. From the walking bass line on "Low Down Blues" to the chugging beat of the cheating epic "Deal Gone Down," his songs are built to get everybody in the joint up on their feet. Even when the sentiments are sorrowful ("Tear Drops On the Table") and his voice is drenched in the blue tones of a crying steel guitar ("Best To Be Alone"), toe-tapping beats remain a constant. Hancock also demonstrates a keen touch for country-jazz on "Gal From Kitchen's Field," his weather-beaten voice tucked inside the warm interplay of guitar and trombone.

Hancock's music has always been a love letter to the past. In his world, there's a honky-tonk on the edge of town where Hank Sr. is forever the headliner.

—**Chrissie Dickinson**

©Photo by Sandy Carson





**Toro Y Moi**  
*Anything In Return*  
 Carpark, LP or CD

**D**espite continually being lumped in with the chillwave movement—an amorphous genre that specializes in hazy, synth-drenched songs that essentially exist as the sonic equivalent of not giving a fuck—producer/singer Chaz Bundick of Toro Y Moi has always been the more ambitious type. While his murky 2010 debut *Causers of This* certainly flirted with the aforementioned form, subsequent albums found the musician stretching out into futuristic art-disco (*Underneath the Pine*) and bubbling avant-funk (the aptly titled *Freaking Out EP*).

*Anything In Return*, Bundick's third full-length studio album, finds him offering up a shimmering slice of headphone R&B that exists somewhere between these poles. Songs here are largely down-tempo, but the production is polished and silky, making the record come across like a collection of bedroom jams for someone that clearly isn't getting any. "When you talk about how your room shakes at night," Bundick sings on one tune, "I wonder if you spend that time/ Taking photos with a friend of mine."



Although the vocalist still sounds more comfortable in the role of an outsider, he's also at his most emotionally unguarded. "I will be her boy forever," he pledges with startling honesty on "Cake." He takes a similarly naked approach to his vocals, placing them front and center rather than burying them in all manner of sonic fuzz. At first blush, this almost seems a mistake. Unlike artists mining similar sonic territory—Miguel, the Weeknd's Abel Tesfaye, or even Tom Krell of *How to Dress Well*—Bundick doesn't have a knee-buckling set of pipes. His vocals can be described as workman-like, even at their best. Fortunately, his unassuming voice turns out to be the perfect vehicle for the album's more earnest and sometimes clumsy declarations of love.

Bundick marries the words to a patchwork musical backdrop that doubles as something of an overview of his production career, flitting between radio-friendly R&B ("Cake"), iced-out funk (the slow-rolling "High Living"), and space-age disco (the pulsating "Rose Quartz," which sounds like digitized seduction). Unlike earlier albums, however, the musician places an increased effort on the low end, layering tracks with woofer-rattling bass lines that anchor the sound and temper his more ethereal urges.

On his oft-weightless debut, Bundick sounded more interested in stimulating the mind than the body, which might explain why the album plays like the soundtrack to a contact high. This time out, he clearly hopes to get hips shaking. Most tempos are ratcheted up, and the entire package is coated with a thick shellac of pop gloss. It's quite a transformation, and Bundick pulls it off with admirable aplomb, akin to a former A/V Club geek claiming the mantle of senior prom king. —**Andy Downing**





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**Inc.**  
*No World*  
4AD, LP or CD

But to 1995, and the music literati would have no doubt been confident that the artists with the most to impart to the next generation of indie-rock acts would have such last names as Cobain, Vedder, Cornell, and Corgan. Yet there's mounting evidence that the listening habits of those who came of age in the 90s are vastly different than the listening habits of those who actually grew up in the 90s. For the latter, names such as Aaliyah, D'Angelo, and TLC appear to be among the generation's most influential artists.

L.A.'s Inc., a sibling act signed to 4AD, is the latest appropriator of the deep grooves and slowed-down electronic techno-babble that marked a significant portion of early-to-mid 90s R&B. These strands don't always show themselves obviously, but they're there in the singer/songwriter approach of James Blake, electronic loneliness of the xx, sexy effortlessness of *How to Dress Well*, and the pop of Haim, among many others. *(continued)*



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**Atmosphere is more important than melody to Inc., or at least that's the way *No World* comes across. For the most part, that's fine, as it's where the tension lies. Everything sounds in its right place, yet nothing sounds quite right at all.**

Think of Inc., nominally, as a more fleshed-out version of the xx, an act signed 4AD sister label XL Recordings. That's oversimplifying things a bit, but it's a starting point. It's also helpful to know that Daniel and Andrew Aged spent a number of years recording and touring with the likes of Pharell Williams, Cee Lo Green, Robin Thicke, and Raphael Saadiq.

Perhaps that is why *No World* brims with near-perfect professionalism, be it the underwater feel of "Black Wings" or the synthesizers that sound smothered in a comforter on "Trust (Hell Below)." "Lifetime" feels built from a collection of effects meant for an old sci-fi TV show and "Desert Rose (War Prayer)" seems destined for a magical campfire. First and foremost, this is a seduction record, a mood piece with the lights dimmed low for the entirety of its 41-minute length. Whispers and wannabe-Prince falsettos dominate, as do spacious, surprisingly arty bass lines.

Ultimately, atmosphere is more important than melody to Inc., or at least that's the way *No World* comes across. For the most part, that's fine, as it's where the tension lies. Everything sounds in its right place, yet nothing sounds quite right at all.

—Todd Martens



©Photo by Natasha Ghosn





**FIDLAR**  
*FIDLAR*  
 Mom + Pop, LP or CD

**N**ever mind that the two main parties in the U.S. government won't compromise for the common good, that unchecked global warming increasingly devastates food supplies and environmental balances, that debt-induced recession looms over the international marketplace, and that tensions in the Middle East continue to spiral beyond control. None of the issues matter. Hell, none even exists in FIDLAR's universe, a half-baked world in which surfing, sex, sleeping, smoking, drinking, and drugs comprise the totality of existence.

Such subjects have long informed raucous rock and roll, and often, serve as conduits for frustration and rebellion. Yet these four Los Angeles burnouts convey the chaos on their buzzed-about self-titled debut as if it's a life choice.

Save for the betrayal of a girlfriend, FIDLAR's youthful members revolt against nothing else than running out of dope or realizing they're broke. Several obvious punk-related reference points—early Replacements, Descendents, Black Flag, early Green Day—largely figure into their pawn-shop guitar distortion and out-of-tune cacophony. The slightly humorous juvenilia and apathetic attitude would soon be forgettable, but then, the band's combustible hooks and sawed-off melodies take over.

FIDLAR sounds aggressive and, on fare such as the defiant “Cheap Beer” and insubordinate “White on White,” borderline angry. However, these skateboarders aren't mad about much; they have

no reason to be. No wonder nearly every song comes off as the theme for a house party at which everything and everyone gets trashed, and nobody pays any mind. Who needs responsibility or a job? FIDLAR's only concerns relate to amusement, self-satisfaction, and scoring the next high. Usually, the three aims are interwoven.

DARE graduates FIDLAR are not. Cocaine, weed, smack, PCP, 8-ball: *FIDLAR* is littered with more drug references than Motley Crue's career. Just don't expect any hair-metal glamour. Aimlessness, homelessness, and dirtiness infiltrate swirling, hyperactive declarations (“Wake Bake Skate”) and fuzz-encrusted screeds (“Blackout Stout”) that beg to be shouted in a sloshed mental state, Styrofoam cup of beer in hand.

Is all a joke meant in good fun? Perhaps. The pharmaceutical-laden narratives are certainly

a long way from the TV-watching, masturbation, and boredom chronicled in “Longview.” Then again, every generation needs its own slacker heroes. And so it is with the entitlement crowd.

Drunken high-school revelers, class-ditching stoners, dead-end amateur dealers, and grown-ups refusing to confront reality (temporarily or permanently): FIDLAR welcomes you to your future. Now hand 'em your joint. —**Bob Gendron**





### Lady Lamb & the Beekeeper

*Ripely Pine*

Ba Da Bing, LP or CD

It's okay to feel uncomfortable while listening to Lady Lamb & the Beekeeper's proper, studio debut. Much of this 12-song record from 23-year-old Aly Spaltro will, in fact, feel strikingly familiar, both in sound (the soft-to-furiously-anxious acoustic strumming of angry open-mic singers everywhere), and topics, namely of the you-ripped-my-heart-out metaphor variety. First loves, lost loves, and misguided loves: All of it is jumbled up as if high school never ended in these dozen melodic warning signs to future suitors.

Ghost, limbs, and missing jewelry—thrown on the floor after heavy-petting sessions—pepper Lady Lamb's songs, which possess a lyrical worldview that doesn't draw a distinction between romance and torture. "You've gotta be starving, you gotta be starving for it," she sings on "Crane Your Neck." And that's one of the more lovely moments, in which you can hear every pluck of her acoustic strings and where she sings almost as if she likes you.

While this is her first collection of works that isn't recorded DIY-style on an eight-track, *Ripely Pine* doesn't much attempt to pretty up the songs. Often, the airiness makes it sound as if she's still singing in an empty bedroom, with drums and small horn sections occasionally popping in for a verse. "Hair to the Ferris Wheel" builds to a feedback-drenched midsection, channeling mid-'90s Juliana Hatfield-inspired alt-rock. Meanwhile, the upbeat trumpets of "Aubergine" give the tune the feel of an European café.

Still, you'll likely have to forgive her for the song's "make me into an egg without yolk" imagery, as you will the "naked as a newborn in the snow" (is that a thing somewhere?) phrase in "Bird Balloons," which otherwise stands as one of the more ambitious, surprising arrangements on the album. Ultimately, though, whether this LP makes a lasting impression will likely depend on what kind of lyrics you had written on your high-school folder, and whether or not you can still relate to them. —**Todd Martens**



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# PASS

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Shuggie Otis has the kind of backstory that makes music obsessives swoon.

Over a five-year period beginning in 1969, Otis, the offspring of R&B legend Johnny Otis, issued a trio of albums for Epic Records. After the 1974 release of *Inspiration Information*, he was invited to join the Rolling Stones as a touring guitarist. He declined. Shortly thereafter, his recording contract with Epic was nullified. The next three decades were relatively quiet for the musician. Aside from some irregular session work for his father, Otis all but withdrew from the music industry, and his discography was relegated to the dustbin. (continued)

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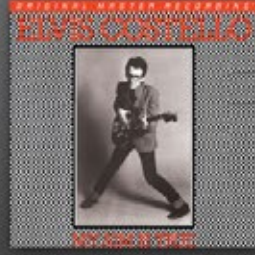
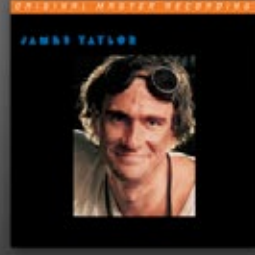
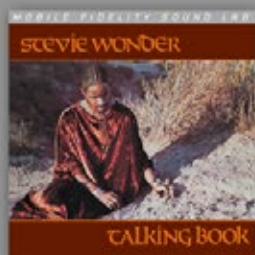


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MUSIC



Shuggie Otis

Inspiration Information/Wings of Love  
Epic/Legacy, 2CD

Then, in the 1990s, *Inspiration Information* unexpectedly gained a cult following, and the psychedelic soul album garnered praise from by musicians such as Prince to noted crate digger DJ Shadow. In April 2001, the record was reissued by David Byrne's boutique Luaka Bop imprint. Still, Otis continued to maintain a low profile, opting not to record and kept live appearances to a minimum.

Adding to the sense of intrigue is the fact that Otis is undoubtedly a virtuosic guitarist, having joined his father's band at age 12 before going on to perform alongside Frank Zappa, Etta James, and Bobby Bland, among countless others. He's also far from a one-trick pony. In addition to playing virtually every instrument on *Inspiration Information*, Otis assumed all of the

writing and arranging duties. Considering the circumstances, it's hard not to both romanticize Otis' early years and wonder what might have been. What, in fact, did this lost soul man have left to say to the world?

The latest reissue of *Inspiration Information*, packaged with four bonus tracks and the "lost" album *Wings of Love*—a collection of 14 songs recorded between 1975 and 2000—answers the question with a resounding "not much."

Despite containing material recorded over two-plus decades, *Wings of Love* comes on like a half-finished collection of oddities, demos, and dead ends. Songs like "Fawn" and the lumbering "Give Me a Chance" sound weirdly dated. The latter, with its twinkling synthesizers and programmed drums, could double as the soundtrack to every 1980s public service announcement. The glossy "Walkin' Down the Country," in turn, exists as a study in synthesized cheese, complete with new-age chimes and a syrupy sweet vocal chorus.

While Otis is a fine guitarist (his inspired soloing on the 11-minute-plus title track nearly makes up for the fact that he opens a song called "Wings of Love" by sampling a goddamned seagull), he's merely passable as a vocalist. As a lyricist, however, he's

downright horrendous, and *Wings of Love* is packed with more forced rhymes than an amateur poetry slam. In one 45-second stretch on "Doin' What's Right," he manages to rhyme "inspiration," "nation," "proclamation," and "observation." (A few suggestions for the eventual remix: "obfuscation," "segregation," "cardiopulmonary resuscitation.") He's also overly obsessed with the fairer sex, and nearly every tune exists as some play on the phrase "I want to get with you"—some more blatantly than others. "C'mon girl, let's go to bed," he commands on "Tryin' to Get Close to You."

That's not to say the album is completely without merit. Musical highlights are scattered throughout, like the scorched blues organ fueling "Fireball of Love," the snappy vocal melody that closes out "Tryin' to Get Close to You," and the bell-bottomed funk riffs pulsating through the disco-era remembrances of "Special" and "Give Me Something Good."

Unfortunately, modern-day Otis seems to specialize in these kinds of moments rather than, you know, actual songs. And while this might make his current output ideal for enterprising DJs/producers/beat makers on the hunt for fresh source material, it's a tough slog for the rest of us.

—Andy Downing




**Jimi Hendrix**

*People, Hell & Angels*  
Legacy, 200g 2LP or CD

**A**nother year, another posthumous Jimi Hendrix record cobbled together with unearthed rarities and miscellaneous outtakes. Right? Mostly. *People, Hell & Angels*, branded as the successor to 2010's *Valley of Neptune*, gathers material the guitarist recorded between 1968 and 1970 outside of the original Experience trio.

Unlike that on previous Hendrix compilations, the fare here is advertised as complete even if several of the songs come across as works in progress. The other headline news relates to the sonics.

Quality Record Pressings oversaw the analog release and, even on CD, the dynamics, headroom, and tonalities shine. Audiophiles and Hendrix aficionados accustomed to the varying quality on collections such as *West Seattle Boy*—aural characteristics that, due to the nature of the source material, remain out of anybody's control—get an early Christmas present.

The songs aren't half-bad, either. Now for the reality check: All the hyperbole and grandstanding doesn't change the fact that, in spite of Hendrix's visionary skills and creative ambition, what's left in the vaults does not approach the compositions or arrangements found on the groundbreaking *Are You Experienced* and *Axis: Bold As Love*. The title may be coined by Hendrix, yet *People, Hell & Angels* plays and feels like a compendium—an intriguing one, but one that nonetheless cannot disguise its identity as a patchwork array of ideas and themes that constantly remind listeners they're not hearing a finished product. Rather, they're experiencing several insiders'

ideas of what they think Hendrix what have wanted.

Several tracks will instantly ring familiar to devotees. Drawn from Hendrix's first session with Band of Gypsys members Billy Cox and Buddy Miles, a searing version of the loose blues "Hear My Train A Comin'" rivals previous renditions. Debuted at Woodstock, "Izabella" is afforded a deeper R&B groove than other editions. And "Somewhere," captured in March 1968, differs in texture from its predecessors and also features Stephen Stills on bass. Historical nuggets, all, and each salt-and-peppered with the legend's still-unsurpassed six-string bending and soulful maneuvering.

Surprises, however, are few. An exception is the funk workout "Let Me Move You," on which Hendrix trades phrases with former collaborator and saxophonist Lonnie Youngblood. A reminder of Hendrix's chitlin' circuit roots, the performance hints at what the guitarist might have done had he more religiously followed a jazz and R&B muse. Ditto the horn-soaked "Mojo Man," on which

psychedelic juju speaks with a Muscle Shoals accent.

As curiosity items go, *People, Hell & Angels* is akin to browsing at a flea market, spotting what might be a painting by a known master, taking it to a professional for an appraisal, and learning that it's a great forgery. The analogy isn't to suggest that anything on this twelve-track affair lacks authenticity, only that sketches do not make a masterpiece.  
—**Bob Gendron**



# Classic Album Sundays

By Colleen 'Cosmo' Murphy

## Publisher's Note:

For those not familiar with Colleen Murphy, she's been producing an event over in the UK called "Classic Album Sundays," where she finds a great space, takes the time to set up a proper high-end system, and after some drinks, snacks and a discussion of the music influencing the afternoon's chosen record, plays it, on vinyl, start to finish. The lights are dimmed, cell phones are turned off, and your full attention is required.

Needless to say it's a massive hit worldwide, and is about to take hold here in the States. Colleen will be doing a session at the New York Audio Show this April, and *TONEAudio* will be hosting some CAS sessions with Murphy's blessing here in Portland, Oregon this year. We will also be hearing from Colleen every issue, with the latest album on her roster.

Here, she makes her case for Led Zeppelin's *Houses of the Holy* ...



## Classic Album Sundays' Album of the Month: Led Zeppelin's *Houses of the Holy*

*Houses of the Holy* does not rank as most Led Zeppelin fans' favorite album. That accolade is usually reserved for the heavy-duty *Led Zeppelin II* or the behemoth *Led Zeppelin IV*. However, Classic Album Sundays is featuring *Houses of the Holy* as our March Album of the Month firstly because it will be 40 years old on the 28th and, secondly, because it showed the band at the height of its powers and doing as it bloody well pleased, thank you very much. It still sounds great today, too.

While touring throughout 1972, Zeppelin was being maneuvered into position as "The Biggest Band in the World" by manager Peter Grant, whose business acumen started to shine when he came up with the nifty idea of taking 90% of gate revenues, unheard of at the time. In between tour legs, the band recorded its fifth album and, full of the confidence of kings, not only gave it a proper name, but had a bit of fun experimenting.

*Houses of the Holy* finds the band using more synthesizers and guitar overdubs and trying its hand at different musical styles. "D'yer Maker" gives a nod not only to the emerging reggae sounds grabbing hold of Britain, but also to 50s rock n' roll heartthrob Ricky Nelson.

"The Crunge" pays tribute to James Brown and features drummer John Bonham having a laugh playing with different time signatures. "The Rain Song" is inspired by George Harrison's comment that Zeppelin should record more ballads, and begins with the introductory chords of the Harrison-penned "Something".

This cornucopia of musical sounds should not have come as any surprise. Before joining the Yardbirds, guitarist Jimmy Page was already a seasoned session player and, at one point, was credited on many of the hits being played on the radio. His manifold musical influences prepared him for the role: He was not only obsessed with the blues, but with folk, Indian music, rockabilly, skiffle, and classical guitar. "I saw the guitar as a multifaceted instrument and this has stayed with me throughout," he told Dave Schulps in *Trouser Press*. And even the man with the ferocious white blues voice, Robert Plant, would soon lament to NME that he wanted to write something as superb as Mendelssohn's "Fingal's Cave".

Many critics—having dug the dirge-like grooves and all-guns-blazing spirit of Zeppelin's first two albums—lambasted *Houses of the Holy* as not heavy enough, man. Some accused the band of going disco, and *Rolling Stone* even name-called the LP a "limp blimp." (*continued*)



# 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**.

A dedicated and passionate knight from a yet another tale, Amadis was born from Verity's undying quest to continue seeking musical truth. Featuring a healthy 93db sensitivity, and with larger, more powerful drivers than Parsifal, Amadis promises to fulfill the desires of those who have loved the transparency and liquidity of Parsifal but seek even more power, extension, and impact. Palpable and accurate, with natural rendering of tone and texture from top to bottom, Amadis is otherwise pure Verity. In short, Amadis faithfully picks up where Parsifal began so long ago.

So we beg the question: are you still searching for your Holy Grail?

The answer to your quest may be closer than you think.



## MUSIC

Other fans bemoaned the diminished presence of overt *Lord of the Rings* references, only to thankfully be able to turn their wands to *Dungeons and Dragons*, published the following year. Not that Zeppelin could be lumped in with other bands whose ersatz employment of occult imagery verged on the ridiculous. Page was an astute follower of the philosophies of Aleister Crowley; Plant possessed a profound knowledge of Celtic mythology.

In retrospect, *Houses of the Holy* wasn't completely out of step with the quartet's previous work. The band already proved itself on the ballad front with "Going to California" and bluesy "Since I've Been Loving You." Zeppelin also laid down some serious booty-shakers, such as "Whole Lotta Love" and "Misty Mountain Hop," before paying tribute to Soul Brother Number One. And what's wrong with crediting other styles other than blues? By taking chances, doing something different, and refusing to be a one-trick pony, Zeppelin became one of the true greats.

So this March, go forth and partake in the sacrament that is "Houses of the Holy" celebrating its anniversary by giving it your undivided attention in an uninterrupted playback session. And make it loud and proud. Happy listening. ●





## FEATURE

# AVA Media Maestro-50 Digital Amplifier

By Mark Marcantonio



The Maestro-50 digital amplifier from AVA Media is about the size of a hefty paperback novel and is aimed at the computer- and desktop-audio worlds. This diminutive amplifier takes the approach of keeping the audio signal in the digital domain until the last possible step before it crosses over into analog.

The simple configuration of the \$359 Maestro-50 begs the user to power it up first and examine it later. I begin by connecting the amp to my MacBook using the TOSLINK cable, with a Shunyata Venom 3 power cord delivering the juice and Cardas speaker cables connecting it to a pair of Harbeth Compact 7ES-3s. The solo piano of a live version of Jamie Cullum's "Wheels" pops forth with all the quickness one would expect from ICE-powered amplification. Having listened to live music in the lounge where this recording was made, I'm impressed by how the Maestro-50 gets the basics of the room's tonal quality correct right out of the box.

Revisiting this track after a week of burn-in reveals less edginess and a more open high end. The rolling keystrokes accompanying this catchy tune rapidly move from calm to intense, with Cullum's slightly hoarse vocals now more clearly dominating the track—a definite improvement.

## Simple, but Not Too Simple

The Maestro-50 is a basic-looking but handsome piece of equipment, with an enclosure sculpted from aluminum and anodized in a brushed black finish. The CNC millwork is hand-finished with rounded edges. The box measures 7 inches wide, 4.6 inches deep and 1.75 inches tall, with the front panel showing only an off-white LED and a small push-button volume knob—the ultimate in simplicity. *(continued)*



## FEATURE



The back panel is just the opposite. AVA was able to maximize this tiny bit of real estate to include a horizontal power-toggle switch, three-prong power-cord receptacle, S/PDIF, TOS-LINK, subwoofer RCA out inputs and left and right female banana connections for the speaker outputs. A USB-to-S/PDIF convertor can be ordered for an additional \$62.

The Maestro-50 produces 25 watts per channel into 8 ohms, doubling into 4 ohms, which is plenty of juice to give impressions via the relatively inefficient Harbeths. I incorporate a pair of ACI Emerald XL speakers (86 dB/watt) for the remaining listening sessions via my desktop system, also with excellent results.

The Maestro-50 is designed and manufactured in the United Kingdom by AVA, which is careful to point out

that there is no built-in DAC in the amp's conversion process. The company use a process similar to that used by Steinway Lyngdorf, NAD and a few others, demodulating the signal right before it goes to the speaker outputs. A full technical explanation is available at the website of Pure Audio Stream, a division of AVA Media that provides direct supply of AVA Media's digital amps: [www.pureaudiostream.com/technology](http://www.pureaudiostream.com/technology).

The Maestro-50 is all about conveniently accessing music in a manner consistent with 21st-century convenience. Users with an Apple AirPort Express can merely set up the Maestro-50 as a zone to be accessed with his or her iDevice, or even a Windows machine. As with all digital amplifiers, electricity usage is minimal, so leaving it powered 24/7 will barely impact your electricity bill.

### Further Listening

Sampling some Blue Note favorites, I find John Coltrane's epic album *Blue Train* highly satisfying. Coltrane's signature sax sound is open, albeit slightly dry, but not enough to be a deal-breaker. The Maestro-50's quick transient response allows me to appreciate Coltrane's masterful finger work in the title track. Lee Morgan's trumpet is deliciously clear, making for foot-tapping fun.

The vocal harmonies of Lady Antebellum's "American Honey" come through smooth and clear, with plenty of country twang. The only place the Maestro falls short is with rich, resonant and more robust male vocalists like Johnny Cash. The test speakers at my disposal all had a somewhat thin presentation here.

The amp's lower bass output is

respectable, with some punch, but those desiring a more robust bass response would do well to take advantage of the subwoofer output, adding the powered sub of their choice to the mix. Our publisher reveals that the Maestro-50 does perform well with a more sensitive pair of speakers, like those from Zu Audio or Klipsch, so consider that as another option, should you really like to rock.

### Final Score

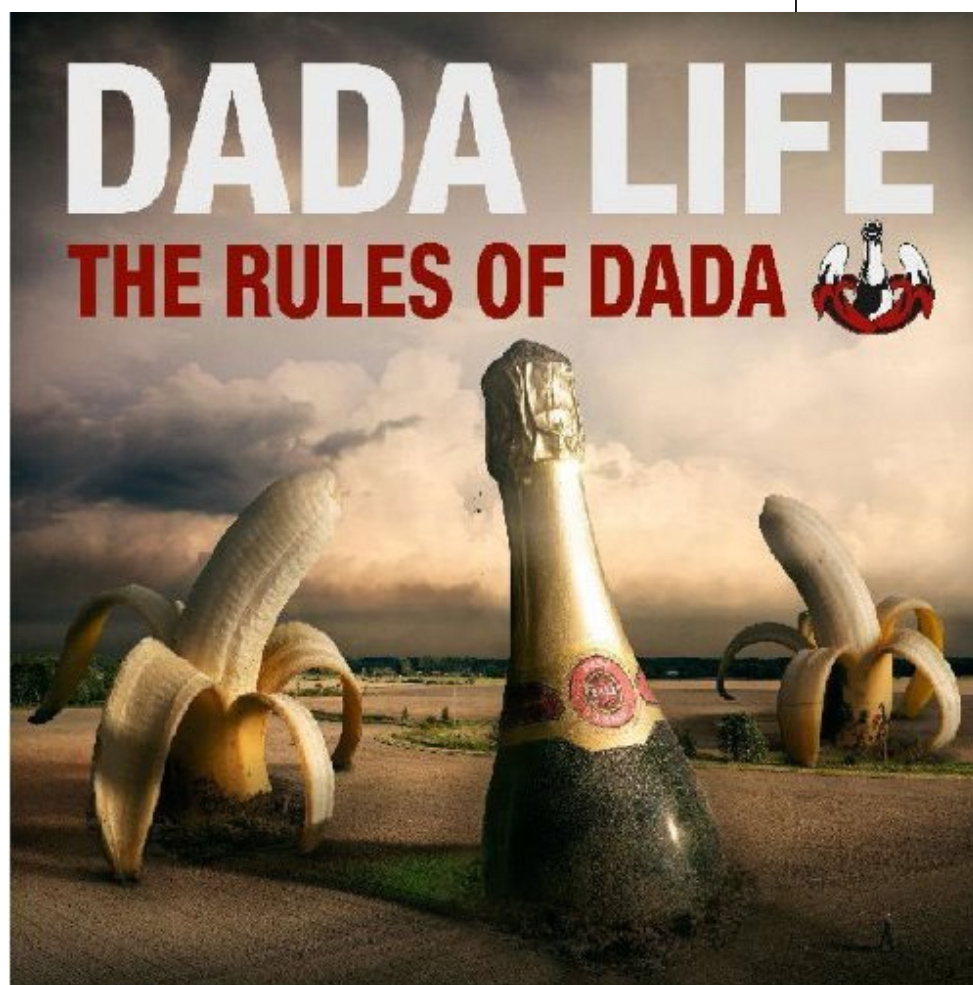
The Maestro-50's fresh design makes it an intriguing amplifier for the desktop and convenience-driven crowds. By staying in the digital domain for inputs, it targets users who crave computer-based audio, and its sound quality makes for enjoyable all-day listening. ●

[www.ava-media.com](http://www.ava-media.com)  
[www.pureaudiostream.com](http://www.pureaudiostream.com)



# Club Mix

By Connor Willemssen



## Dada Life

*The Rules of Dada*

So Much Dada,

CD and MP3/WAV/AIFF lossless download

Stand a little too near the stage at a Dada Life concert and you're liable to get drenched in champagne. The Swedish duo is famous for eccentric performance antics, which not only include spraying bubbly, but floating giant inflatable bananas over the audience and having dancers stage-dive inside huge plastic bubbles while wearing gorilla suits. Sure, there's no smashing of guitars or costumes, but Dada Life plays to a youthful audience whose peace-and-love, hugs-over-handshakes mentality might well make them the flower children of a new generation.

No surprise, then, that Dada Life members Olle Corneer and Stefan Engblom cook up a seductively unique sound in their sophomore album, capturing the irreverence and whimsy of the electronic-dance-music scene and framing it against a backdrop of pounding bass and soaring electronic melodies.

*The Rules of Dada* is completely, and mercifully, free of the wobbly dubstep influence that has spread like wildfire via Skrillex through the dance-music scene and into innumerable chart-topping pop and rap songs. Instead, house bass lines crash with regularity yet capture a grandness of scale. Bouncy melodies rendered in crackling synthesizers and computerized tones cleanly rise above the beats and almost feel soothing at the Dada-preferred tempo of 128 beats per minute.

Despite the danceable nature, songs never become tiring. Corneer and Engblom relentlessly tweak rhythms and juggle loops. They specialize in collapsing crescendos into reverb-laced lulls that lead to new, ever-changing beats. And calmer tracks lie amidst the stadium-sized rave anthems. "Rolling Stones T-Shirt" dials back the bass to deliver a cheeky, wistful experience that leans towards contemporary pop. "Don't Stop" winds down the album with a soothing conclusion that recalls the weariness at the end of a long night out.

Lyrics and song titles ("Arrive Beautiful Leave Ugly," "So Young So High") suggest *The Rules of Dada* might be a full-throated endorsement of the hard-partying, rave-frequenting ethos of electronic music's avid fans. Yet the mood is so lighthearted, Corneer and Engblom could just as easily be poking fun at the scene's youthful blitheness. No matter: *The Rules of Dada* is all about having fun and not giving a damn—dance music at its best.



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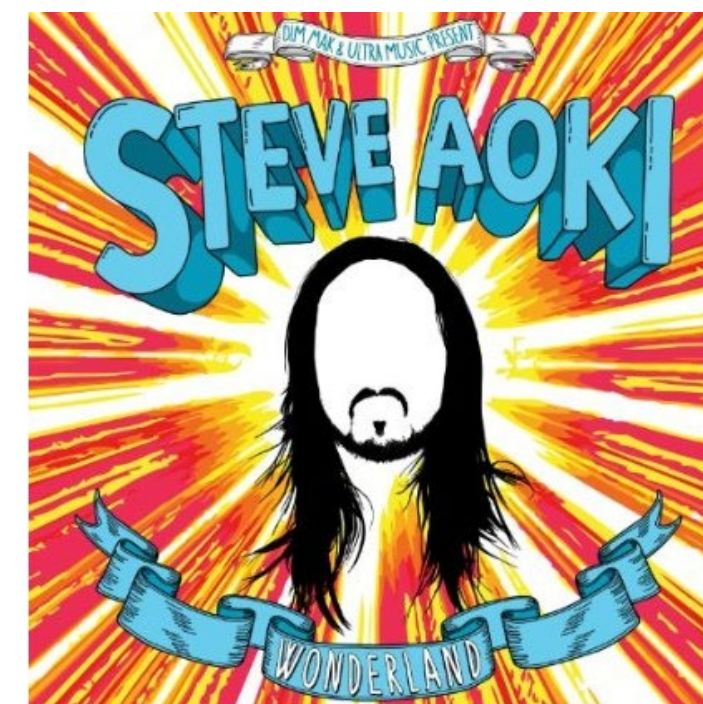
When Steve Aoki decided to start his own record label in 1996, he was 19, in college, and could spare only \$400 for the venture. Countless likeminded endeavors conceived by starry-eyed youth have met their end shortly after conception. Yet Aoki's Dim Mak Records is thriving with more than 80 current artists and a solid track record of finding burgeoning musicians. Think of Aoki as the Dr. Dre of dance: Not only does he own a successful label, collaborate with other artists, and market his own headphones and custom Supra shoes, he makes excellent music under his own moniker.

The entrepreneur's second full-length album, *Wonderland*, decisively defies any attempt to be pigeonholed into a single genre. Rap guest spots from Kid Cudi and will.i.am (credited as Zuper Blahq), hints of reggae, a brief descent into crunk, and a healthy dose of LMFAO are all in attendance.

Aoki is fundamentally a dance music producer, and despite the profusion of mainstream acts featured on *Wonderland*, the album stays true to his roots. The beats backing Kid Cudi's slick flow on "Cudi the Kid" soar with heavily reverbed synthesizers and sparkling cymbals before dropping into churning dubstep. Distorted tones blast underneath Wynter Gordon's saccharine vocals on "Ladi Dadi," while "Ooh" offers a carefully crafted soundscape of Tetris-like electronic melodies that float above equally surreal bass lines. "Livin' My Love" features LMFAO and, love it or hate it, the duo's signature "party rocking" sound predominates. A dulcet respite comes from Brazilian indie-rock singer Lovefoxxx, who, on "Heartbreaker," croons a beguiling siren song.

Aoki seamlessly slips into the styles of the artists with whom he works, retaining their attributes while building a solid rhythmic foundation and tweaking bits to infuse his own flavor. When Lil Jon and Chiddy Bang vociferously exchange lines on "Emergency," Aoki lays down a clean house beat that serves the rapped vocals albeit keeps the song firmly planted in the land of dance music.

Indeed, Aoki's widespread allure—he plays more than 200 shows a year—is easy to understand. He delivers a polished mix of dance that simultaneously appeals to electrohouse, dubstep, and pop fans alike. *Wonderland* exemplifies Aoki's balancing act with big bass lines and meticulously crafted fusion songs that speak volumes to his talents as a producer and collaborative artist. ●



**Steve Aoki**  
*Wonderland*  
Ultra Records, CD

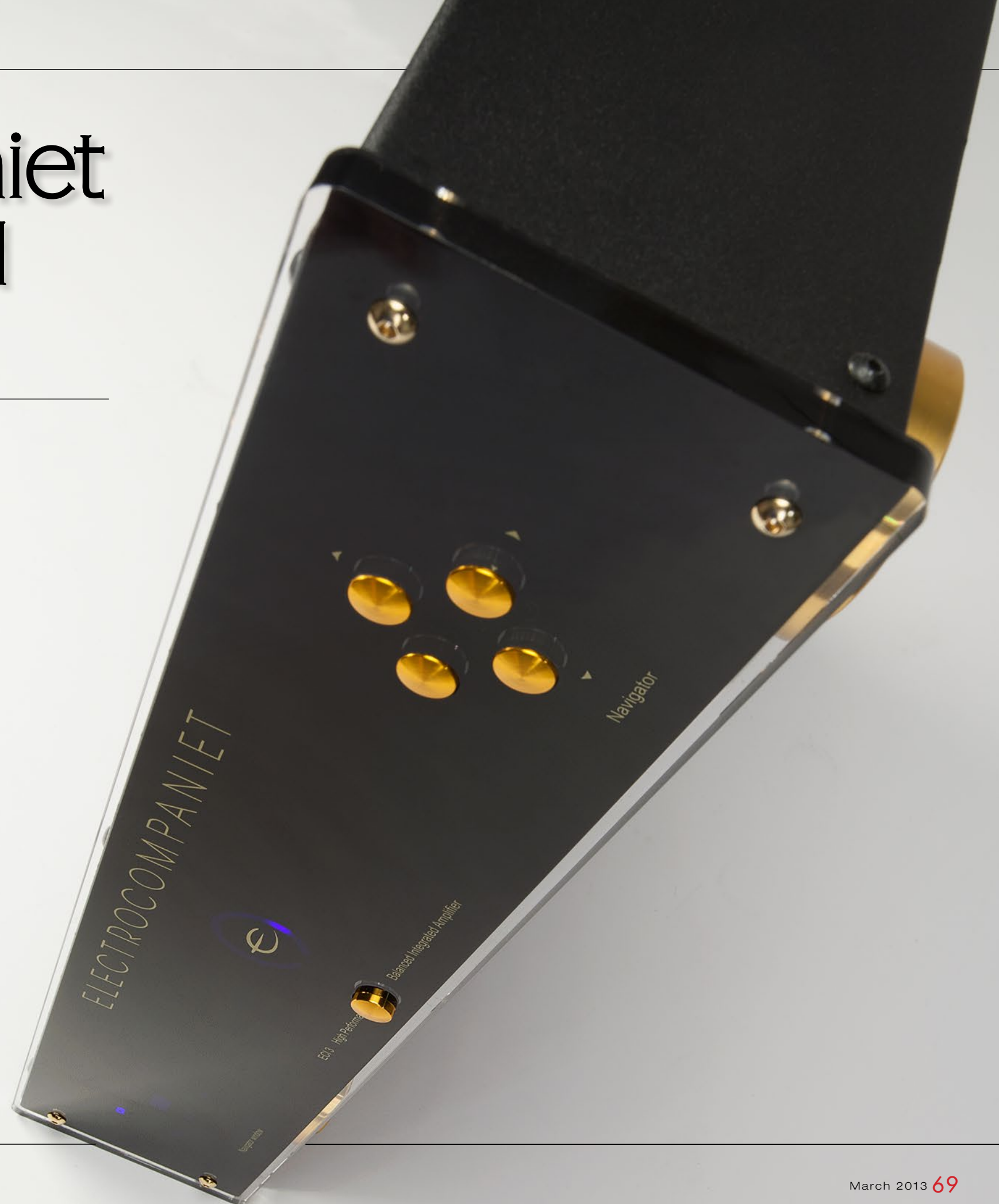


# Electrocompaniet ECI 3 Integrated Amplifier

By Andre Marc

Norwegian manufacturer Electrocompaniet has produced highly regarded electronics going on four decades now. My first vivid audio memory from childhood is of my father reading a glowing review of an Electrocompaniet amplifier in the *The Audio Critic*. As I recall, he mentioned that the reviewer loved the way the amplifier sounded with the Rogers LS3/5A, which he also owned. Why my father was telling me this I don't quite know, but I've always maintained a curiosity about this seemingly exotic Nordic brand. The company currently offers a full line of products, including speakers, amplifiers and cutting-edge digital sources, like wireless and USB DACs.

The 70-watt-per-channel ECI 3 integrated amplifier, priced at \$3,400, is the entry-level integrated amp in Electrocompaniet's Classic line. And it's a stunner, with copper-tipped buttons adorning a heavy-duty acrylic faceplate against black casing—the signature look for the entire line—plus ice-blue LED lights, which lend the amp a futuristic feel when the lights in the listening are dimmed. Its connector and speaker terminals are high quality, and its 26.5-pound weight inspires confidence in its build quality.



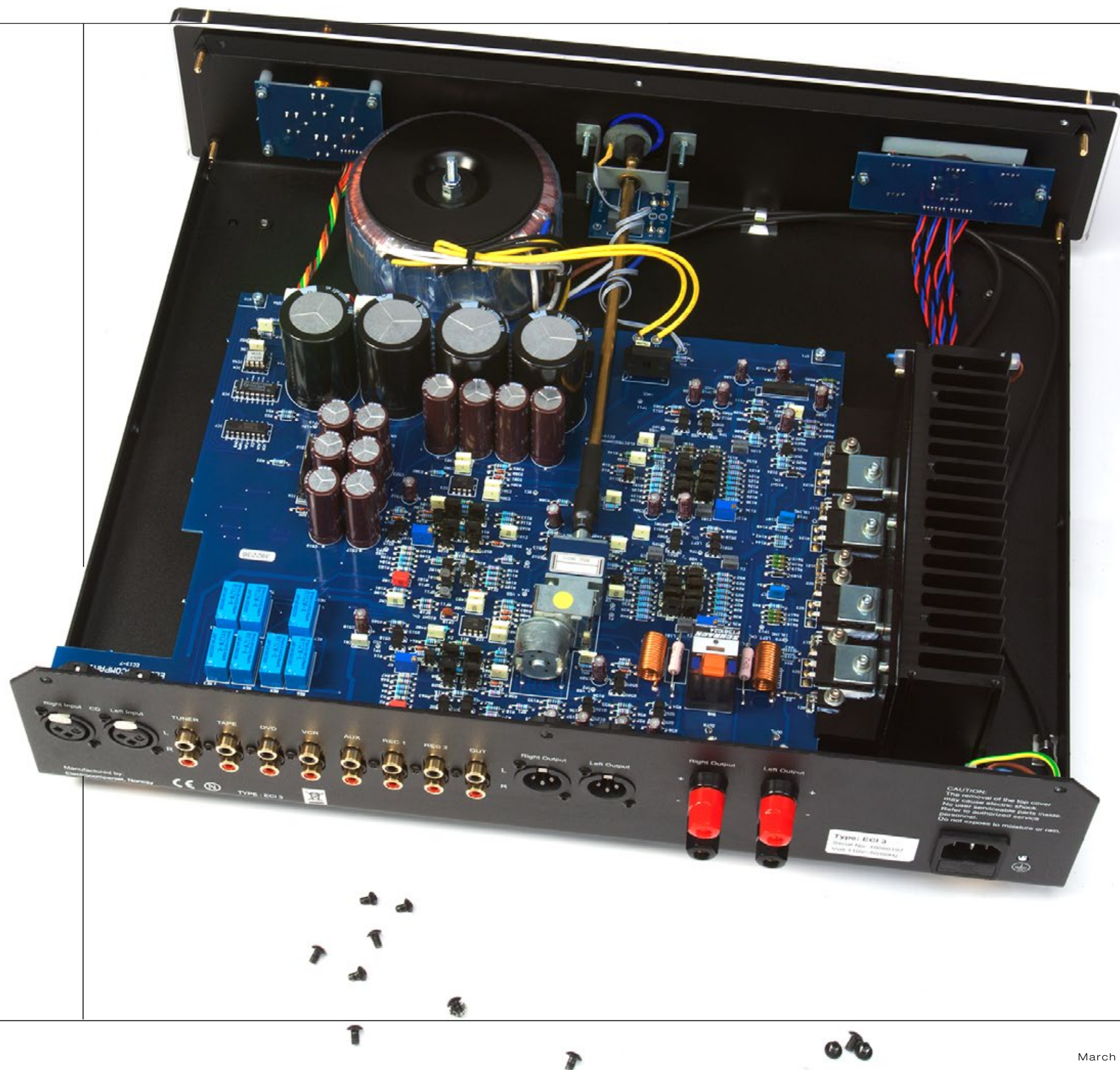


## FEATURE

The ECI 3 is fully balanced, with six inputs, and it offers two tape outputs. There is also a balanced output, an Electrocompaniet trademark, for driving an external balanced amp. Electrocompaniet touts its motorized volume control as being virtually transparent. The company also claims that its proprietary Floating Transformer Technology is unique, allowing greater current reserve than other conventional power supplies, and that the amp can drive virtually any loudspeaker.

All of its functions are accessible via the supplied remote, which has the ability to control multiple Electrocompaniet components. Setup is simple and straightforward, which makes it easy for me to use the ECI 3 in two separate systems with three different pairs of loudspeakers, including the MartinLogan Ethos, the Thiel CS2.4, and the Harbeth Compact 7ES-3. My sources include various CD transports, as well as Logitech's Squeezebox Touch decoded by Bryston and PS Audio DAC units.

The ECI 3 is an excellent match with the MartinLogan and Harbeth speakers, but not so much with the Thiels, which just sound too dry and lifeless when paired with this amp. As superb as the Logans sound with this amplifier, the Harbeths prove to be the proverbial match made in heaven, with an incredibly wide soundstage and a tonal beauty that makes walking away from listening sessions difficult. This combination displays an almost tube-like quality in terms of harmonic richness. But don't get me wrong: This is not a soft-sounding amplifier obscuring musical detail in a haze of warmth. There is plenty of energy and presence, which the amp delivers in the most musical way. *(continued)*





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Staying true to the vision of the late Julian Vereker, the founder of Naim Audio, we will continue to push the envelope and invest in new technologies that carry forward the experience of listening to music in its most genuine form.

But even as we move from spinning vinyl to CDs to streaming hi-res music files throughout the home, we will never lose sight of what truly matters:

the music.



## FEATURE



Specifically, I truly enjoy the superb delicacy in the treble and the wonderfully clean and smooth mid-range, with plenty of bass weight and articulation. These qualities are found across the board, regardless of musical genre. I call up a slew of Ben Harper albums, which are always a great test for gear, since he bounces between earnest acoustic stuff and blazing Zeppelin-influenced rock, as well as soul, punk and alternative. His sublime *Diamonds On the Inside*, from 2003, even throws in some hardcore '70s-style Bob Marley jams and ballads. I am very impressed with the ECI 3's ability to navigate these winding musical waters with absolutely no effort, and its ability to render the music with zero

mechanical artifacts. This is not a mechanical sounding solid-state amplifier by any means.

Digging deeper into my music collection leads me to Gábor Szabó, the hugely influential Hungarian jazz guitarist. His '60s and '70s albums are littered with pop tunes of the day and standards in mind-bending psychedelic arrangements. His album *1969* sounds exactly as the title suggests, with quaint embellishments in the fashion of the time, like sitars, tablas and Eastern modalities. The ECI 3 keeps Szabó's tone creamy and fluid, yet it maintains a high level of resolution all the while.

I decide to pull a joker from the deck, cueing up *Shine a Light*,

the soundtrack to the 2008 documentary on the Rolling Stones. Mick and the gang are unusually energetic in this show, but the CD mix tends to come off as a bit messy. This is not the case when listening to it through the ECI 3. I hear Bob Clearmountain's mix in a whole new light, so to speak: The guitars bite, the drums crack with authority and there is plenty of bottom end. Jagger's vocals are dead center in the mix, with the horns and backup singers positioned well across the soundstage. The ECI 3 rocks out, and does so with class.

Operationally, the ECI 3 is plug-and-play all the way and a pleasure to use. (continued)



## FEATURE



Careful listening reveals the balanced input has a slight edge on the single-ended inputs in terms of clarity, but this of course will depend on the source component. As the PS Audio NuWave DAC is truly balanced, it showcases the ECI 3's balanced design. Furthermore, the ECI renders amazingly quiet backgrounds and excellent dynamics—it easily handles the most dynamic of orchestral crescendos, which supports Electrocompaniet's claim that the company uses top-quality parts and execution for this piece of gear.

As a self-admitted remote-control junkie, my only complaint is the plastic remote, but this is a minor issue. I'm sure most users would prefer that Electrocompaniet instead allocate its resources to the parts affecting sound quality.

With a crowded field of integrated amplifiers in the \$3,500 range, it is difficult to stand out. The example *does* stand out, combining elegant sound and aesthetics, with the support of Electrocompaniet's long and respected pedigree. We are so highly impressed with ECI 3 that it will be an in-house reference component for the *TONEAudio* reviewing team going forward, because it offers such high value and flexibility. With plenty of power on tap, more than enough inputs to satisfy, a fully balanced design, superb build quality and cool Scandinavian aesthetics, the Electrocompaniet ECI 3 is a product that we highly recommend. ●

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



Cardas Headphone Cables



# Audiophile Pressings

By Jeff Dorgay

Sponsored by Music Direct

**L**ynyrd Skynyrd built the genre of Southern Rock, brick by brick, with clever songwriting, badass lead guitar playing (with three lead guitarists), and sheer grit. Legendary producer Al Kooper created a masterpiece here, and it finally gets the treatment it deserves.



## Lynyrd Skynyrd

*Pronounced Leh-Nerd Skin-Nerd*  
Mobile Fidelity, 180g LP

The gold band at the top of the record jacket, marked “Original Master Recording,” means the original master tape was used for the reissue. It only takes a cursory listen to an early MCA pressing, which sounds like a CD in comparison, to hear the increase in sound quality on this MoFi edition. Much like early Van Halen records, there is almost a non-existent bass line in the original, now replaced by a big, fat sound that anchors the rest of the rhythm section and provides a proper foundation. And yes, there’s more cowbell too.

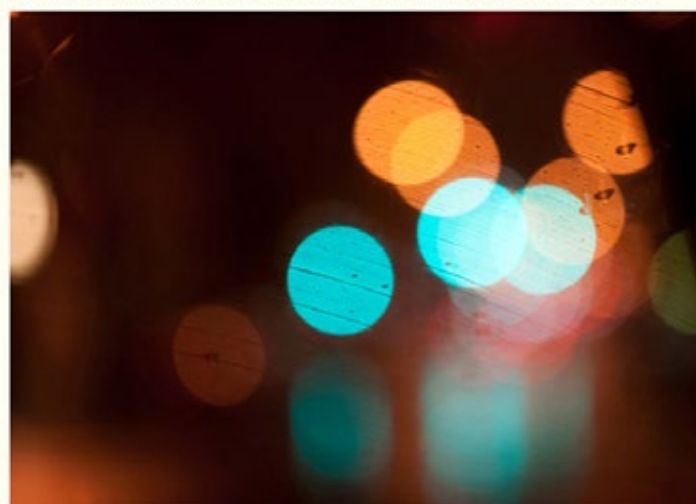
It might have been easier to dismiss this band if listening to the poorer original, but with so many sonic treats liberated from the mix, it’s great fun finding all the tidbits you’ve never heard over the years. The bongos in “Gimme Three Steps” are but one example. The overall sound is so much more clean and dynamic, you just can’t turn this one up too loud. You haven’t lived until you hear the reverb-laden guitars on “Freebird” the way they were intended to be heard.

Get out your lighter and boogie. Do it.



**meshell ndegeocello**  
**pour une âme souveraine**  
**a dedication to nina simone**

#10



**Meshell Ndegeocello**  
*Pour Une Ame Souveraine—  
 A Tribute to Nina Simone*  
 Naïve Records, 2LP

**M**eshell Ndegeocello's latest record pays homage to Nina Simone in a rather obtuse but nonetheless excellent way. Where Simone was always a fusion between jazz and blues, Ndegeocello explores a wide range of styles here. There's plenty of R&B, funk, soul, and gospel added to the soufflé.

Upon hearing the delicate rendition of the opening "Please Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood," it's tough to believe this is the same woman that wrote "If That's Your Boyfriend, He Wasn't Last Night." Female collaborators including Toshi Reagon, Valerie June, and Sinead O'Connor all add their voice to Ndegeocello's in tribute. The record is consistently good throughout, and "Nobody's Fault But Mine" is a standout. Ndegeocello exercises excellent taste in the company she keeps.

Sonically, the vinyl is much better than the CD (included free with the 2LP set) in every way, yet it the analog version sounds like a 24/96 recording mastered to LP. The recording is big and spacious, with great attention paid to capturing Ndegeocello's powerful bass playing. The giveaway: a hint of crunchiness on top and slight haze to the overall presentation that tells you it's not all analog.

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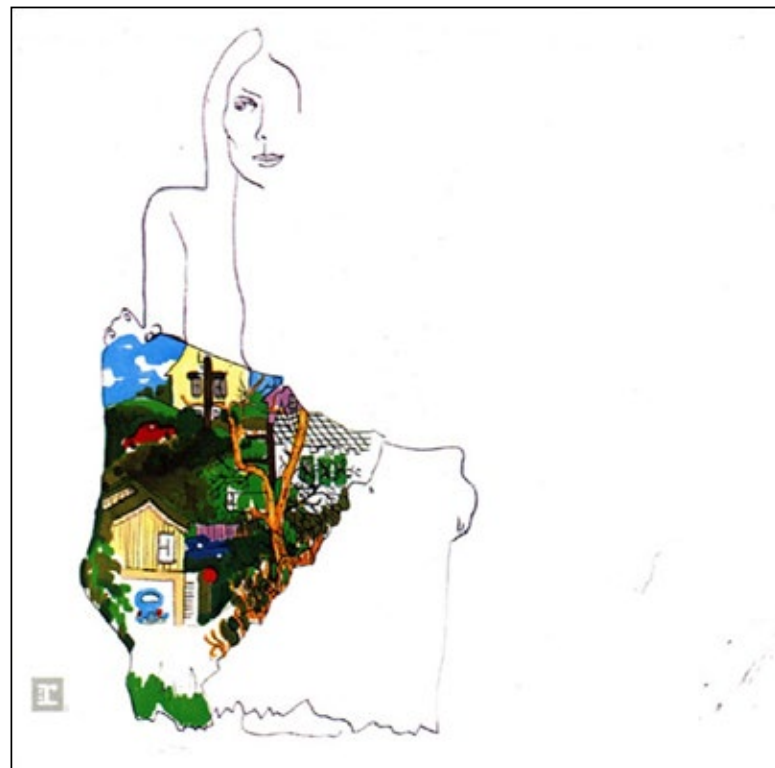
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### Joni Mitchell

*Ladies of the Canyon*  
HD Tracks, 24/192 download

Joni Mitchell's first two albums are relatively tame and, depending on your musical taste, maybe a bit too folksy. On *Ladies of the Canyon*, Mitchell stretches out with a wider range of semi-shrieky vocals (which toned down by her career-topping *Court and Spark*) and a taste of the jazzy riffs that would soon become abundant in her material. A platinum seller, *Ladies of the Canyon* contains two of her biggest hits, "Woodstock" and "Big Yellow Taxi."

Other than the original Reprise vinyl, this record never

received a proper audiophile remaster beyond a very average Rhino edition a few years ago. The CD from the early 80s is relatively flat, like many period discs. The only other copies available are on cassette and 3 ¾ ips reel-to-reel tape, both of which are dreadful, yet the latter often fetches as high as \$100 on eBay.

The HD Tracks version represents substantial jump in dynamics and overall tonality over the standard CD, with longer reverb trails and a fatter tone to Mitchell's voice. The solo keyboard at the beginning

of "Woodstock" has plenty of dimension and decay, coming out way beyond the speaker boundaries. Backing vocals also have more space and are easier to discern.

Mitchell's vocal histrionics, compressed on the original vinyl release, are liberated on the high-resolution file. It's difficult to tell whether this aspect is a result of the mastering here or the increased resolution. No matter, the HD Tracks file makes it much easier to appreciate her vocal style, and for now, sets the benchmark as the definitive version of this classic. ●

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**Audio Arts NYC**

By Jeff Dorgay

Audio Arts NYC

provides an oasis of chill, just four floors above the hustle and bustle of New York City's Fifth Avenue, in the Flatiron District. Owner Gideon Schwartz buzzes me up to his suite, where the main listening room, about 20 x 30 feet, features a comfy couch, a wonderful view of the city, Madison Square Park and a big fireplace. When was the last time you saw a fireplace in a hifi shop? Instantly, your blood pressure takes a big dip for the better and it's easy to relax. This is not a typical retail environment in any sense of the word.

# An Oasis on Fifth Avenue



The central room showcases one main system, with a variety of turntables from Holborne Swiss Audio, Simon York and a beautifully restored Thorens TD-124 from Schopper. Off to the left the massive Kalista CD transport from Metronome Technologie sits, waiting to make magic from the often criticized compact disc. A single pair of Zellaton speakers is placed to perfection in this acoustically correct space. Well off to the side, are some neatly arranged components from Nagra, waiting for audition by another customer, along with electronics from CH Precision (Switzerland), Malvalve (Germany), Lavardin (France) and Kora-Eda (Japan) flanked by a pair of Stenheim speakers.

“Want to hear a record?” Schwartz cues up Teddy Pendergrass, via the Holborne table and the sound from what some audiophiles might consider an average pressing comes to life on the big Zellatons, powered by the Burmester 911 mk. 3, an amplifier that I also use as a reference. The sound is infinitely familiar on one level, yet a few clicks beyond what I’m used to, as the Zellaton speakers provide such a clear window into the music. If I didn’t know better, I’d think that we were listening to an expensive remaster of this recording. Fortunately, there are no audiophile standards in his record collection on display.



Switching to digital, we listen to *Musica Nuda*, by Petra Magoni and Ferruccio Spinetti, the delicacy of analog remaining. It’s hard to believe we are listening to digital, and again, the combination of excellent music and system synergy allows the listener to forget about the left-brain stuff that often gets in the way of enjoying their system.

The magic that this system offers sums up what Audio Arts NYC brings to the table. Purchasing components at this level requires a well versed guide, someone capable of hand picking things that work well together for maximum effect and demonstrating them in a comfortable environment, lacking in clutter makes it easy to unwind and take it all in. *(continued)*





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At the time of our visit, a second, smaller room is nearing completion, to showcase other components, primarily speakers more suited to clients with a similar sized listening space. Here, I see components from Swissonor, Shopper Thorens, Wavelength and the new Midnight Blue series from 47 Labs.

While some of the names on the roster, like Burmester and Nagra are well known to American audiophiles, others like Zellaton and Stenheim are new to our shores. And while

some of these components carry a lofty price tag, many do not. All too often, hifi salons become myopic and militant, offering potential customers few choices, which can be detrimental to those wishing to engage this hobby. Everything here has been hand picked by Schwartz for sound quality, build quality and uniqueness. "It's really about the overall sound. I put a very strong emphasis on the greatest possible fidelity for every approach. This results in a musical consistency in my products regardless of cost."

Schwartz says. And whether your interest is in solid state, single ended triodes, or anything in between, Audio Arts NYC has an interesting solution.

Schwartz underlines the importance of this process. "Sometimes, it takes months for us to put just the right system together for a client. I'm not in a hurry." Right in the heart of New York City, he understands the stress that many of his clients face, and the importance a music system plays in their lives.

Wonderful as Audio Arts NYC is, perhaps the highest compliment I can pay Gideon Schwartz is that I heard four albums that were completely new to me. This is the direction that high-end audio has to take if it is to survive. Having just returned from Tokyo, reflecting back on my visit to Audio Arts, it reminds me of the Leica store in the Ginza shopping district, where photography and the gear to create those photographs is equally respected, showcased in a soothing environment.

This deliberateness, and attention to detail, all the while celebrating the music that makes it all possible is what makes Audio Arts NYC so unique; I highly suggest an appointment. ●

**Audio Arts NYC**  
[www.audioarts.co](http://www.audioarts.co)







# Audio UFO

Bang & Olufsen's BeoPlay A9

By Jeff Dorgay





If you're looking for an unconventional yet gorgeous audio system, consider the A9 from B&O. Sitting on a tripod of oak legs, this saucer-shaped system (27.5 inches in diameter) is delivered with a white fabric cover. Red, green, brown, black and silver are available as optional colors, and changing the cover is easy, but does require the help of a second pair of hands.

Upon first listen, Robert Plant's "Little by Little" fills my living room with thunderous bass, and the outward-firing 3-inch midrange drivers and 3/4-inch tweeters create a large stereo image. For those not connected via AirPlay, adjusting the volume only requires a gentle hand swipe across the top face of the system.

Staying in the Plant groove, I decide to make a quick shift to the first Led Zeppelin album, which instantly establishes the A9's ability to rock out. With a pair of 80-watt amplifiers for both midrange drivers and the dual tweeters, combined with a 160-watt amplifier for the lone 8-inch woofer, the A9 has almost 500 total watts of power on tap. The spacy guitar riffs in "Dazed and Confused" fill my living room, and the A9 doesn't run out of juice, even when turned up well past prudent levels. But it's Zeppelin, right?

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## TONE STYLE

### Great Sound, Right Now

It's worth noting that the A9 succeeds brilliantly in any kind of sonic environment. A few minutes to find the spot for the best bass response, aided by B&O's adjustable DSP correction for corner, wall or open placement, makes for trouble-free sound. And thanks to its convenient handle, the A9 is easy to transport to wherever the party is—whether out on the back porch, another room in the house or even out in the garage. The possibilities are endless.

Regardless of program material, from classical to heavy rock, the A9 is a top performer. Running the gamut from Beethoven to Skynyrd, the A9 impressed everyone on the staff with the sound quality it musters. Gear editor Bailey Barnard and I had an excellent demo of the A9 at this year's Consumer Electronics Show, and I recently heard one again at the B&O store in La Jolla, Calif., but it was even better in my house, up front and personal. Skynyrd's "Call me the Breeze" proves a fantastic track to showcase the A9's audio capabilities, as it firmly anchors the drums just left of center, while making the multiple guitar layers easily discernible.

The slightly angled back stance of the A9, combined with the woofer's placement about a foot off the floor, makes for rich, tuneful bass that keeps solid pace with the rest of the music. The A9 has a quoted LF spec of 33 Hz, which it delivers solidly, especially when playing electronic music with plenty of bass content.  
*(continued)*



### Multiple Input Options

Having visited the B&O factory and knowing how much labor goes into the A9, it seems a shame to only feed it a diet of MP3 files. While AirPlay is incredibly handy, it is not the best sonic solution for those having higher-quality files than MP3s loaded in their music library. Those who do have ripped music in their collections in lossless or WAV formats will achieve much higher fidelity by going straight into the A9 via the USB port or the line-level input. Running an iPhone 5 via USB into the A9 reveals a much larger soundstage, making the AirPlay option seem more like a fat mono sound in comparison. The greatest benefit to utilizing the USB option is in the clarity and freedom from grain the A9 delivers in this mode.

When plugging my iPhone directly into the A9, Mae Moore's vocal stylings on her mid-90s record, *Dragonfly*, are a joy. The additional depth and breathiness of her voice in lossless format comes through all the more cleanly, easily illustrating the benefit of music files with little or no compression. In terms of scale, the overall vocals seem as if they are coming from a large pair of floor standing speakers, yet the A9 has such an airy sound, it disappears sonically in the room.

Taking this to its ultimate conclusion by combining the best of the old world with something clearly from the 21st century, I bring the Rega RP6 turntable and Lehmannaudio Black Cube

phonostage to the A9, via its RCA line input. While this takes away somewhat from the self-contained concept (and the convenience), those with a vinyl collection will not be disappointed when using the A9 with an analog source. You can make a turntable and small phonostage like the Black Cube fairly inconspicuous and, in turn, make the further increase in sound quality that much more worthwhile.

### A Hit with the Ladies

The A9 was a unanimous hit with all of my female friends, and the \$2,699 price tag was not a barrier in the least. All remarked on the sound quality first and the simplicity of operation second. It's easy to brainwash your friends into thinking they need something this gorgeous. Everyone wanted to touch the A9 once they saw how easy it was to raise or lower the volume, and then mute it by holding your hand steady on the top for just a few seconds.

Having visited the B&O factory, I know the high level of quality that goes into the A9 first hand. Everything is rigorously fine-tuned in the Danish company's anechoic chamber and sound studio, as well as being mercilessly tested against failure and environmental compatibility. I don't think I've ever been to a factory that takes product testing more seriously than B&O, so this is a product that can stay in your family for generations. *(continued)*





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## TONE STYLE

### Simple, Different, Gorgeous

Every aspect of the A9 has been designed to make enjoying your music collection simple to the point of almost being telepathic. Setup takes only minutes; however, the IKEA-like instructions are almost too simple. A few pages of well-written copy would go a long way for those having a tough time making the initial connection to the A9.

Bang & Olufsen's BeoPlay A9 is a music-making machine like no other. If you've been looking for sound, simplicity, aesthetics and an absence of wiring in your room, the A9 is the perfect choice. The only tough decision is what color to order. ●

### Bang & Olufsen BeoPlay A9

\$2,699

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





# Peter Roberts “Concentrique” Grand Complication 5

By Ken Kessler

In watch circles, possessing a reputation equivalent to that of Dan D’Agostino or Dave Wilson in audio, Peter Roberts has cult status. Unlike D’Agostino or Wilson, however, Roberts has never put his name on a product of his manufacture—until recently. Instead, he worked with Rolex for 40 years, and was the Technical Director of Bremont. During his tenure as an instructor at Hackney Technical College in the U.K., his students included Stephen Forsey and Peter Speake-Marin, who now have eponymous brands of the highest repute.

At last, Roberts is producing a watch worthy of his name, and is doing so with an historic precedent. As the first Englishman to attend the Watchmakers of Switzerland Training and Educational Program (WOSTEP), Roberts fashioned a rather special watch as his graduation project—think of it as his doctoral thesis. The watch, called the “Concentrique,” was a rather special chronograph with five hands extending from the center of the dial, which Roberts chose to produce in spite of the fact that his professor said such a timepiece only existed as a drawing in a book about chronograph dials, and that none had ever been built.



“The original watch will be handed down to my son, James,” says Roberts in response to the countless pleas from collectors to part with it. But to mark the 40 years since he built the first example of this five-handed timepiece, Roberts will now produce 40 modern equivalents of it in steel and four in rose gold—which has only become possible since he managed to find enough unused examples of the specialty movement, the Valjoux Calibre 88, required to create the watch. Called the Grand Complication 5, the new watch betters Roberts’ original by benefiting from 40 years worth of experience accrued since producing that first example.

For the new iteration of the watch, Roberts added three more functions to the original timepiece, which displayed the time and a second time zone. The new model adds a moon-phase display at the six o’clock position, sharing a small dial with the 12-hour counter, while windows have been added to reveal the day of the week and the month. The original watch’s 24-hour bezel has been retained and refined, while the inner ring displays the numbers 1 to 31, for the day of the month. In total, the new “Concentrique” Grand Complication 5 boasts 11 indications.

Roberts has sourced only Swiss- and British-made parts for the new watches, including dials, hands and straps. The

movements, although made in the 1960s, are still in their original sealed packaging before Roberts applies them to the new timepieces. Each movement will be hand-finished by Roberts himself, who will make all 44 watches, in addition to having designed every aspect of the watch himself, including the case, dial, strap, buckle and crown. Even the eight hands are individually made, and hand-finished and treated with luminous material. The watches made in stainless steel will be numbered 1 to 44, except for numbers 10, 20, 30 and 40.

“The decades are reserved for the rose gold ones,” says Roberts. The price for the stainless-steel model is £18,000 (about \$28,000), and £28,000 (about \$43,500) for the rose-gold model.

TONE readers will be interested to know that Roberts is one of us: He rebuilt his own Nagra SN tape recorder, to Nagra’s surprise, and his audio sources include a Nagra IV-S, Revox B77, G36 and Studer PR99, as well as a Sony Walkman Pro. He plays vinyl with an SME 20/3, and drives LS3/5As or Quad 57 speakers with Radford tube electronics. All of this is my way of saying, “At last, a watch for audiophiles, made by an audiophile.” ●

**Peter Roberts Watches**  
[www.peterrobertswatches.com](http://www.peterrobertswatches.com)





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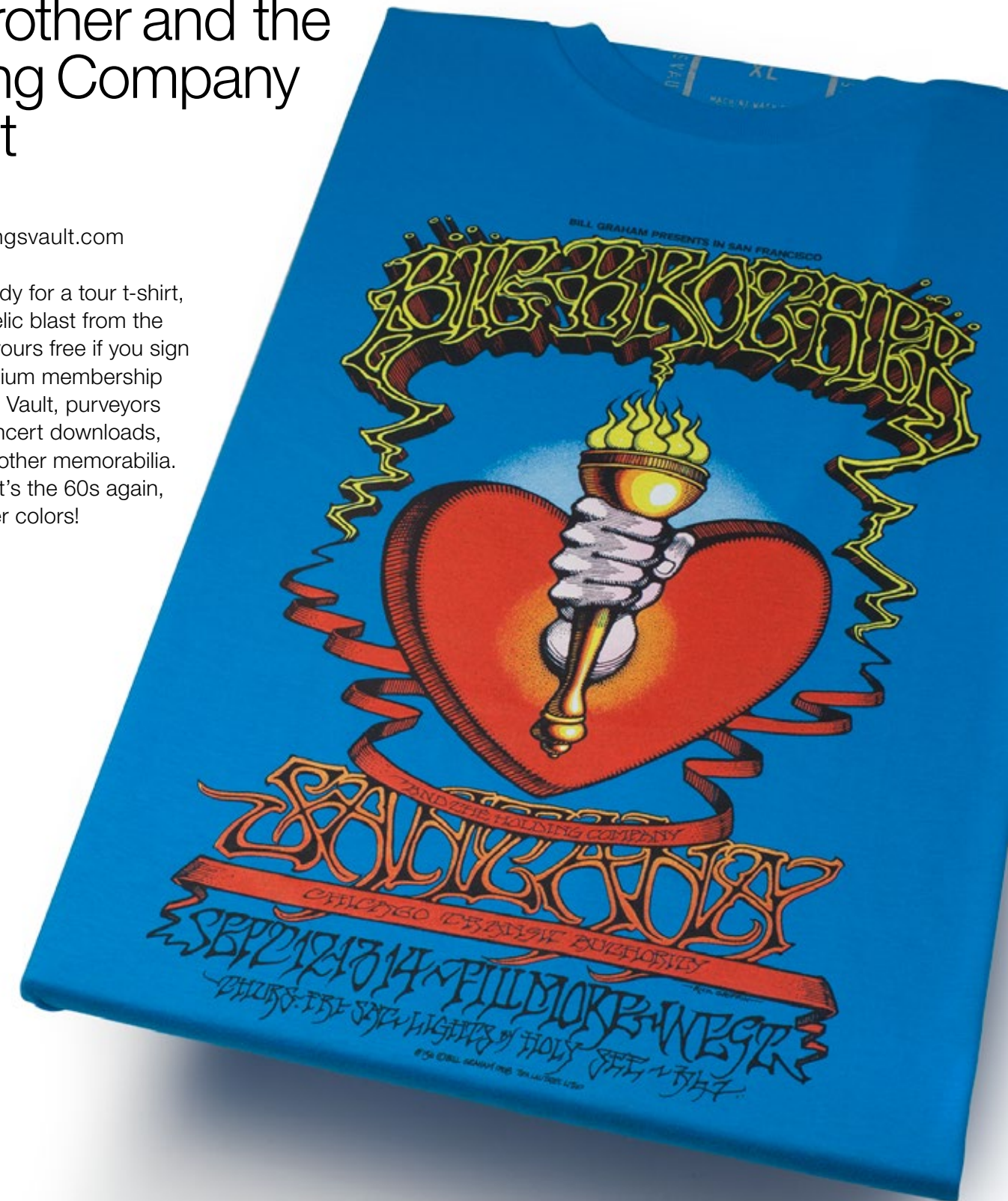
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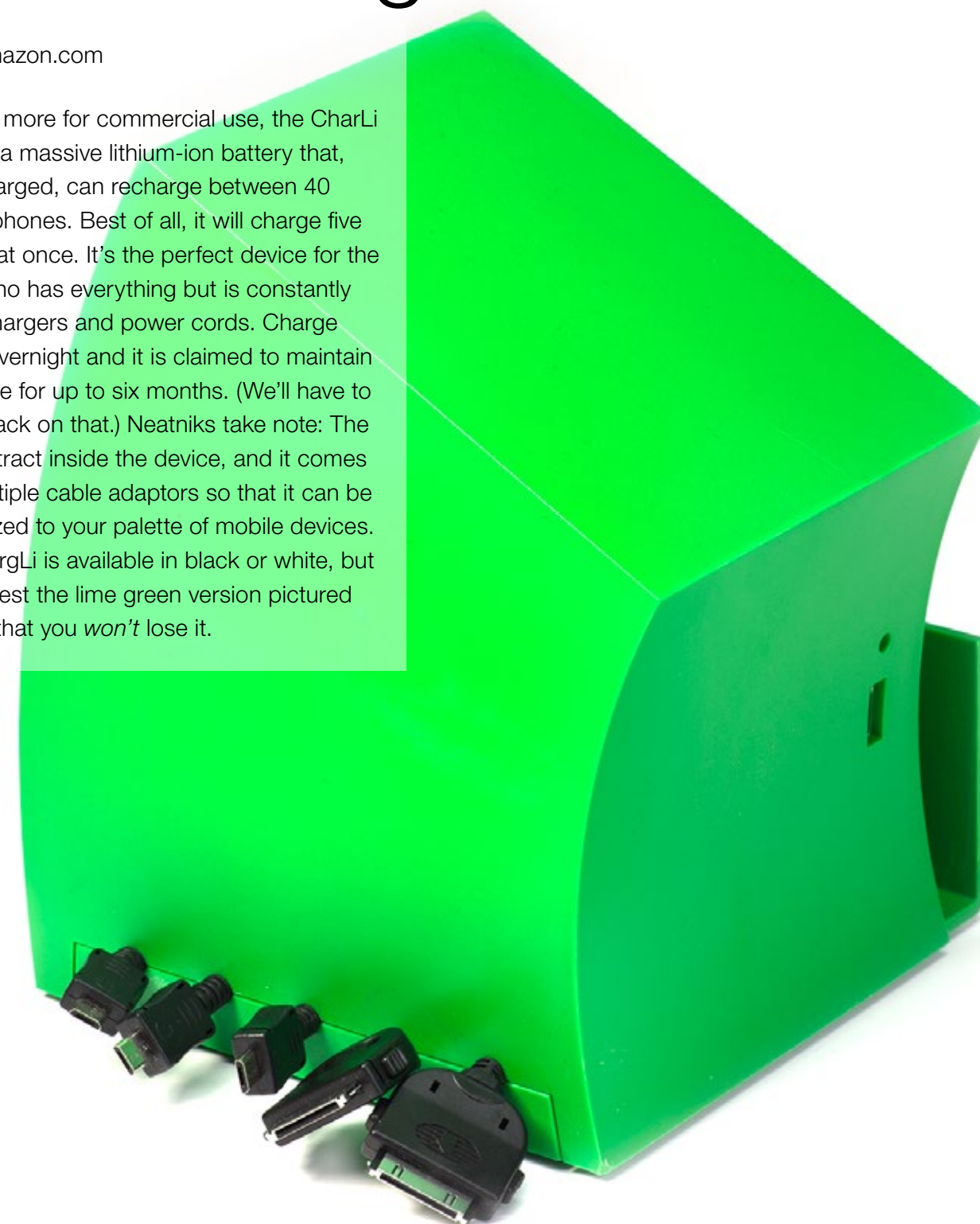
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**G**eared more for commercial use, the CharLi features a massive lithium-ion battery that, once charged, can recharge between 40 and 50 phones. Best of all, it will charge five devices at once. It's the perfect device for the family who has everything but is constantly losing chargers and power cords. Charge CharLi overnight and it is claimed to maintain its charge for up to six months. (We'll have to report back on that.) Neatniks take note: The cords retract inside the device, and it comes with multiple cable adaptors so that it can be customized to your palette of mobile devices. The CharLi is available in black or white, but we suggest the lime green version pictured here so that you *won't* lose it.





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# More Power, Inside and Out

## Fiat 500 Abarth with Beats Audio

By Jeff Dorgay

**B**ack in issue 40, we covered the FIAT 500 Sport with Bose audio and found it a fun ride—so much so that I bought the review sample. Shaking off the “Fix it again, Tony” stigma that has dogged the FIAT brand for years, the 500 Sport proved problem free for almost two years, and the dealer service here in Portlandia has been fantastic.

But just as with a hi-fi system, the thought of more performance creeps into your subconscious. Enter the Abarth. Packing 55 more horsepower and nearly *double* the torque (90 ft./lb. in the Sport; 170 in the Abarth), it's instant fun, dropping the 0-to-60-mph time from just under 10 seconds to 6.8 seconds. And an additional 30 plus horsepower lurks on the horizon in a tiny box the size of a Lehmann Audio Black Cube phonostage, dropping that sprint time below six seconds—now we're talking.



Best of all, the little *uovo* (Italian for egg) that optimizes the delivery of this power, is mated it to a greatly enhanced chassis, with bigger brakes, Koni shocks, quicker steering and a magnificent dual exhaust. As good as the Beats audio system is, you may never listen to it once you fire up the Abarth and hear to its glorious rumble.

The messiah to many car crazies, *Top Gear* host Jeremy Clarkson put it perfectly while screaming around the test track: "I'm a Lamborghini. I really, really, am!" *TONE* staffer and Italian car enthusiast Jerold O'Brien concurred, as we rocketed onto the motorway, slowing down to about 85 mph to merge with traffic. "No one does a better exhaust note than the Italians," he commented.

With nearly every part of the car geared towards high performance, the Abarth certainly has the spirit of a Ferrari or Lamborghini, although the (still) too-high seating position makes it feel more like you're sitting on the car than in it. Those willing to give up the sumptuous heated leather seats can opt out and install their favorite aftermarket high-performance seats. Conversely, the wacky seating position does add to the tension of driving the Abarth, along with a boost in spirit.

The plethora of sensory inputs that the Abarth provides makes it easy to forget that there's even a stereo system in the car, but sooner or later, you will be stuck in commuter traffic, unable to row through the gears at will. That's when you'll be glad you checked the box for the upgraded Beats audio system, complete with an 8-inch subwoofer neatly integrated into the rear compartment behind the seats. The only sacrifice is the 1.5-liter volume required for the system's enclosure. *(continued)*







But even with the system, the Abarth's rear compartment is still highly useful—able to accommodate enough luggage for a short business trip or a week's worth of groceries without putting the seats down. You wanted another excuse to go to the store anyway, right?

The Beats system dishes out 375 watts of power through a pair of 6.5-inch woofers in the front doors, 3.5-inch drivers in the rear compartment and a pair of 1-inch tweeters in the A-pillars—all tied together with a DSP program optimized for the Abarth's cabin. Bottom line: The system works brilliantly and is a quantum leap from the Bose system in the 500 Sport. (For 2013, the Sport comes equipped with an Alpine-sourced system, which is a modest step up from the Bose in the 2012 models.)

While many audiophiles eschew tone controls, they prove handy in the mobile environment, where uneven road surfaces constantly chip away at your listening enjoyment. Stationary in the driveway, the system sounds balanced with the controls all set to zero, but out on the road, the ability to increase bass level to overcome cancellation due to road noise is welcome.

Bass-heavy tracks from Mickey Hart, Skrillex and the Bombay Dub Orchestra only require a modest increase in bass level to keep the system's tonal balance in check. Going all the way up to +6 provides serious thump for such a small car, along with a hint of license-plate rattle at stoplights. Yet, classic rock tracks from Zeppelin and the Who benefit from the additional LF boost, especially on rougher roads. Only a touch of treble boost is required when moving, and listening to MP3 tracks via the AUX input and my iPhone actually calls for some treble attenuation at times. *(continued)*



## TONE STYLE



New for the Beats audio system is the addition of a midrange control, which proves to be a savior on long road trips by making up for a wide range of production anomalies. A little boost makes Chrissie Hynde's vocals easier to hear, and a slight cut gives you the ability to turn the Effigies up past 11 without a problem. This control also proves handy when the windows go down, making it easier for the system to cut through the wind noise.

While not the equal of the premium automotive sound systems from Burmester, Meridian and Naim, the Beats audio system in the FIAT is impressive for the \$1,000 up-charge on the Abarth's short list of options. Much like the current crop of Beats headphones, the sound is slightly warm, punchy and pleasing tonally—a fantastic combination for life on the road. There's enough audiophile DNA here to satisfy and surprise most music lovers with the system's ability to throw a huge soundstage and offer excellent midrange clarity and resolution, in addition to providing weighty sound on the open road. And for the rest of you not of the audiophile persuasion, rest assured; you can really crank whatever tunes you fancy to illegal levels without distortion or strain.

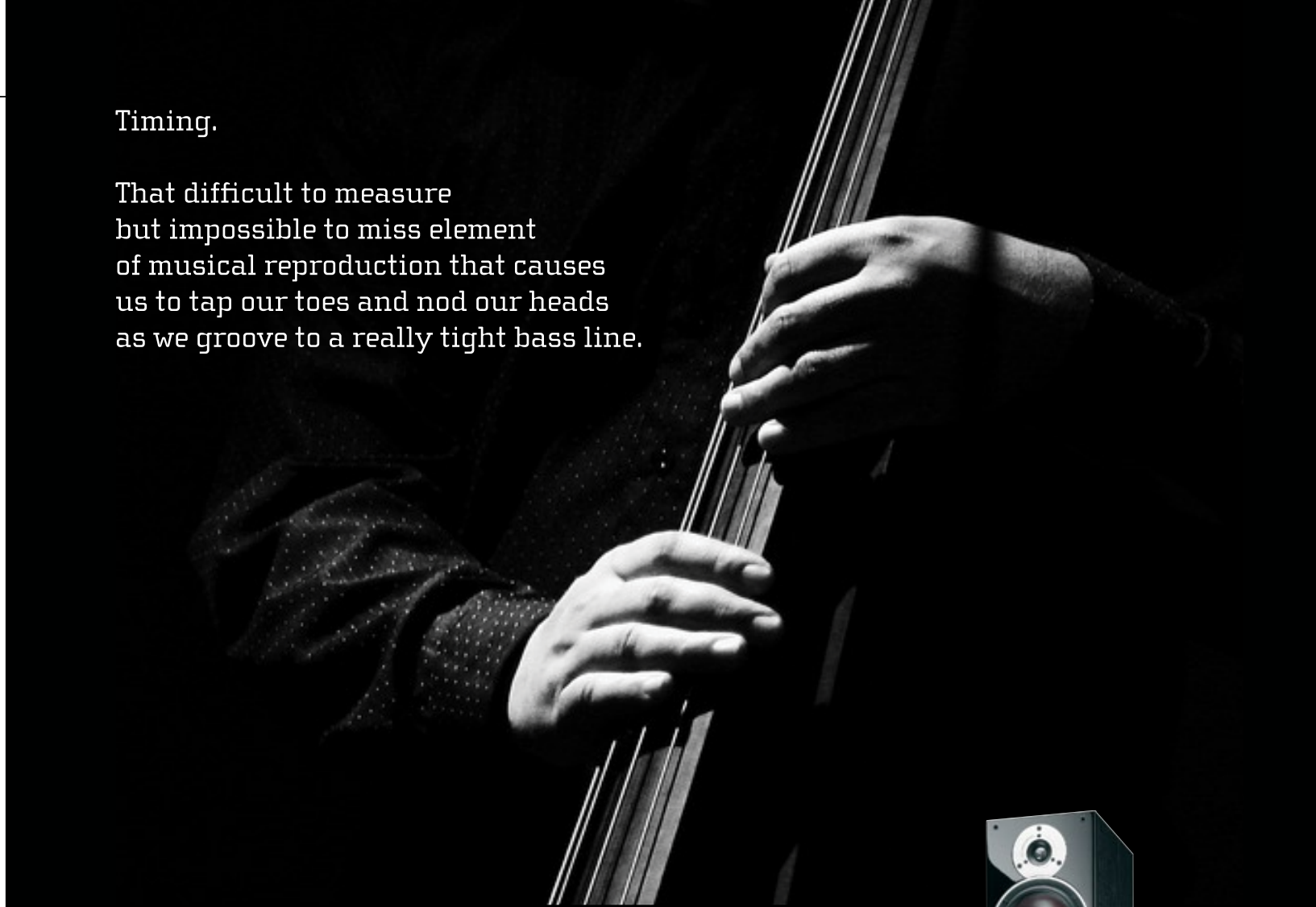
There's never been a better time for lovers of small but high-performance cars than today. The Abarth's acceleration, braking and handling rival (and in some cases exceed) those of a Porsche 911 from 25 years ago—all wrapped in a fuel-efficient, low-maintenance package.

But what makes the Abarth so outright cool is its exclusivity: Only 3,000 examples were made in 2012, and they sold out almost immediately. Word on the street is that FIAT will sell out equally fast this year, making the Abarth an elusive target in a sea of GTIs, Minis and WRXs—and making its exclusivity perhaps the best reason to have one.

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# Carry On

## The Scottvest Fleece 7.0

By Rob Johnson

**S**cottevest (aka SeV) produces specialized, tech-enabled clothing laden with the company's signature pockets. Its Fleece 7.0, for example, features a remarkable 23 pockets that vary in shape, size and purpose. With seemingly endless storage, SeV jackets facilitate hands-free functionality for audiophiles and techies wishing to take their favorite portable devices and accessories on the go.

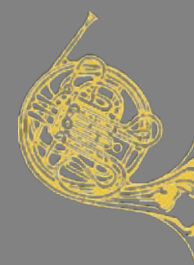
In the Fleece 7.0, a magnetically sealed pocket underneath the left hand-warmer pocket offers a clear, touch-sensitive fabric window inside the jacket to allow control of electronic devices, making it a breeze to navigate songs and playlists without removing the audio source. While the pocket is sized to accommodate an iPhone, an iPod classic also fits nicely and is easily viewed in the window. *(continued)*

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The Fleece 7.0 also includes SeV's Personal Area Network, which allows the wearer to thread audio and headphone cables within the lining of the coat. With a little finagling, wires can connect electronic items through and between many of the pockets, ultimately enabling headphone wires to exit the collar for convenient access. Each side of the collar contains a mini-pocket to store ear buds out of sight when not in use.

Among the Fleece 7.0's 23 pockets are a few specialized

ones. For instance, there is a soft-lined glasses pocket that includes a built-in, tethered cleaning cloth, which proves handy for cleaning touch-screens. This pocket also features a map of the jacket to help the wearer navigate any audio accessories potentially lost in the maze of pockets. There's even a built-in water-bottle holder to reduce risk of dehydration during long listening sessions while on the go.

Taking into account all this onboard gear, the Fleece 7.0 arranges pockets so that

## TO NE STYLE

telltale bulges from carried objects are minimized, even eliminated in many cases. Is that an iPad in your pocket? Yes, ahem, we're happy to see this capability.

With devices galore, weight is also a consideration, which SeV addresses with the jacket's weight-management system. This design element distributes the jacket's weight evenly across the wearer's shoulders so that no one side of the body bears the sole burden of carrying all that gear—a vast improvement compared to carrying a laptop bag or briefcase with a shoulder strap. While encased in pockets of plastic-and-metal electronics, the wearer may feel bullet-proofed, but with this clever design, at least he or she won't feel encumbered with armor.

If breaking a sweat from a vigorous walk to the pace of the crescendo of Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody," wearers will appreciate the fact that the sleeves are removable. And, as you might have guessed, they can be placed in a back pocket, leaving wearers free to dance in the streets unbridled.

The Scottvest Fleece 7.0 comes in black or red. Load it up and get ready to rock!

**Scottvest Fleece 7.0**  
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# Beer Snob

By Bob Gendron

*Life is too short to drink mediocre beer.*

## Deschutes Brewery Marches Eastward

Throughout U.S. history, inhabitants and employers have traditionally moved from the east to the west. Even as the South has recently emerged as the strongest migration magnet, population and jobs continue to relocate east of the Mississippi.

Founded in 1988 in Bend, Oregon, and having long ago established itself as a major player in the Pacific Northwest's burgeoning craft beer market, Deschutes Brewery is going against the grain due to the very nature of its home base. With each year that passes, it seems the independent enterprise covers more territory further removed from Oregon. With its January expansion into Illinois and fiercely competitive Chicagoland area, at least one variety of Deschutes is now available in 20 states and two Canadian provinces.

Reflecting the modest, earthy style inherent to Portland and its surrounding region, Deschutes opts for a low-key identity akin to peers such as Rogue and Hopworks Urban Beer (HUB). Flashy historical rhetoric and ultra-witty descriptions

are left to their California neighbors. Deschutes keeps to a minimum the informative narratives and persuasive messages on the label. Its Web site ([deschutesbrewery.com](http://deschutesbrewery.com)) prizes functionality over showiness. The same can be said for its staple beers—always a good sign.

While it's a mistake to judge a beer entirely by its label, the latter conveys plenty about the brewer's approach and aims. Distinguished by a simple oval design—in which hand-drawn images depicting nature scenes and organic colors combine to yield artwork along the lines of a serene painting—Deschutes' iconography speaks to what drinkers can expect. Namely, consistency and, above all else, balance. Save for its Reserve and Conflux Series beverages, made in limited quantities and produced for bold palettes, Deschutes isn't out to wow patrons with outrageous ingredient pairings or trendy flavors. This is a brewery that wins converts via subtle complexity and astounding drinkability. *(continued)*



# THE FIFTY



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## TONE STYLE

Available for the first five months of the calendar year, and named after a ski lift, Red Chair NWP (Northwest Pale Ale) elevates seven European and domestic malts to blissful heights. Denoted by an amber-orange appearance and minimal head, the beer gives off whiffs of light citrus and hops along with a tinge of sugariness. Yet its taste is why drinkers need to seek out this winter and spring delight. Hints of pepper, honey, oak, orange, and grapefruit play off a caramel anchor. The smoothness, carbonation, harmonized ingredients, and medium body defy expectations in a beer that can be had for less than \$10 for a sixer. A winner of four World's Best Beer 2012 awards as well as multiple other red ribbons, Red Chair is the Deschutes offering to try if you can choose only one. Truly exceptional. *(continued)*





## TONE STYLE

Not that the Oregon outfit's staple pale ale, Mirror Pond, is a slouch. Upon initial pour, the sunset-orange color, frothy egg-white head, and faint lacing appear vivid enough to inspire any interior decorator specializing in kitchen remodels and kitschy living-room furniture. On the nose, Mirror Pond retains a subtlety that sets it apart from many of today's intentionally fierce pales. The faint pine, ester, apricot, and caramel aromas won't knock anyone for a loop, but what's equally noticeable is what isn't there—any inkling of alcohol, exhibiting, once again, Deschutes' hallmark balance. On the tongue, a dryness coincides with citric and grapefruit bitters, restrained bready toastiness, and sweet malts. Pleasingly mellow and spotlessly clean, the delightfully understated beverage epitomizes the West Coast's handle on American pale ales.  
*(continued)*



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## TONE STYLE



If Deschutes can be said to claim a divisive beer, Chainbreaker White IPA is it. West Coast breweries are renowned for full-bodied, explosive IPAs, but Deschutes takes an entirely different tact. Chainbreaker White is essentially a Belgian wit in disguise. Featuring a nice, white head and muted yellow color that parallels that of the label, the beer tempts with coriander, orange, and spice flavors. Cloves and citrus greet the nose, yet none are overly obvious. Big, overpowering hops aren't here, nor are the traditional elements of an IPA. Akin to Deschutes' other beers, this bright and light-bodied offering sports tremendous balance and cleanliness. Best enjoyed on a hot summer day and paired with spicy foods, it qualifies as a solid albeit not a standout brew. ●



# Jazz & Blues

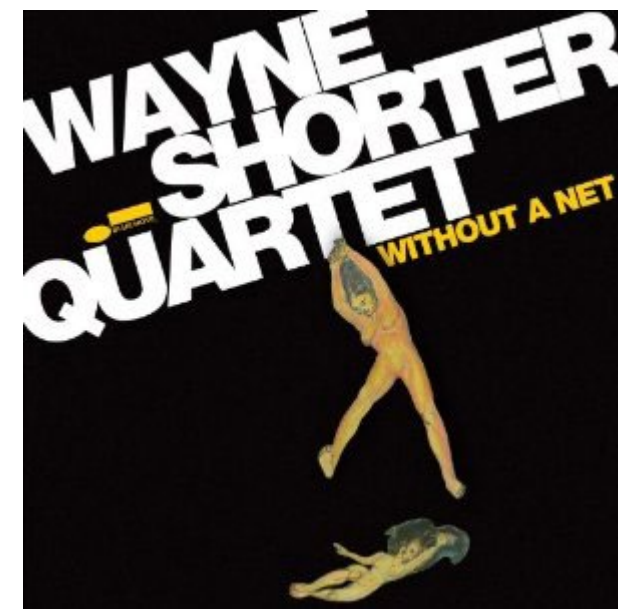
By Jim Macnie

We usually expect the level of eloquence to rise as artists move into their advanced years—refinement and judiciousness blend to elicit a certain grace. But some, like Wayne Shorter, are lucky enough to bring ferociousness along with them.

The kinetics and drama that dominate the saxophonist's return to the iconic Blue Note label, where he was responsible for a string of earthshaking records that began with 1964's *Night Dreamer*, are nothing less than disarming. Through a steady stream of the elliptical horn lines for which he's become famous, the 79-year-old Shorter and his squad wring a series of cataclysmic crescendos from these rich originals. *Without A Net* is recorded live, and it boasts the kind of ardor that immediately tickles an audience. Something wild is always going on.

This quartet is deeply dedicated to interplay. Pianist Danilo Perez, bassist John Patitucci, and drummer Brian Blade have proven their collective agility since their 2002 debut, *Footprints Live*. Their exchanges are playful but never glib; a perpetual seriousness hovers above these pieces. Part of it is architectural. Shorter is often cited as jazz's greatest living composer, and indeed, his fusion of structural savvy and melodic aplomb has few equals. From "Starry Night" to "Plaza Real,"

©Photo by Robert Ascroft



## Wayne Shorter Quartet

*Without A Net*

Blue Note, CD

the four-way conversation embraces both the giddy and mysterious, and when the players invent a tune on the spot, like "Zero Gravity To the 10th Power," their skills at waxing mercurial are totally seductive.

An extended piece recorded live with the Imani Winds is sandwiched between the eight quartet tracks. The chamber work "Pegasus" reiterates the Shorterian method, full of swells that accommodate the constant darting of his soprano sax (there's a smidge of tenor on the album as well) and Blade's bombs-bursting-in-air approach to punctuation. It's certainly more static than its counterparts, but possesses its own idiosyncratic momentum, which is basically the DNA of this disc. In some way, the Imanis are rendered superfluous—present for color, not kinetics. As the quartet shows time and again, it's got everything it needs to spark a wealth of action on its own.

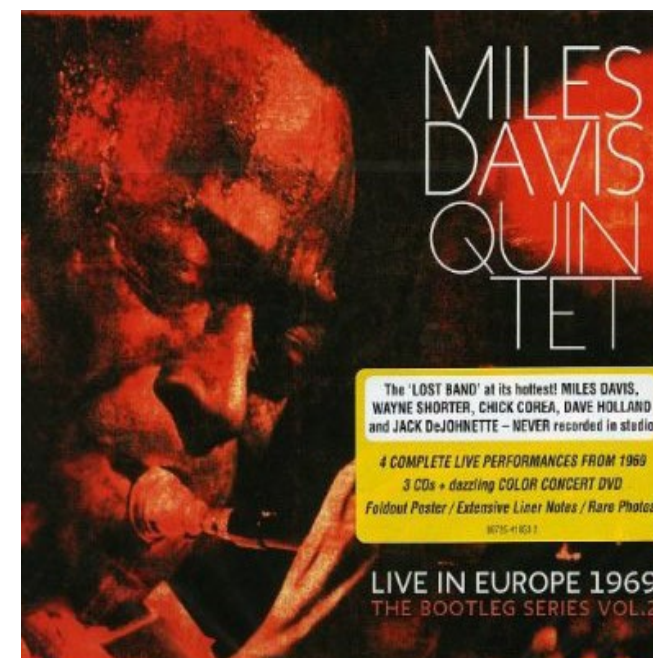


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## MUSIC



### **Miles Davis Quintet**

*Live in Europe 1969:  
The Bootleg Series, Volume 2*  
Legacy, 3CD + DVD

Seems like Miles Davis had but one request of his band when he bounced from Antibes to Stockholm to Berlin during the final summer of the '60s: tear shit up. And being some of the most audacious instrumentalists of the era—full of piss, vinegar, and boundless inspiration—they complied. The music on this essential four-disc box is loaded with kinetics, the kind of crackling tension-and-release maneuvers that let you know you're listening to the most animated declarations the band has in it.

Recorded live on tour after the sessions for the electric yet ethereal *In A Silent Way* and before the studio dates that yielded the electric and exclamatory *Bitches Brew*, the action here finds the trumpeter and his cohort of saxophonist Wayne Shorter, pianist Chick Corea, bassist Dave Holland, and drummer Jack DeJohnette in pivot mode. Older, more trad tunes like "Round Midnight," "Milestones," and "Footprints" share time with the latest offerings from Shorter and Davis.



# gamut gamutaudio.com

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©Photo Sony Music Entertainment

This particular outfit is often deemed “the lost band” because, as such, it never made a sanctioned disc for Davis’ label of the time, Columbia. Bootlegs have floated around for years, regaled for the way the group lets the frenzy flow on stage. Now, with some of the sonics polished by Team Legacy, the ensemble’s musical impact is unmistakable. There’s not a moment that doesn’t crackle with creativity.

One of the main revelations comes via the clarion blasts of Davis’ horn. For such a ballad master, especially a ballad master whose signature was often a muted purr, the trumpeter comes out firing. His work on “Masqualero” from the July Antibes show is a series of fierce declarations—mildly screechy, fully impassioned, and loaded with

the swag that often fed his public persona. The other sparkplug here is DeJohnette, who applies grace but avoids subtlety. The vehemence that makes the music so vivid often stems from his drum kit.

The mix of swing rhythm, funk implications, and lots of free stretches translates to some of the most catholic music of Davis’ oversized career. Hearing the Antibes romp through “Nefer-titi” encompass all of the above and makes it seem like the band can do anything; being able to see the group pull off such feats on the DVD from Berlin proves equally edifying. With Davis sweating through the dreamy “Sanctuary,” it’s a reminder of the band’s ardent attack. Once lost, now found. ●



# Motorheadphone Headphones

By Bob Gendron

“By rockers for rockers.” The slogan behind Motorhead’s new headphones (and earphones) cuts to the chase in the same way the band’s no-frills rock n’ roll blares through stacks of Marshall amplifiers and hits fans squarely in the chest at its concerts. Promoted as lifestyle devices, Motorheadphones claim to deliver rumbling bass without sacrificing midrange and high-frequency dynamics. While legalities prevent the literature and ads from naming names, it’s obvious the line seeks to go head-to-head with Dr. Dre’s Beats ‘phones, which give up plenty of bass but lack in other sonic areas.

Motorhead, whose records fall short of audiophile standards, isn’t the first artist that springs to mind in terms of launching personal audio gear. Yet, in terms of branding, the trio’s long history, international fame, umlaut-accented logo, and, most importantly, uncompromising live-hard attitude make it the hard-rock equivalent of Harley-Davidson. Vocalist/bassist Lemmy Kilmister and company exemplify independence, nonconformity, and defiance—characteristics associated with rock n’ roll.





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## FEATURE

As such, neither the Bomber, Iron Fist, nor Motorizer (named after Motorhead albums) over-ear model seeks to appeal to hip-hop or classical tastes; the black, heavy-duty construction and silver-embossed logos scream leather-and-studs cool and whiskey-drinking raucousness. Amazingly, audiophile manufacturers still haven't caught up to the fact that most listeners don't simply want good sound and portability. They demand fashionable looks that reflect and project their interests; 'phones are all about making a statement. From this angle, Motorheadphones already have a leg up on the competition. And they're tied to a band unafraid to literally piss on anybody that gets in its way. Look out below.

Motorheadphones' lifestyle imaging is reinforced in the clever packaging, intended to mimic a road case. With Motorheadphones, you're not only buying a product—you're buying into a free-spirited belief system, aggressive symbolism, and the group's hallmark "Everything Louder Than Everything Else" motto. For the privilege, prepare to spend \$120-\$130, which, in the case of the top-of-the-line Motorizer, gets you a pair of 'phones, two cables (a 2.5m version for home listening, and a 1m edition complete with a microphone/controller dubbed "Controlizer" for smartphones), a gold-plated stereo mini-jack adapter, and carrying bag. Cigarettes and Jack Daniels aren't included.

To their credit, Motorizers tolerate high-decibel volumes without caving into distortion or smearing. If, like Lemmy and his crew, loudness is your primary criteria, they won't likely disappoint. As promised, bass is full and smooth, and the percussion healthy and upfront. Midrange suffers not an iota. However, Motorizers sound rather trebly, with vocals and guitars receiving more attention than they should. It's an intentional bias, but one that on discs such as Iron Maiden's metal-breathing *Live Over Hammersmith* and Jamey Johnson's country-appointed *The Lonesome Song* results in annoying brightness and occasional tizziness. The imbalance is to be expected: Beats 'phones amplify the low end; Motorheadphones aim for the opposite by way of restoring the midrange and highs.

Motorizers, which utilize 40mm neodymium speakers, perform fairly well in the areas of instrumental separation and noise-canceling immersion—particularly given the price. However, critical listeners and music lovers preferring a more detailed, warm presentation—as well as a wider, deeper soundstage and realistic acoustic equilibrium—will be better served by other models. Then again, they won't know the fist-in-the-air pleasures of pumping Motorhead tunes like "Killed By Death" through 'phones tailored for such tension-releasing escapes.

\$129 [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)





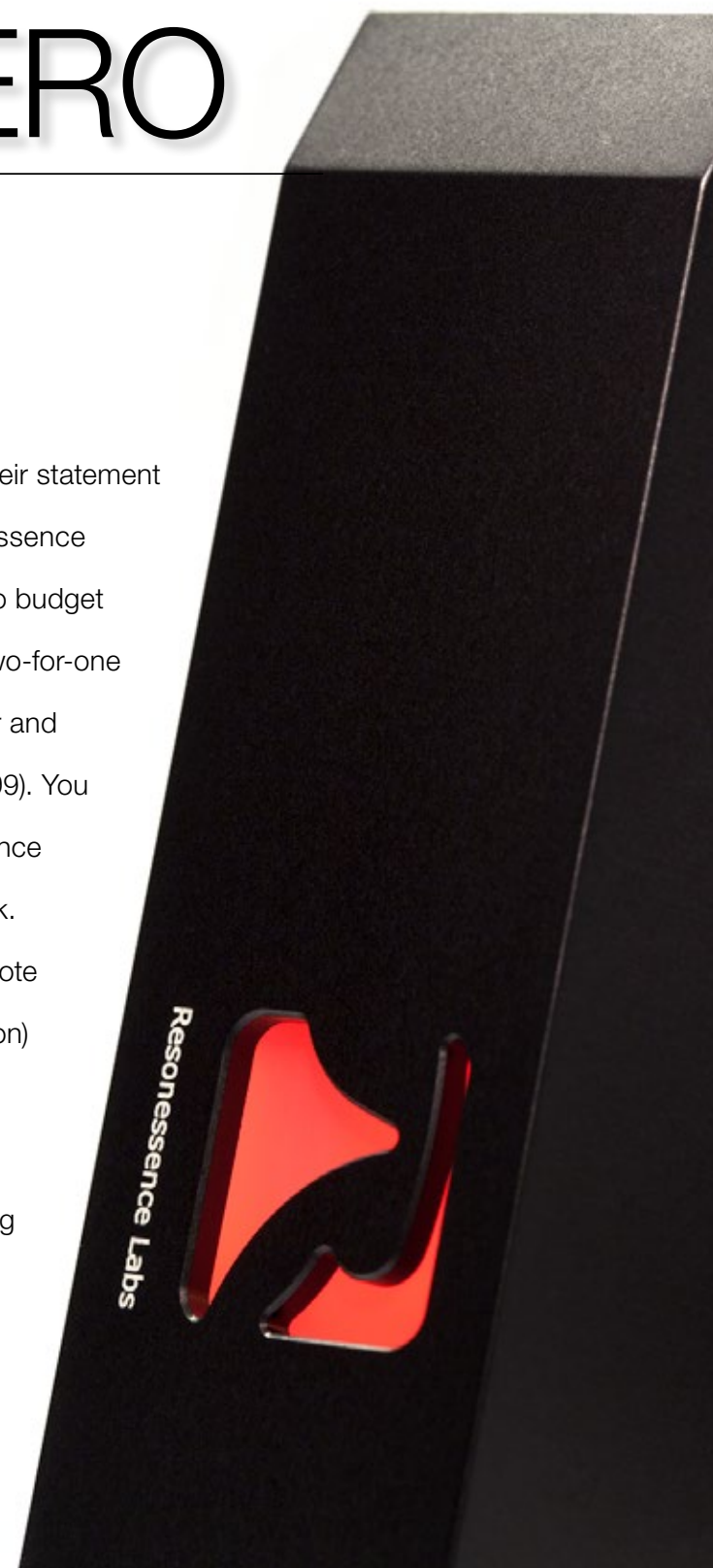
FEATURE

Resonance Labs

# CONCERO

By John Darko

Following the success of their statement INVICTA DAC(CA\$3,999) Resonance Labs have fired their first salvo into budget territory. They've come armed with two-for-one ammunition: a USB-S/PDIF convertor and DAC packed into a single unit (CA\$599). You can purchase direct from Resonance themselves or via their dealer network. An additional \$50 bundles Apple remote (for playback control and filter selection) and USB power supply (required for S/PDIF DAC mode) into the bargain. Accessories aside, the whole shebang is manufactured and assembled right there in Canada.



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### FEATURE

#### Custom coding

On paper, basic expectations are comprehensively met: separate clocks for 44.1 kHz and 48 kHz sample rate families and an in-house coded asynchronous USB solution. Concerned that it will introduce jitter, Resonance Labs have dispensed with PLL circuitry. No, it's not another XMOS implementation.

A DAC's sound isn't uniformly influenced by the decoding silicon—there's I/V conversion and output stage to consider—but its sticker price certainly is. The CONCERO is the digital guts of the INVICTA wedded to a cheaper ESS Sabre chip—the 9023. Remember: the INVICTA runs a pair of Reference ESS Sabre 9018 and sells for CA\$3999.

Resonance combines their own custom (FGPA) code and the Cypress CY7C68013 chip in a USB receiver that uses their own asynchronous code and handles remote functions. Their designer Mark Mallinson emphasizes that “they spent a lot of time making sure that the speed differences between the computer's clock and the high quality/low phase noise reference of their DAC's don't cause issues—the code is written to handle when the computer is both faster and slower than the source. This required a custom solution.”

#### Remote control, up-sampling and filters

Team Resonance have pulled some neat tricks with the CONCERO's functionality. Hi-jacking an Apple remote control is a clever trick. *(continued)*





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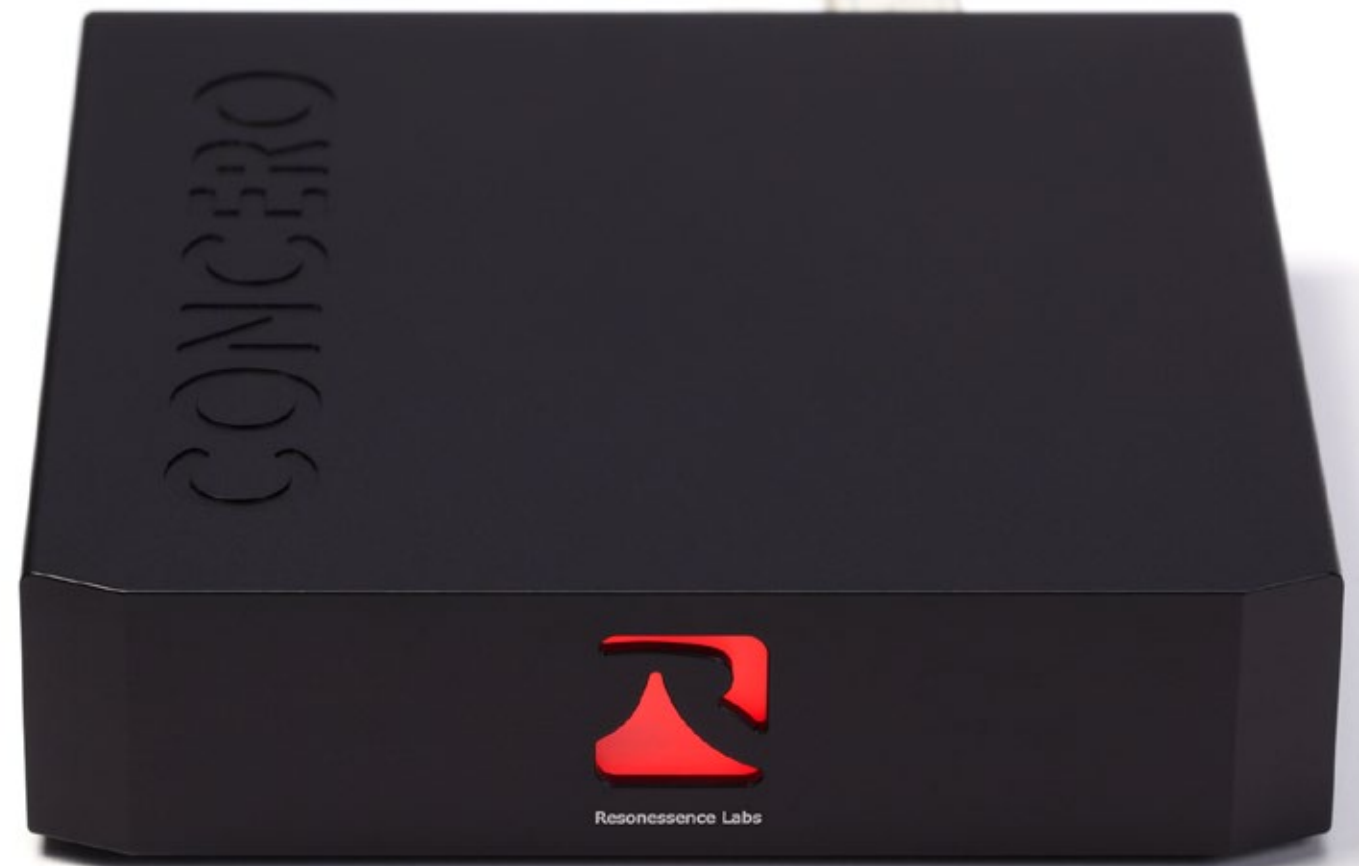
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### FEATURE



The up/down buttons toggle on/off states for digital and analogue outputs; useful if you're keen to minimize internal processing but I could discern no audible benefit when doing so. Play/pause and fwd/next sends the same signal back down the USB cable to your host computer; a real boon if your existing PC or Mac has no existing remote control receiver. Windows users will require the USB Class 2.0 driver (downloadable from the Resonance Labs website). Windows 8 compliance is now in the bag.

Unlike the price- and function-matched rival UD384 from Taiwan's KingRex, no external power brick is required for the CONCERO to get going. It runs on 5V USB fuel. Engineering smarts have been deployed here too: connect the CONCERO (via USB cable) to a host computer to enable USB DAC mode OR plug the same USB cable

into a power-only 'phone charging' brick (supplied in the power pack) for S/PDIF DAC mode.

#### USB DAC

Julian Cope's epic and sprawling Peggy Suicide is presented as full, smooth and rich. It's a sound that's free from digital glare and metallic sheen. Not as obviously detailed or airy as the Micromega MyDAC, the CONCERO is much more conducive to longer listening sessions. Build quality on the Resonance Labs unit underscores the toy-like appearance of the Micromega.

There's more. Pressing the menu button on the Apple remote cycles through three filters: native mode (logo blue), IIR filter (logo magenta), apodizing filter (logo magenta). The latter two 4x up-sampling filters work their magic only when fed 44.1 and 48 sample rate material. *(continued)*



FEATURE



I preferred the IIR filter. It demonstrated greater heft with lower frequencies and was more rhythmically self-assured than both native mode and the apodizing filter. The latter revealed more air in recordings but strayed into brightness on occasion.

Whichever filter is preferred for one style of music might not be suited to another. Spinning (an ALAC rip of) the original CD of Thomas Dolby's *Golden Age Of Wireless*, the IIR filter tamed some of the needling transients and added a little body and drive. On the other hand, the lighter, crisper native mode filter dials back some of the bass on already-beefy techno: Sighe's *Living With Ghosts* or Surgeon's *Fabric* mix being two such examples. The take away here is that the user can tweak the sound to balance out their existing system's sonic characteristics.

Higher sample-rated source material—or digital music already software up-sampled to 88.2kHz, 96kHz, 176.4kHz and 192kHz—is passed bit-perfectly down the chain; the filters remain dormant and the logo holds fast to blue.

**The gift that keeps on giving**

There aren't too many combo currently units doing the rounds. One could applaud Resonance Labs for packing filtering flexibility into a six hundred dollar DAC and then go home. But no. There's USB bridge mode too.

As a USB-S/PDIF convertor, the CONCERO is utterly superb. The jitter-reducing sauce that got poured into the recipe brings greater fluidity to Peachtree's Nova125. *(continued)*

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## FEATURE

In this reviewer's broad experience with USB convertors, the CONCERO is the next device to join the Audiophile and John Kenny's battery-infused modified Hiface as the goto models at their price point. If you find the Audiophile too dry or the JKSPDIF too smooth, a happy medium might be found with the Resonance box: glabrous with excellent tonal saturation. There's less transient bite than the Audiophile. Think black coffee laced with a few drops of cream. Yum.

The same up-sampling filters are available in USB bridge mode but with some volume drop-away in all but native (blue light) mode, a necessity to avoid filter distortion on the digital output.

Note: both filter and native modes are level matched at 1.2V on the analogue outputs. The Concero is quieter than rival units and possibly isn't for ideal for those lacking headroom in their amplification chain. Conversely, a cooler analogue output is suited those with too much headroom or those with more sensitive inputs on vintage amplifiers and receivers.

In a recent experiment to extract audio from an iPad with Camera Connection Kit and iFi's iUSBPower, the CONCERO and iFi's own iDAC were the only DACs to meet the challenge without issue. A USB clocker and DAC for the iPad. No other unit currently offers this one-two at any price.

### A Keeper

I could easily live with the Concero as a long-term decoder; its eloquence and articulation of musical

spirit is simply terrific. Selectable filters lift its flexibility when applied to different music genres (and listener mood) whilst the USB bridge operation is up there with the best of them at this price point.

For those wondering: yes, the Concero is a superior-sounding unit to the Schiit Modi. It offers more refinement and tonal depth. Modi aside, I can think of no greater bang-for-buck currently available in the budget digital space. Hands down a triumph of innovation and sonic flair, Resonance Labs' CONCERO exceeds expectations by a healthy margin and then some. ●

**\$599**

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





# Rega RP8 Turntable

www.rega.co.uk  
\$2,999 (\$3,999 with Apheta MC cartridge)



The RP8 is the next step in Rega's new RP range. It replaces the the exiting P7 as a major upgrade, closing in on the company's flagship P9 for considerably less cash out of pocket. Should you be interested in Rega's excellent Apheta moving-coil cartridge, you can purchase it with the table for \$3,999, which is an \$800 savings over buying them separately. This has to be one of the best bargains in high-end audio. Cooler still is Rega's new "skeletal plinth" design, shown here, for the first time in a production turntable. And all you have to do is fit the belts and the platter, and set tracking force. It doesn't get any easier.

Watch for the Analogaholic's review, coming soon to our website.



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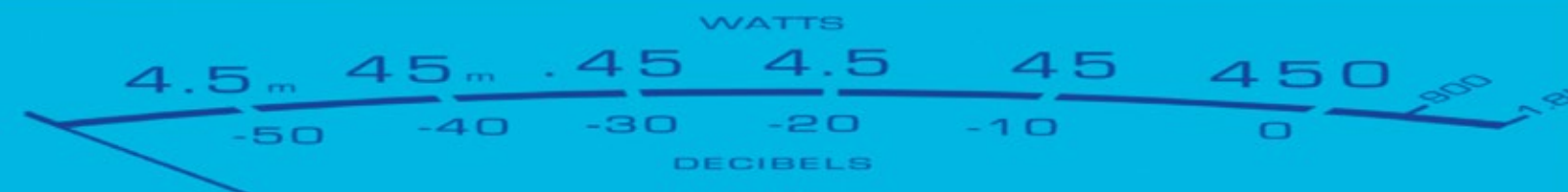
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# Oppo BDP-103 and BDP-105 Disc Players

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**O**ppo has made a big splash in the last few years with great budget universal disc players. Our publisher has been using the \$500 BDP-63 with excellent result, but the latest crop of Oppo players is light years ahead. Taking advantage of the latest ESS DAC chips, power supply upgrades and a more robust analog stage, the company's current players continue to set the bar at their price point.

Either one of these decks would satisfy the true music lover, because their ability to play any kind of digital disc means the freedom to pick up anything

when you are shopping for audio or video content. Both allow connection of a NAS drive to allow the player to function as a digital streamer, and the BDP-105 even has optical and coaxial (S/PDIF) digital inputs, allowing it to be used as a DAC for your computer-based music server.

And that's just the audio. Both players have video sections that, alone, are worth the purchase price, making these new Oppos a best buy in terms of price, features and performance.

Watch the Comparo section of our website for the full review of both players, which is coming soon.



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# Thorens TD-125 Turntable, Rebuilt by Vinyl Nirvana

About \$1,200 (price dependent on arm and plinth choice)  
www.vinylnirvana.com

If new just isn't your bag, consider a beautifully restored Thorens turntable from Vinyl Nirvana. Company owner Dave Archambault has built a thriving business out of restoring AR and Thorens turntables. He's to the point now where he's pretty much shipping a table a day to a happy customer somewhere in the world.

Taking advantage of its huge parts cache and master-plinth builder, Vinyl Nirvana can do anything from a simple cleanup to a frame-off

restoration, with a plinth built from a custom hardwood of your choice. The result is a table that looks and sounds better than the day it rolled off the assembly line at Thorens back in 1968. And as Dave reminds us on his Facebook page: "A new TD-125 cost \$280 with the base arm then. That's \$1,882 in today's money!"

A full review of the table and an interview with Dave is on the immediate horizon.



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Boulder's US sales manager, Rich Maez mentioned that no one has had a pair of 3050s for review, because "no one has enough power..." Each amplifier needs a dedicated 220 volt outlet, and utilizes a power receptacle looking like it should be for a fire hose, not a power cord. But that wouldn't stop our quest for auditioning these monsters, so tune in next issue, for our visit to the Boulder factory and an extended listing session with these beauties. Spoiler: They are incredible!



# Primaluna Prologue Premium Stereo Power Amplifier

By Jerold O'Brien



So what exactly makes this a *premium* PrimaLuna product? Like all products from the Dutch brand, the ProLogue Premium Premium Stereo Power Amplifier has a certain aesthetic appeal: a gunmetal-colored finish, which wouldn't be out of place on an AMG Mercedes, set off by an anodized-aluminum faceplate (available in silver or black). Also like the rest of the company's lineup, the ProLogue Premium stereo amp offers serious levels of performance—this is where the amp's *premium* designate becomes apparent.

Popping off the bottom cover reveals ceramic tube sockets and Nichicon and Solen capacitors flanked by premium resistors, along with newly designed output and power transformers. Wiring is all point-to-point and meticulously done by hand, which is one of the reasons PrimaLuna amps have earned such a high reputation for their reliability. All this precision comes wrapped in a somewhat compact package that weighs nearly 50 pounds, and has an MSRP of \$2,299. *(continued)*





# GIBRALTAR 1999-2013 RIP ALL HAIL CASTLE ROCK!



Late one snowy night at a Michigan motel, January 1999, I designed Gibraltar speaker cable for my own system. I needed an extremely high-performance cable which would provide true Double-BiWire performance in a single attractive cable. While I needed to optimize a 2-way speaker, in which the transition between woofer and tweeter is above the midrange, the challenge I enjoyed overcoming in those early morning hours was designing a cable which would also be equally effective Full-Range or when used to BiWire a 3-way speaker (in which the bass/treble transition is below the midrange, the midrange information being carried by the treble cable rather than by the bass cable as with a 2-way).

Original Gibraltar's all important basics – superior geometry, almost ideal isolation between the magnetic fields of the bass and treble signals, Perfect-Surface metal, conductor size maximization (AQ's SST), etc. – are the fundamentals of our new Castle Rock cable, as are crucial post-1999 improvements to Gibraltar, such as even better metal and AQ's DBS (Dielectric-Bias System).

You might not notice that Castle Rock's new more nicely sculpted "breakout" (covering where the cable separates into red and black legs) is no longer metal. We have made this all-models upgrade because speaker cables and AC cables carry large magnetic fields which interact with any metal "collar" around the cable.

Smaller ingredients, such as non-metallic breakouts and the new NDS (Noise-Dissipation System) built into Castle Rock, and bigger changes, such as Castle Rock using the same sleek new Signature Series spades and bananas developed for the WEL Sig. Series cables, add up to an important difference in what you hear and enjoy.

Even though the jump up from last-generation Gibraltar to Castle Rock is no bigger than the cumulative improvements brought to Gibraltar over its long life, Castle Rock's own new systems and materials earns it a new name to honor Gibraltar's long-term evolution + Castle Rock's new ingredients.

Happy listening!

William E. Low

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "WEL", written over the printed name "William E. Low".

**audioquest**

REVIEW



## Hassle-Free Tube Power

PrimaLuna amplifiers have long been known for their Adaptive AutoBias circuitry, a PrimaLuna trademark that makes traditional tube biasing a thing of the past. This design allows a wide range of tubes to be used in the output sockets: KT88 or EL34 tubes work equally well—every Prologue Premium Series amplifier comes with either set of tubes installed. (The KT88s produce 36 watts per channel; the EL34s produce 35 watts per channel.) The new premium version of the amp adds a switch on the side of the chassis, allowing you to optimize the amplifier to your choice of tubes, in order to achieve the lowest possible levels of noise and distortion.

I'm immediately struck by the lively sonic response that the Prologue provides, with a quick, organic and natural sound that spans all frequency ranges. This amplifier always feels ready and able to take on whatever you can throw at it—which is exactly what I did. The Prologue Premium eliminates the hassle of owning a vacuum-tube-powered amplifier. It even has a PTP circuit (for Power Transformer Protection) that will protect the amp's output transformers, should you have an accidental, catastrophic tube failure, which can happen with today's tubes.

PrimaLuna has updated the front-end circuitry for this amp, which now uses 12AU7 tubes instead of the 12AX7s in the company's earlier amplifiers. *(continued)*



The inveterate tweak-geek in me could not resist fooling with those 12AU7s, even though the amp sounds great with stock tubes. New old stock GE tubes render a smoother top-end response, but offer a different listening perspective, as if I had moved back about five rows in the orchestra. Next, a set of RCA clear tops (with side getters, for the tubeophiles in the audience) provides a big jump in frequency extension, as well as more transparency and a more palpable midrange. Best of all, Kevin Deal, the owner of Upscale Audio (and the PrimaLuna importer) has a massive cache of these tubes in stock, so you can experiment at will; the 12AU7s aren't nearly the cost of the 12AX7s. When asked, Deal said that he has "over 10,000 rare and NOS 12AU7s."

Be aware, I achieved these results with my system; so don't take them as an absolute, as results will vary on other systems. But that's the fun of an amplifier like this: You can experiment as much or as little as you want—and we haven't even talked about swapping output tubes. Don't forget to save those stock tubes just in case you find yourself lost in the vacuum-tube jungle.

### Love at First Listen

Brian Bromberg's closely miked contrabass in "The Saga of Harrison Crabfeathers," from his *Wood* album, instantly confirms the level of full-bodied bass definition the ProLogue Premium provides. In addition to the solid low-end response, you can clearly hear the creaking and groaning of the instrument, as well as the strings being plucked and slapped on the fretboard. I've never heard this kind of resolution from a vintage Dynaco Stereo 70 (or modded variation on the theme).

Muddy Waters' album *Folk Singer* proves a perfect midrange showcase for this amp, which places Waters' voice firmly at center stage, while simultaneously revealing the ambience in the recording studio present on this intimate performance. Perhaps the best showcase of any tube amplifier is its ability to convey the sultriness of the female voice, which is another test that the ProLogue Premium passes handily. I listen to the entire disc of Renée Fleming's *Haunted Heart* without pause. The track "When Did You Leave Heaven?" gives Fleming and the accompanying guitar, courtesy of Bill Frisell, plenty of space without missing a lick of subtlety. *(continued)*



ProLogue Premium Stereo Amplifier





### And Secondly

It's usually a given that vacuum-tube amplifiers excel at revealing low-level detail and vocal tonality, but the Prologue Premium performs equally well with larger-scale music. Nelson Riddle's *Nice 'n' Easy: The Music of Nelson Riddle* is a classic big-band record full of massed horns, which the Prologue Premium sails through, keeping the horns sorted without becoming harsh or buried in the mix—impressive.

The acid test comes via the Minute-men's "One Reporter's Opinion," from the *Double Nickels on the Dime* disc. D. Boon's AK-47-style guitar playing is present in all its force, Mike Watt's fluid bass is easy to follow and drummer George Hurley's seems to punch a hole in my forehead—the PrimaLuna delivers all of this while giving the track the precision and grit on the scale it deserves. No matter how complex the musical selections, this amplifier does an excellent job keeping pace.

### I'm a Fan!

I'm taken with this little but heavy amplifier, and can see why our publisher has

been an advocate of PrimaLuna since day one.

This amp takes everything I throw at it in stride—always musical, always eager and always evenly balanced in overall presentation. As with the other PrimaLuna products, the Premium stereo amp represents good value. This is the perfect power amp for a music lover wanting to assemble a high performance system on a tight budget. The Prologue Premium is worth every penny.

I will say that one must be realistic when pairing the Premium with his or her speakers and listening environment. Although the volume levels I'm able to achieve with this amp in my largish room are quite satisfying, 35 watts only go so far—even great watts such as these. The amp does clip slightly when I get lead-footed with the volume. To its credit, when the amp does clip, it does so with gentle compression instead of just falling apart. To this point, speakers that are in the 90-plus-dB category will make for optimum system synergy in most rooms. *(continued)*

product: Mozart Grand - Symphony Edition



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# Additional Listening

By Jeff Dorgay

As Jerold mentioned, I've been listening to PrimaLuna amplifiers since the company introduced the original ProLogue One almost 10 years ago. It's almost like *TONEAudio* and PrimaLuna have grown up together. That original amplifier is still in my family and, with a replacement set of power tubes, it keeps playing music on a daily basis without bother.

It's been fun watching the PrimaLuna products evolve over the years into a more fleshed out line, with each model revealing more music than the one before. Putting the ProLogue Premium stereo power amp through its paces is a joy, with the matching preamplifier and a few other examples I have on hand. If you don't need a built-in phonostage (and like your garanimals to match), the \$2,199 ProLogue Premium Preamplifier makes for killer a setup with the Premium power amp. The preamp is perfectly matched to the power amp electrically and stylistically, and pairing the two together will easily fool you and your friends into thinking you spent a lot more scratch on your system. Many of my old-school buddies were having visions of vintage McIntosh in their heads, when I had this PrimaLuna combo connected to a mint pair of JBL L100 speakers.

Cranking up Judas Priest's *Screaming for Vengeance* (on

the matching PrimaLuna CD player we reviewed a few months ago) is a little slice of heavy-metal heaven—for a minute I was worried I might just blow up those JBLs, like I did back in the day. The smooth sound of this PrimaLuna front-end package does not disappoint.

Another, more modern speaker that is a spectacular match with 35 watts per channel of tube power is Vienna Acoustics' Mozart Grand. The speakers have a 90-dB-sensitivity rating and a very gentle first-order crossover, but the ProLogue never runs out of gas when powering them. And at about \$3,500 a pair, the Mozart speakers won't put you in the poorhouse. Those on a tighter budget, consider a pair of Vandersteen 1Cs, which have the same high sensitivity, but are only \$1,200 a pair.

Back when Kevin Deal and I sold mid-fi gear in stereo shops reminiscent of the one in the movie *Ruthless People* (1986), we used to describe gear as being more suited to rock or classical, etc., etc. But the PrimaLuna electronics are a little bit of magic: They play everything well, yet they inject just enough of that tubey warmth to make the bulk of your music collection sound much better than you'd expect it to. This is a godsend for those having a mostly digital music

collection, MP3s or CDs.

For this amp, I took the time to swap output tubes. A set of super high zoot NOS 6550s or a new set of EAT KT88s, both of which will set you back about \$1,500, but fear not, there are tons of great new EL-34 tubes in the \$25-\$50 range that sound fantastic. The extra midrange warmth and liquidity they provide will have you wondering if you ever need another amp. And should a tube fail at an inopportune moment, the Adaptive AutoBias will even keep the amp purring along with a mixed set of output tubes. You'd be surprised at how many hardcore audiophiles have gone full circle back to the simplicity of an EL-34 amplifier paired with moderately efficient speakers. This is an amplifier you can either start your tube journey with, or live with happily ever after.

With vintage Luxman, Marantz and McIntosh tube amplifiers fetching crazy money on the used market these days (not to mention their questionable reliability), make your life easy: Put a PrimaLuna Prologue Premium between your speakers and just dig it. You'll be glad you did. ●



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Premium Stereo Power Amplifier**  
MSRP: \$2,299

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## PERIPHERALS

**Digital Source** PrimaLuna ProLogue Premium CD Player, dCS Debussy

**Analog Source** Rega RP6w/Exact, Monk Audio Phono Pre  
**Preamplifier** PrimaLuna ProLogue Premium, VTL TL-5.5Mk. II

**Speakers** Lawrence Audio Violin, Dynaudio Confidence C1 II

**Cable** AudioQuest King Cobra, Furutech LineFlux and SpeakerFlux



# Penaudio's New Sinfonietta

By Rob Johnson

Growing up with a Finnish grandma, the word “sisu” became part of my vocabulary at an early age. According to her, there isn’t a perfect translation into English since the word represents a guiding philosophy—a mindset—rather than one specific thing. Loosely translated, the term embodies qualities of perseverance, determination and resilience.

The Finnish speaker manufacturer Penaudio embraces sisu in their constant efforts to evolve great products into even better ones. New for 2013, Penaudio’s Sinfonietta loudspeaker makes its debut. As you might guess from its name, it’s a direct descendent of their flagship Sinfonia and looks like, well, the bottom half of one.

*TONEAudio* reviewed several Penaudio speakers over the years and are a perennial staff favorite, yet the Sinfonietta takes the lineage to the next level.



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## REVIEW

### More than a pretty face

Listening to the Mobile Fidelity Sound Labs' *Sinatra at the Sands* on vinyl it's hard not to chuckle at Sinatra's banter between songs. As he jokingly describes his own childhood appearance to the audience, "I was born a very skinny kid...So skinny my eyes were single file. Between those two and my belly button my old man thought I was a clarinet."

That album rendered through the Sinfoniettas brought an unexpected moment of irony as I looked at the speakers' narrow, seven inch front baffle. Below the fluid cooled dome tweeter are two vertically stacked, five inch drivers separated by a few inches. As the Sinfonietta's single-file "eyes" centered by copper-colored pupils stare back at the listener, the small port on the front is vaguely reminiscent of the navel Sinatra joked about.

A slender "clarinet", however, the Sinfonietta is not. Looking head-on the speakers disguise the muscle behind their narrow face with a 21-inch cabinet depth. Each speaker sports a 10 inch, paper-coned, side-firing woofer on one side near the bottom. With a depth three times its width each Sinfonietta has a wide base which creates additional stability and facilitates insertion of spikes.

Available in several equally attractive wood finishes, our sample pair showcase the Rowan wood option. Regardless of the finish Penaudio creates a unique look to their speakers as if they were made entirely of many parallel, thin wood sheets. (continued)





The subtle gradients of the natural wood color provide a beautiful, organic quality to the speaker which is understated, but hard not to admire. The fit and finish on this speaker is well executed and with so many veneer options the Sinfonietta complements a room's décor rather than dominating it. Beautiful sound may be the primary goal of any speaker design, but equally beautiful looks never hurt!

### Dancing with Sinfoniettas

My usual speakers moved aside to accommodate my temporary Rowan wood-veneered roommates, and to provide a starting point for optimal Sinfonietta placement in my 17'D x 20'W x 10.5'H listening area. After a full hour of scooting the 110-pound Sinfoniettas around the room in an effort to eek every last drop of sonic benefit from them, it's clear they are not simple to place. I'm also fairly certain the neighbors below my condo will have concern about my mental state given all my apparent pacing back and forth between the speakers and my listening position.

Subtle movements of these speakers prove meaningful sonically and so the investment of time for proper placement is critical for getting the most musical enjoyment from your audio investment. For example, at some locations the bass overpowers my room, but small adjustments of speaker placement bring it back into check.

Ultimately the Sinfoniettas sweet spot is 3.5 feet from the ASC Tube Trapped back wall and about 8 feet apart. This combination offers the reward of an exceptionally wide soundstage—one which extends well beyond the speakers themselves—as well as great bass extension and depth.

Trying many different angles of toe-in requires experimentation too. Starting with the speakers toed at a fairly aggressive angle, crossing in front of the listening position, moving them outward a few degrees at a time helps identify the optimal placement angle. *(continued)*



# Music First Audio



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In my case the Sinfoniettas offer the greatest combination of resolution and depth of soundstage with small amount of toe in and their theoretical target well behind my listening seat.

### What's shakin'?

Penaudio suggests minimum power for the Sinfoniettas to be 50 watts into 8 ohms. Fed 250 watts though, you might be advised to add a seatbelt to your listening chair. The powerful voice of these speakers emerges as a single, cohesive experience despite the many drivers and crossover points which comprise the Sinfonietta's design.

Other than transparency what first stands out when listening is the Sinfonietta's bass presence. During songs like Massive Attack's "Angel" or Bill Laswell & Jah Wobble's "Subcode" very low bass notes produce a resonant rattling of the glassware in my kitchen cabinets! The Sinfoniettas are easily capable of filling a much larger room than mine with sound. Based on the vibration in my sofa (and my kidneys) while listening, a smaller room might find itself overly-consumed in bass.

### Smooth Operator

String instruments like those presented in "Sleep Will Come" by Bliss and the upright bass rendered in Dave Brubeck Quartet's "Blue Rondo a la Turk" are portrayed with deep and woody delicacy.

Sia's emotive voice on "I Go To Sleep" proves captivating each time I hear it. However, the recording's vocal crescendos can be a bit overpowering on some equipment where highs

go beyond "extended" and into the realm of stridency. Mated with complementary electronics upstream, the Penaudios strike a well-voiced balance by providing non-fatiguing, natural-sounding highs without the often-accompanying side effects.

With the Sinfoniettas, the width of the virtual soundstage and the specific placement of the various instruments and vocals within it are revelatory. Air's "Venus" and Ray Lamontagne's "Be Here Now" provide stellar examples of the Sinfonietta's sound-staging prowess as notes and voices wrap around the listening room. Lyle Lovett's "Church" is a challenging image portrayal, given multiple instruments and a choir behind the singer. The Penaudios handle the layering with finesse.

In larger group performances, like Pink Martini's "Let's Never Stop Falling in Love", the physical speakers blend seamlessly into the virtual width and depth of the performance in such a way that, with eyes closed, it's difficult to point out the speakers. Sound seems to emerge from all around the Sinfoniettas including the trumpet nestled in the rear stage behind them.

Other strong suits for the Sinfoniettas include detail and nuance. The gravel in Leonard Cohen's voice on "Be For Real" is not just audible, but tangible. Listening to Stevie Ray Vaughan's rendition of "Little Wing", the guitar's strength and delicacy both emerge with aplomb. The speakers also portray fast, realistic sounding percussive strikes followed by gentle decay, regardless of who's on the drum kit. *(continued)*





### Rock On!

One of the Sinfonietta's greatest strengths reveals itself as ability to rock when compelled to do so. Rage Against the Machine's "Bombtrack" pack ample, visceral punch. Electronica like "Juanita/Kiteless" from Underworld's *Everything, Everything Live* proves equally invigorating. At medium-to-higher volumes, the Sinfonietta's drivers demonstrate their ability to move air—sometimes quickly and forcefully enough to generate a noticeable pop in my ear, even from a distance of 11 feet. I've had this experience plenty of times before, but usually only in the presence of live drums.

In my listening space, the Sinfoniettas had the potential to produce the same physical impact with many types of music when played at a moderate volume. Listeners craving this level of tangibility, will find it in spades with the Penaudios. Those preferring a more relaxed, warm, musically-emotive presentation from

their loudspeaker could find the Sinfoniettas a bit intense in some systems. As such, room size and upstream equipment synergy are important considerations for the full enjoyment of these speakers. There is no right or wrong answer here. Some people like bourbon, some prefer wine. Both can be excellent.

### Conclusion

With the Sinfoniettas, Penaudio creates a speaker which commands, and even demands, active listening. Those seeking an energetic, detailed, and accurate portrayal of music will certainly embrace it through the Sinfoniettas. If my grandma were still alive I think she would agree they bring the sisu of their Finnish heritage to the listening room.

For those in the market for a speaker in the \$20,000 range, the beautifully designed Penaudio Sinfoniettas prove worthy of your consideration.

**Penaudio Sinfonietta**  
MSRP: \$20,000/pair

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### PERIPHERALS

**Analog Source** Marantz TT-15

**Digital Source** ARC CD3mk. 2, dCS Purcell, Genesis Digital Lens, EAD 9000 Mk3 DAC

**Power Amplifier** Mark Levinson 335

**Preamplifier** Coffman Labs G1-A

**Cable** Jena Labs Valkyre/Symphony interconnects and Twin 15 speaker cables

**Power** Running Springs Audio Haley, Cardas Golden, Golden Reference / Mongoose Power Cords

**Accessories** ACS Tube Traps, Cathedral Sound Room Dampening Panels



# A New Peak

## Simaudio MOON 880M Monoblocks

By Jeff Dorgay

Revisiting Dave Grusin's classic audiophile album, *Discovered Again!*, brings back frustrating memories of how amplifiers in the early '80s didn't have enough horsepower to do justice to a record with wide dynamic swings. The same dilemma exists when playing many of today's carefully remastered records with ultra-wide dynamic ranges: Even though there is no obvious distortion, something is still missing. And you don't know it until you hear what a mega power amplifier can achieve.

Forget "simpler is better," "lower power is better" or whatever other mantra you've let yourself be convinced by to avoid making the step up to a high-quality, high-power amplifier. You're in for a shock the first time you plug the MOON 880Ms into your system. It's a "space, the final frontier" kind of thing, with the 880Ms opening up a parallel universe where the Enterprise now goes to warp 13, instead of only warp 9.7.





At \$42,000 per pair, these amplifiers are not for the faint of wallet—but the only other amplifiers I’ve heard with this kind of jump factor are the \$205k-per-pair Boulder 3050s. Instead of spending that kind of cash, you could go with a pair of the 880Ms, Simaudio’s \$28,000 MOON 850P preamplifier, your favorite \$25k digital front end, a similarly priced analog front end, and maybe \$40k for a great pair of speakers. You’ll still have enough cash left over for European delivery of a new Porsche Cayman S and a trip to the Montreux Jazz Festival for a week to take in some great live music. To the right buyer, the MOON 880Ms are a major bargain—it’s all relative.

### The Un-Compressor

Thom Yorke’s *The Eraser* is a fairly compressed recording, as is Supreme Beings of Leisure’s album *11i*. The recently remastered Deluxe Version of Thin Lizzy’s *Jailbreak* feels tighter still. The MOON 880Ms bring these dense albums to life in a way the other amplifiers at my disposal simply cannot do. It’s like driving a high-revving, high-horsepower V-12 supercar that produces its power without the help of a turbo or supercharger—there’s an immediacy to the throttle response that a boosted car never has, even though it may have more torque.

When it comes to amplification, reserve power is essential if you love metal or large-scale orchestral music. Distortion is



the enemy of tweeters, and playing metal at high volumes will easily liquefy your speakers if your amplifier can’t deliver massive amounts of ultra-clean power. I don’t think I’ve ever played System of a Down’s single “B.Y.O.B.” as loud as I did with the MOON 880Ms, and it never became painful. These amplifiers are without practical limit, even with my 89-dB speakers. If you have a more sensitive speaker up in the range of 93 to 95 dB @1 watt, like the Focal Grande Utopia EMs, Wilson XLFs or Verity Lohengrins, I’d highly suggest a good calibrated level meter to protect your ears from damage. The extra dynamic range of the MOON 880Ms produces a listening experience so free of artifacts that you’ll likely catch yourself playing music a lot louder than you normally do. And dammit, that’s really cool.

Even at modest levels, the MOON 880Ms sound clearer and more spacious. On Liszt’s *Hungarian Rhapsodies for Orchestra*, 1-6, from the recent Mercury CD set, the initial attack on the string bass at the beginning of the first piece, combined with the glorious hall ambience, only begins to prepare you for the excitement in store as the full orchestra kicks in about three minutes later. And the tone? Fantastic. Oboes and violins just float silky and softly through the listening space, and are never the least bit grainy. These amplifiers simply do not impose a sonic signature on the music, and they always get out of the way of the presentation. *(continued)*





The MOON 880M does run in Class-A mode for the first 10 watts, and the transition to Class-AB at higher levels and power peaks is achieved seamlessly.

### The Amplifier or the Egg?

Visiting the Simaudio factory last summer, I had the privilege of listening to the MOON 880Ms for the first time, driving a pair of Dynaudio Confidence C1 II speakers in Simaudio's listening room, which is about 20 feet by 30 feet and expertly tuned to take the room out of the equation. Upon returning home, my own pair of C1s was somewhat disappointing in comparison. As one who loves a good rationalization, I chalked it up to the better room tuning and went about my business.

After properly treating my listening room, that experience was still missing by a substantial margin. The MOON 880Ms in my room convince me that it's the amplification making the big difference. Though it may come across as controversial to some, especially those who think that speakers are nearly everything, I propose that the amplifier affects the system's overall sound just as much as the speakers do, if not more. Pairing the MOON 880Ms with some excellent but modestly priced speakers (like the splendid KEF LS50s or the Harbeth Compact 7ES-3s) makes for a bigger, more spacious and detailed sound than connecting a \$50k pair of speakers to the best \$1,000 integrated amplifier you can find. *(continued)*

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REVIEW

880M POWER AMPLIFIER

Playing Thievery Corporation's *The Richest Man in Babylon* is a revelation through these amplifiers, even though I'm sure you'll be buying a better pair of speakers for the 880Ms in your house. Yet, these great compact speakers, which sound spectacular paired with a Rega Brio-R or a PrimaLuna ProLogue integrated, offer a breathtaking experience with the MOON 880Ms. They now have real bass weight where there was barely any before. Like any of the large floorstanding speakers used for this review, these amplifiers' enormous power reserves redefine control. This kind of current is not swayed by the reverse EMF generated by the loudspeakers to anywhere near the extent that it is with a small amplifier.

Moving back to my reference GamuT S9s, tracking through DJ Cheb i Sabbah's *La Ghriba: La Kahena Remixed* is a religious experience for those worshipping at the temple of mega bass. The throbbing, tribal beats in this record compress my spinal column as the volume approaches club level without a trace of strain, and as the final notes fade to extreme black, it's tough to find where my room boundaries lie, even with my eyes open. You don't need to dim the lights to get into a deep, deep, listening experience with these amplifiers. (continued)





Of course, the better recordings at your disposal will benefit even further. Aphex Twin's *26 Mixes for Cash* features a broad sonic landscape in all directions, deriving much of it from all the low-frequency bass texture—an area that the MOON 880Ms enhance considerably. Tracking through a large stack of audiophile workhorses, the gestalt of the MOON 880Ms is crystal clear: These amplifiers provide incredible resolution; yet, even after 12-hour listening sessions, they are never fatiguing.

### Right Brain, Left Brain

The MOON 880Ms feature top-quality casework, with aluminum enclosures produced in Simaudio's Montreal facility on its own five-axis CNC mill and anodized to last a lifetime, perhaps longer. (Those wanting a more in-depth view of the company's operation can click

here for our recent visit: <<<INSERT LINK>>>.) Simaudio's engineers feel that the effort spent on solid casework not only eliminates vibration from the electronic environment, but also makes for stunning aesthetics—again an emphasis on quality and value.

As an added bonus, all this power comes in a relatively compact package. These monoblocks will fit on any rack capable of supporting about 100 pounds each. Simaudio's high-biased, Class-AB design runs barely warm to the touch, even at high volume levels, and the company uses standard 15-amp IEC sockets. As with the other giant monoblocks reviewed in this issue, the 880Ms will work on a single 15-amp circuit, but will perform even better with a dedicated 20-amp circuit, preferably a pair of dedicated 20-amp circuits. *(continued)*

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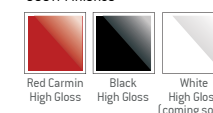
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#### 800W Finishes





Lifting the cover reveals a fully balanced design that also has an RCA input for those not having a fully balanced preamplifier. Each amplifier utilizes 32 matched Motorola output devices, along with a pair of 1.3-kV power transformers and 240,000 uF of power-supply capacitance—all contributing to the complete lack of noise in the 800M's presentation. This is an amplifier that music lovers and technology geeks can both cuddle up to; all the right boxes are ticked. Those wanting a further technological analysis, click [HERE](#).

### Call Me Crazy

But don't call me Shirley. Though a pair of the Simaudio MOON 880M amplifiers costs as much as a 3-series BMW, consider this: These amplifiers will easily last 20 to 30 years without any attention. If you leased a new 3 series every three years for the next 20 years, you'd have spent just over \$100,000 and still not have a fixed asset at the end of the term. Considering that over 90 percent of all the Simaudio components ever made are still playing music without effort (and have a 10-year warranty), that pair of 880Ms you buy today will probably still be worth \$5,000 to \$10,000.

Jay Leno once said that car enthusiasts are either check writers or wrench turners, which also applies to many audiophiles. Taking it a step further, one faction of audiophile is on a quest to swap gear nearly constantly in search of an elusive grail, while another diligently assembles an excellent system and pursues music exploration with fervor. While we won't pass judgment on either camp here, if you fall into the latter, a pair of MOON 880Ms can be your final destination—even if you swap speakers a few times on your journey, there's nothing they will not drive.

Factoring that into the equation, the Simaudio MOON 880Ms represent an exceptional value, and are highly deserving of one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2013. They provide a sonic experience that few amplifiers can match, at any price, and they are built to the highest levels of quality. ●



## Simaudio MOON 880M Mono Reference Power Amplifiers

MSRP: \$42,000 per pair

### MANUFACTURER

Simaudio

### CONTACT

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

### PERIPHERALS

#### Analog Source

AVID Acutus Reference SP turntable, TriPlanar arm, Lyra Atlas cartridge; AMG V-12 turntable, AMG arm, Clearaudio Goldfinger cartridge

#### Phonostage

Simaudio MOON 810LP, Indigo Qualia

#### Digital Source

dCS Vivaldi stack, Sooloos C-15, Aurender S10, Simaudio MinD

#### Preamplifier

Simaudio MOON 850P, Audio Research REF 5SE, Robert Koda K-10

#### Speakers

Dynaudio Confidence C1 II, Sonus faber Aida, GamuT S9

#### Cable

Cardas Clear



STEREO AMPLIFIER

*Bob Carver*

# Small But Soulful

**Bob Carver Black Magic 20 Stereo Amplifier**

By Andre Marc



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## REVIEW

To say Bob Carver is a legendary amplifier designer would be a major understatement. Without going into historical detail, suffice it to say he has produced a few gems in his day. And now it's back to the future, with Carver again producing amps under his own name. The Cherry 180 (reviewed [HERE](#)) and the Black Beauty 305 monoblock amplifiers have both received universal praise from reviewers and happy customers alike, for their build-quality, stylish good looks and plenty of power on tap. But with the \$2,400 Black Magic, Carver takes a different direction.





## REVIEW



This small amplifier, model designation VTA20S, is finished in black with a “silver-fleck” chassis and brushed-silver trim. It is outfitted with 12AX7B tubes for the input stage, and a quartet of EL84Ms for the output stage. According to Carver, the “M” variant of the EL84 was selected because it has a higher plate-voltage rating, allowing for maximum power output within safe operating conditions.

Setting up the Black Magic is amazingly simple. There is no need to bias the tubes, which is done automatically with one set of speaker binding posts, optimized for a 4-ohm load. There is, quite interestingly, a volume pot at the top-front area of the chassis. (More on that a bit later.) I drive the Black Magic with a Rogue Ninety-Nine preamplifier for the bulk of my listening sessions, and in turn drive my Thiel CS2.4 speakers.

After giving the Black Magic ample warm-up time, I’m rewarded with startling clarity, a liquid-smooth midrange and, most impressively, floor-shaking bass. Carver says that the amp is “conservatively” rated at 20 watts per channel—it definitely sounds more powerful than its published rating suggests. For my review, I go directly from my Audio Research VS55 amplifier (rated at 50 watts per channel) to the Carver with no immediately discernible decline in dynamic performance, power output or bass quality.

The Black Magic’s imaging specificity is impressive, with little of the “tube haze” surrounding the vintage sound of the EL84 tubes. The Black Magic easily handles music of any scale, including orchestral crescendos. *(continued)*

# Benchmark



## DAC1 HDR

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The Audio Critic



## REVIEW

The Direct-Stream Digital SACD of Semyon Bychkov conducting Rachmaninoff's *Symphonic Dances* is simply ravishing in the tone colors of the strings and woodwinds, and the full impact of the orchestra's power is there in all its glory. I am continually stunned at just how much of a wide dynamic swing this little amplifier can muster.

The sublime SACD pressing of the Moody Blues classic album, *In Search of the Lost Chord*, plays to all the strengths of the Black Magic. The melancholy melodies and vintage arrangements on such tracks as "The Actor," "Visions Of Paradise" and the album's centerpiece, "Legend Of A Mind," are breathtaking in their majesty. Lead vocalist Justin Hayward's voice is a holographic presence in my listening room, and the amp delivers more than enough resolution to hear long-buried recorded details—just the thing you call on a tube amplifier to perform.

Staying with the vintage vibe, the Carver brings sparkle and life to the iconic '60s recordings by Smokey Robinson & the Miracles, from the well-mastered compilation, *The Definitive Collection*. The Black Magic commands attention on such classic tracks as "Going To A Go-Go," "The Tears Of A Clown" and "Mickey's Monkey." The rhythmic incisiveness is top notch, with a keen ability to get a track moving. This inner detail and delicacy is always a key factor with an amplifier based on the EL84 tubes, and the Carver has the best balance of new- and old- school sound that I've experienced in this genre.

Moving on to modern times, U2's "Electrical Storm," from *The Best of 1980–2000* collection, simply rocks when playing through the Carver, which highlights the shimmering acoustic guitars, jagged electric lead lines, throbbing bass line and, of course, Bono's passionate lead vocals. (continued)



## Welcome to the Family

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

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

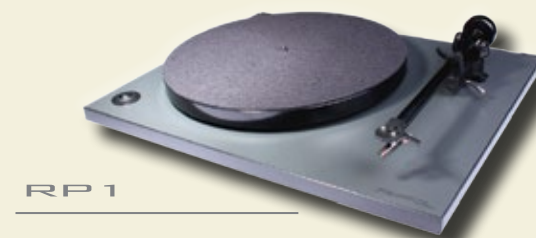
Available in four high-gloss finishes: Red, Green, White, and Black. \$1495 (without cartridge) or \$1990 with Exact cartridge pre-fitted.

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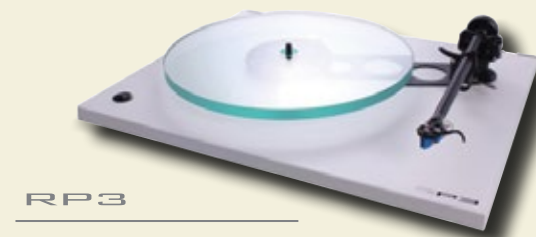
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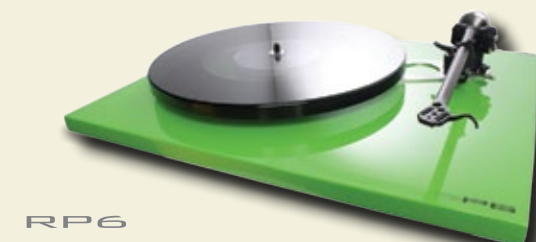
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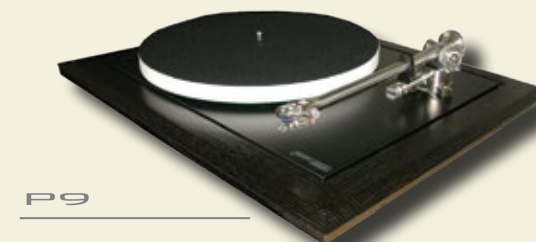
RP1



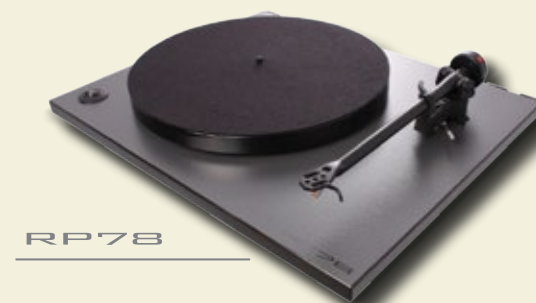
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### REVIEW

On this track, all of the separate elements of the recording are made into an organic whole, providing some rare goose-bump moments. The remix of "Gone," from U2's *Pop* album, is another standout track providing such moments.


An now, more about the amp's volume pot I mentioned earlier: Connecting the Marantz SA-11S3 SACD player/DAC directly to the Black Magic and adjusting the volume level directly from the amp provides additional transparency to the source and bass articulation. The volume control has an excellent range of attenuation, never going past the 12 o'clock position. Most modern line sources, like a CD player or DAC, output 2 volts, which is more than enough to power an amplifier with sufficient gain. For those only utilizing a DAC and multiple digital sources, I suggest eliminating the linestage altogether—the Carver is that good. However, for those using a linestage/preamplifier, I would leave the volume control at full, effectively taking it out of the circuit.

With the Black Magic, Bob Carver has done it again. In addition to all of its positive sonic attributes, the Black Magic ships with a seven-year warranty on parts and labor, along with a generous one-year warranty on the tubes. (Most manufacturers only offer 90 days.) It is made entirely with point-to-point wiring in Carver's Kentucky facility. You can read more about Carver's manufacturing process [HERE](#).

While 20 watts per channel isn't the solution for every system, a modestly sized room matched with sensitive speakers will deliver a rocking performance using this modern EL84 marvel. *(continued)*





  
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## REVIEW

# Additional Listening

By Jeff Dorgay

**B**lowing the dust off of my Dynaco SCA-35 integrated amp reveals just how far Bob Carver's classic design has come. The vintage Dynaco is a pleasant listen, but switching to the Black Magic, even with vintage speakers like the JBL L26s, is a revelation. Where the vintage amplifier has loose, flappable bass, the Carver is taut. An equal paradigm shift is experienced in the upper registers—the HF roll-off that I've almost come to expect with this tube doesn't happen, which is a testament to the quality Carver's circuit and transformer design.

The only speakers in my arsenal that prove a challenge for this amp with heavier music are the Dynaudios, which have a somewhat low 84-dB sensitivity rating. Thanks to a single-order 6-dB/octave crossover network, the speakers work well with the Black Magic, as long as not asked to play extremely loud—you can always pick up a second one and run them in bridged mode if need be.

Much like when listening to a top-notch mini-monitor, the Carver Black Magic excels at throwing a three-dimensional sound space that feels almost like wearing a gigantic pair of headphones. It also delivers a tonal balance, falling more on the romantic side of the scale. The Carver is certainly not vintage, but it does embellish slightly—for those using primarily digital source material, this should be a very good thing.

Lastly, to probe the absolute limit of the Black Magic, I insert it in my main reference system while finishing the review of the \$120,000 Sonus faber Aida speakers (92-dB sensitivity). This makes for a great showing, as the little amp is able to control these gigantic speakers incredibly well.

Andre and I agree: If you've been wanting to try tubes, this is the perfect place to start your journey! ●



**Bob Carver Black Magic 20 (VTA20S) stereo amplifier**

**MSRP: \$2,400**

### MANUFACTURER

Bob Carver

### CONTACT

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

### PERIPHERALS

**Analog source** Rega RP6 turntable/Exact cartridge/Lehmannaudio Black Cube phonostage

**Preamplifiers** Rogue Audio Ninety-Nine, Conrad-Johnson PV-12

**Digital sources** Marantz SA-11S3 SACD player/DAC, Logitech Squeezebox Touch, Meridian Sooloos Media Core 200/Rega DAC

**Speakers** Thiel CS2.4, Dynaudio Confidence C1 II, Definitive Technology SM65, JBL L26, Sonus faber Aida

**Cables** Darwin Cables Silver interconnects, Transparent Audio Super MM2 interconnects, Transparent Audio Plus MM2 speaker cable

**Power cords/conditioners** Acoustic Zen Tsunami II power cables, Audience Adept Response power conditioner, Running Springs Audio Haley



# Further Evolution

**Pass Labs XA200.5 Monoblocks**

By Jeff Dorgay



All things must eventually come to an end, but this time the breakup is not sweet sorrow. Living with the Pass Labs XA160.5 Class-A monoblocks has been a wonderful experience, and the heat that these massive monoblocks let off is a small drawback compared to the glorious sound they produce. In a year and a half of flawless performance, driving every kind of loudspeaker imaginable, I didn't jot down a single complaint in my mental logbook.

The XA160.5s even proved more engaging than a number of vacuum-tube power amplifiers parked here for various reviews and personal auditions, supporting Nelson Pass' claim that listening to his amplifiers are like "listening to tubes, but without the hassle."



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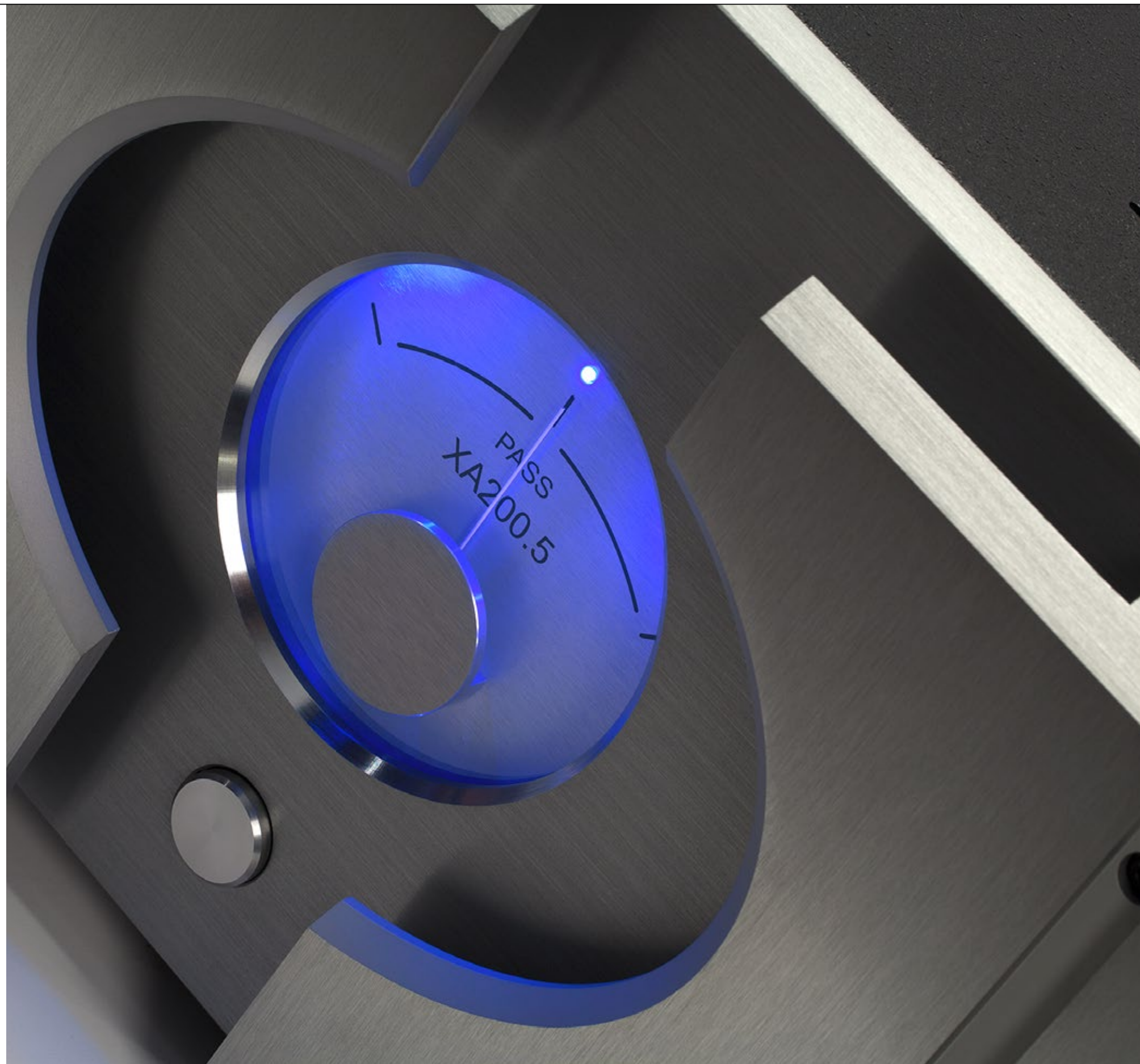


But then the XA200.5 mono-blocks arrived. “More devices and more power equals more control,” says Pass Labs’ Desmond Harrington when asked about the difference between the XA160.5, the XA200.5 and the soon-to-arrive XS amplifiers. If there was ever a case of specs *not* telling the whole story, this is it. You might think there would be barely any difference between these two amplifiers—one delivering 160 watts per channel and the other delivering 200 per channel—but fire up the drum solo in Zeppelin’s “Moby Dick,” and the XA200.5 paints an entirely different picture. “Stairway” is pretty damn good, too.

### Hey, Ho, Let’s Go

Tony Levin’s bass playing on the *Black Light Syndrome* album, from Levin, Steve Stevens and Terry Bozzio, illustrates this perfectly. This album offers some of the heaviest prog rock available; a dense, driving orchestral soup in which these three virtuosos repeatedly lay down notes like they’re firing automatic weapons. Levin is solidly anchored, while his bandmates careen off to the far edges of the soundstage from start to finish. Keeping all three musicians straight without blur is a tough task, but the XA200.5s handle it effortlessly, even at high levels.

The low, grumbling undercurrent of Burial’s “In McDonalds” takes on a more visceral feel through these amps, helping the listener truly feel the track’s deep bass and low-level texture in a way few amplifiers can muster. The overblown bass in Cash



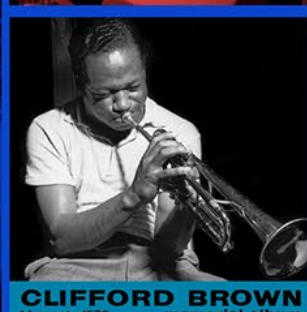
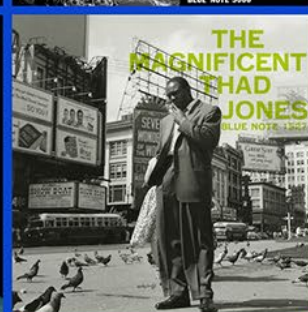
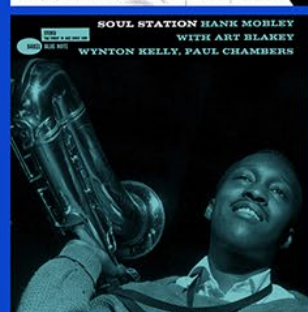
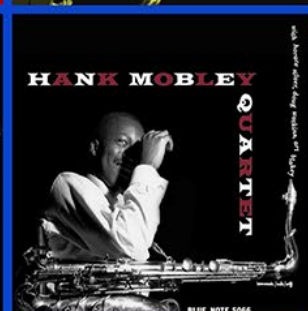
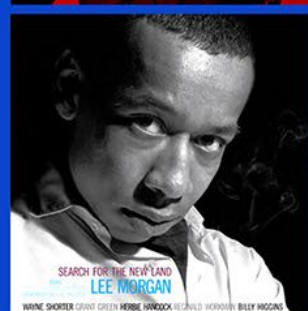
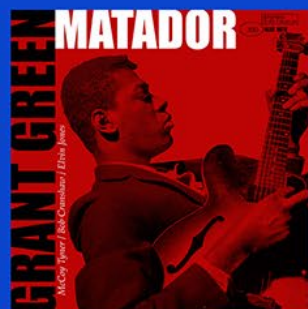
Money and Marvelous’ “Ugly People Be Quiet” loses none of its rawness and boom, while rumbling the woofers in the GamuT S9 speakers as if a subwoofer has been added to the system. Many audiophile amplifiers suffer from too much control and damping in such instances, taking the soul of the music with it, but the XA200.5s are true to the music, no matter what the genre. Even a lousy-sounding record like Teenage Fanclub’s *Bandwagonesque* is better sorted through these amps—this thick, compressed recording actually gives up some dynamics, with a little help from the dCS Vivaldi source.

With two pairs of world-class reference speakers at my disposal (the GamuT S9 and the Sonus faber Aida), these amplifiers play to a painfully loud level without distortion. Whether using the S9 (89 dB sensitivity) or the Aida (92 dB), the XA160.5s can be driven to a point of compression; the XA200.5s have no limit in my system. But man cannot live by bass alone—transient prowess is another area at which the XA200.5s excel. Romping through the title track from Carsten Dahl’s *Bebopish Rubbish Rabbit*, these amplifiers provide not only control, but also acceleration. They equally render drum transients and brushwork with the proper scale and finesse.

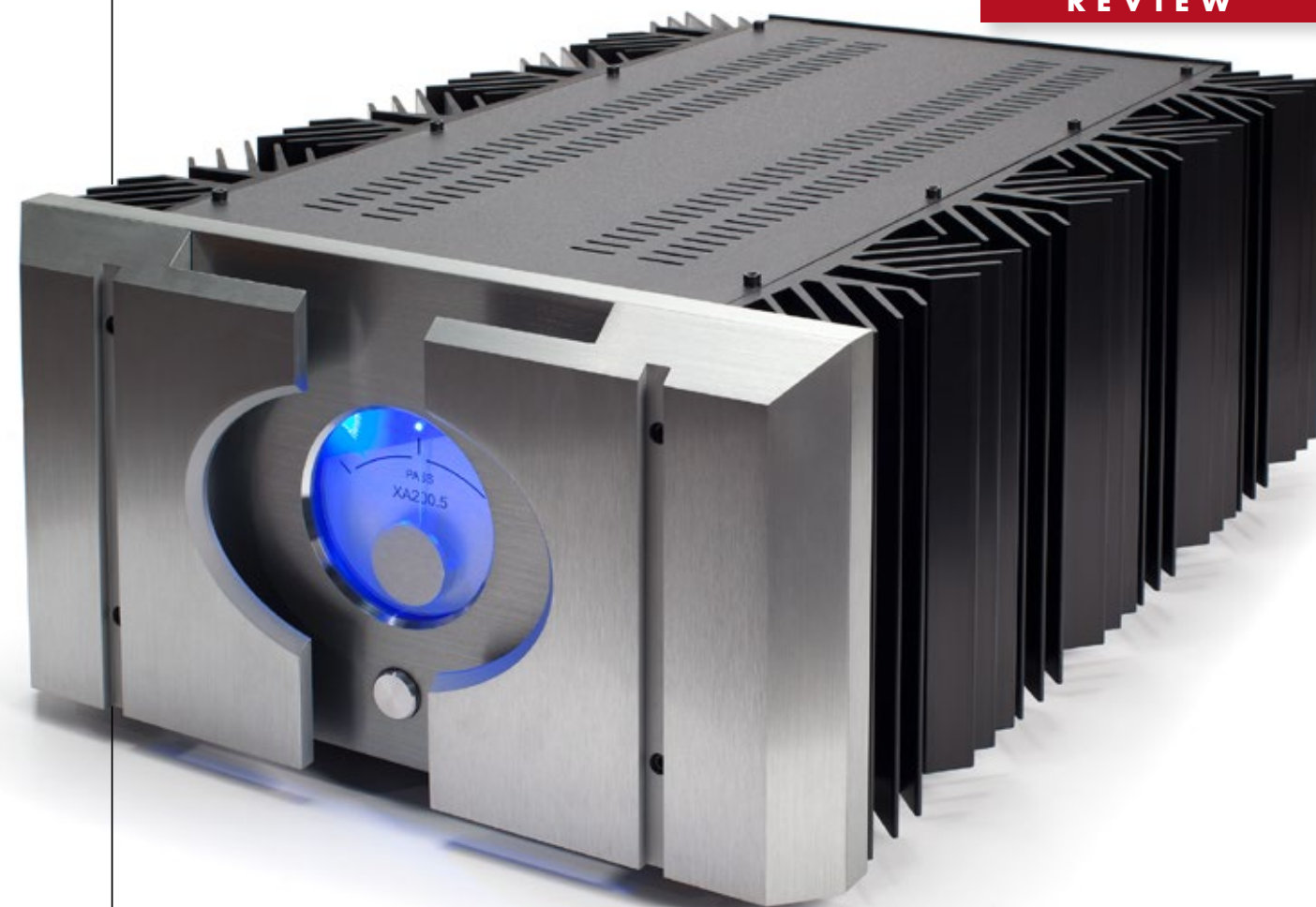
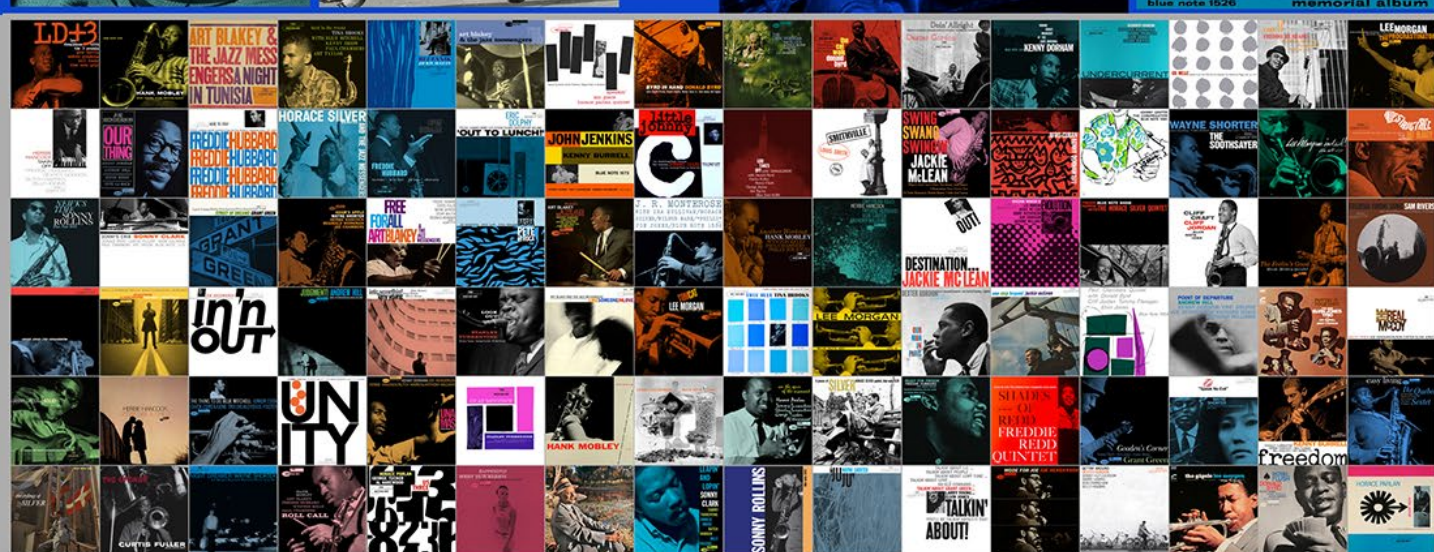
On one level, a component can really only be evaluated in the context of a system, and it’s tough to attach a sound to said component without seeing how it reacts to the known performance of a number of other preamplifiers and speakers. *(continued)*



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REVIEW

Having lived with a variety of Pass amplifiers for a few years now, I would characterize their overall sound as ever so slightly on the warm and harmonically rich side of the scale.

The XA200.5, like all of the other XA-series amplifiers I've auditioned, paints a big, spacious, three-dimensional soundstage—again, much like your favorite tube amplifiers do, but with considerably more dynamics, grip and control. On the title track from Leni Stern's album *Smoke, No Fire*, the XA200.5s capture her delicate guitar playing with every bit of the gradation she presents in a live show, while layer upon layer of overdubbed vocals hang in mid air, meticulously spaced between each other. Too often, mediocre solid-state amplifiers fail musically when presented with these kinds of recordings, because their inability to resolve spatial information results in an overly flat and sterile picture. Modestly powered tube

amplifiers excel at this kind of thing, but are unable to produce the giant dynamic swings required to capture a large orchestra or driving rock band. The XA200.5s excel here, providing the best of both worlds. Thanks to their massive power supplies and big banks of output transistors, these amplifiers retain inner detail while simultaneously carrying a heavy bass line or the roll of a kettledrum.

## A is A

The Pass Labs website simply states in the FAQ section that the reason the company produces Class-A amplifiers is "because they sound better." I love this firmness of conviction. I must also admit to a bias towards high-powered Class-A solid-state power amplifiers in the same way someone might prefer tubes, SET amplifiers or a pair of Quad 57s. (continued)



**BLUE NOTE** The Definitive 45 rpm Reissue Series  
You listen, you look, you're there...



At the end of the day, we all have a *preference*, and I won't apologize for this one. Pass' large Class-AB amplifiers, as well as a few other massive AB amplifiers I've experienced (like the Simaudio 880Ms also reviewed in this issue), still have slightly faster acceleration and ultimate dynamic swing, but this always comes at the expense of that last bit of inner sweetness. That being said, one person will always prefer the slightly softer ride of a standard Mercedes to the AMG version with sport suspension.

Pass Labs' relatively recent .5 series of Class-A amplifiers come as close to offering it all as anything I've experienced. While I still treasure my Pass Labs Aleph 3 (from the '90s) and Threshold 400A (one of Nelson Pass'

first Class-A designs from the late '70s—also a big favorite), comparing them to the XA200.5s clearly illustrates where Mr. Pass has built on his initial strengths, constantly refining the sonic delivery of today's models.

Romping through a plethora of recorded male and female vocalists underscores these amplifiers' combination of power, delicacy and tonal accuracy. Anne Bisson's gentle vocal stylings on the title track of her recent *Blue Mind* album are reproduced perfectly though the XA200.5s, as are the piano and soft drum work that accompany her. If not for the enormous heat sinks on the side of each amplifier, you'd swear that the grain-free tonal texture that the XA200.5s provide is due to some

vacuum tubes inside the box. And that's the entertaining paradox: These amplifiers have too much sheer grunt to be tubed. Like Nelson Pass said...

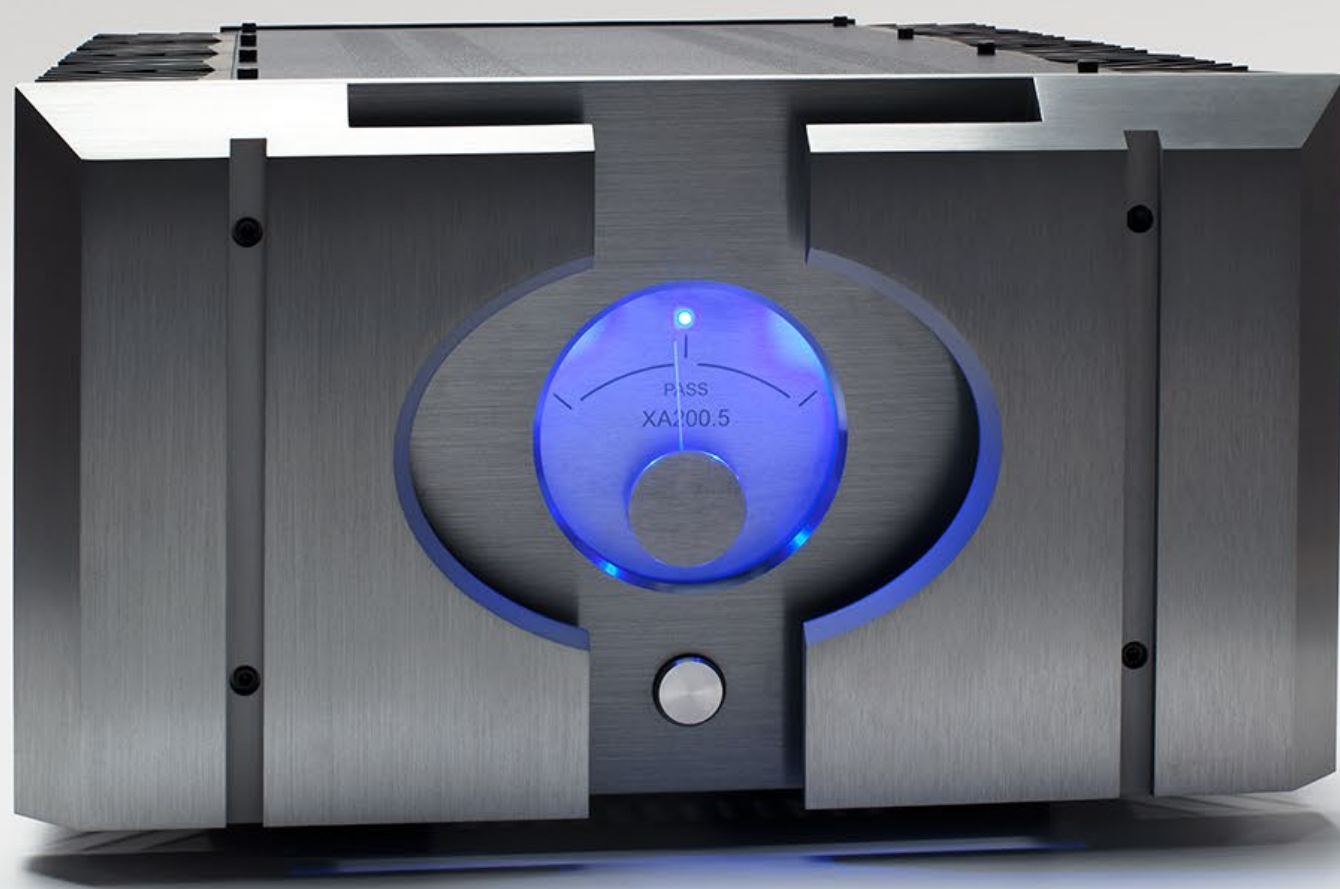
### Setup and Synergy

During our time with these amps, we had the opportunity to power about 30 different sets of speakers, from a pair of freshly refurbished MartinLogan Aeries i speakers to Sonus faber's flagship Aidas. Nothing poses a challenge to these amplifiers or affects their performance.

The amp's balanced XLR and single-ended inputs have an impedance of 30k ohms, which makes them easily mated to the preamplifiers at our disposal from Audio Research, Burmester, Conrad-

Johnson, Robert Koda and Simaudio. Cardas Clear cabling was used for the bulk of our listening tests, yet both speaker cables and power cords affect the XA200.5 less than many other high-powered amplifiers in recent memory.

One thing the XA200.5s benefit from, if you have the luxury, is dedicated power. Drawing 700 watts each, all the time, they will work connected to a standard 15-amp circuit, but will work better with a 20-amp line and better still with a pair of dedicated 20-amp circuits—one for each amplifier, if you really like to twist the volume control. I'd suggest having your electrician install a pair of 20-amp outlets for your XA200.5s before you drop a few thousand dollars on exotic power cords. *(continued)*





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For more info visit [www.paradigm.com](http://www.paradigm.com)



All Monitor subwoofers consume less than 1 watt in Standby



Fortunately, these 159-pound monsters have conveniently placed handles on the rear panel, though (unless you're incredibly buff) you will still need a friend to help you unpack these amplifiers. Once you've installed the amps, be sure they have plenty of ventilation, because they do get warm.

### The Big, Big Money

This extra power and control doesn't exactly come cheap. The XA200.5s have an MSRP of \$34,100 per pair, compared to \$24,000 per pair for the XA160.5s. It's always easy for me to spend your money, but if you can find a way to come up with the extra \$10,000, you will not be disappointed—this is truly a case where absolute power corrupts absolutely. The XA160.5s are no slouch by any means, and tonally identical to the XA200.5; yet, even at modest volume levels, the effortlessness provided by the bigger, beefier output stage and larger power supply is instantly evident.

If you are looking for a pair of monstrous Class-A amplifiers that take no prisoners, consider the Pass XA200.5 monoblocks, or stick around for a few more issues—the XS two-box monoblocks have just arrived for review! ●

**Pass Labs XA200.5 Monoblocks**  
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### MANUFACTURER

Pass Laboratories

### CONTACT

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### PERIPHERALS

**Analog Source** AVID Acutus Reference SP turntable, TriPlanar tonearm, Lyra Atlas cartridge; AMG V12 turntable, AMG tonearm, Clearaudio Goldfinger cartridge

**Digital Source** dCS Vivaldi, Meridian Sooloos Control 15, Aurender S10

**Phonostage** ARC Reference Phono 2 SE, Indigo Qualia

**Speakers** GamuT S9, Sonus faber Aida, Sonus faber Elipsa SE

**Cable** Cardas Clear

**Power** IsoTek

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

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





# Otherworldly Power

**Burmester 909 MK5 Power Amplifier**

By Jeff Dorgay





Just as mega sports cars all offer different approaches to performance, giving the Aston Martin driver a completely different experience than the Ferrari, Porsche or Corvette driver, so do mega power amplifiers. I've spent a lot of time these last few months with some of the world's top amplifiers and it's amazing how different from one another they sound. But each amp, in its own way, defines state-of-the-art audio performance.

Burmester's smaller 911 MK3 has been a reference amplifier here for almost four years. Surviving a fall from the FedEx truck in the middle of a busy intersection, the 911 has played nonstop for the duration, rarely being powered down, always providing fantastic performance.

But even considering the 911's prowess as an amplifier, more power changes the game. Beyond the obvious ability of bigger amplifiers to achieve higher sound-pressure levels, they also offer more control at all power levels. Most, if not all, speakers present a treacherous load to an amplifier's output terminals, changing impedance with frequency and generating back EMF—some speakers are even highly capacitive to boot. The dynamic load a speaker presents does not adversely affect a mas-

sive amplifier like the 909 MK5, with substantial power reserves and a high-damping factor, in the same way it does a small amplifier. The end result? A spacious sound, free of fatigue.

### Big Power, Big Price Tag

Merely swapping out the 911 for the 909 provides an immediately noticeable and revelatory improvement—which it should for \$73,495. The German Physiks speakers I've been auditioning for the last month appear to grow in stature, feeling like someone snuck in overnight and moved them about 4 feet farther apart; the effect is not at all subtle. And that's *starting* with the amazing Burmester 911 as a baseline! The instant Alex Van Halen's drum stick hits the opening cymbal in "You're No Good," there's more decay, more weight and more meat on the bone. Right from the first power cord, the guitar has a much fatter sound, feeling more like a wall of amplifiers at a live performance, with a feeling of unlimited power.

The bass line underneath Radiohead's "In Limbo" not only has more texture, but there's also more space between everything—said bass line, the ethereal guitars, keyboards and dreamy, over-processed vocals. *(continued)*





This tune can sound compressed, as if the musicians are too close together and crowded, but the 909 opens it right up, giving the music room to breathe and keeping the pace of the rhythm section solidly anchored while everything else floats around the room.

Burmester's 911 MK3 produces 350 watts per channel into 4 ohms; the 909 MK5 pumps out 600 watts per channel. With 20 precision-matched outputs per channel and an enormous 3.5-kV power transformer, the 909 doesn't have much empty space inside its mammoth enclosure, which measures 19 by 19 by 20 inches and weighs in at 170 pounds. Fortunately, it comes in a padded road case with wheels—another sign of the care that goes into its production. It's worth noting that all Burmester power amplifiers are burned in at full power for seven days *continuously* before they are released to customers. Though Burmester suggests that the 909 sounds its best after 200 hours, it's damn good straight out of the (aluminum) box.*(continued)*

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## The Loud and Quiet of it All

Playing Rachel Macfarlane's *Hayley Sings* through the 909 MK5 provides a perfect example of the silky smoothness that the amp presents. It's not all about brute force. Backed by a Sinatra-esque big band, her lead vocals deliver a strong timbre that the 909 effortlessly renders. As her voice goes quickly from loud to soft, it never gets lost in the blaze of horns accompanying her. Equally delicate is the opening bass line in Rage Against the Machine's "Calm Like a Bomb." The 909 captures every bit of texture, until the song goes full tilt, with distorted guitars bombarding the listener from every angle. Again, this monster amplifier handles it all in perfect stride.

Switching speakers to the GamuT S9s and giving the volume control a twist towards the maximum, on Fear's "New York's Alright if You Like Saxophones," sheds new light on this classic punk cut. The 909 provides an otherworldly, out-of-body experience, transporting me right back to when I followed the band in 1981. It's as if the 909 reproduces the sound *and* the sweat. There's an extra dimension at work here.

With the volume up to brain-damage levels, it just wouldn't be a proper Burmester review without a few Scorpions tracks, so out comes the 45-rpm maxi singles. Tracking through "Rock You Like a Hurricane" has those present for the audition reaching for lighters and brings the police to our front door—the ultimate testament to the 909's brute force.

Those of you in the audience who are more proper audiophiles will be pleased to know that the 909 MK5 does a smashing job on your favorite acoustic tracks, female vocal pieces and, of course, large-scale orchestral recordings. The cannon shots at the end of *1812 Overture* really come to life with this much power on tap, and if that's not enough, you can bridge the 909 to produce a monoblock capable of 1,250 watts per channel.



You'll probably need an electrical-supply upgrade to a pair of 20-amp dedicated lines; Burmester makes note that your power must be up to the task in order to achieve this high output. Bridging can be done via external adaptors, as with the 911, or your 909s can be ordered directly from the factory this way.

## Unshakable

While it's just so much fun to explore an amplifier that has no real dynamic limits (at least in the context of my room and system), the true magic of Burmester's power amplifier is twofold: It has an almost silky sonic texture that is unique, nestled right between the "just-the-facts" sonic signature of the Boulder 3050 or the Simaudio MOON 880M, as well as the slightly warm and inviting, almost tube-like sound of the Pass XA200.5. Heavily biased, but not fully Class A, the 909 generates precious little heat, even after a long listening session.

Anyone attending Burmester's after-hours party at last year's New York Hi-Fi Show witnessed a pair of these mighty amplifiers playing to a crowded room that was easily the size of a small club with a 30-foot ceiling. By the end of the night, the 909s remained barely warm to the touch, and were not damaged by the DJ plugging and unplugging things with the volume turned up, making a hateful sound through the enormous Burmester speakers in the process.

## Exquisite Build

This brute force is packaged in a stunning box. From the extrusions on its heat sinks, to its subtle bits of chrome plating, to the Burmester logo machined in script on its top cover, the 909 goes to show that no one produces better casework than Burmester. I spend a lot of time removing the last few dust specs in post-production and can't help but be blown away with the quality work of Burmester's machine shop. Even with the images blown up 1000 percent on screen, there are no machining, engraving or plating flaws to be seen anywhere. *(continued)*



## REVIEW

This is truly a luxury product that delivers the goods sonically and is also a joy to look at, even when turned off. The 909 MK5 is built to a standard that should allow you to leave it for the next generation—a true value in a society where so many products are easily discarded.

The back panel has two large carrying handles, and the speaker binding posts have large winged knobs, making it easy to attach any type of speaker cable you might be considering. Even though there are banana plugs in these gigantic twist terminals, Dieter Burmester himself suggests spade-lug termination on your speaker cables for the best connection and transference of such high power. *(continued)*



Product: I22 Integrated Amplifier

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## REVIEW

The only problem with the Burmester 909 MK5 is that once you have the experience, it's tough to go back. As we spend more time with this remarkable amplifier, we will do a proper head-to-head comparison between it and the 911 MK3 with a wide range of program material, and will report back in the Comparo section of our website, so please check back shortly.

For now, suffice it to say the Burmester 909 MK5 will handle any challenge. ●

**Burmester 909 MK5**  
Power Amplifier  
MSRP: \$73,495



## MANUFACTURER

Burmester Audiosysteme GmbH

## CONTACT

www.burmester.de (factory)  
www.rutherfordaudio.com  
(North American Distributor)

## PERIPHERALS

**Analog Source** AVID Acutus  
Reference SP Turntable, TriPlanar  
arm, Lyra Atlas cartridge

**Phonostage** Indigo Qualia

**Digital Source**  
Light Harmonic DAC,  
Meridian Sooloos Control 15

**Preamplifier** Burmester 011,  
Robert Koda K-10, ARC REF 5 SE

**Speakers** GamuT S9, German  
Physiks Unlimited MK II

**Cable** Cardas Clear

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**M**eridian's stylish new portable digital-to-analog converter and headphone amplifier has taken the world by storm. It offers the ability to drive the highest-quality headphones and play audio files with resolutions as high as 24 bits/192 kHz. Meridian cofounder Bob Stuart claims the Explorer allows you to experience his company's audio equipment anywhere you may be. Best of all, it plugs into your laptop or computer via an external cord, thus eliminating the potential risk of USB socket damage. Additionally, it is powered by your computer's USB port, which means there's no wall wart for you to accidentally leave in Tokyo.

● Read our full review here.



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● We investigate further here.

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# Slummin'

By Jeff Dorgay



In this issue we are on a streak of MiniDisc madness, being that Sony has just discontinued the production of these little buggers. Using Sony's ATRAC compression scheme, these tiny optical discs recorded musical data at about 300kb/second.

But in the limbo land between the cassette Walkman

and the coming domination of the iPod, MiniDisc was a hit with the small group of audio-philes that loved to take their music with them.

The catalog of recorded music was slim, with titles now fetching over \$150 – each on EBay, but blanks are plentiful and inexpensive. Sony even made a deck for your car!

## Sony MDS-E10

\$90, EBay

**C**omplete with rack handles still attached, this “Pro” deck proves clean and in excellent working order. We see mix discs on the horizon.



BARGAINS



## Sony MZ-1

\$60, EBay

The MZ-1 was somewhat of a replacement for Sony's WM-D6C Pro Walkman, but even they admit that the MZ-1 did not sound as good as the cassette workhorse that was often seen on the soundboard at many concerts in the 80s.

The BP-MZ1 batteries are getting tougher to find and with a short two-hour play time, not of much use compared to today's MP3 players. But what a great trip down memory lane.

For more info on the MZ-1 from Sony, click here:  
[www.walkmancentral.com/products/mz-1](http://www.walkmancentral.com/products/mz-1)

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