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PUBLISHER'S LETTER



Summer is in full force and we've got some great music for you this issue, as always, along with usual fare of gear reviews. Remember being in your 20s and dreaming that you were back in high school, but then for some reason in your dream you find out that you're not going to graduate? Well, with this issue, I feel like I've been in summer school, catching up on my homework.

So this issue is a bit heavy on copy from yours truly, but I've had some exciting things in the listening room that have needed my attention for some time. (I'll be equally absent from issue 57.) So thank you in advance for reading through so much me this issue.

On a more fun note, we've done something a little different with this issue, as you'll notice: The gear reviews are all in black and white! Glowing tubes aside, we chose to take a different look at things so we could celebrate the design elements of the gear we love by reducing the images in this issue down to shape, line and shadow.

A number of the images were shot with the Nikon D800 using a Leica 60mm f2.8 Elmarit R lens, and the rest were shot in complete Leicavision, courtesy of Shane Drew, of HiFi Hawaii, who is a Leica dealer as well as a hi-fi dealer. When I told Shane about the monochrome project, he immediately said, "How about I send you my M Monochrom. I think you'd like it!"

And that's what makes my job at *TONEAudio* so awesome. We have a great relationship with our industry partners, as well as our readers—which brings us to another milestone: We've passed the 10,000 "likes" mark on the *TONEAudio* Facebook page.

Last June, when editor Bailey Barnard suggested that we "get into the 21st century" with our social media efforts, we had 500 likes on our FB page. Thanks to his hard work, help from our headphone guy Mike Liang and our loyal readers, *TONEAudio* now has a bigger following with more engagement than any other high-end audio magazine. While other publishers brag about having the best magazine, I submit we have the best readers and a tremendous sense of community that is unmatched anywhere else.

I thank you for your support and on behalf of everyone here at *TONEAudio*, I am honored to continue producing content that you enjoy.

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink.



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NEW CONTRIBUTORS

Jaime Lee Fritze

Jaime is a long time music lover, growing up listening to classic country, southern rock, folk, Elvis, and Bruce Springsteen. In fifth grade her grandfather gave her a CD console stereo and box of used CDs containing a world of wonders - Arlo Guthrie, Stevie Nicks, The Byrds, Ray Charles, Metallica - and changed her life.

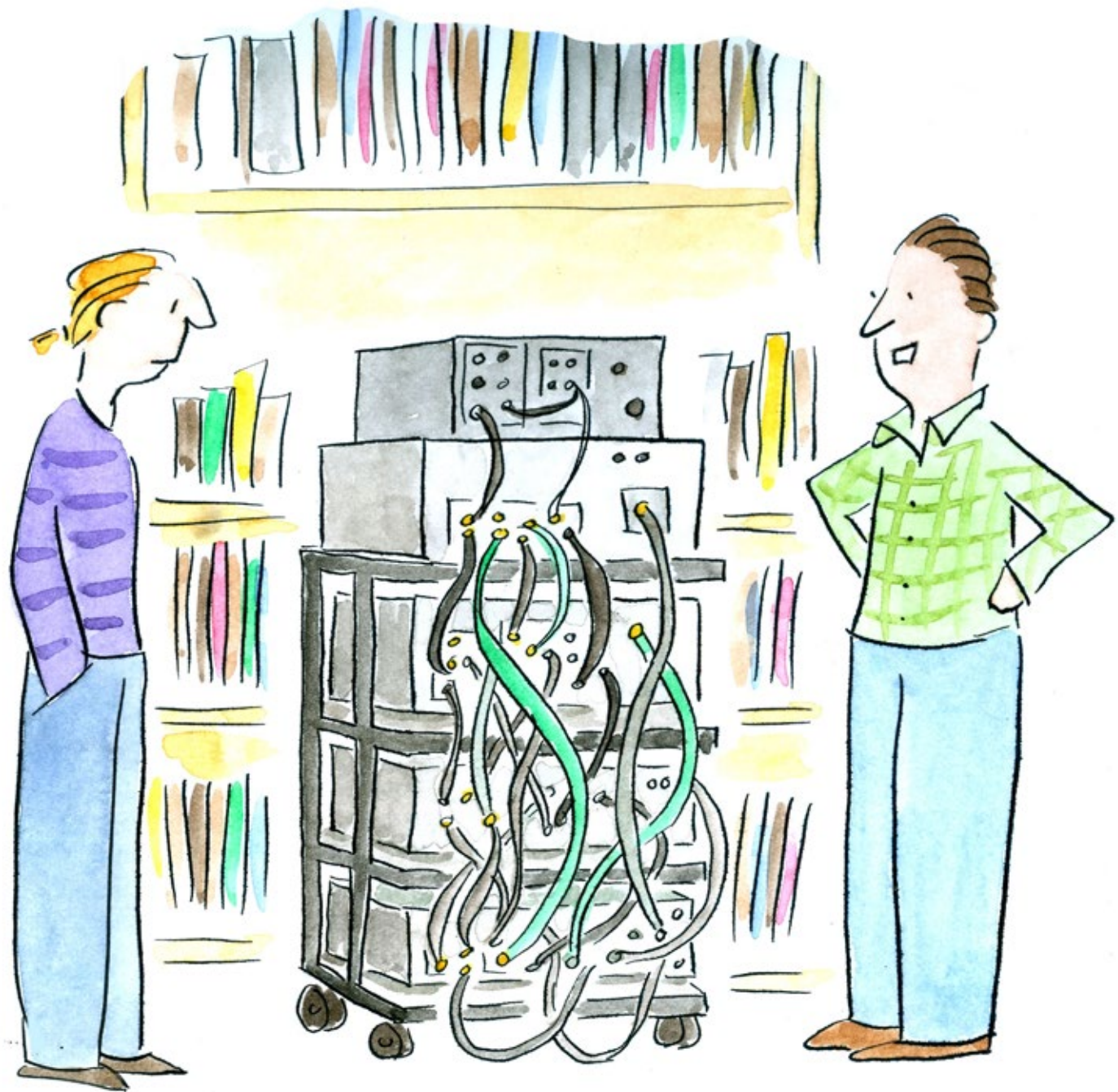
By adulthood, her music collection was diverse; spanning genre, eras, and formats. After her turntable met an early demise during a move, her small vinyl collection languished in a cabinet until a chance meeting and a first date to a record store. Fast-forward several years and Jaime's record collection is far from small. She and her boyfriend own several vintage turntables. A self-professed geek, Jaime's interests also include comic books, movies, and the paranormal.



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“I can fix that ...”

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Aragon Ballroom

Chicago, Illinois

June 29, 2013

By Bob Gendron

Photos by David Thai



she & him

During the encore of She and Him's 85-minute concert on a late June evening at Aragon Ballroom, the band kicked up the tempo and launched into a note-perfect version of Chuck Berry's "Roll Over Beethoven." In guitarist/vocalist M. Ward's hands, the rollicking albeit polite version could've been used at a dance party for any ages—be it awkward junior-high kids slogging through their first co-ed get-together or a mixer at a retirement home.

Such is the nostalgic innocence, charm, and respect the duo of Ward and creative partner Zooey Deschanel invest in every song they perform. Live, the line discerning the duo's covers from originals becomes even thinner than on album. On wax and onstage, She & Him play 50s- and 60s-oriented pop that counters that of the modern era's self-effacing irony, artificial effects, and self-aware celebrity. In the age where "Mad Men" receives raves for its recreation of a bygone period's fashions, behavior, and settings, She & Him thrive in a similar light. Ward and Deschanel's perky, sun-splashed fare relates

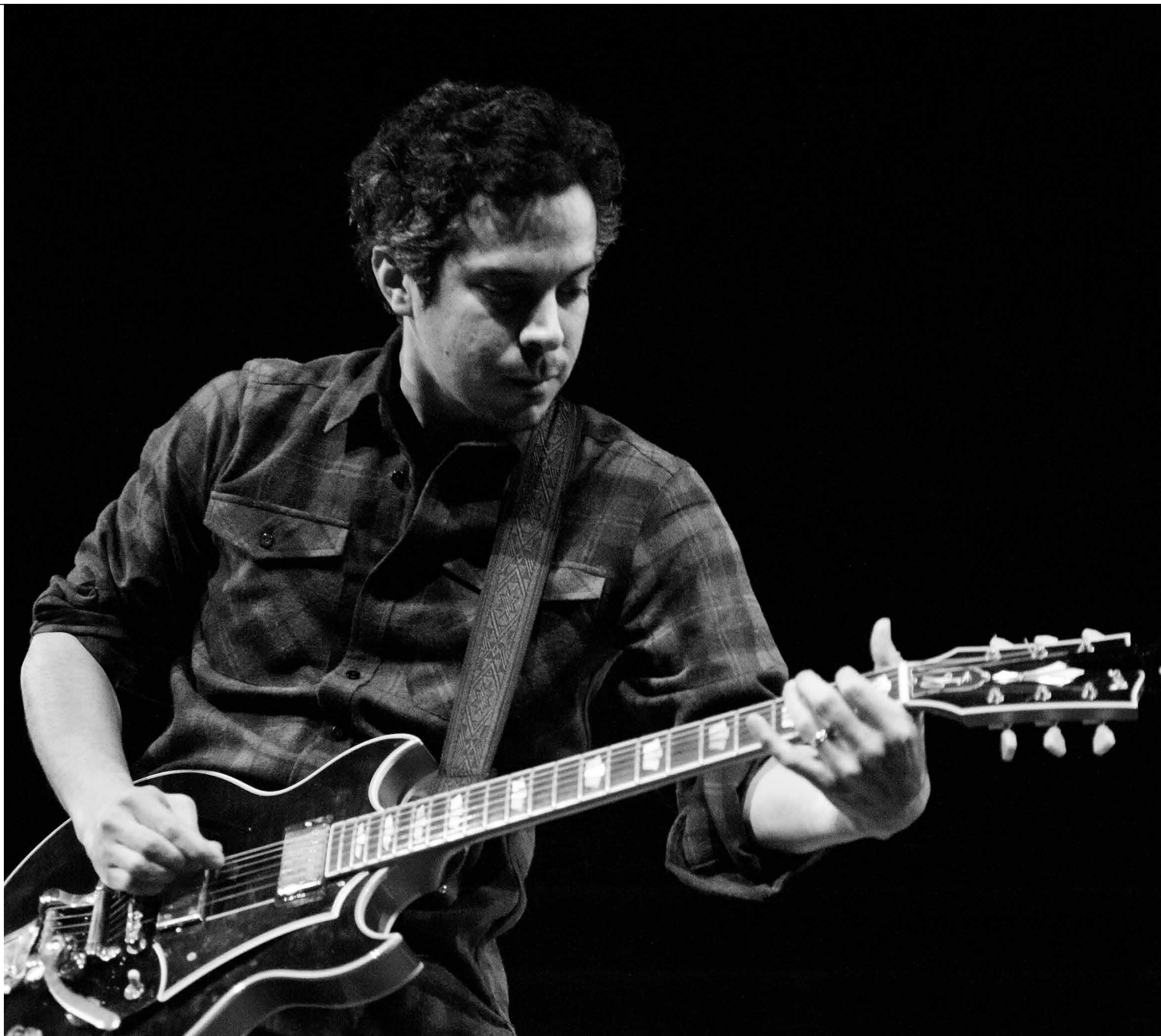
more to the glory days of the seven-inch single and hula hoop than it does the 21st century's digital downloads and of-the-minute trends.

Wearing a summer dress and spending a majority of her time standing still behind a microphone stand, Deschanel effectively deflected the "it girl" status currently bestowing her character—she's the object of nearly every hipster male's affection, and her starring role on the hit comedy series "New Girl" turned her into the rare media figure accepted by both indie and mainstream cultures—and remained deaf to the audience's perpetual swooning attempts. Doing so meant refraining from small talk and distracting banter. All the better to showcase simple songs notable for concise structures, call-and-response refrains, and sugary choruses. For Deschanel at least, the strict attention to singing, playing piano, or banging a tambourine seemed to illustrate a serious point to anyone that still believed her group a whimsical side project.

(continued)

Backed by a four-piece band and two female support singers, She & Him ooh'ed, aah'ed, and la-la-la'ed their way through tunes steeped in doo-wop, street-corner harmonizing, and girl-group soul. Songs like the carefree "Together" and tender "Baby" conjured handholding vibes, malt-shop backdrops, and poodle-skirt cuteness. Instrumental touches—delicate violins, chirping keyboards, keyboard swells, pedal-steel guitars, occasional cowbell—added faint country, orchestral, and rock cues. Yet the heaviest lifting came via Ward, a minimalist guitarist that never overplayed or sought the spotlight.

If he'd been born 30 years earlier, he'd probably have landed a job at Stax, Hi, Motown, or the Nashville arm of Columbia as a session musician. Ward coaxed surf, Western, and R&B fills from his instrument at will, seemingly standing in the shadows as Deschanel enchanted with a direct, clear timbre. On the surface, her swoon-worthy crooning conveyed anxiousness and optimism, but She & Him weren't all lollipops and daisies. Subtle pangs of hurt and longing clung to songs such as the jazzy "Take It Back," which placed the vocalist at the solitary end of a bar. Similarly, an understated rendition of "You Really Got a Hold on Me" indicated initial reluctance before Deschanel bowed to her emotions.



Patient and tender, She & Him specialized in what it feels like to be smitten, unable to think clearly or fully control desires when transfixed on another human being. Deschanel approached most songs as private confessionals, thoughts a girl might scribble in her diary. Her breathy insouciance during a clock-stopping take of "Hold Me, Thrill Me, Kiss Me" and naked vulnerability on a gorgeous, stripped-down, high-and-lonesome arrangement of the Righteous Brothers' "Unchained Melody" with her two female contemporaries could've fulfilled the romantic wishes of most red-blooded males. Pure, compassionate, and heartfelt, she belonged to the same time warp as Ward. And while Deschanel lacks the vocal reach and steady highs of the pop greats—be it Ella Fitzgerald, Dusty Springfield, even Linda Ronstadt in her prime—her expressiveness summoned the sweaty palms and nervous optimism of a first date.

Then, of course, most of her predecessors never could convert what at first came across as a spring-loaded pop ditty into a throwback to French ye-ye. Delivering an entire verse of "Sunday Girl" *en français*, Deschanel turned crushes into heartaches, dulcet accents into exotic persuasions, all the while acting as if what transpired was completely natural, the everyday manners of a woman strong enough to refuse to settle and warm enough to still believe in teddy bears, boardwalk strolls, and ice-cream cones on a hot summer afternoon. ●

THE HARMAN KARDON RABCO ST-7 LINEAR-TRACKING TURNTABLE

By Jerold O'Brien

WELCOME TO KLUDGEVILLE,
aka the H/K Rabco ST-7 linear-tracking turntable. Introduced in the mid 1970s and selling in fairly high numbers, the ST-7 was a brilliant product, which eventually crashed and burned because of reliability issues and a changing marketplace. It and its sibling ST-6 and ST-8 models introduced linear tracking, or tangential tracking, to a wide audience of music lovers seeking to extract that little bit of extra magic from the record grooves.



FEATURE



Tangential arms were nothing new at the time. Companies like Rek-O-Kut, Ortho-Sonic and Burne-Jones had fielded products of this nature as early as the mid-1950s. However, it wasn't until the mid-1960s that a somewhat commercially viable tangential-tracking turntable, the Marantz SLT-12, became available to the buying public. As valiant an attempt as the Marantz was, it was doomed to fail as a successful business venture, due to various mechanical problems.

Enter Rabco, the Maryland-based manufacturer of the now-famous SL-8 and SL-8E tangential-tracking tonearms. Somehow, Rabco figured out a way to make these arms relatively reliable, despite their mechanical complication (i.e. two electrical motors). These arms found their way onto many of the revered turntables of the early 1970s, like the Thorens TD-125 and Technics SL-1100. Rabco even marketed a complete linear-tracking turntable in the form of its ST-4 model. At the time, the ST-4 retailed for \$159, while the more sophisticated SL-8E retailed for \$169. These prices weren't out of line by any means, considering that a garden-variety belt-drive turntable at the time sold in the vicinity of \$115.

Even though Rabco was reasonably successful, the company eventually sold out to Harman Kardon. By 1975, the acquired brand was manufacturing the ST-7, which was embraced momentarily by its dealer network. I actually owned an ST-7 in 1975 and enjoyed it immensely, but its complication led to frustration and I passed it on to another owner. So here I am now with a nice example of an ST-7 and it's working pretty well. How did this happen?

About a year ago, I was the recipient of three gifts from two friends: a Marantz 2245 receiver, a pair of JBL L100 speakers and the ST-7. The Marantz and JBLs were easy to sort out and get up to excellent working condition. However, the ST-7 sat on a filing cabinet for months before I even plugged it in. I know that getting this thing up to new-operation condition was going to take a lot of patience, so that is what was exercised.

(continued)

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FEATURE

After plugging it in, various problems came to light. It needed thorough cleaning, extensive lubrication, new belts, new indicator lamps and many, many adjustments.

I said welcome to Kludgeville and that is not an understatement. Removing the platter and top panel of the ST-7 reveals a mechanical nightmare that would do Rube Goldberg proud. And just about everything is adjustable. But those adjustments must be made just right or the thing simply won't function properly.

So, over a four-month period, I deal with one issue after another, often creating another issue, which created another. There were times when I just wanted to hit it with a hammer and be done with it, but I persevered. Eventually I got it to play records without

either malfunctioning or going out of adjustment. And even though I had the owner's manual, I was missing the all-important cartridge-alignment gauge; luckily, wonders of modern technology fixed that for me. A company called Shapeways makes a 3D-printed version of this gauge that works like a charm.

Before putting the ST-7 into service, I did a couple of tweaks that worked out well. I did some internal damping of the metal casework and I installed a GEM Dandy turntable mat. I also replaced the crummy molded RCA plugs with high-quality gold-plated copper models. Another tip for good operation is getting the table to be perfectly level; I have a handy bi-directional mini level that works perfectly for this task. I use a Shure V-15 Type III cartridge for all of my listening. *(continued)*

FEATURE

First impressions are very promising—the ST-7 keeps its speed stability well and exhibits little signs of rumble. A tap on the chassis does produce an audible *thunk*, but that is not too bothersome. Who smacks their turntable while listening anyway? The tonearm tracks perfectly straight across all the records that I play, and the end-lift/shut-off mechanism performs flawlessly—promising indeed.

Going with period music, I decide to play nothing but 1970s records. First up is Chick Corea's album *Crystal Silence* (ECM). The lengthy composition "Sometime Ago/La Fiesta" is thoroughly enjoyable, exhibiting a nice clean treble presentation and good rendering of Flora Purim's vocals. Next up is "Miles Beyond," off of the Mahavishnu Orchestra's *Birds of Fire* album (Columbia). There is excellent punch on Billy Cobham's drums, Rick Laird's bass lines are clearly delineated and John McLaughlin's guitar has incredible bite, while Jerry Goodman's violin does not irritate. I move on to the Jan Hammer Group's album *Oh, Yeah?* The title cut is very busy with synthesized bass, bass guitar and bass drum, but the ST-7/V-15 combination unravels all of it.

By this time, I'm into the smiley-face/toe-tapping region of listening. For the final album, I tee up *In Praise of Learning* by Henry Cow. Yes, I realize that admitting to listening to Henry

Cow is akin to admitting that you set cats on fire or throw bricks at school busses, but I like the music. The song "Beautiful as the Moon – Terrible as an Army with Banners," a paen to oppressed working classes, sounds as good as I remember it sounding when I played this very same record on my original ST-7. If I remember correctly, the cartridge I had on that one was a Fidelity Research FR-1 MK II. To achieve similar results with the refurbished table is not too shabby.

If I can criticize the reproduction of this particular ST-7, it is that the lower registers are lacking in weight compared to some modern tables, and the front-to-back staging is a bit compressed and two dimensional. On the plus side, you get a big, steady left-to-right image, great focus and absolutely no mis-tracking.

Owning one of these turntables is not for the faint of heart. You either have to be mechanically adept or know a technician who can deal with the various trouble spots. Most of all, one must have patience. However, once you have it sorted out, the ST-7 is easy to use, it sounds pretty darn good and it has looks that are way past cool. I'm keeping this one, which will be mated to the Marantz/JBL system, where it will live happily ever after—at least until it goes out of adjustment. ●



NEW RELEASES

**Mavis Staples***One True Vine*

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If you're looking for some good news this year, take solace in this: Mavis Staples, Chicago's legendary gospel-blues voice, marches on. Now in her early 70s, the singer sees a finish line on *One True Vine*. At times, she's wondering what her lost friends are doing up in heaven, and on the album opener "Holy Ghost"—a vulnerable, ballad-by-candlelight—she's hanging onto an indefinable but powerful force that is her faith in a higher power. Make no mistake. No pall hovers over these songs. As exemplified by "Every Step," this is the sound of a fighter and a survivor, as Staples' finely aged voice of soulful grit polishes with a spit-shine.

©Photo by Chris Strong



"Every Step," one of three original tracks penned by Wilco anchor Jeff Tweedy, collaborating with Staples for the second consecutive album, surrounds her with a deep-down guitar that echoes as if recorded in an empty well and a rhythm forebodingly punctuated by the rattling of chains. Yet Staples doesn't waver, her intensely sweet rasp building in strength until a backing gospel choir sheds some light on the tune. Fellow Chicagoan Kelly Hogan, who sings with a blue-collar balm herself, leads the assisting vocalists. The choir graces many of the songs with a presence that recalls the band leader's definitive work with the Staples Singers. As does Tweedy's guitar playing.

Tweedy splits the difference between folk, blues, and funk on fare such as "Jesus Wept," a heartache of a strummer to those who have passed, and "I Like the Things About Me," which comes across akin to an ol' Staples Singers tune recast into a defiant statement of late-in-life acceptance, complete with a guitar that howls like a groovy trumpet. Throughout, however, the star, as it should be, is Staples. (continued)

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MUSIC



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An anything-goes looseness perfumes some of the arrangements—note the trippy acoustics, galloping beats, and give-and-take vocals on “Can You Get to That”—but nothing ever pulls out in front of the headliner. She quivers to a whisper on “Holy Ghost,” leads a back-porch revival on “Woke Up This Morning with Jesus On My Mind,” and delivers an I’ve-seen-it-all-before, no-nonsense toughness on “Sow Good Seeds”

This is an album on which pessimism takes a permanent holiday. Such a joy is the sound of Staples singing that even a potential tearjerker as the title track—“Life had ceased/I was lost and tired,” she confesses, a serenade brimming with passion—is handled with clear-eyed force. This is a woman who’s always looking ahead to better days yet to come. —**Todd Martens**

**Dessa**

Parts of Speech
Doomtree, LP or CD

● Purchase LP from Music Direct

Dessa's *Parts of Speech* is likely the only hip-hop record this year to cover one of the deep cuts from Bruce Springsteen's *Born in the U.S.A.* The tune in question, "I'm Goin' Down," is in its original form is a rock 'n' roll trifle with a big beat, a repetitive chorus, and some vague, easily misinterpreted lyrics about a relationship gone south. It's now rarely even performed by Springsteen. So what does Dessa want with it?

The Minneapolis artist places it in the center of *Parts of Speech*, her second proper album, and turns it into gripping relationship drama, making it an atmospheric acoustic strummer more about what isn't said than what is. At times an earnest and smartly wordy coffeehouse rapper, Dessa can turn it down and let her vocals ache like the best of balladeers, flipping a perfectly manicured garage rocker into a slow, awkward tale of two lovers that can no longer speak to one another during a car ride.

But that hardly covers Dessa's range. "Dear Maria" is slow-burning R&B, anchored by a barely-there piano and chopstick rhythm, and then there's the opposite end of the spectrum. "Warsaw" is a cold, synth-rap stomper with breaks into noisy nothingness; "Fighting Fish" is a gloves-off, hard-knocks rap track about swimming with the male sharks. "Women, children, let me tell you, I've been both, and it's a myth, we all swim for the lifeboat," she raps.

"The Beekeeper" reframes Dessa as a potential jazz vocalist. Here, she slips into a higher register and is accompanied by a string arrangement and digital effects that scurry like rodents. Dessa's tough-but-wounded songwriting holds it all together. "Call Off Your Ghost" comes on as a moody, blow-by-blow account of two exes introducing each other to their new significant others, but it's "The Lamb" that makes clear Dessa's tense storytelling abilities.

"I don't believe that you're reformed," she raps, her cloudy voice buried in the beat-driven menace as she confronts a former lover—a "monster"—now sick and powerless in the hospital. "Do I scare you?" she asks. She definitely has our attention. —**Todd Martens**

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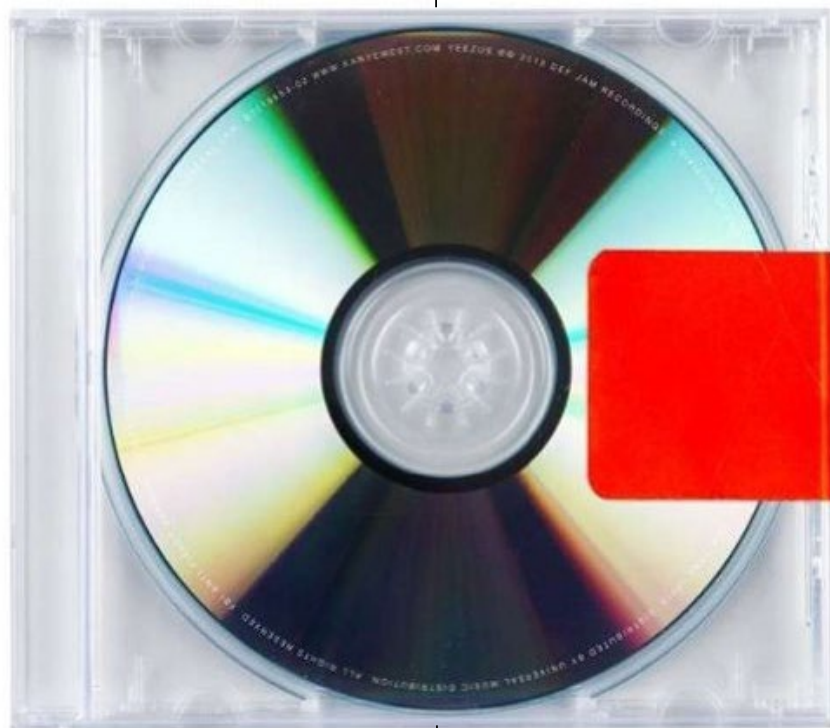
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go to sleep with a nightlight,” Kanye West confesses late onto *Yeezus*. If he doesn’t, his demons come out to play. If that’s the case, *Yeezus* was no doubt recorded with the lights definitely off. The demons are not only out; they populate songs like a club that’s well over capacity.

Even for West, an artist known to rant and regret (half-regret, sometimes), *Yeezus* is a brutally abrasive lesson in mouthing-off and worrying about it never. Sexually aggressive, racially blunt, and at times borderline abhorrent, the record’s 10 songs are littered with moments that dare the listener not to turn the record off. And yet *Yeezus* is an album that twists and turns until it throws questions back at the listener. “Soon as they like you, make ‘em unlike you,” West raps in “I Am a God,” a line that serves as a sarcastic mission statement for the album.

Weapons-grade synths quiver like they’re leveling the middle-class, horror soundtrack screams appear out of nowhere, and West prattles off with the free pass unparalleled fame has brought him. Uttering a line that will forever define *Yeezus* on Twitter, West hassles the wait staff for his “damn croissants” and then pretends to talk to Jesus, all of it continuing at least “until the day I get struck by lightning.” On *Watch the Throne*, West’s 2011 collaboration with pal Jay-Z, the Chicago native celebrated the good life. Here, he absorbs all its temptations, contradictions, and money-driven deceit, and shoves it back in the listener’s face like a combination superstar/supervillain. West’s transformation from a middle-class kid on 2004’s *College Dropout*, on which he told tales of his gig at the Gap, to a TMZ target on *Yeezus*, on which he sings of needing lawyers to end a relationship, is complete.



Kanye West

Yeezus
Roc-A-Fella/Def Jam, CD

Don’t like it? Well you made me, West may as well be saying.

What he sees on *Yeezus* is not a 64-carat playground filled with riches and rap-star posing, although he uses plenty of the latter to get his point across. Rather, this is a world where sex is currency and racism is disguised but no less rampant. “They see a black man with a white woman,” West raps on “Black Skinhead,” and “they gone come to kill King Kong.” The song plays out like a panic attack, all huffs and puffs and steel-coated tribal rhythms as West goes on a fists-up terror through mainstream America. *Yeezus* is bracing in its imagery and striking in its sound. Throughout, primal beats frame the most potent lines and synthesizers are equally cacophonous and minimal, creating an argumentative mix that references old industrial, pre-EDM dance, and the distort-it-all adventurousness of 80s hip-hop.

Yeezus once again proves West’s musical risk-taking is as outsized as his personality, as he has the gall to shred Nina Simone’s “Strange Fruit,” the good sense to call on R&B vocalist Charlie Wilson for a sobering assist, and the vocabulary to sample Hungarian rock and old Chicago acid house. It may not be as revolutionary as 2008’s *808s & Heartbreak*—on which melancholic robotics paved the way for everyone from Drake to Frank Ocean—but *Yeezus*, with Daft Punk and Rick Rubin among the producers, is out for blood.

That’s obvious from the lyrics. They’re set to offend, and no doubt they will. Perhaps it’s the moment

West makes light of Parkinson’s disease, or perhaps it’s the moment he graphically describes where in a woman he’s going to stick his fist. Or maybe it’s the downright unjustifiable line about “sweet and sour” sauce in regards to bedding an Asian woman. The West on *Yeezus* is maniacal, his dark humor never more twisted, his disregard for political correctness never more brazen.

IF GREAT ART CONFRONTS, THEN WEST HAS PUT UP A MASTERPIECE OF A CHALLENGE.

What saves West, barely, from succumbing to the violent, misogynist amateur hour of Odd Future and Chief Keef (the latter a guest on *Yeezus*) is the sense (the hope?) that while he may be an unconscionable braggart, at least he’s one with something to say. “New Slaves,” for instance, is an explosive gift to those who think his antics with Taylor Swift and paparazzi can pass as controversial. The song aims to shine a light on less-gossipy aspects of fame. In it, West jousts around popcorn-popping synths as he slams corporate America, seduces your preferably white wife, and references prison overcrowding. A shock tactic? Hardly, as West wonders why he’s treated differently now that he has cash and paints those richer than him as modern slave owners—puppeteers that are using West’s antics to distract from anything real affecting inner-city America.

“I’m in It” and “Blood On the Leaves” go even further in using

Civil Rights-era imagery, although West’s revenge fantasies involve little more than acting the sexual aggressor. The former, his voice manipulated like some sort of anonymous night stalker, is a test of patience. And while “Blood on the Leaves” is a rather gripping drama about upper-crust adultery and abortion, its connection to the harrowing tale of racism that is “Strange Fruit” proves more

puzzling than eye opening. “Hold My Liquor” provides a counterbalance, as West and Chief Keef drop machismo for vulnerability and West can’t stop himself from hunting for a lover who knew him before he became “hopeless,” “soulless.” Desperation and one-night stands rarely sound as urgent—the rhythms buzzing, the synths a chainsaw—while all the enticements around West keep sending him into a spiral.

“Bound 2” closes the album by slowing things down and giving West some soul samples to catch his breath. “I’m tired, you tired,” West raps at song’s end, but not before asking for all sorts of unsavory Christmas gifts and discarding a thousand other women. It may bring the album to a close, but the arguments over what West presented have just begun. If great art confronts, then West has put up a masterpiece of a challenge.

—Todd Martens



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Queens of the Stone Age

...Like Clockwork

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Following a tour in support of Queens of the Stone Age's 2007 album *Era Vulgaris* and a short stretch playing alongside Dave Grohl and John Paul Jones in Them Crooked Vultures, Josh Homme retired to his home in the California desert to enjoy some much-deserved time off with his wife and two children. He also died, according to an interview with British music magazine *NME*.

"I had surgery on my leg [in 2010] and there were complications," he told the publication. "And I died on the [operating] table."

The incident clearly left a mark on Homme, the lone constant in Queens' ever-rotating lineup. It serves a focal point of the crew's long-in-the-works comeback, *...Like Clockwork*, surfacing in everything from the album artwork (a stark red-and-black image of a woman in Death's embrace) to the frontman's clawed-free-of-the-grave words.

"I survived/I speak/I breathe," he sings on the haunted piano ballad "The Vampyre of Time and Memory," "I'm alive, hooray." Then, on the surprisingly vulnerable "I Appear Missing," Homme appears to address the experience even more directly, singing, "Shock me awake, tear me apart/Pinned like a note in a hospital gown/A prison of sleep, deeper down/The rabbit hole never to be found."

Such admissions would have been inconceivable early on in Queens' career. The band's 2000 breakout, *Rated R*, opened with a song, "Feel Good Hit of the Summer," that doubled as a checklist of recreational drugs ("Nicotine, valium, vicodin, marijuana, ecstasy, and alcohol!"). The music is equally raucous, speeding up the elephantine stomp Homme explored with his previous group, the now-revered stoner rockers Kyuss. The hedonistic approach reached its potent peak in 2002 with *Songs for the Deaf* before things, predictably, started falling apart. In 2004, the band fired bassist Nick Oliveri, and subsequent albums (*Lullabies to Paralyze* and *Era Vulgaris*) are at best mixed bags. *(continued)*



©Photo by Chapman Baehler

Many lazily chalked up the group's wandering focus to the loss of the notoriously intense Oliveri (a personality trait that revealed itself in a much less positive light when he was arrested for suspicion of felony domestic violence after a four-hour standoff with a police SWAT team in 2011), and much has been made of his return to the group for *...Like Clockwork*. But, like a bulk of the album's numerous contributors—Elton John, Trent Reznor, Scissor Sisters' Jake Shears, Alex Turner of Arctic Monkeys, and so on—Oliveri's guest spot is limited to a brief cameo, and even the most ardent fan would find it difficult to pinpoint his precise contribution. (He's one of several singers providing backing vocals on "If I Had a Tail," for the record.)

Not so drummer Dave Grohl (Nirvana, Foo Fighters), who mans the drum kit for roughly half the songs and brings a palpable sense of urgency to tunes like the stampeding, psychedelic "My God Is the Sun" and "Fairweather Friends," an operatic gem that nods to the over-the-top grandiosity of 70s arena rock.

Despite the impressive guest list, however, there's never any doubt this is Homme's show. This is true whether the frontman is exploring his mortality (the album-closing title track plays like an acceptance of death's inevitability, Homme singing, "Not everything that goes around comes back around") or expressing his still very-much-alive sexuality. "Fairweather Friends," for one, comes on like the prelude to a one-night stand ("What's it gonna take to get you back in bed?" asks the singer), while the wonderfully perverse "If I Had a Tail" casts Prince as a desert stoner, Homme singing, "I wanna suck/I wanna lick/I wanna grind/I wanna spit."

Indeed, the song could easily be interpreted as an embrace of earthly pleasures, and it wouldn't be surprising had the frontman shouted "I wanna live" at the climax. After all, who wouldn't want to feel the ecstatic warmth of human flesh after so closely holding Death's cold hand? —**Andy Downing**

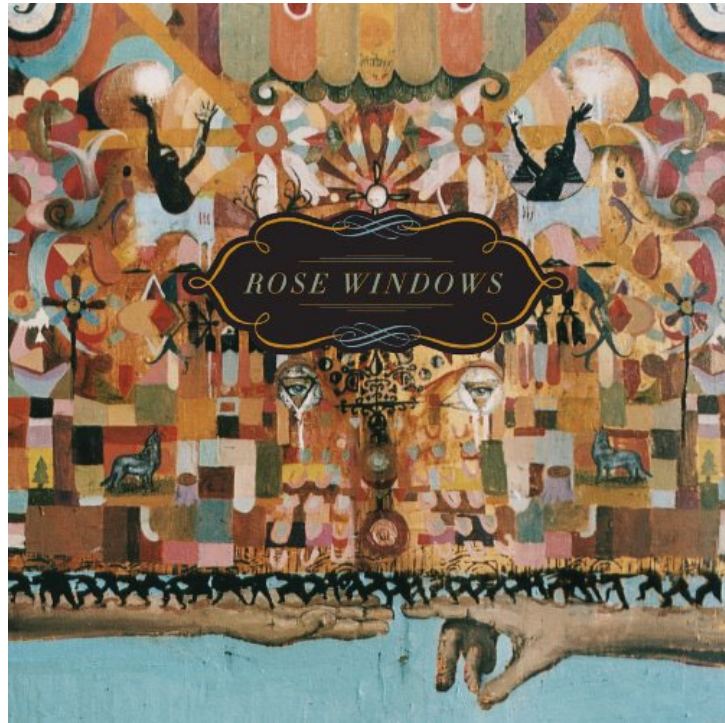
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Rose Windows

Sun Dogs

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In 1981 animator Gerald Potterton released his film *Heavy Metal*, a sort of *Fantasia* for the longhaired hard-rock set. The film's tag line promised viewers a universe of "mystery," "magic," and "sexual fantasies," all explored through images of science fiction and fantasy. It was all completed long before the time of Seattle's Rose Windows, which this summer are releasing a debut album for Sub Pop. But the band seems to live by a similar mantra. *Sun Dogs*, as any album bearing its name should be, is filled end-to-end with guitar mysticism, howling, cut-through-the-fog vocals, and the kind of casual zest for the sounds of the Middle East and India usually possessed by a young, barefooted backpacker.

On a song such as the nearly 10-minute "This Shroud," the seven-piece band leads the listener into a landscape colored with fanciful Eastern flourishes, snake-dance chants, hippy flutes, and a two-and-a-half minute guitar soloing finale that sets it all aflame. It's downright reassuring. Styles may change and digital tools may provide new musical playgrounds, but somewhere, someone still abides by the rules laid down by Led Zeppelin: make it loud, make it trippy, and disregard international borders.

The Rose Windows aren't the only modern indie band kneeling before the altar of rock (see the Besnard Lakes, Black Mountain), but *Sun Dogs* holds the listener's attention because at times it seems in danger of becoming a folk record. Vocalist Rabia Shabeen Qazi could no doubt do a killer version of Robert Plant, but neither she nor the band has an easily recognizable style. A sunburned keyboard guides "Indian Summer" while "Native Dream" is a slow march into volcanic, reverb-drenched noise.

Qazi approaches "Walkin' With A Woman" like it's a ghost story, although Monkish backing vocals and devil-obsessed lyrics contribute to the mood. "Wartime Lovers" has the feel of long-lost 60s nugget, when biting social commentary (the "old misers" preying on the desert so they can "cash out") at least felt more commonplace in pop. Despite the occasional dips into the topical, Rose Windows emphasize mystery. How else to explain an album that declares this a "season of serpents"? —**Todd Martens**



©Photo by Alison Scarpulla

**SIGUR RÓS***Kveikur*

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A

s often as critics equate Sigur Rós' sound to the natural elements, one could be forgiven for mistaking the Reykjavik crew for a weather system rather than, you know, an actual band.

The group's haunting 1999 breakthrough, *Ágætis byrjun*, which roughly translates to "A Good Beginning," earned frequent comparisons to the melancholic Icelandic landscape. It's a challenge to find early reviews that don't include words like "glacial," "wintry," "volcanic," and "avalanche." Not that the band members have historically shied from such analogies. On a 2010 solo tour, frontman Jón Þór Birgisson (or Jonsi, for short) dressed as a nymph-like creature and performed on a set decorated to resemble a vast, untamed wilderness populated by hungry owls, foraging rabbits, and thick swarms of migrating birds. Seven albums and 15-years-plus into its career, however, Sigur Rós was due for a sonic makeover—a shakeup that finally arrives in the form of the driving, urgent *Kveikur*.

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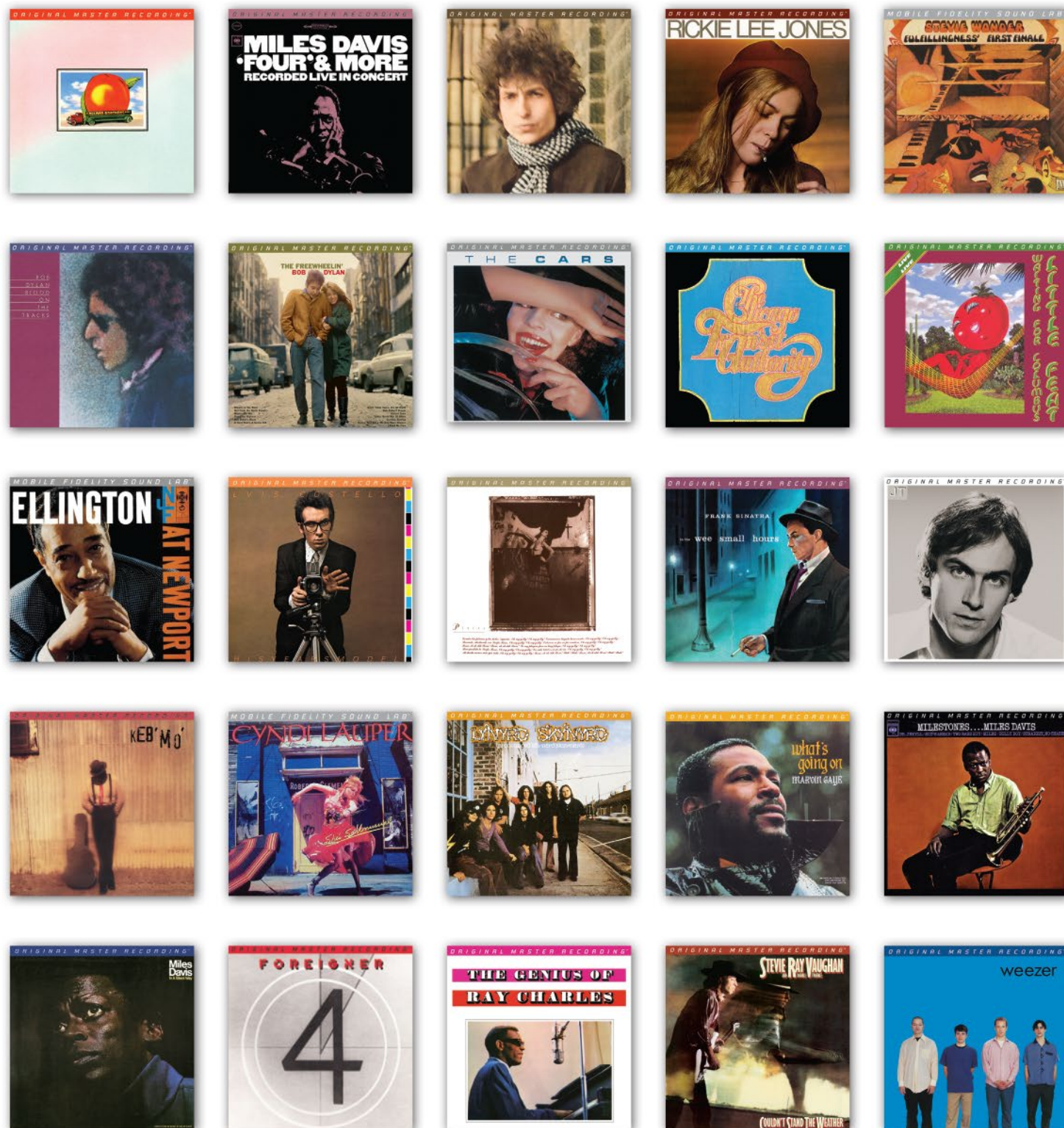


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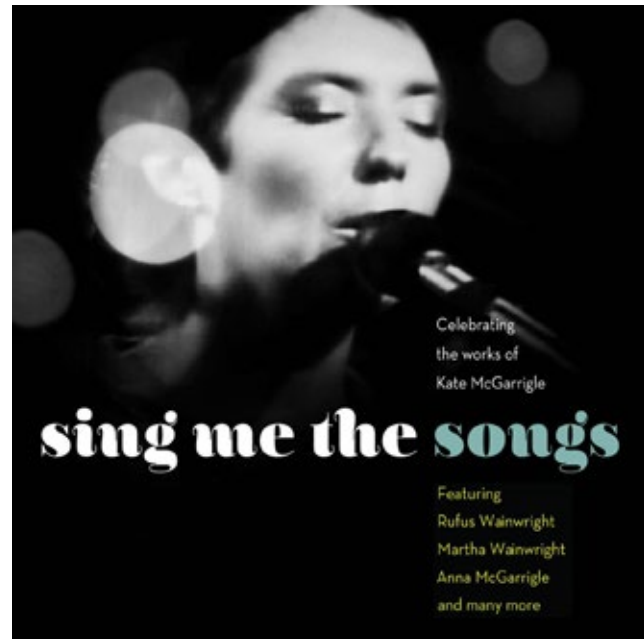
The band, now a trio following the 2012 departure of keyboardist Kjartan Sveinsson, has rarely sounded this aggressive. Its more naturalistic tendencies, while far from absent, are supplanted by a menacing, machine-like pulse. The first sound listeners encounter, for example, is a massive roar that sounds something like a fighter jet passing closely overhead—the kind of sound that would undoubtedly send Bambi and his furry friends scrambling to find cover.

Elsewhere, the three-piece conjures the industrial majesty of Nine Inch Nails on the lumbering, fuzz-laden title track, constructs massive walls of drum noise on “Ísjaki” (Orri Pall Dyrason has evolved into an absolute monster behind the kit), and turns out easily the most abrasive song in its expansive catalog with “Brennisteinn.” The latter is an eight-minute whirlwind of buzzing guitars, possessed strings, and disembodied

vocals that doesn’t end so much as it corrodes and gradually falls to pieces.

Yes, it’s still impossible for those who don’t speak his native tongue to discern the meaning in Birgisson’s words. But judging from song titles that translate to things like “Sulfur” (“Brennisteinn”), “Storm” (“Yfirborð”), and “Was” (“Var”), it’s safe to assume the lyrical content took a downcast turn to match the album’s more ominous musical direction.

Occasionally, the angelic Sigur Ros of old turns up. “Blápráður,” for one, hints at the celestial wonder of the band’s past work, with Birgisson unleashing a series of “ohh ohh ohhs” in that still-weightless falsetto. But more often than not, the trio sounds content to embrace its primal urges this time around, ditching ghostly atmosphere in favor of visceral, earthly thrills. Heaven, at least for now it would appear, can wait. —**Andy Downing**



Sing Me the Songs: Celebrating the Works of Kate McGarrigle
Nonesuch Records, 2CDs



©Photo by Lian Lunson

Sometimes, a moment on an album serves as a summation of the entire project. On this tribute to late Canadian singer-songwriter Kate McGarrigle, such a revelation stems from Emmylou Harris, who reprises her self-penned “Darlin’ Kate.” A heartbreaking elegy to her lost friend, who died of cancer in 2010, the song begins with a tender account of the deathbed scene. But Harris is also singing about McGarrigle’s power as an artist. “With your perfect words and all that voice/We fell in love/We had no choice.”

It’s highly unlikely that you, either, will have a choice with *Sing Me the Songs: Celebrating the Works of Kate McGarrigle*. Culled from three concerts in London, Toronto, and New York, this double-disc is no standard tribute. It’s breathing artwork in its own right, honoring McGarrigle’s wide-ranging legacy as a songwriter, collaborator, and artistic inspiration.

What makes this release so organic is that it’s not a parade of disparate celebrities popping in for a tune. The project was piloted by Kate’s sister and duo partner Anna McGarrigle, and Kate’s children, the singer-songwriters Rufus and Martha Wainwright. Songs are performed to evocative effect by Kate’s

actual family, friends, and admirers.

Surrounded by a shivery violin and stately piano, Rufus Wainwright and Harris take turns giving voice to the bereft diner who sits at the center of “I Eat Dinner (When the Hunger’s Gone).” The details devastate in their simplicity, both from what is there (“leftovers with mashed potatoes,” “a light that switches on”) and what is forever gone (“no more candlelight, no more romance, no more small talk”). This is more than just fine writing; it’s an exquisite painting.

An equally disarming spot comes from Martha Wainwright, who sang backing vocals on the original “Matapedia.” She takes center stage to interpret her

mother’s song of memory and mistaken identity, the ache in her voice palpable. “Go Leave” is interpreted twice. Antony Hegarty renders it as dramatic torch song, while Linda Thompson, backed on guitar by ex-husband Richard Thompson, envisions it as forlorn folk ballad. In both versions, the lyrics detonate in the one-sided study of a break-up filled with slivers of anger, confusion, and desperate hope.

Other highlights include performances by Norah Jones, Teddy Thompson, Krystle Warren, Peggy Seeger, and Jimmy Fallon. Like the life it commemorates, the saddest part of this A+ release is when it ends. —**Chrissie Dickinson**

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City and Colour

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D

allas Green, the singer-songwriter and sole creative force behind City and Colour, spends a bulk of his fourth full-length studio album, *The Hurry and the Harm*, physically and emotionally adrift.

On “Of Space and Time,” the former Alexisonfire guitarist wanders a desolate road, a murder of crows circling overhead, and is plagued by mysterious forces “eating away at [his] brain.” Even as the album closes, he envisions himself remaining unsettled throughout his final days, wondering aloud whether he’ll be able to find a comfortable resting place before death comes a-calling.

And what, precisely, is Green searching for? It’s a question he doesn’t shy from throughout, singing: “I’m looking for a way out” (“Paradise”); “[I’m] searching for wisdom” (“Two Coins”); “I’m just looking for the sweetest melody” (“Commentators”). At least on occasion, the singer uncovers the latter. *(continued)*

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MUSIC

The entire record is richly appointed, awash in lonesome acoustic strumming, shuffling drums, gospel organ, and Green's aching falsetto, which, at times, calls to mind Justin Vernon of Bon Iver. It's an instrument he unfurls with particular success on "Take Care," a stripped-down tune that feels like an optimistic prayer surviving amidst the darkness surrounding it.

"I will provide you with reason to believe," sings Green atop delicate finger-picking. "I will not desert you in your time of need." It's a brief moment of hope on an album on which the singer professes to being emotionally dead ("Harder Than Stone"), seeks solace from his troubles in the bottle ("The Lonely Life"), and storms away from a former lover, leaving her to be ravaged by thieves ("Thirst"). Perhaps it's true what he sings on "Two Coins": "I've always been dark/With light somewhere in the distance."

The music can be equally tumultuous, veering from jaunty folk-rock ("Harder Than Stone") to comparatively dark moments where the instrumentation neatly matches the shadows haunting Green's words. Witness the jagged electric guitar that knives its way through "Thirst" as the frontman sings of being overcome by an "ocean of anger."

Yes, the album can be a little one-note ("Death's Song" and "Of Space In Time" appear to differ in title alone), and Green isn't averse to tacking on a throw-away cut or two ("The Golden State" is a West Coast-bashing number that plays like a bland response to Phantom Planet's even blander "California"). But the musician's willingness to bare his soul, and his keen ear for melody, should be enough to garner any audiences' admiration—if not some rest for the ever-wandering soul. —**Andy Downing**

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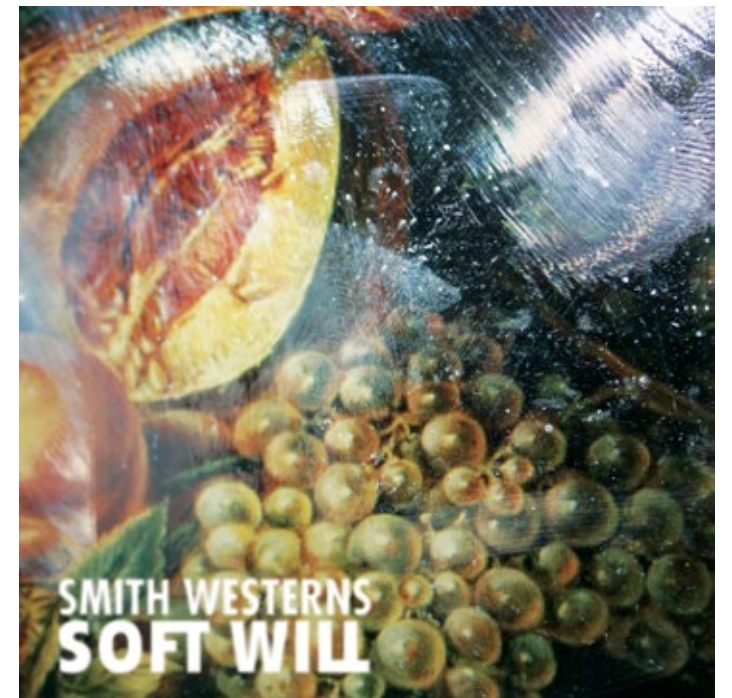
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MUSIC



Smith Westerns

Soft Will

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time, either an era when harmonious pop was all it took to get a radio hit (after one album on Fat Possum, the band is on indie Mom + Pop) or a period when first heartbreaks and new crushes were life and death. “Glossed” ricochets between high and lows—twinkling guitars, falsetto backing vocals, and sudden, swooshing, keyboard-driven drops—and, on in “Fool Proof,” sliding guitars and bouncy synths fight back the sadness.

The tempo doesn't shift much for 40 minutes, but there also isn't a moment where it feels anything less than a rather lovely soundtrack to handholding. “Varsity” ends the album with a sing-along, where guitars and keys dip in and around each other, and the band goes out crooning that “it's hard to be alone.” It is, but the thesis driving the Smith Westerns is simple: All you need is love.

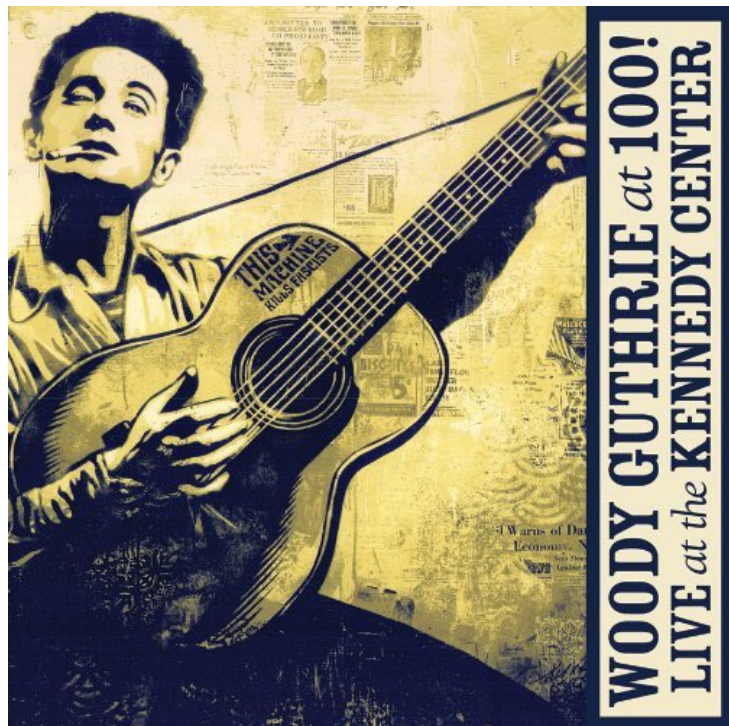
—**Todd Martens**

Early on *Soft Will*, the third album from Chicago's pristine pop-rock trio the Smith Westerns, singer Cullen Omori wistfully sings to the song's inspiration that he wishes he could see their “dark side.” Who knows how he would describe what he may find, as the musical universe of the Smith Westerns isn't one where the unseemly is a common occurrence.

While one would have to stop short of calling the Smith Westerns optimists, the band writes songs as if they're composing mid-afternoon daydreams. This is an album of mini-escapes, where a piano-based reverie such as “XXIII” recalls the languid psychedelics of Pink Floyd and “Cheer Up” makes its case with watery guitars, silky harmonies, and ever-so-slight symphonic touches.

With three albums completed by the time most people graduate college, the Smith Westerns are definitely growing up fast, but *Soft Will* retains the sense of innocence and longing the band has become adept at putting into four-minute pop songs. Disappointment in “3am Spiritual” is that “you don't look like you did on TV” and “Only Natural” channels the hurt of a fresh breakup—images of reading alone and “oceans part for you” poetry that no doubt will cause someone to cringe when the age of 30 is reached.

But more than any one particular moment, the Smith Westerns are skillful at recalling a



Woody Guthrie at 100!:
Live at the Kennedy Center
 Sony Music/Legacy, CD/DVD

All-star tributes can be underwhelming affairs. They're almost always too long. But, sprinkled in the mix, you usually find glorious interpretations that stop you in your tracks. Such is the case with this homage to the songs of folk legend Woody Guthrie.

Recorded at the Kennedy Center last year, the live concert recording covers the bases of Guthrie's oeuvre. His songs are both dirt-simple and poetically complex, from populist anthems to searing political indictments. He was, at his core, a guy who cared.



And it's clear the artists celebrating him care too, including Rosanne Cash, Old Crow Medicine Show, Jimmy LaFave, John Mellencamp, and Jackson Browne. These musicians and more perform with varying degrees of success. As for the sub-par showings? Joel Rafael sounds perilously close to a Dylan parody on "Ramblin' Reckless Hobo." Yet the most thankless task falls to Donovan, who gamely takes on the annoying children's ditty "Riding In My Car."

One can understand Ramblin' Jack Elliott's shaky handling on "1913 Massacre." The man is 81, so god bless. But there's no forgiving the caterwauling battle of egos when the entire cast assembles for mass sing-alongs of "This Train Is Bound For Glory" and "This Land Is Your Land." If this were vaudeville, the hook would come out.

There's a silver lining. Artists that capably put their own stamp on the Guthrie canon include Sweet Honey in the Rock ("I've Got to Know"); the Del McCoury Band ("So Long, It's Been Good to Know Yuh"); and Ani DiFranco with Ry Cooder and Dan Gellert ("Deportee").

After Woody Guthrie's death, his family discovered notebooks filled with his lyrics to a number of unfinished songs. Lucinda Williams puts music and her scorched voice to one of them, the unsettling prostitute's tale "House of Earth." It's one of the two genuinely head-turning moments here. The other knockout punch comes courtesy of Judy Collins. She arrives like a dark angel on "Pastures of Plenty," a painful meditation on Dust Bowl migrants.

Singing against lovely, insistent piano and guitar, she turns Guthrie's words into a depth charge: "I worked in your orchards of peaches and prunes/I slept on the ground in the light of your moons/On the edge of your cities you'll see us and then/We come with the dust and we're gone with the wind."

The tracks by Collins and Williams alone are worth the price of admission. The two create the greatest tribute of all—unique interpretations that make Guthrie feel more alive than ever.

—**Chrissie Dickinson**

FEATURE



GREAT ANALOG ON A BUDGET

The Ortofon 2M Red and Grado Black1 Prestige

By Jaime Lee Fritze



Like most entry-level audiophiles, I struggle with bridging the gap between affordable gear and quality sound, especially with my vintage system. Turntable performance is particularly important and the challenge of choosing a cartridge can be daunting. Whether you are looking to replace your existing cartridge or freshen up a vintage table, there are some good options on the market that won't leave your wallet screaming for mercy.

The Ortofon 2M Red and Grado Black1 Prestige are two solid entry-level cartridges. At just around \$100, the Ortofon Red is a high performer for its price. The Grado Black1 is less expensive, retailing around \$60, making it another viable option for the cost-conscious analog lover. I was able to spend some quality time with both carts, along with my Pro-ject Carbon Debut table (for which the Ortofon is a standard issue), Harman Kardon Three Thirty receiver, and circa-1980s JBL bookshelf speakers. The Ortofon also took a turn on an '80s-era Rega Planar 3.

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FEATURE

Ortofon 2M Red

The Ortofon 2M Red phono cartridge may be the base model in its line, but it should not be underestimated. It certainly surpassed my expectations. The Red is a moving-magnet cartridge with a split-pole-pin design, allowing for a flat frequency response like that of a moving-coil cartridge. It's attractively designed but not flashy, and installation couldn't be easier. The plastic body has a metal top plate, and it attaches to the tonearm via bolts that screw directly into the headshell. Also, the pins are color coded, which makes attaching the wires a breeze. Ortofon states that the cart's tracking-force range is 1.6 to 2 grams, but I found that it performed best in my table at a lighter weight of 1. grams. Impressively, the 2M Red performs almost as well with about 10 hours of play as one with over 100 hours of play, but it does need to be broken in to tame the slight initial brightness. The Red is a nice quiet cartridge without any noticeable hum.

Ortofon prides itself on producing cartridges that are accurate and do not color the sound. The technology mastered in the company's legendary cartridges carries straight through to its entry-level models. The 2M Red is an excellent tracker, in addition to being somewhat forgiving in that it does not highlight every imperfection; it even brings new life to well-worn records. Tracking through a tattered copy of *Led Zeppelin II*, which I had all but left for dead, proved to be a highly listenable experience. In the context of my vintage system, the Red comes across as tonally accurate, with a soundstage that is surprisingly open and well suited to a wide range of genres. *(continued)*



FEATURE

Putting it through the paces, I discover that the Ortofon 2M Red is dynamic and far from boring. It handles the highs well without adding noticeable sibilance or brightness after the initial break-in period. Bass response through the Red has an impressive amount of punch, but it doesn't overwhelm. The midrange is musical sounding and balanced, lending itself to pleasing vocals and an overall smooth sound quality. Even the quietest albums explode with an impressive amount of detail. The 2M Red works equally well on the aforementioned '80s-era Rega Planar 3, outperforming the Pro-Ject table in terms of detail retrieval. A perfect example is Elliot Smith's self-titled album, on which there is less tape hiss present with the Rega and slightly more top-end extension.

Grado Black1 Prestige

Right out of the box, the Grado Black1 Prestige is a rather simplistic-looking cartridge. With an exterior of black plastic and silver metal, it will blend well aesthetically with almost any table. The Black1 is a little bit harder to install than the Ortofon, but in its defense, the Black1's bolt-and-nut configuration is typical of most standard-mount cartridges. I quickly confirm that the recommended tracking weight range of 1 to 2 grams works well for the majority of records, but if imperfections are present, the higher end of the range will minimize skipping. This is a perfect choice for the budding analog maven shopping for records at thrift stores and garage sales. Like the Ortofon, the Grado needs modest breaking in, requiring a few days to loosen up the midrange and dampen the highs completely.



FEATURE

The Black1 has a robust bottom end and is well suited to those loving classic rock. It handles warhorses from Genesis and Pink Floyd with confidence, but the treble is a little more of a challenge, sounding a bit sizzly at times, especially with newer pressings, like some of the recent Metallica reissues. The midrange is somewhat flat for my taste and some vocals seem to fall into the background, but this may be partly due to the overall tonal balance of my system—even at this price, system matching is essential.

There is a low-level hum detectable between songs when played at high volume through the speakers and with headphones, which may be a little distracting for some listeners; this was more prominent on the Rega table. However, this is a fairly well-documented issue between Grado and Rega. In terms of soundstage, I feel this cartridge is a little closed and less dimensional than the Ortofon, but it is not displeasing. Though the Grado has only slightly less output than the Ortofon (5 mV versus 5.5 mV), I find myself always reaching for the volume control with the Grado in the system. Users with easy access to capacitive loading on their MM input will be able to wring the last bit of performance from both cartridges, but the average install in a budget or vintage system will prove phono-stage dependent.

Each of these cartridges provides a great way to revitalize your vinyl setup on a tight budget. The Ortofon 2M Red certainly reveals more music, and even though it is only \$40 more, it does deliver increased performance in keeping with the price asked. ●

Ortofon 2M Red

MSRP: \$100
www.ortofon.com

Grado Black1 Prestige

MSRP: \$60
www.gradolabs.com

AUDIOPHILE PRESSINGS

By Jeff Dorgay



Rickie Lee Jones

Rickie Lee Jones

Mobile Fidelity, 180g LP

B Rickie Lee Jones

Back in the beginning of 1979, when this record made its debut, it became a demo staple in every hi-fi store. Even the original pressing sounded decent, and budding vinyl enthusiasts can usually find a clean copy for a few bucks about anywhere.

Both the original MoFi and the current MoFi remasters have more dynamics and quieter surfaces than the original WB pressing, and each will set you back about \$30. However, the current MoFi release exceeds its predecessor in every way but one: the “smiley face” EQ. (For those unfamiliar with this term, it means that the upper treble and lowest bass frequencies have been slightly boosted in the attempt to gain some listenability, more excitement, if you will.) Pressed on the original JVC “Super Vinyl,” the original is still a smidge quieter than the current pressing, which is excellent.

It’s up to you whether you bypass the first track, “Chuck E’s in Love,” since it was played to death on the radio and MTV. The rest of the record still holds up after all these years, with great arrangements and a stellar cast of musicians, including Dr. John, Tom Scott, Randy Newman, Jeff Pocaro, and Neil Larsen, to name just a few.

Bass response is now sorted, there is more midrange palpability and ambience throughout, and the record now reveals a higher degree of low-level detail. Jones’ voice possesses more decay on all tracks, and those that have frequently listened to this record will notice more nuance from beginning to end. And, while this album has grooves going almost all the way to the center label, MoFi did a much better job of cutting this copy. The inner-groove distortion creeping in on the label’s original is eliminated, another bonus.

Todd Rundgren

Yeah, yeah, you never remember your first download. But this is one you should remember. If you're a Todd Rundgren fan, you know most of his albums sound lousy. Rolled-off highs and compression are the order of the day. Mediocre mastering values aside, Rundgren's records are always rife with lush, layered vocal harmonies and cool keyboard effects.

The HD Tracks version of *Hermit of Mink Hollow* finally reveals not only the true wizard that is Rundgren, but all the hard work that went into this record. Even on the sparse track "Lucky Guy," his vocal purity comes through loud and clear, with the piano no longer buried (especially the lower register of the piano) and a much bigger soundstage in all three dimensions.



Todd Rundgren

Hermit of Mink Hollow
HD Tracks, 24bit/192khz download

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Sly and the Family Stone



Sly and the Family Stone

There's a Riot Going On
ORG Music, 180g 45RPM 2LP

On initial spin, if you think this record is not really up to audiophile standards, dig out your original and you'll be surprised at just how terrible the latter sounds. While this pressing still sounds somewhat hot on the top end (part of which might be the result of Mr. Ludwig's mastering), with distortion artifacts present, the new version sounds like butter.

Skip right to the single "Family Affair," and you'll instantly get the groove and see why this record topped the charts. The female backing vocal has much more presence, and more distance between it and Stone's heavy lead vocal. Cymbals still sound buried, but there is a bevy of groovy, funk-laden guitars out in the open. The other hit, "(You Caught Me) Smilin,'" is also well represented, with a much larger stereo image than the original Epic pressing.

The surfaces on this double 45RPM set are incredibly quiet, whereas the originals are awash in tape hiss and sound like an 8-track in comparison. Surprisingly, even though the LPs are cut at 45RPM, the tracks still only take up about a half of each LP side, respectively, so ultimate dynamics remain lacking.

Carole King

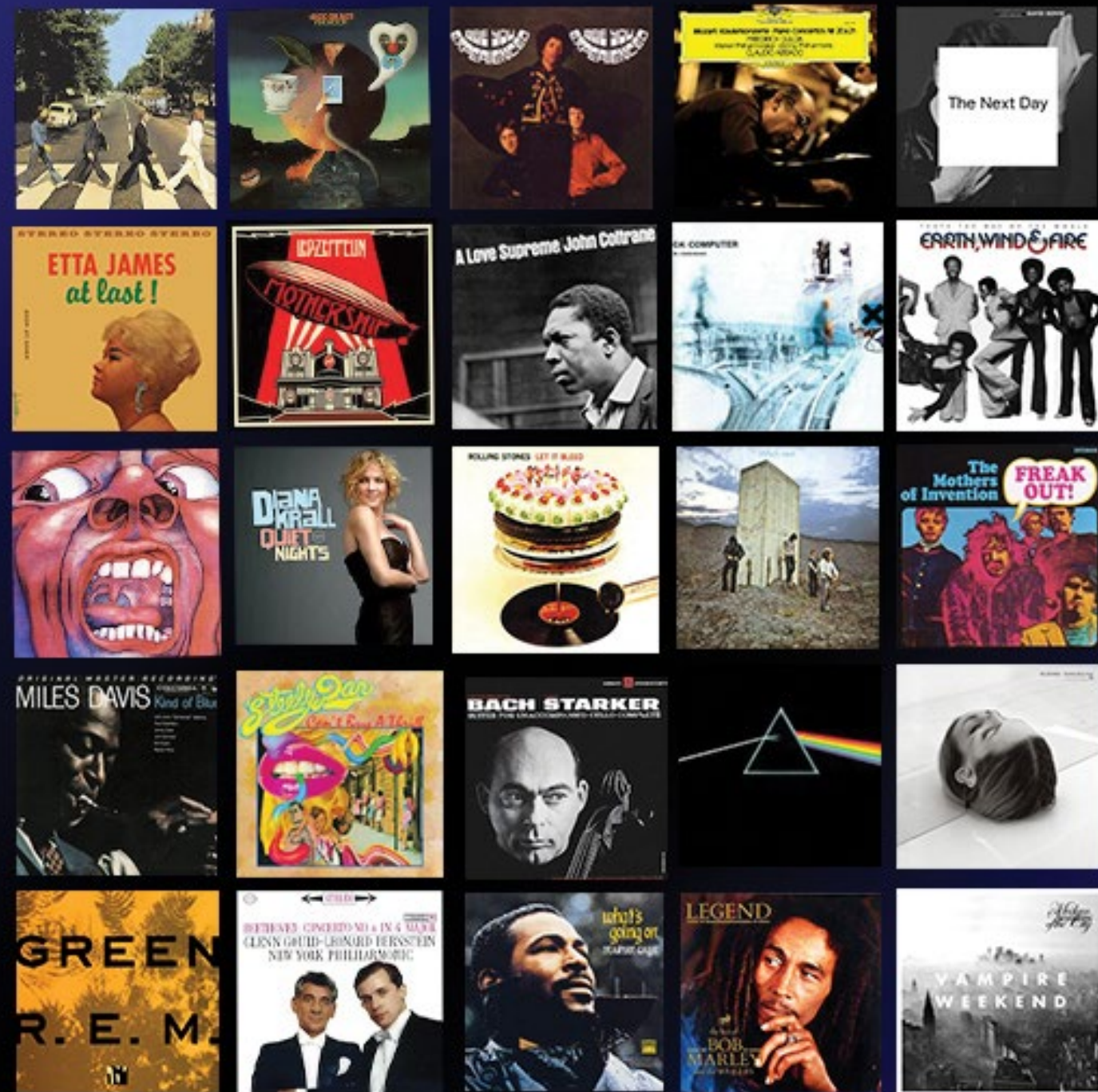


Carole King
Tapestry
 ORG Music, 180g 45RPM 2LP

Another well-ridden audiophile warhorse, *Tapestry* has been remastered a number of times on multiple formats. Do you need this one? Not if you have one of the others cut in recent years. Classic Records' 33RPM single-LP still gets the nod for overall clarity and a stronger, more well-defined bottom end. However, the collector market pushed its price to as high as \$400 for an unopened copy.

Expertly mastered by Bernie Grundman and pressed at Pallas in Germany, this freshly minted edition is one of the better versions available. However, the loss of high-frequency information and smoothness makes itself known, suggesting that perhaps these tapes are ready for retirement.

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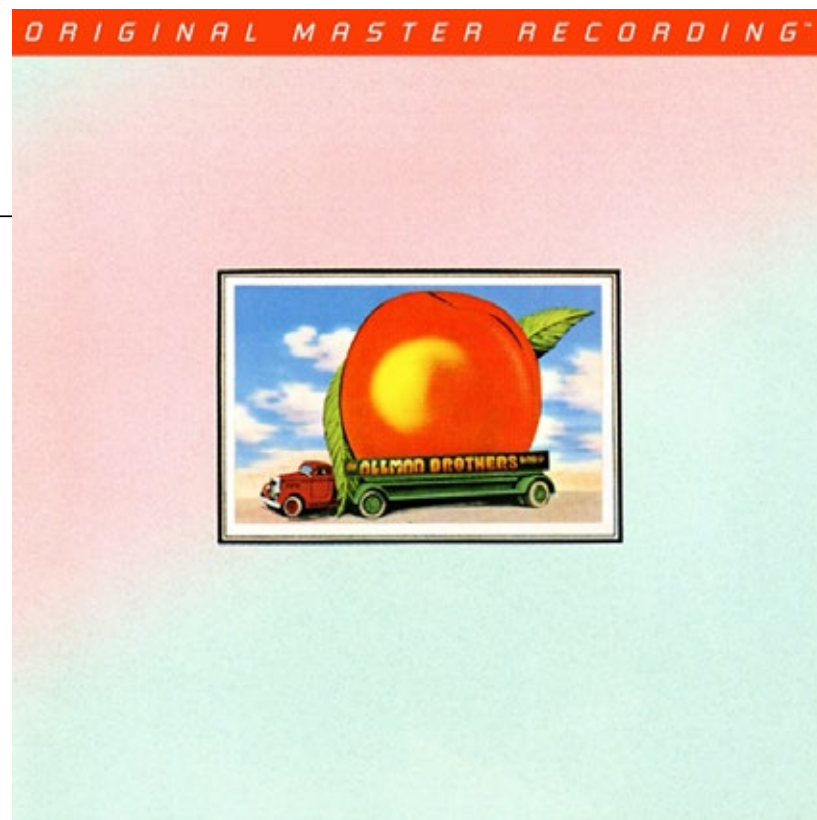
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The Allman Brothers Band*Eat a Peach*

Mobile Fidelity, 180g 2LP



The Allman Brothers Band

We positively reviewed the SACD version of this album in Issue 54. All the same sonic attributes apply, but this one goes to 11. Whisper-quiet backgrounds, and thanks to an analog master tape, this classic sounds better than ever. We'll even argue that this is the definitive edition, save for the rare white-label promo. ●

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FEATURE

Peachtree Audio nova125 Integrated Amplifier

By Mark Marcantonio



FEATURE

In the world of hi-fi audio, some equipment just begs to be stared at, like gear with the big blue McIntosh power meters, or a brightly glowing 845 output tube. Others, like classic 1970s Pioneer receivers, welcome being pushed, touched and turned. In the case of Peachtree Audio's nova125, this little integrated amplifier inspires anyone within arm's reach to caress its real-wood casing. The appeal is instantaneous.



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For over 40 years, Naim have been designing, engineering, testing, and hand-building fine audio equipment in their factory in Salisbury, England.

Over the years this has included tonearms, speakers (both active and passive), a record label producing and recording some of the world's finest musicians, cabling and interconnects, phono stages, tuners, amplifiers, DACs, preamps, CD players, crossovers, power supplies, whole house distributed audio systems, and networked audio components such as audiophile-grade servers and streamers.

Naim also designed the audio system for Bentley® automobiles.

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.



Classic curves aside, the nova125 is a 21st-century integrated amplifier designed for the digital-audio enthusiast. With USB, Toslink, and two coaxial inputs, the nova125 has one's preference for music-server output covered. Just a single analog input joins the digital quartet, leaving room for those needing a vinyl fix, with the help of an external phono preamp. A set of RCA preamp output jacks are included if you desire to move up to separates, or want to add a powered subwoofer (or two) to your system.

My nova125 review unit arrives with a dark rosewood veneer case—cherry wood and high-gloss black are also options. The amp measures 14.8 inches wide, 11.5 inches deep and 4.4 inches tall. It weighs in at just under 15 pounds. While diminutive compared to my reference Simaudio Moon i-7 integrated, the nova125 is solid in stature. Its elegant yet understated front face, with rounded buttons outlined in blue light

when engaged, accentuates its curvy look. Even the tube window has rounded edges. The smooth, damped action of the volume control, should you choose not to use the remote, has the feel of an amp twice the price of the nova125, which has an MSRP of \$1,499.

What's in a Name?

True to its model designate, the nova125 delivers 125 watts per channel into 8 ohms (or 220 watts into 4 ohms). This integrated begs to be pushed to the limit, easily pressurizing my 13-foot-by-18-foot listening space through my reference Harbeth Compact 7ES-3 speakers.

The thundering bass lines on Led Zepelin's "Immigrant Song" pulsate through the room, with the nova125 keeping the woofers well controlled—the Harbeths are speakers that need major current drive to sound their best, and the nova125 delivers. *(continued)*



peachtree audio

Keeping in the Zep groove, I turn to “Since I’ve Been Loving You,” the bluesy fourth track on *Led Zeppelin III*. The nova125 reproduces John Bonham’s legendary drumming with incredible finesse at the beginning of the track, while Jimmy Page’s guitar eases in slowly and later screams with authority. The Hammond B3 shines through very convincingly and with plenty of weight.

I then challenge this little amp with a pair of Magnepan 1.6s, which are notorious for easily absorbing the output of most amplifiers, driving them into fits of clipping. The nova125 is up to the challenge, and proves its mettle.

Next up are various orchestral works, which the nova125 reproduces honorably. Filling the room with “Jupiter,” from Gustav Holst’s *The Planets*, which I play at high volume, the nova125 stays with the musical score, and the soundstage never collapses—my ears give up first. Surviving this torture test proves that the amp has a robust power supply and the ability to drive a wide range of speakers, something that, until recently, was a problem for many Class-D amplifiers.

ICE amplifiers are known for their solid bass response and drive, and the Nova 125 does not disappoint. The deep, sinister bass beats on Kanye West’s “Hold My Liquor,” from his recently released *Yeezus*, rattle everything in my listening room that isn’t nailed down. A few classic tracks from Pink Floyd prove equally compelling. The quality of the bass response that the nova125

delivers is as impressive as the quantity, with more texture than I would normally expect from an integrated amp at this price.

The 6N1P vacuum tube that lurks behind the nova125’s front panel can be used as a buffer stage, and it can be easily switched in or out of the circuit via the supplied remote. Offering a bit more smoothness, the tube really adds some warmth to MP3-based selections, and it is also nice to have on hand for a bit of system tuning. This isn’t necessary with the already forgiving Harbeths (though still enjoyable for this listener), but it makes a huge difference taming the edges on budget speakers.

The critical midrange region is perhaps the only area where the nova125 can’t really escape its price point and topology; though, to be fair, this is the downfall of all ICE designs. Mumford & Sons’ “Hopeless Wanderer,” for example, is full of powerful acoustic guitar work, and it feels a little congested coming through the nova125 in comparison to my reference Simaudio i-7 (which, to again be fair, is priced new at \$6,000, making it four times the cost of the nova125). Luckily, the Peachtree amp’s tube buffer goes a long way to mitigate this.

I borrow one of Peachtree’s original Decco integrated amps from a friend for comparison, which reveals the tremendous progress that the company has made in a just few years. The design of the nova125 is miles ahead in every respect. *(continued)*



Cardas Headphone Cables



Doing Digital

Connecting an Apple MacBook via the amp's USB input allows me to compare how the nova125's built-in ESS Sabre 9023 DAC chip handles 16-bit/44-kHz files versus 24-bit/192-kHz files. S/PDIF and Toslink inputs are also available, so the nova125 should accommodate whatever source you have at your disposal. Using iTunes with the Amarra upgrade works perfectly, and you can save \$100 on a copy of Amarra when you register your nova125.

Dialing back from the hard rock of Led Zeppelin, I go with the Indigo Girls, whose stunning harmonies reveal that the nova125 is a cut above other ICE amplifiers. The buttery smooth vocals on "Watershed" illustrate the openness and lack of glare

that the nova125 provides when powering the Magnepans. It's a perfect example of clarity without the edge. This amplifier is a non-fatiguing delight.

Just Add Analog

A well-rounded integrated amp, the nova125 offers a single analog input, making it easy to add a turntable. Pairing the amp with the \$200 Lounge Audio phonostage we reviewed in issue 55 and the \$400 Pro-Ject Debut Carbon turntable (with Ortofon 2M Red cartridge) makes for a synergistic low-cost, high-performance system. For those craving a richer analog experience, the nova125 is not out of its league paired with the Rega RP6 turntable with Exact cartridge (though this duo has a higher price tag than

the nova125), easily illustrating the increased resolution that the Rega combination has to offer. As great as the nova125's DAC is, the recent Mobile Fidelity 45-rpm remaster of *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* underscores the palpability that this amp is capable of, capturing a lot of the space and decay in Dylan's voice, along with the texture of his harp.

For the headphone crowd, the nova125 comes with 1/4-inch jack on the front panel. The amp's headphone section is far from an afterthought, delivering a sonic signature through a pair of Sennheiser HD800s that stays true to that of the speaker output. The sharp percussion hits on R.E.M.'s "Shiny Happy People" stay quite even, with no edgy boost to break the smoothness. (continued)



Vocals lack the last bit of resonance that a dedicated headphone amplifier provides, but as a part of a multipurpose unit, the nova125's headphone offers worthwhile private listening when speakers aren't a viable option.

The Final Score

Aristotle said, "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts," a phrase that suits the Peachtree nova125 perfectly. Great sound, contemporary industrial design and incredible flexibility make this amp a tough one to beat. We are pleased to award the Peachtree nova125 one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2013.

And it really appeals to this Portlandia resident that Peachtree has taken a major green initiative with its products. The California Air Resources Board has certified the MDF used for Peachtree cabinets, its packing materials are recycled and the company's veneers are sourced from Forest Stewardship Council-approved suppliers. Well done, Peachtree! ●

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For full details on the M1 visit **www.anthemAV.com**.



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The Leica M Monochrom

By Jeff Dorgay

How can a camera that is so unintuitive (to all but Leicaphiles) be so seductive? If black and white imagery is your preferred method of image delivery, there is nothing finer than the Leica M Monochrom.

If you've still got a darkroom, mothball it. Printing with Epson's new fiber-based paper yields results so stunning, you'll never have the urge to handle film again. It's that good.

Its secret? An 18-megapixel sensor that forgoes the typical RGB pixel array in favor of one that only reads brightness values, benefitting the final image in a few ways. Increased sensitivity first, but because each pixel only generates grayscale values, there is none of the "fringing" effect that occurs when converting RGB images to black and white.

The images produced have a three-dimensional feel beyond anything you may have experienced in the digital realm, and the increased sensitivity the all-grayscale array provides gives you the freedom to shoot at ISO 3200 with ease – and you'll swear that you were shooting Tri-X when you make the prints.

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TONE STYLE



The big news here is that you can use these files on any recent version of Photoshop produced in the last ten years so you won't need to keep updating the RAW capture to keep your work flowing – a major boon, should you be working remotely without your own computer.

Our test camera arrived, via Shane Drew at HiFi Hawaii, which is Hawaii's largest Leica dealer and a premier hifi shop, with the 50mm f2 Summicron lens. Perhaps not as zooty at the f1.4 ASPH (the designation for Leica's aspherical lenses), but considerably more reasonable at \$2,495. The f1.4 lens is more than double that price, and with the Monochrom's incredible high

ISO performance, most users will never really need that extra f-stop's worth of light gathering.

Those requiring ultimate bragging rights will step all the way up to the f.95 Noctilux lens; however at almost four pounds, the weight penalty may offset the lens speed. Remember, there's no anti-shake in the world of Leica.

The rest of the camera is no-nonsense. The 2.5-inch viewing screen is probably a bit smaller than what you're used to, migrating from anything else, but the images are crisp and easy to view. Shutter speeds operate as they do on a traditional film-based Leica M-series camera, yet the film advance lever is now absent. The bottom cover of the camera

must be removed to access the battery (which lasts about 450 shots) and the SD memory card.

Again, homage to film Leicas aside, this makes the Monochrom cumbersome to use in a studio situation, unless all photos are taken in one session. In all fairness, this is probably using the Monochrom outside of its comfort zone. As with all other Leicas, this camera excels in landscape and photojournalistic situations. The more familiar you become with the camera, the easier it is to use. Should you be migrating from an SLR camera, chances are you will be highly surprised at how quickly this camera allows you to express your vision. *(continued)*

TONE STYLE



All pertinent controls are readily at your disposal, and the Monochrom's center-weighted metering information is easily visible through the rangefinder. The equivalent film speeds are "pull 160," up to 12,800. Many of the product images in this issue were captured at ISO 320, and a tight grain structure is easily held up to 3200. Take a closer look and see if you can spot the images shot at higher speed.

As mentioned at the beginning of the review, images captured with the Monochrom lack the digital artifacts that traditionally come bundled with grayscale images converted from RGB, i.e., those from any other digital camera. The clarity of detail and wide tonal range are like listening to a master tape instead of a copy that's been through multiple layers of mastering.

The good news is that you'll easily become accustomed to this level of image quality, and the bad news is you'll soon become spoiled for anything else. For those already having an investment in Leica glass, stepping up to a Monochrom will mean merely adding another body to their collection. If you are new to this world, adding a basic collection of lenses (50mm standard, 75 or 90mm telephoto and some kind of wide angle) will quickly push this to a five-figure investment.

But you'll never make a better one. If you've been lurking on the sidelines, wondering if Leica's M Monochrom is really that good, the answer is yes. Don't test drive this one unless you are ready to write the check. ●

MSRP: \$7,995 www.leica.com

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Jeff Dorgay, *Tone Audio Magazine*, January 2013



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Paul Rigby, *Hi Fi World*, March 2013



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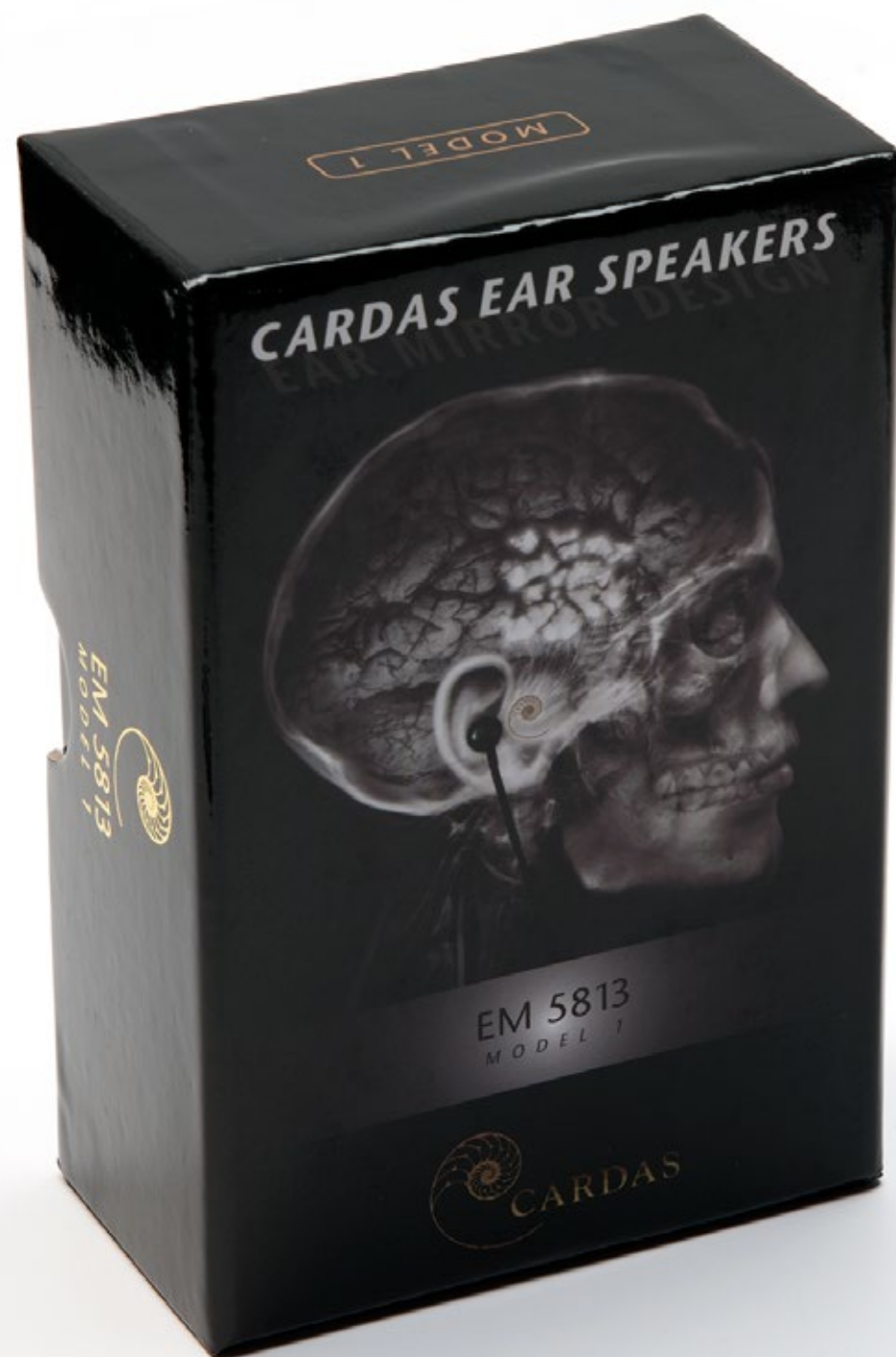
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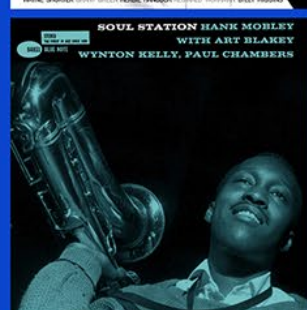
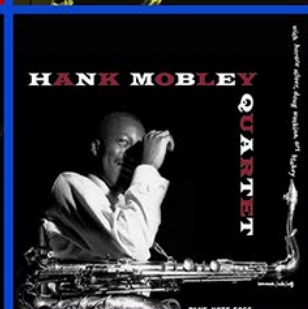
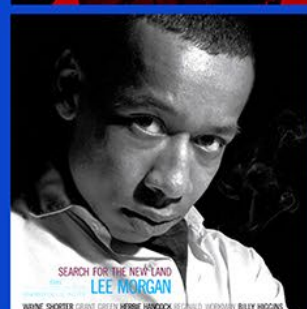
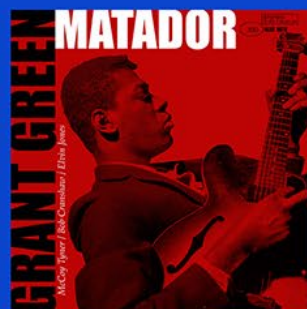
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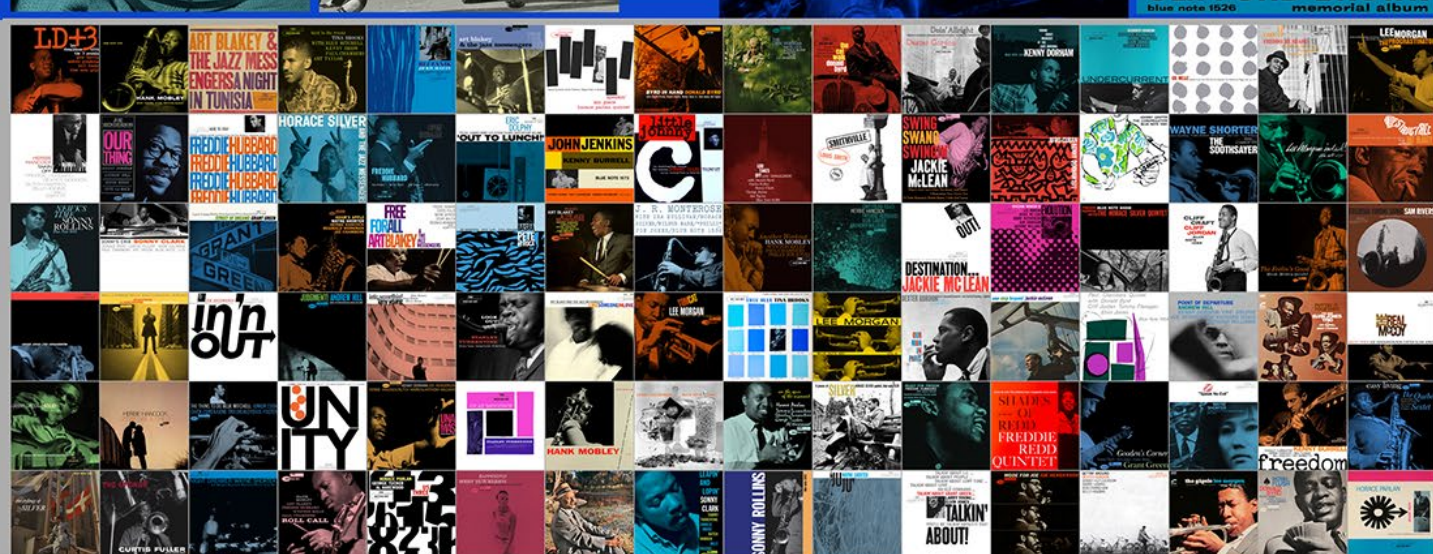
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tone style

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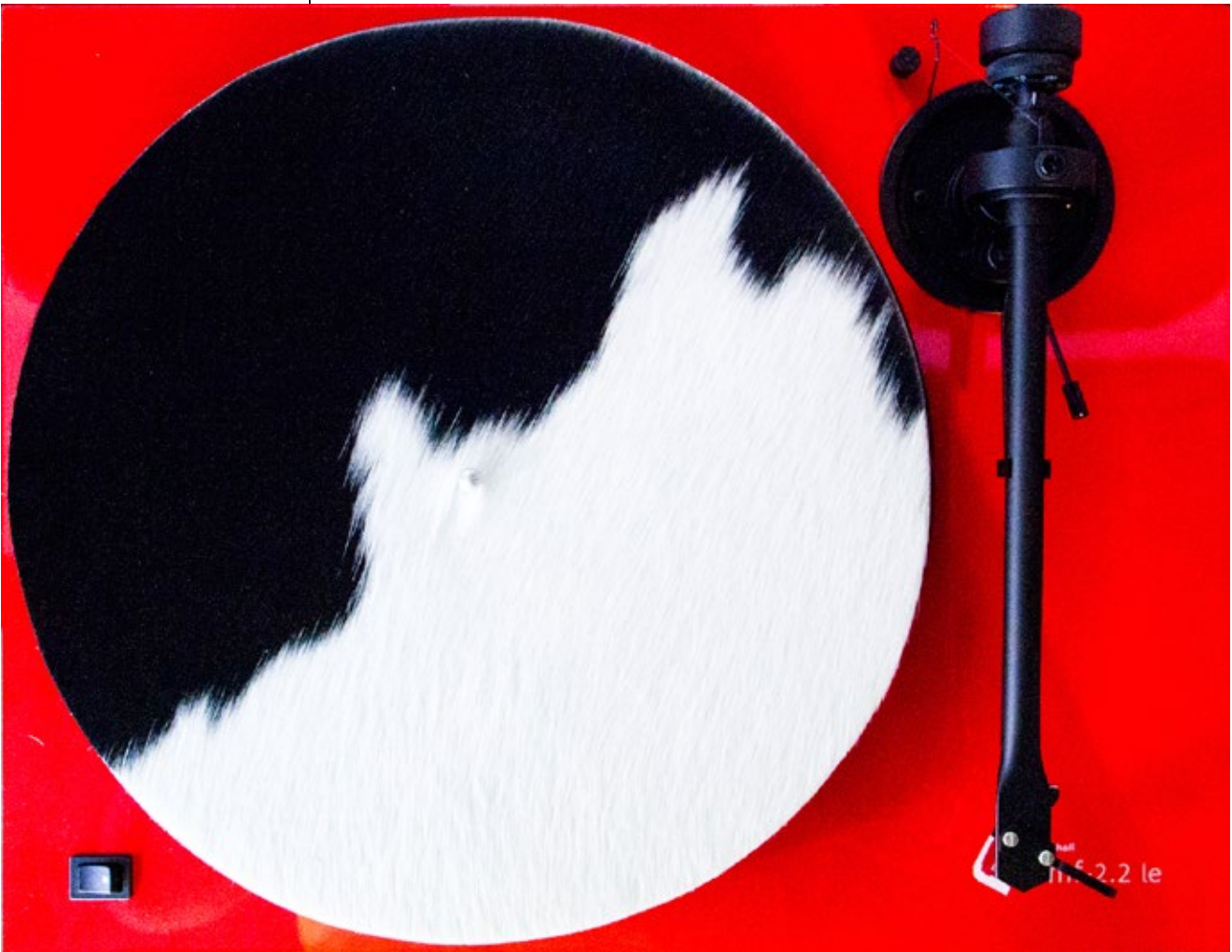
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Analog enthusiasts love to discuss the merits of turntable mats, which can often deteriorate into major arguments. With so many different variations on a theme, we submit the Moo Mat from Music Hall. It’s made from real cowhide, bonded to a piece of cork, so as with any mat, the results on your turntable will vary, but it certainly looks cool as hell sitting on *your* turntable! As Music Hall’s Leland Leard likes to say, “Vegans need not apply for this one.”



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www.ryobitools.com \$109



Perhaps a bit overkill for securing phono cartridges, the P260 does a great job everywhere else you might need an impact wrench on all but the most rusted wheel bolts. And, it uses the same 18V battery that the rest of the Ryobi family uses, to cut down on the number of battery chargers to keep track of. Now if only the hifi industry could standardize like this!

THE WINO

By Monique Meadows

Art Meets the Grape

The UPS shop owner around the corner only buys wines from me with “crazy wine labels.” She practically declared a national holiday the afternoon she discovered a bottle of Boxhead Shiraz on the shelf. Those UPS people are all about boxes. And to Brenda, if the wine was as fun as the label, that was a bonus – she laughed at herself for saying just that. There are people who sheepishly apologize for selecting a bottle of wine based on its label, as if appreciating a wine’s packaging was subpar to seeking a bottle of good wine. Yes, there are wines of rather poor quality with whimsical, bold or amusing labels and there are extraordinary wines whose labels are understated or of a historically classic style. And that’s the visual treat of it. No apologies necessary.



Wine labels actually have an extensive history: in 1922 archeologist Howard Carter discovered jars of wine in King Tut's tomb. Nice carry-on luggage for the afterlife, the jars had detailed etchings, so it seems the Egyptians may have been the first to record a wine's details. Fast forward to the 1920s when using labels to not just to record but to market wine was a technique used by Bordeaux's Baron Philippe de Rothschild, who commissioned important artists of the time – Picasso, Dali, Kandinsky, Chagall – for the wine estate's label designs. Even Andy Warhol's art has since graced the bottles at Château Mouton Rothschild.

As a teenager and college student, my memories of wine labels at home consisted of German bottles of Riesling with a logo of an arched black cat, and Bordeaux bottles with illustrations of vineyards or castles, both wines favorites of my father. I wasn't paying any more attention than that to wine packaging back then, but I do now – and the scope of what is wrapped around, or printed on, wine bottles today is impressive. Designs can be elegant, striking, modern, abstract or even odd and, in some cases, will display a winery's sense of humor.

If the wine you choose only for the label is not what you were hoping for in the glass, cook with it. Consider the choice a "wine adventure" and enjoy the label that took you there. For these pages, I've chosen four wines as striking and delicious as the art on the wines' labels.



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“Hugel” Pinot Gris 2009

Alsace, France \$24

If you have perused an aisle of wines from France’s Alsace region, chances are you would recognize the traditional Alsatian wine label. It is often understated and sports a classic yellow motif, Roman typeface and gold accents. The highly regarded Hugel wine estate is no different, yet made a dramatic – and humorously fun – switch with the label on their Pinot Gris by commissioning illustrator Ralph Stedman, who illustrated the book jackets for *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail ‘72* by American journalist Hunter S. Thompson. For Hugel’s Pinot Gris, Stedman created “Alsace Man with Corkscrew.” Throw a pair of those iconic Hunter Thompson sunglasses on him and “Alsace Man” could be the author.

The fun in this Hugel selection is the gorgeous Pinot Gris in the bottle. Grapes ripen slowly in this corner of France, and wines are rich in flavor intensity with exquisitely refined aromas. Hugel’s winemaking family history dates back to the 1600s. Most of their wine cellars today sit below 16th century buildings that house barrels more than a century old. Serious wine-making indeed, which sets a nice stage for a play in contrast to Stedman’s “Alsace Man” gracing the Pinot Gris label. Though the wine is rich with energetic fruit flavors, it is best with food. A seafood pasta dish would make a fantastic pairing, as would a picnic of smoked salmon.



TO NE STYLE



“The Show” Garnacha 2010

Calatayud, Spain \$16

Nashville letterpress poster design meets Spanish Grenache in this bottling from a team of celebrated winemakers. “The Show” is the brainchild of Three Thieves: winemakers Joel Gott, Charles Bieler and Roger Scommegna. Gott is a fifth-generation winemaker. Bieler’s roots in winemaking go back to time spent in Provence with his father at Château Routas, and is half of Charles & Charles wines with creative winemaker Charles Smith of Washington’s K Vintners. For the Three Thieves’ endeavor, Gott and Bieler are joined by Scommegna, a hotelier-now-grape-grower who is currently beginning a vineyard in the Anderson Valley of California’s Mendocino County. In a surprising move for the branding of a Spanish wine, the Thieves sought the talents of the legendary design think tank of Hatch Show Print: a division of the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum in Nashville, and one of the oldest working letterpress print shops in America. Hatch became the source of volumes of promotional posters for Nashville’s music legends. Today Hatch Show Print is a museum, historical archive, tourist attraction, and house of creative inspiration for graphic designers.

To have an American letterpress design grace the label of a Spanish Garnacha by a trio of innovating winemakers makes this a bottle one to look for. The wine in the glass will not disappoint. Garnacha is Spain’s Grenache grape and, for The Show Garnacha, hails from the warm wine region of Calatayud. This Spanish red is right at home at a barbecue.



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TONE STYLE

Some Young Punks "The Squid's Fist" 2010

Barossa Valley, Australia \$24



Leave it to the Aussies to make a bold statement on a wine label. Some Young Punks are Col McBryde, voted Australia's Young Gun Winemaker of the Year and a Ph.D'd Guinness World Records holder for the most tattoos; Jen Gardner, a Ph.D scientist and self-confessed "nerdy yeast expert"; and winemaker Nic Bourke. They are part of a new guard of young Australian winemakers doing things a little differently, both in the wine-making and the packaging.

The label on The Squid's Fist features the commissioned work of Asaf Hanuka, an editorial illustrator whose graphic novels have appeared in the U.S., France, Israel and Spain. He has done work for *Rolling Stone*, *Fortune*, and *The New York Times*, and teaches il-

lustration and comics at Shenkar College of Engineering and Design in Israel. In tapping Hanuka, Some Young Punks have brought to life on the Squid's Fist label what they describe as "Passion, a monster bigger than the three of us that leads us to soapbox, grandstand and sometimes pass out on the couch." The back label explains their mission – to do something they felt had not been done before in Australia – to make outstanding wine with the charm of small estate production. "Each wine, each vintage, each label," they state, "is a moment that will never come again...we believe that awesome wine is a powerful aid to creativity."

The 2010 Squid's Fist, an homage to a comic book-like

story of a "mighty Cephalopod," is a serious blend of Sangiovese and Shiraz from grapes grown in the same vineyard in Australia's Barossa Valley. The blend spotlights the versatility of the Barossa region by showcasing the prominent native grape of Tuscany. Squid's Fist has deep flavors with interesting complexity from oak barrel aging. The comic book label completes the modern wine-making statement and is reason enough to pick up a bottle of this Australian renegade. "It is okay to judge a book by its cover," state the Punks, "we judged the covers of books to decide on these labels. These labels are as bright and bold as the wines they clothe. Fresh classics printed in glorious Punknicolor."

Jean-François Mérieau, “L’Arpent des Vaudons” Sauvignon Blanc 2010

Loire, France \$17

Before returning to his family’s vineyards Vignoble des Bois Vaudons, third-generation winemaker Jean-François Mérieau traveled the world’s wine regions and worked at several wineries. He took over his family’s estate in 2000 in the Touraine region of northern France and produces most of his wines in single varietal bottlings, versus blending different grapes, to better express the region’s unique “terroir.” A refreshingly creative winemaker, he is considered one of France’s bright new winemaking stars, so it is quite fitting that he would take a different approach with label design.

The artist for many of Mérieau’s wine labels is Swedish painter and designer Madlen Herrström, who studied in Provence, Paris and New York in the late ‘70s to mid ‘80s. She now lives in Paris, France and Vejbystrand, Sweden. You can find her art specifically dedicated to wine labels on her website *Wine label - Etiquettes de vin* <http://mh-etiquettes-vin.com/mh-etiquettes-vin/Home.html> and her personal, non-wine related work at: www.madlenherrstrom.com

L’Arpent des Vaudons is a luscious 100% Loire Valley Sauvignon Blanc. Mérieau selects grapes from his “Bois Vaudons” vineyard in the village of Saint-Julien-de-Chédon from a single parcel of 60-year-old vines planted in organically farmed soils. The first time I experienced this wine, I was sitting at a bistro’s bar with California Chardonnay drinkers to my left and to my right. I put my nose in my wineglass and inhaled the most intoxicating explosion of grapefruit and peaches, and an essence of mineral that I so love in many whites from northern France. I sent the wine-glass down the bar for several diners to experience. It wowed them all. L’Arpent des Vaudons has been compared to a Sancerre at a fraction of the cost. I find the wine richer in flavor than the classic steely Sauvignon Blanc examples from the Sancerre appellation. Try L’Arpent with your next craving for ocean shellfish and persuade a Chardonnay drinker to join you. ●

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Coming to Terms

A Candid Conversation With Jason Isbell

By Andy Downing

On “Alabama Pines,” the opening track off Jason Isbell’s 2011 album *Here We Rest*, the singer-songwriter interrupts a peaceful Sunday drive home to stop off at a liquor store, admitting, “I can’t stand the pain of being by myself/Without a little help.”

This, it turns out, was another instance of art imitating life. Isbell has recently opened up about his struggles with alcoholism in numerous interviews, admitting he can no longer recall much of the time he spent recording and touring with Southern rockers the Drive-By Truckers, a band with which he parted ways in 2007.

“You come to and you’re in a room full of people you don’t know and you don’t trust, and your life can be in danger,” said Isbell, 34, in a recent phone interview. “That happened in a lot of shitty hotels on a lot of different nights for me.”

Aware of his downward spiral, and determined to not repeat past mistakes, Isbell gave up booze early in 2012. This decision, as well as his February marriage to fellow musician Amanda Shires, forms the backbone of his fourth solo album, *Southeastern*. The career-best effort, awash in country rock, folk, and Americana, is populated by a range of damaged characters that, much like Isbell, are struggling to come to terms with past misdeeds.

“That’s certainly a major theme,” said the musician. “I didn’t set out to do that, but it’s something that was on my mind while I was writing these songs.”

In a wide-ranging interview, Isbell opened up about his decision to give up drinking, the process of becoming an adult, and why you never want to be pitted against his wife in a board game.



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FEATURE

On Here We Rest, it seemed like you were writing about characters that were broken and emotionally raw. This time around, there's a sense many of them have finally stumbled upon the right path—even if they're still reconciling the damage that's been done.

Mmm-hmm. I'm trying to expand on that sentiment since I certainly don't disagree with it. I really wanted to try to have some hope on this record. That's something I've had more of in my life lately, and I wanted that reflected in the music. The world isn't as terrible a place as I thought it was a couple years ago—at least not my world. I think I finally came to the realization I have it a whole lot easier than most folks do.

How important was it for you to end the album on a more optimistic note with "Relatively Easy?"

The world isn't as terrible a place as I thought it was a couple years ago—at least not my world. I think I finally came to the realization I have it a whole lot easier than most folks do.

I did that on purpose. I don't know how much a tracklist matters to people anymore because I don't know if people listen to records the whole way through like they used to, but that kind of thing is important to me. I wanted to leave on a good note. I certainly wouldn't want to put a song like "Elephant" last, or people would need to eat some ice cream or something like that to cheer themselves up afterwards.

"Relatively Easy" is an interesting track. There's a real sense of maturity and empathy in the your words. I don't think it couldn't have been written by someone who hasn't been through a few rough patches.

Who hasn't, you know? Anybody who cares about anybody has had to deal with that kind of tragedy and that kind of loss. I think if you're paying attention to the people around you, those stories are everywhere.

True, but you have to reach a certain point in your life before you feel that kind of empathy for others and start to realize, "As bad as things might seem for me, these people over here actually have it worse."

Oh yeah, that one does take awhile. I was a pretty pissed-off teenager for 32 years [laughs]. It took me a long time to realize that compared to 99.9999% of the world I'm really, really lucky. I've had a lot of personal struggles over the last couple years, and a lot of things I myself had to overcome, but it wasn't like I was walking three miles a day to get water for my family.

On "Different Day," the narrator keeps returning to this idea they were a different person 10 years prior. You're 34 now. How would you have described yourself at the age 24?

That's a good question. I was still pretty wide-eyed and adventurous, I would think. In those

days I didn't think before I spoke or acted as much as I do now. I allowed a lot of decisions to make themselves back then. Once you figure out how to make decisions on your own rather than allowing them to be made for you...you've solved a pretty big problem.

What's the first decision you can recall making for yourself rather than simply allowing events to unfold?

Well, when I quit drinking...a whole lot of that decision-making actually returned to me. I'm not saying the alcohol was making the decisions, but when I really put my foot down and quit drinking it helped me make decisions in more of an informed manner. When I quit drinking and got into a serious relationship that really made all the difference for me. Those two things started branching out into other aspects of my life...and really forced me to address the way my decisions and my behavior effected other people.

It seems like Amanda was an instrumental part of that process. (continued)

Very much so. I've been in relationships before I felt were healthy, but I never really thought it was possible to be this happy and satisfied with somebody. I never thought that was for me. I thought that kind of happiness was a myth. So, yeah, coming to terms with actually having something worth keeping is very interesting to me, and I think it came out when I was writing the record.

On "Songs That She Sang in the Shower," the narrator talks about "repeat[ing] the mantras that might keep [them] clean for the day." Did you turn to an organization like Alcoholics Anonymous to help find sobriety, or is it someone you pursued on your own?

I don't really talk about that part. That's a little more information than I'd like to give people.

On the surface, "Live Oak" is a murder ballad. But at its core, the song is really about a man trying to make peace with his past. How much of that was inspired by the decision to forego alcohol?

I would say all of it. That song really formed around my anxiety about what parts of me would be lost on the other side of that. And it wasn't just booze, but deciding to become an adult in general. You start to wonder what parts of yourself people are attracted to, and you wonder if you're going to lose those when you finally do decide to start behaving in a grownup manner.

Do you feel like you've lost something?

I don't know. The jury's still out on that. I didn't lose any of the people that were most important to me, and we'll see about the rest of it. It's been interesting to me to see what's still there. What kind of person I am now compared with who I was.

I was surprised the record label included a beer koozie as a bonus for fans who placed a pre-order for the album, considering the circumstances.

©Photo by Eric England



Yeah, that could also be used for soda pop [laughs]. I don't think alcohol is evil. I'm not one of those folks. I think a whole lot of people need a drink. Anyone who can have one and stop needs one.

There's a line on the record where you say "from the sky the highway's straight as it can be." Time and again, you kind of return to this idea that the closer you look at a person, the more you see we're all flawed and damaged and trying our best to somehow hold it together.

I think the older you get the more you realize everyone is dealing with some pretty serious issues. I think that's something that comes with maturity. When you're younger it's so important to be nice, and everybody is judged so heavily on whether or not they're nice to you. You're so focused on impressing everybody and pleasing everybody and making everybody like you, and the older you get, the more you realize that's just exhausting. Those folks have foibles and flaws just like you do, and it's not your responsibility to make everyone like you or to be nice to everybody. I think it's more important to be honest about things.

By taking that approach, it seems like you can write about simple gestures and personal relationships and have them take on these bigger, more universal concepts like love or friendship or death.

Yeah, a lot of that comes out of things I listen to. James McMurtry, for example, is really good at making these small, everyday gestures or phrases really take on broader meaning, and that's the kind of world I like to live in. I like that kind of precision, and I like that there can be a lot of poignancy in common conversation. I like to imagine that very often when someone says something to you about their day they're saying more than just those simple words. I'm sure it's not exclusive to old folks, but it seems like that's the way my grandparents talk. There's more to what they're saying, and a couple hours after talking to them you realize how they were actually teaching you something or passing along some piece of information you might not have understood completely at first.

You almost pursued a master's degree in creative writing. What ultimately led you to choose songwriting instead of a career as a fiction writer or poet?

Cause I like to eat [laughs]. I like paying rent. I grew up playing musical instruments, so it seemed like a natural fit. I started playing guitar when I was really young, and when it occurred to me you could mix the two together in a song, it seemed like the greatest thing in the world. And it still does. To me that's always carried more weight than just words on a page.

I'm curious about the physical aspect of your songwriting process. Do you sit at a desk? Work on a typewriter?

I write with a pencil, and usually it's at the dinner table. I like to spread things out and be by the window there where I can see everything. If I'm on the road I'll do it wherever I can. I've written on bar napkins, and I have notebooks with me all the time. Sometimes I'll just sing into my phone for a minute or two. But in a perfect situation, I'm sitting at home at my dinner table with a pencil so I can erase. I hate looking at scratched-up, marked-up corrections. I'm not sure why. Maybe it's a little OCD thing I have.

You're also married to a fine songwriter. Is there any sense of competition between the two of you?

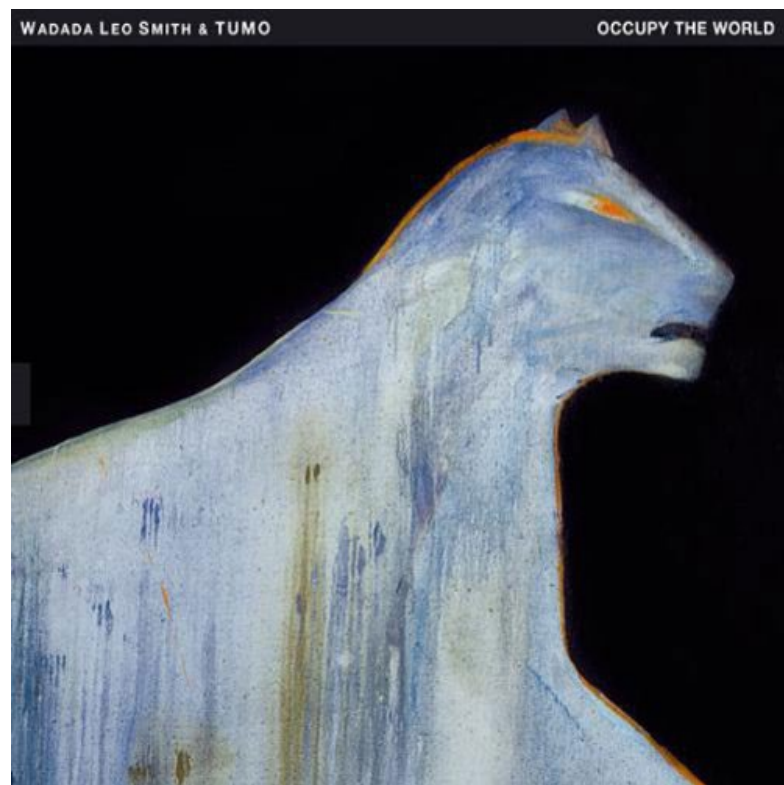
You can't really be competing with your wife. Right before we got married her granddad said, "You can either be happy or you can be right." You can't be too competitive, but there is a standard we try to maintain. When we've finished a song we'll play it for each other and make some corrections and suggestions here and there. But we don't really compete other than I know what she's going to be writing will be of pretty high quality and I don't want to be the one in the family that drops the ball.

What about when it comes to Scrabble? Do you get competitive there?

Yeah, there we're very competitive. She's a cheater at board games [laughs]. ●

JAZZ & BLUES

By Jim Macnie



Wadada Leo Smith & TUMO

Occupy The World
TUM, 2CD

Exploration remains one of jazz's root elements, and Wadada Leo Smith doesn't pick up his horn unless points unknown are psychically circled in red on the road map. The 71-year-old trumpeter-composer's interaction with the TUMO orchestra (a one-time collection of Nordic improvisers gathered specifically to bring improvisational savvy to these five extended Smith pieces) is based largely on the investigatory vibe of Smith's charts.



© Photo by Maarit Kytöharju

Occupy the World isn't pretty music in the luminous ways of, say, late 50s Miles & Gil. Indeed, it's provocative, dissonant, and ominous. Smith's roots as a member of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians—the groundbreaking Chicago collective that brokered valuable iconoclastic ideas—are as strong as ever here. But “pretty” is just another term that's up for grabs in 2013. The more I listen to this double-disc set, the more I hear the sentiment at its core. “I do not believe in reducing the sonic field to a singular tonal spectrum,” Smith offers in the album notes. If you believe

that sentiment contains extended moments of tumult, call it a victory for poetic agitation.

Take the Mississippi native's dedication to his pal Marion Brown, “Crossing On A Southern Road.” Smith has the 21-member TUMO cohort essay the rural South of his youth with a vibe that borrows from Bernard Herrmann much more it does Aaron Copland. Strings drone and percussion chatters; menacing crescendos dot the landscape. Smith's horn keens in sharp blasts. It's an apt bookend to Brown's 1970 pastoral abstraction, *Afternoon of a Georgia Faun*. (continued)



© Photo by Maarit Kytöharju

Smith gives his charges plenty to do. “Queen Hatshepsut” boasts percussion features, reed forays, and a flute digression. In several ways, this is TUMO’s show as well. “The Bell-2,” an update of an early Smith piece first recorded on Anthony Braxton’s seminal *3 Compositions of New Jazz*, finds the trumpeter delivering his steely resounds. But a blend of electronics, guitar, and tuba shares the foreground with him.

By the time “Mount Kilimanjaro” arrives with an extended bass foray by longtime Smith associate John Lindberg, it’s obvious the composer’s palette contains innumerable hues (he’s actually been showing us this since 1979’s *Budding Of A Rose*, an overlooked large ensemble disc). From the intricate turbulence of the title track to the opening flutter of “Queen Hatshepsut,” the breadth of textures and design strategies are both coherent and compelling.

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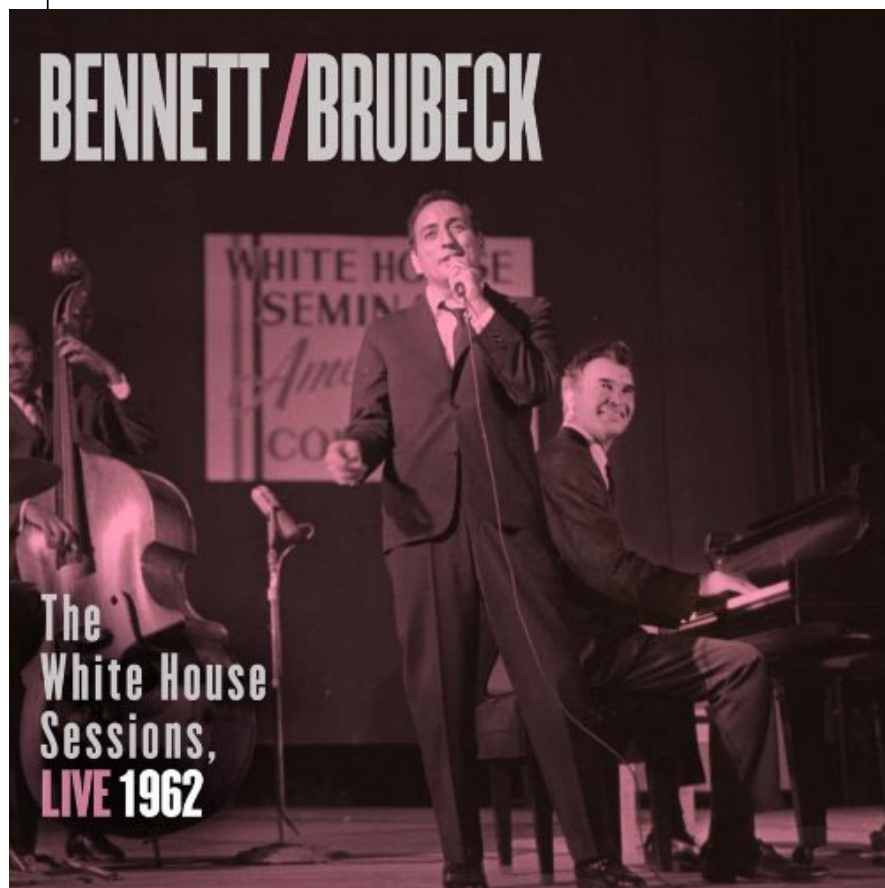
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Tony Bennett and Dave Brubeck

The White House Sessions, Live 1962
Columbia/Legacy, CD

When lost jazz tapes are found, it can be like manna from heaven. Vide, after being mislabeled in the vaults for a half century, this recently unearthed date from two jazz masters arrives as an unexpected treat.

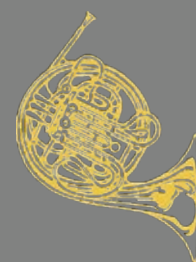
With JFK in the Oval Office, Tony Bennett and Dave Brubeck hit DC to bring their music to college students working in the city for the summer—an apt audience given the fact that Brubeck previously cut records at Oberlin and various other campuses. The vocalist and pianist hadn't previously played together, but were both in a strong spot. (continued)

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MUSIC



Bennett's soon-to-be-iconic single "I Left My Heart In San Francisco" had dropped two weeks prior, and Brubeck's groundbreaking *Take Five* exploded his visibility back in '59. Each led his own set at the Washington Monument's Sylvan Theater, and then, in an impromptu move, did what jazz musicians are wont to do: took a chance at playing together.

The four tunes that find the stars connecting are more overtly jazzy than the six Bennett sings with his usual crew (led by ever-reliable pianist Ralph Sharon). The Brubeck Quartet (saxophonist Paul Desmond sits out on the vocal sessions) was a keenly interactive outfit, and from the chattering "Lullaby Of Broadway" to the splashy "Chicago," Bennett and band have fun injecting the standards with plenty of élan. The hopped-up beat of "That Old Black Magic" liberates the singer and gives the pianist just enough rope to throw fancy lassos around his phrases. Marked differences exist between this set and that with Bennett and

Sharon. A pop sensibility dominates the latter while, conversely, a caution-to-the-wind vibe permeates the air when Brubeck gets involved. Both participants sound ready to romp.

Four pieces offered up by the Quartet are equally intriguing. A palpable physicality marks "Nomad," a tune the ever-cosmopolitan leader introduces as being built around "simple Middle Eastern rhythms." Like the Modern Jazz Quartet, this group claims a distinct brand of precision that nonetheless offers plenty of elbowroom for interaction. Drummer Joe Morello puts true force into the piece's tom-tom opening, and Desmond generates ample liftoff for his swinging solo. Throughout "Thank You (Djekuje)" and "Castilian Blues," the instrumentalists pepper each other with pithy ideas that make their mark and move on. Akin to tracks on which Bennett joins, the results are marked by an improviser's sense of play.

Earthshaking revelation? Not really. But lots of fun. ●

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PREVIEW



AURALiC Merak Amplifiers

\$4,995/pair
www.auralic.com

These potent power amplifiers have a small footprint, yet pack a substantial wallop. Rather than a full class-D approach, the Meraks use high quality input isolation transformers, combined with class-A driver stages, with the class-D section only doing the heavy lifting. The whole circuit is powered by a beefy linear power supply and a 56,000uf capacitor bank instead of a switching power supply for more musical results.

A full review is in process, along with AURALiC's Vega Digital Audio Processor and Taurus Headphone Amplifier.



Nagra 300p Power Amplifier

\$16,900

www.nagraaudio.com

Those buying by the watt will freak at the 300p's price, but those wanting more will find this compact Swiss amplifier to be a treasure to last a lifetime. Nagra builds every speck of this masterpiece in house, including its hand-wound transformers.

Utilizing a "polarized push-pull" configuration, the 300p delivers 20 watts per channel, making this amplifier much more realistic to use than so many SET designs that struggle to produce 9 watts per channel. This configuration is also much more stable with a wider range of speakers than any SET we've encountered. But the biggest surprise for those accustomed to the SET sound is the bandwidth and low frequency control that this small but mighty amplifier possesses. If you have fairly efficient speakers, the 300p will forever spoil you.

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PREVIEW



Audionet PAM G2 Phonostage

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This two-input, solid-state phonostage can be operated in single-chassis mode, or it can be augmented by Audionet's EPC external power supply, which also adds remote functionality. Each input can be configured as either MM or MC, and gain is adjustable from 38 dB to 68 dB.

Serious listening has just begun, but this one is definitely a contender!



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Utilizing core technologies, capitalizing on Boulder's ability to build everything in house and simplifying the metalwork, the 865 delivers the sound quality for which the company's amplifiers are world famous—albeit at a more reasonable 150 watts per channel. Don't let the understated casework fool you: The 865 will prove a destination product for all but those bent on having the pinnacle of amplification.

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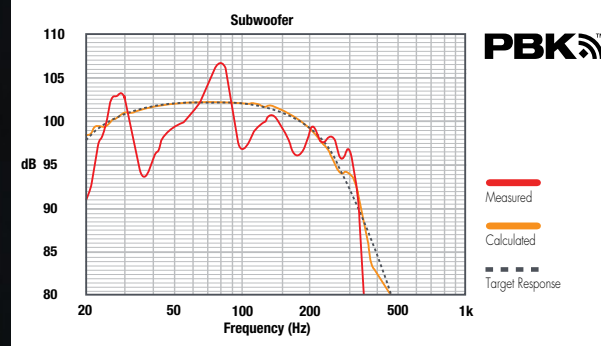
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PREVIEW



Peachtree deepblue Bluetooth Music System

\$399

www.peachtreeaudio.com

The newest entrant in the wireless-music-system market is one of the least expensive, yet it may be one of the best sounding. Though Peachtree's deepblue console lacks the ability to dock a mobile player or iDevice, like the much more expensive units from Meridian and B&W, the wireless connection provides stunning sound. Purists can plug in via the supplied analog input.

This compact marvel offers way more bass response than you'd expect, and its tidy design looks at home in any environment. Like the original Ford Model T, the deepblue is only available in basic black.



Worthy of the Moniker

Light Harmonic Da Vinci DAC

By Jacob Heilbrunn

A

certain comfort level comes with listening to your own audio system, like slipping into a pair of old tennis shoes or worn jeans. The surprises are few and your ears have become accustomed to the insufficiencies that are an inevitable part of any system, no matter how good it may be. But this is no cause for shame. The cold, hard truth is that the best that even the fanciest rig can attain is a simulacrum of the real thing—a fact that I was reminded of this past June, when attending a performance by the amazingly dynamic and inventive Jamaican pianist Monty Alexander at Blues Alley in Washington, D.C.

But if we're chasing rainbows, then it's always healthy and intriguing to hear a different audio system than your own. Surprises can lurk in unexpected places. I recently had such an experience when visiting Mike Grellman, who used to work for *FI* magazine during its heyday in San Francisco (before it crashed and burned like so many audio magazines). Having retreated from the audio-magazine battlefield, Grellman now contents himself with listening to his own very high-end system. Like more than a few audiophiles, Grellman is proud of what he's assembled, and it provides good reason for his paternal pride: His system consists of the legendary Rockport Sirius III turntable with a Lyra Atlas cartridge, Aesthetix preamp and phonostage, CAT Legend monoblock amplifiers and last but surely not least, a pair of Rockport Altair loudspeakers.



What struck me most forcibly when listening to Grellman's system was the thick, rich and palpable sound produced by all the tubes in the chain, plus the amazing control of the Altairs. Only afterward did I begin to dwell on the equipment and I realized, with something of a start, that there was no digital on hand. No CD player, no DAC, no nothing—just old-fashioned vinyl played back at very high levels of resolution and fidelity.

The Sound of Silence

But as enjoyable as the experience may have been, it did start to nag at me a little that we only listened to vinyl, for digital playback has reached very high levels indeed. A case in point is the new Light Harmonic Da Vinci DAC, which is constructed near Sacramento, Calif., and is a quite unusual beast. For one thing, it swivels on its pad. This isn't simply an aesthetic choice; it also ensures that the unit runs as coolly as possible. But it has to be said that the Da Vinci also looks pretty darn cool. However, looks aren't the only thing that distinguish this DAC. Talk about silent backgrounds—this baby really commands your attention in its ability to reduce grain and grit. But I'm getting ahead of myself in my enthusiasm for the Da Vinci, which is priced at \$30,000.

No one would mistake me for a technical guru, but I will say that the Da Vinci has some unique aspects that warrant note before I launch into discussing its sonic attributes. *(continued)*

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REVIEW



Probably the best way to run the DAC is via its USB 2.0 input; the unit also offers S/PDIF inputs. Outputs options include XLR and RCA. I usually opt for RCA because I often run my stereo in single-ended mode and, yes, when utilizing the RCA output, playback is quiet with no buzz, noise or hum—the usual nasties that balanced operation is supposed to cure. (I should note that I am feeding balanced power to my equipment via an Equitech 10-kW wall-mounted transformer, which noticeably lowers the noise riding on the electrical lines and allows me to isolate stereo equipment from the rest of the house.)

Another of the Da Vinci's features is a sophisticated 64-bit digital volume control that allows you to set the level directly from your computer—and this opens up a whole can of worms regarding the benefits of digital versus analog controls. I tend to prefer analog (that is, having a preamp in the chain), but with the Da Vinci you can bypass the analog control and run the DAC directly to your amplifier, a move that could save you a bundle of money. In my experience, however, it is almost always preferable to have a preamp in the system. I've fought and lost this battle in the

past, which is why I run my dCS Vivaldi into a Ypsilon preamplifier. The Da Vinci does not use any digital filters, nor does it up-sample. Light Harmonic maintains that this introduces its own set of distortions, which audiophiles perceive as "ringing"—you know, the shrill enunciation of notes in the treble that make you wince. This is another battle that designers like to wage. Having played around with the dCS filters quite a bit, I can say that I enjoy being able to use them, but can't render a definitive verdict on this topic. *(continued)*

Losing My Religion

As with many things in audio, I am agnostic about the means used to achieve sonic bliss. I don't care as much about the travel as the ultimate destination. And what a ride the Da Vinci provides! Constructed out of six CNC-milled aluminum blocks, it offers superlative sound that should grab all but the most jaded listeners. What we're all searching for, after all, is that aha moment, that brief instant when an emotional connection with the music is forged, when mere reproduction turns into a transcendent experience, leaving behind the mundane aspects of technology to create a state of ethereal bliss.

The Da Vinci excels at helping listeners reach that enviable state of mind in a number of areas. For one, its playback offers a lack of grain that helps sets the DAC apart from many other digital units. Grain is something that seems to be far more of a problem with digital reproduction than with vinyl. But the Da Vinci goes a long way toward creating a much silkier sound than is usually the case with digital equipment, particularly when reproducing high frequencies. Any trace of sibilance is usually pretty easy to detect on a high-end stereo system. It may be the most vexing aspect of digital recordings. Enter any room at a stereo show and it's possible to tell pretty quickly whether or not the sound suffers from rebarbative treble. The Da Vinci emphatically does not. Put on the Chesky recording of The Persuasions, for example, and I defy you to detect anything untoward. Instead, a sumptuous and velvety sound will greet you.

The Da Vinci also does not lack bass slam. Quite the contrary, this unit will send crushing bass waves rolling through your room. One of my favorite cuts for checking out bass is on Jacky Terrasson's album for Blue Note called *Smile*. On the cut "Mo Better Blues," the Da Vinci sails through the track with aplomb, digging out every last note of the electric bass. Or consider Monty Alexander's fantastic album *Montreux Alexander*, which the Da Vinci handles with great dexterity and power. If you can really feel that warm, deep and woody bass reverberating through your body, then something is right on. And that's what the Da Vinci delivers. This is no negligible aspect. Bass is a tricky affair and is often discounted by audiophiles and even (gaspl!) reviewers, but they're fooling themselves. It supplies the foundation of the music and sets up the ambiance for recordings being played at home. To my ear, there are few things more satisfying than hearing a resolute, stygian bass note properly reproduced.

Versus DaVinci

What about dynamics? Here, the Da Vinci must cede some ground to the dCS Vivaldi. For sheer slam, verve and speed, I have not heard anything that matches the Vivaldi system. But where the Da Vinci shines is its finesse, subtlety and speed. Lack of distortion buys you a lot, including a vast soundstage. What's more, the Da Vinci is simply one of the quietest and smoothest units that I have heard. Throw anything at it, ranging from Mozart string quartets to Led Zeppelin, and it will shower you with detail and filigree. *(continued)*

REVIEW

Cymbal crashes, piano arpeggios, violin double stops—all are rendered with exquisite fidelity. Perhaps most impressive are the quiet, gentle passages where you can hear the interplay of piano, drums and bass at pianissimo levels, achieving a new understanding of the musicians' mastery of their respective instruments and their ability to communicate with each other.

Or listen to Monty Alexander reach inside his piano to pluck the strings gently and then allow them to fade into the ether. To me, music like this is one of the most moving and revelatory aspects of high-end audio. It makes the struggle to achieve better sound worth it. Much of this sonic prowess can probably be ascribed to the heroic technical measures that Light Harmonic has implemented in the Da Vinci.

But the best way to describe this DAC may be to say that it would have done the old master Leonardo proud. Da Vinci the man was always looking for the next big thing. And when he found it, the achievement was always executed with sublime subtlety and grace, which is what the DAC named in his honor also goes a long way toward accomplishing. If audio systems demand some compensation on the part of listeners, the Da Vinci helps alleviate the burden of this task. Its combination of a lustrous tonal balance and alacrity ensure that the music it helps reproduce always sounds engaging and riveting. *(continued)*



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It's in the nature of the high-end-audio consumer to jump from one product to another. But despite the virtues of the Da Vinci, it isn't enough to prompt me to leap in a different direction. Am I dumping the dCS Vivaldi? No. Does the Da Vinci sound better than the Continuum Caliburn? Nope. But in the digital wars, which will continue as long as the format exists in one medium or another, the Da Vinci more than deserves its name. Anyone looking for truly high-end digital performance with an analog sound would do well to audition it. ●

Light Harmonic Da Vinci DAC
MSRP: \$30,000

MANUFACTURER
Light Harmonic

CONTACT
www.lightharmonic.com

PERIPHERALS

Digital Source dCS Vivaldi—four-box

Analog Source Continuum Caliburn, Lyra Atlas cartridge, Lyra Titan mono cartridge

Phonostage Ypsilon VPS 100 phono stage

Speakers Wilson Alexandria XLF loudspeaker, Thor's Hammer subwoofers

Preamplifier Ypsilon Pst-100, Mk. II preamplifier

Power Amplifier Ypsilon SET-100 Ultimate mono block amplifier

Cable Transparent Opus interconnects and speaker cables



WILSON BENESCH

Full Circle Turntable

By Paul Rigby

You could save up what it would cost to buy yourself a Porsche Cayman S or a two-week holiday in the Bahamas, and still not be able to afford a set of Wilson Benesch's top-of-the-range Cardinal speakers. So when the British manufacturer offered its Full Circle turntable up for review, I was initially wondering just how many circles would be on the price tag—surprisingly, not many. In fact, the Full Circle (complete with the company's A.C.T. 0.5 tonearm and Ply MC cartridge) turned out to be a relatively low-cost, high-value bundle. It's priced at about \$4,400 (£2,795).



And, while some decks look like they are all elbows and sharp angles, the Full Circle is all curves—so much so that I half expected it to launch into a chorus of “Happy Birthday, Mr. President” once I got it out of the packaging and put it together. The assembly took about 30 minutes.

The Full Circle follows a lineage chock-full of careful research. The deck is a direct descendent of the company’s first turntable effort, which it released in 1990 as the first deck to feature carbon-composite structures and which Wilson Benesch soon followed with the world’s first hyperbolic curved tonearm. To create the current iteration of the table, the company upgraded the motor and dropped the sprung suspension, which it replaced with a combination of compliant rubber and carbon-fiber cantilevers.

In terms of the chassis design, the Full Circle “is constructed of two component parts,” says Craig Milnes, Wilson Benesch’s Design Director. “The lower part has the motor attached to it. The upper part is where the vinyl is transcribed and so it has to be isolated from the vibrations of the motor. The task was to link the two systems but isolate them at the same time. Between the top sandwich and the bottom sandwich, you have rubber compliant feet that deal with the load frequency coming from the motor.”

A secondary system, says Milnes, tackles the high frequencies, utilizing thin carbon-fiber rods that sit between three aluminum pillars, which are on top of the second sandwich. A stainless-steel sub-platter features a phosphor-bronze bearing and also serves as the host for the belt. A piece of felt lies on top of the acrylic platter. *(continued)*



The Full Circle is all curves—so much so that I half expected it to launch into a chorus of “Happy Birthday, Mr. President” once I got it out of the packaging and put it together.



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Alan Sircom, HiFi+ Issue 99

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REVIEW

The 0.5 tonearm sits on a carbon-infused steel rod and utilizes an intriguing kinematic bearing system, which is formed by three captive ball bearings, with a fourth bearing dropped into the center to locate the arm. This system, says Milnes, is superior to a normal ball-race system, because it removes the stiction problems that require a force to change the bearing's state from stop to go, and also eliminates the unipivot design, which can suffer from excess wear around the bearing tip. "Even if the kinematic balls wear," says Milnes, "the rate of change will be the same on every one of the balls and will have no effect on the center of the point of movement."

But perhaps the most integral feature of the tonearm is its carbon-fiber tube. While carbon fiber is a popular design material, it is often poorly implemented, according to Milnes. "Off-the-shelf carbon rods might be stiff, but they're not damped," he says. "To do it correctly, it has to be optimized." For the 0.5, doing it correctly entailed creating a one-off tool that enabled the company to produce an arm with a homogeneous, integrated headshell and enhanced dampening by allowing the carbon fiber to flow in a twin-walled, overlapping, double-helix pattern. "Everything about the tonearm is unique," says Milnes. "We went out on a limb to prove that the result was possible. The headshell has to have different characteristics than the arm. It requires super stiffness and super damping, but you also want it to flow naturally into the tube so that the energy that flows from the headshell goes into the rest of the tonearm, where it can be absorbed and damped. This is the stiffest tonearm in the world and it's the most highly damped tonearm in the world."

(continued)



The final part of the Full Circle package is the Ply cartridge, which utilizes a generator from Benz Glider. Wilson Benesch then adds its own carbon-fiber body.

Sounding Off

There are two reasons to buy a Full Circle: to invest in a new midrange system, or to take the first step in a hi-fi upgrade. For the latter, I wanted to find out exactly what a Full Circle offers, so I hooked up a Rega RP3 turntable, Rega Brio-R integrated amp and Spondor S3/5R2 speakers with Tellurium Q Blue speaker cables.

Mounting the Full Circle on its pedestal stand (about \$770), I played "Tribal Statistics," from Manfred Mann's Earth Band 1983 album *Somewhere in Afrika*. Attempting to replicate a bare-bones upgrade, I temporarily shunned a phono amp and plugged the Full Circle directly into the Brio-R's phono section. I immediately detect a dramatic reduction in distortion, an increase in clarity and an ordered, structured soundstage, while each instrumentalist now has space to maneuver. The music flows, rather than sounding squeezed out of the speakers. The bass is not necessarily weightier, but it is full of character and integrated within the mix, while synths have a textural, informative presentation. The vocals prove to be nuanced and delicate.

I then add the roughly \$630 Trichord Dino phono amp to better support the Ply moving-coil cartridge, and the music jumps from very good to spectacular. The entire soundstage opens up, with the bass roaring from the Full Circle with both mass and authority, while the percussion provides a forceful rhythm that grounds the entire track. The vocal performance is full and rich, and the midrange is dynamic, offering greater breath and reach. (continued)



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Elegantly designed, well made and easy to install, the Wilson Benesch Full Circle gives a typical hi-fi system a confident and commanding suite of lower frequencies, with an airy midrange that oozes detail.

Turning to Ella Fitzgerald's "Bewitched," via Speakers Corner's re-issue of the *Rodgers & Hart Songbook*, I find the smooth tones of the vocals both clear and free from stress, while the lazy percussion, which normally sits hidden behind the piano, is now visible, adding depth to the mix. The piano now dances around the soundstage with a syncopated swing, as the bass provides a steady underpinning in contrast to the flighty keys.

So how far can the Full Circle go? I integrate it with my reference system, replacing the Circle stand with a Decent Audio wall stand (approx. \$440). Starting this time with Fitzgerald, I notice a new layering within her intonation changing the focus of the delivery. The track's guitar, which was

almost unnoticeable previously, now emerges like a butterfly from a cocoon, providing added depth and complexity to the overall performance. The piano also has a new grandeur that takes nothing away from its jazz tones but that does give the song added gravitas and weight. Meanwhile, the bass offers a low-frequency tone and shade that extends the melodic range of the song, with the overall soundstage now showing a new depth and height.

When I move back to Manfred Mann's Earth Band, the Full Circle almost pins me to the rear wall. The bass is shatteringly powerful, pushing me to the rear of my chair with its drive, while extending the range of the lower frequencies. The vocals finally reveal the multi-

tracked nature of the recording in clear tones, providing new focus to the delivery. The upper midrange, supported here by the synth backing and guitar, is now calm and smooth, without a hint of brightness. Superb instrumental separation also allows the ear to hear each instrument from different angles as each settles into the soundstage.

Tweakable

The Full Circle proves that it is highly tweakable. For example, I replace the supplied felt mat with an Oyaide BR-12 mat (approx. \$140), which opens up the soundstage further, tightens up the bass, reduces the distortion and improves clarity, while adding focus to the overall presentation.

Topping the Full Circle off with an Oyaide STB-MS vinyl stabilizer (approx. \$250) gives the music a sharp emphasis and adds to the weight of the lower frequencies, providing much greater stability to the overall presentation. The whole delivery of the soundstage exudes control and solidity.

Elegantly designed, well made and easy to install, the Wilson Benesch Full Circle gives a typical hi-fi system a confident and commanding suite of lower frequencies, with an airy midrange that oozes detail. Showing that it also responds well to tweaks and other improvements, the Full Circle will prove an ideal purchase for beginners, audiophiles and hi-fi enthusiasts. ●

Wilson Benesch
Full Circle Turntable
MSRP: Approx. \$4,400 (£2,795)

MANUFACTURER

Wilson Benesch

CONTACT

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PERIPHERALS

Analog Source

Avid Acutus turntable, SME IV tonearm, Benz Glider cartridge

Preamplifier

Aesthetix Calypso

Speakers

Quad ESL-57 electrostatics with One Thing Audio upgrade

Power

IsoTek Super Titan, IsoTek power cords

Cable

Tellurium Q Blue and Black



A LITTLE DIGITAL ON THE SIDE

The Coincident Statement Phono Preamplifier

By Jeff Dorgay

Even the most dedicated analog enthusiast might want a digital option now and then, if for no other reason but convenience. Should you be a minimalist analogophile craving a line-level input, the Coincident Statement Phono Preamplifier will be your dream come true. While many of the audio world's famous preamplifiers include a high-performance onboard phonostage, the Statement takes it a step further by including a line-level input along with a world-class phono and linestage.

The Coincident offers a perfect balance of performance, elegance and simplicity that, for \$5,999, won't break the bank. That would be a great deal for a linestage or phono preamplifier alone, but getting them both on one chassis for this price has to be one of the best audio bargains going. And those chassis are highly polished stainless, so they will never tarnish or pit, staying beautiful forever. Don't forget that combining both functions on one chassis eliminates the need for another expensive interconnect and power cord, sweetening the deal even further.



Mega Quality

Every aspect of this preamplifier exudes quality, but it also takes an old-school approach that suggests the people at Coincident truly savor music. Absent is a microprocessor display or remote control, and you must adjust the volume for each channel individually, because vacuum tubes, by design, require taking things at a bit slower pace—but this is a good thing.

You'll probably want to get this chrome-plated beauty rocking right away, but should you have the patience, remove the bottom panels from each of the two chassis for the power supply and preamplifier. The power supply alone weighs 41 pounds, which is more than a lot of power *amplifiers* we've reviewed! The preamplifier chassis reveals an equally enticing attention to detail, with precision attenuators, Teflon coupling caps, Teflon tube sockets and meticulous point-to-point

wiring throughout. A supplied umbilical cord that is easy to connect couples the two chassis together.

While there is only one line-level input, there are two line-level outputs, so the Statement can be integrated into a system with more than one power amplifier. Whether your system is multi-amped or utilizes a powered subwoofer, you'll find this to be a nice touch. *(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.



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REVIEW



Thanks to its use of four 12AX7 tubes, the Statement should play music until the Earth cools, unlike a few other vacuum-tube designs that rely on exotic NOS tubes. The new factory-supplied Mullard tubes work incredibly well and for all but the most fanatic tube roller these will be the only tubes you'll ever need—much like with the current Nagra preamplifiers. However, should you really have the itch, a set of EAT tubes or custom-matched Telefunks will extract a few more molecules of music from this high-quality preamplifier—or it may just sound different to you. I suggest sticking with the factory tubes and calling it a day. I never find myself wanting to swap tubes other than for mere investigative purposes, but I'm a lazy tube roller, even on a good day.

But I did use a wide range of phono cartridges to investigate compatibility with the Statement. When utilizing a precision-wound transformer that has four loading ranges (available separately for \$2,499, for those of you requiring an MC step-up)—with impedance loads of 3 to 10, 11 to 30, 31 to 100 and 101 to 300 ohms—the only high-performance cartridge the Statement was *not* compatible with was my Grado Statement 1 moving-iron cartridge, which possesses a 0.5 mV output, but still needs to be loaded at 47k ohms.

The sound of the Coincident Statement is unmistakably vacuum tube with step-up transformer: delicate and resolving yet ever so slightly softer in comparison to the best solid-state and hybrid designs. And it's worth mentioning that my solid-state reference happens to be the 65-thousand-dollar Indigo Qualia, so the Statement is in damn good company. (continued)

Neither is wrong, any more than preferring a Ferrari over an Aston Martin or vice versa, and the sound of your overall system will determine if this is a perfect match for you. Having listened to countless Coincident demos, it's more than safe to say that in the context of an all-Coincident system, with the company's speakers (which are highly resolving, lightening fast and extended), the match is heavenly. Coincident consistently presents some of the most musically revealing sound out on the show circuit. Its gear always proves musical, dynamic and highly engaging.

Getting Down to Business

I begin listening with an old classic, Tommy Bolin's *Private Eyes*, and the Statement instantly reveals the nuances lurking in the grooves of this average recording. Even though the drums are highly processed, they have more weight and particularly more decay than I'm used to on this record. If I had to sum up the Statement in only one word (though I have plenty of other kind words for the Statement), that word would be *decay*. This preamplifier does a phenomenal job at reproducing the subtle decay present in analog recordings—much like that feeling you get when playing back a great analog tape.

Examining a Japanese pressing of Springsteen's *The Wild, the Innocent & the E Street Shuffle* proves immersive. Listening to "The 4th of July, Asbury Park (Sandy)" through the Statement puts a new perspective on this classic. Not only does the bass line of this tune emerge from the mix, but the accordion also now permeates the track with its own voice and Clarence Clemmons' signature sax floats in the space between the speakers, where it often loses its pace.



And, of course, there is more rawness and more immediacy to young Springsteen's voice, along with a few more layers of background vocals that I swore were not there before.

I then switch program material to a more recent vintage, Low's latest album, *The Invisible Way*, which the Statement renders forcefully, capturing the dynamics of drummer Mimi Parker's big kettle drum on "Waiting" in a manner close to that of experiencing the band live. Iggy Pop's latest record still sounds dreadful, so the Statement will not create magic where there is none—this isn't a vintage Mac or Marantz tube preamplifier.

What it *does* do highly successfully is achieve a near-perfect balance of musical resolution, without being harsh, and tonal contrast that is slightly on the warm side of neutral, yet it is never slow, rolled off or plodding. This is a pretty tough thing to achieve, even for a five-figure preamplifier, and impossible for a \$5,995 unit—until now.

The recent ORG pressing of Marianne Faithfull's *Strange Weather* clearly illustrates the finesse with which the Statement handles the female voice. Faithfull's voice, now seasoned by years of abuse, comes alive through the Statement, this time through the Lyra Atlas cartridge, via the AVID Acutus SP Reference turntable with TriPlanar arm. Moving to my other Acutus Reference SP, utilizing the SME V arm and Clearaudio Goldfinger cartridge, I discover that the Statement easily resolves the difference between these two premium cartridges, which possess very different yet equally enthralling characteristics: The Lyra proves the closest to neutral sounding that I've had the pleasure of using, while the Clearaudio is slightly robust and equally exciting. *(continued)*



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REVIEW

The Statement is also the perfect anchor for someone at the ground floor of assembling a music system based around a high-quality analog source. Even if a high-dollar table isn't in your budget or on your rack now, the Statement has the capability to grow with your needs, no matter how you want to go. Moving downstream a bit to the VPI Classic 1 and Dynavector 17D3 proves equally satisfying, as does the Rega RP8/Apheta combination.

As with many transformer-based phono setups, the Statement is a particularly good match with the Denon DL-103R and Ortofon SPU cartridges, so even audiophiles on a relatively modest budget will enjoy this one.

True to the owners manual, the Statement needs about 100 hours to sound it's best, so a couple of weekends and you're good to go. That being said, it sounds damn good cold, right out of the box.

Digital if You Must

As part of a minimalist system in room two, fed by the wonderful, four-box dCS Vivaldi digital playback system, the Statement is not outclassed in the least, its tube topology adding a bit of extra depth to digital recordings, even those reproduced via the Vivaldi. The rest of the system in room two is no slouch either: a pair of Sonus faber Guarneri Evolution speakers (\$22k/pair), the D'Agostino Momentum stereo amplifier (\$30k, also in this issue) and the SME 10 turntable with SME V arm, sporting a Sumiko Palo Santos Presentation cartridge.

The Bad Plus' *Blunt Object: Live in Tokyo* provides one of my favorite acoustic torture tests, with its driving, atonal rhythms, massive drums and thundering piano crescendos, punctuated with applause. Listening to the trio romp through their version of Blondie's "Heart of Glass" is a sheer delight, with the drum kit sounding larger than life and all of the delicate piano work reproduced flawlessly. (continued)



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REVIEW



Another great word for the Statement is *texture*. Acoustic instruments sound incredibly natural and lifelike, with an abundance of timbre and tone, in a way that fools you into thinking you are actually hearing the real thing—the true test of any component, and the Statement passes it easily.

Another relatively benign recording that really comes alive through the Statement's line-level input is the self-titled debut from the Wallflowers. Granted, the dCS stack does its part extracting as much sound as could possibly be buried in that limited bit stream of a Red Book CD. Yet, there is much more separation between bandleader Jakob Dylan's voice and the rest of the band than is normally there, with acoustic guitars fleshed out better, occupying their own distinct space better than before. There's no question that the Coincident Statement can hang in the context of a six-figure system comprised of some of the world's finest components.

(continued)

REVIEW



Interestingly, it's easier to confuse young Dylan with a young Springsteen on a lesser system, in terms of texture and vocal styling. The Statement reveals the difference between these two vocalists with crystal clarity, as it does when comparing Seal to Peter Gabriel—the differences in phrasing between them is now night and day.

Award-Winning Performance

Not only did I purchase the review sample of the Coincident Statement, but we are also awarding it one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2013. This product defines what we're after for the category: top build quality *and*

performance for which you'd expect to pay a lot more. I pulled the wool over the eyes (and ears) of a few of my audiophile buddies, who weren't aware of Coincident, telling them that this preamplifier cost 25 grand—and they all believed me. I know I promised that I'd use my powers for good instead of evil, but it's tough to resist with this one.

Bottom line, if you are an analog lover searching for the perfect anchor to a high-performance system, you need look no further than the Coincident Statement Phono Preamplifier—and you certainly need not spend any more money. We suggest this one very enthusiastically. ●

Coincident Statement Phono Preamplifier
MSRP: \$5,999

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PERIPHERALS

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BEYOND POWER

Pass Xs 300 Monoblock Amplifiers

By Jeff Dorgay

Even with a track that is not bass heavy, the Pass Xs 300 amplifiers immediately show their superiority. Sinéad O'Connor's luscious voice on "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered," from her album *Am I Not Your Girl?* lingers in the air between the KEF Blades in a way that it never has before—her voice is bigger and airier, with a higher degree of "reach out and touch it" than I'm used to. And when Michael Jackson takes us through a time warp with minimal accompaniment, courtesy of *The Stripped Mixes*, he truly feels right in the listening room about five feet in front of the couch. The realism is staggering.

In the world of high-end audio, where Internet-forum pundits loudly proclaim that expensive gear is not worth the money and that its curve of performance versus diminishing returns is incredibly steep, I must strongly disagree in favor of the Xs 300s. Having lived with Pass Labs' \$22,000-per-pair XA160.5s monoblocks for over a year, and then having stepped up to the \$34,100-per-pair XA200.5s (a *huge* jump in performance) and now taking the leap to the \$85,000-per-pair Xs 300 two-chassis monoblocks, I'm still staggered at how much more of *everything* is available with Pass' flagship amplifiers.

Here in Portland, Oregon, one of America's greenest cities, my aging hipster friends would mess themselves if they knew I had a pair of amplifiers that draw 1,000 watts each, all the time. Okay, so I've thrown concerns about my carbon footprint out the window with these amps, but I do walk to work and I've replaced all 22 of the 50-watt halogen bulbs in my studio ceiling (along with the 15 in the house) with LEDs that only draw 7 watts each. That just about makes up for the power that these massive monos consume. I'd light the place with candles and eat dirt before I'd give up these amplifiers!

As *TONE* staff member Jerold O'Brien helps me unpack these super-sized beasts, which weigh in at 168 pounds for the power supply and 130 pounds for the output stage, we become awestruck: The Xs 300s have six banks of output devices per channel and Pass has increased the bias current by a factor of 10 compared to the XA amplifiers. (continued)

And as Pass Labs' Desmond Harrington is fond of saying, "This means more control." Interestingly enough, Jeff Nelson of Boulder Amplifiers says the same thing, and both the Boulder 3050 monoblocks and the Xs 300s are definitely the two most incredible amplifiers I've ever heard (for those of us who are not worried about the price tag).

Where the mighty Boulders take more of a "just the facts, ma'am" approach, the Xs 300s sound more like a gigantic tube power amplifier with tighter grip and more bass grunt, while retaining the airy character and ravishing tonality that you would normally associate with vacuum tubes. I'd happily put the Xs 300s up against any vacuum-tube power amplifier on the market, regardless of price, and I'd still prefer them to tube power. The Xs 300s are equally yummy, and knowing you'll never have to forage for power tubes again is a major bonus.

Love at First Listen

O'Brien and I are both equally stunned when we begin to hook up the Xs 300s. Way too anxious to just let one stack sit there while taking the photos for this review, we connect one of them to the GamuT S9s. We look at each other and O'Brien exclaims, "Dude, your system sounds better in mono with one of these than it does with the pair of XA200.5s."

Strong words indeed; this is the level of performance increase that comes with spending twice as much money with a reputable company. If you've ever fallen deeply in love at first sight then you know how this is. The Xs 300s are love at first listen. (After months of using them with an incredibly wide range of speakers, from the \$1,500-per-pair KEF LS50s to the \$150,000-per-pair GamuT S9s, I'm even more smitten with them now than the day I unpacked them.) *(continued)*

THE FIFTY



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By the time we have the photos done and the second channel connected, it's time for some shut-eye, so the Xs300s are left to play all night, and we'll reinvestigate them in the morning. As is the standard procedure with massive class-A power amplifiers if they are going to be on all night, no heat is needed in the studio.

The next day's listening session begins with a comfortably toasty listening room, but more importantly, the amplifiers are now thoroughly warmed up. Normally, we always leave solid-state power amplifiers on 24/7, but this is just not practical with the Xs 300s, because they produce such a prodigious amount of heat.

Boxes Ticked

The amount of sheer control the Xs300s provide is unbelievable—there is truly nothing they won't do. When we swap out a few of the other amplifiers we have on hand for the Xs300s (even the awesome XA200.5s), it feels as if a subwoofer has been added to the system, even with the tiny KEF LS50s—which, incidentally, sound *amazing* through these four-box wonders.

It isn't just all power and punch, though: These amplifiers offer the magic of incredibly high resolution, without throwing delicate tonality out the window. You'll notice tasty little nuances in your favorite well-worn recordings, prompting the desire to revisit as many of them as possible. I predict many late-evening listening sessions once you get these fully broken in.

A perfect example is Ornette Coleman's *Ornette on Tenor*. This straightforward bop record features great interplay between Coleman on sax and Don Cherry on trumpet, backed up with bass and drums—a sparse mix to be sure. The sax and trumpet tear it up across the wide stereo mix, with the drums and bass exploding from the left and right channels, respectively.



The scale at which all of this takes place, especially in the way the Xs 300s render height, makes it all sound so convincing.

The Hammond organ sounds fabulous as it creeps into the mix at the beginning of War's "The World is a Ghetto." The Hammond is barely there, just skating in and out of your consciousness, but it adds an unmistakable texture to the track—all the better in 24-bit/192-kHz resolution courtesy of HDtracks. All the while, the funky, wah-pedal-laden guitars segue in over layer upon layer of horns. Backing up to "The Cisco Kid" proves equally enlightening. When a piece of gear can render a track that you've heard way too many times and still keep you riveted, you know you're onto something special. This is what the top of the mountain looks like, or rather sounds like—and it's good. No, it's wonderful.

Those who live and die by the sword of pace and timing will be equally enthralled with the Xs300s. The needle in the gigantic round meter on the front panel of the amplifier chassis stays firmly planted in the center, indicating that the amp is staying in single-ended class-A operation. Until pushed well past reasonable and prudent levels, the needle barely ever budes, as is the case when powering the 90-dB-per-watt KEF Blade speakers.

Jazzman Marc Ribot's *Silent Movies* is a collection of atonal tracks that exhibit laser-sharp focus through the Xs 300s. The decay of Ribot's heavily processed guitar on "Natalia in Eb Major" is so realistic that I'm magically transported back to the 10th row at the Montreal Jazz Festival as I soak it all in. As Ribot switches from distorted electric guitar to clean acoustic, the Xs 300s allow the notes to just linger in the air so that you can feel the strings resonate. *(continued)*

The one.



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REVIEW

Comfortable at All Levels

Even at practically intolerable volume levels, the Xs 300s hold their poise completely, with *no* soundstage collapse whatsoever. Audioslave's "Gasoline" is by no means an audiophile darling, and it's actually somewhat compressed; yet, on a great system this track can be unraveled. With the meters just beginning to budge from their stops, I can feel my brain rattling around inside my head from the sheer sound-pressure level, but the pounding drums and lead guitars stay in place and Chris Cornell's high-octane scream stays anchored, drilling itself into my being. These amplifiers remain composed, even at these elevated levels.

Yes, this kind of listening is bad for your eardrums, but being able to pressurize your listening room at near concert levels (no matter what kind of music you enjoy) is enthralling to say the least, so use the Xs 300s with care. A sound-level meter would be an apt accessory for these amps.

In the end, every aspect of music reproduction sounds more convincing with these amplifiers. Pass Labs founder Nelson Pass has always been a proponent of the "first watt" methodology (i.e. if the first watt doesn't sound great, why bother with the rest?), and he went so far as to build a pair of small power amplifiers bearing that name. We've reviewed most of the First Watt amplifiers and they are superb; the massive Xs 300s manage to retain that same level of delicacy while still providing major power. There are just some speakers with which 15 watts per channel simply won't cut it.

(continued)

Setup and Stuff

If you think you really don't need 300 watts per channel of class-A power, think again. The combination of speed, control and bone-crushing dynamics offers an experience you just don't get with less power, even at low listening levels—it's more about the control these big amplifiers provide than just power. Incredible acceleration is an added benefit of all this power, along with the ability to stop instantly. The Xs 300s are lightning fast with no hangover or fatigue. They've been playing nearly nonstop since they arrived, and at the end of a 16-hour day I can still keep going back to the record rack for just one more.

Like the other Pass amplifiers we've used, the Xs300s require about 100 hours of play to be all they can be, but they are damn good straight out of the box. Once you become intimately familiar with them, you will notice that they sound slightly hazy at first turn on, and gently yet linearly they come out of the fog over the course of about 90 minutes. Everything just gets easier as they reach operating temperature.

Because of the heat they generate, these amplifiers need ventilation, and Pass confirms that you can stack the chassis one on top of the other, but be sure to give them plenty of room. And if you are in tight quarters, make sure you have decent HVAC.

The Xs 300s can be used with balanced or RCA inputs, though they are fully balanced amplifiers.



The ARC REF 5 SE and Robert Koda K-10 preamplifiers work fantastic, as do the Simaudio MOON Evolution 850P and Burmester 011. Even my vintage ARC SP-11 Mk. 2 works well, but the high resolution of the Xs 300s does reveal the limitations of this great vintage piece. The only real downside to the Xs 300s is that you're likely to find yourself wanting linestage and source upgrades.

A pair of enormous cables connects the chassis with the biggest Neutrik connectors I've ever seen. I plug each monoblock set into a dedicated 20-amp line, even though the power cords are of the 15-amp variety—there's no point in putting regular gas in your Aston Martin, right? The four speaker binding posts are the super-coolio Furutech carbon-fiber jobs that ratchet tight and click when you've reached the proper torque, which is a nice touch.

The \$85,000 Question

Though saying so may result in some hate mail, the Pass Xs 300s are worth every penny of their \$85,000 price tag. Considering a few other amps on the market that I've sampled, Pass could probably charge an even 100 grand for them and easily get away with it.

But you have to ask yourself a couple of questions before making this kind of a purchase decision: Do these amplifiers take you somewhere you've never been before, giving you an experience that you just can't get with a lesser product? Are they built with a level of precision, care and attention to detail commensurate with other products at a similar price? *(continued)*



Yes and yes—and then some. Fortunately, I've had the privilege of listening to a lot of fantastic amplifiers in the \$20k-to-\$40k range over the last few years, and the Xs 300s are considerably better. They reveal more music and are more transparent, with bottomless dynamic power and they present no problem driving any of the speakers I have at my disposal.

So if you've got the system, the software and the scratch, buy these babies—you won't regret it one bit. And the couple of readers I've talked to who have jumped off the cliff agree with me. These are indeed very special amplifiers. ●

Pass Labs Xs 300 monoblocks
MSRP: \$85,000 per pair

MANUFACTURER
Pass Laboratories

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PERIPHERALS

Analog Source

AVID Acutus Reference SP turntable, TriPlanar and SME V tonearms, Lyra Atlas and Clearaudio Goldfinger SP cartridges

Phono Preamplifier

ARC REF Phono 2 SE, Indigo Qualia, Pass Labs XP-25, Simaudio MOON 810LP

Digital Source

dCS Vivaldi, Sooloos Control 15, Aurender S10

Speakers

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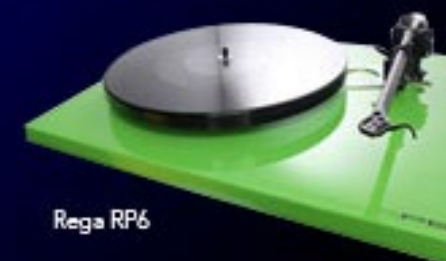
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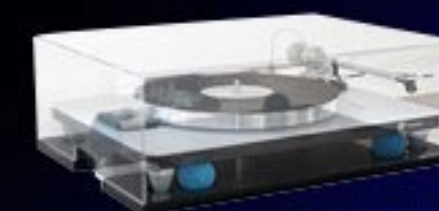
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AVA Ultravalve Vacuum Tube Amplifier

By Jeff Dorgay

The finger snaps on Thomas Dolby's "The Ability to Swing" hang in midair between the speakers, as Dolby's highly processed yet ethereal vocal enters the mix. "It isn't worth a bean, if you haven't got the ability to swing," he declares.

Indeed, the six-figure system assembled in room two is in full swing right now, but the amplifier powering the Sonus faber Guarneri Evolution speakers is the humble AVA Ultravalve, not the \$65,000 Octave Jubilee monoblocks I've been using for some time. This is truly an amazing amplifier. If I powder-coated the chassis a certain shade of blue-green, slapped an Air Tight badge on the front panel and told you I paid five figures for this little jewel, you'd believe me—it's that good.



With so much excitement about the vinyl resurgence of the last few years, some of you have forgotten how popular vacuum tubes have also become lately. Yet, in the midst of these newer products sprouting up, it's easy to forget some of the players that have been around for quite a while. Audio by Van Alstine (AVA) is that "other" amplifier company in Minnesota—Audio Research is located nearby—and it is a perfect example of a manufacturer that has quietly gone about its business making great products without a ton of fanfare. And you rarely see products from AVA for sale on the secondary market. The company obviously has a legion of loyal customers.

No matter how much time I spend with mega-dollar power amplifiers, I always love a variation on the Dynaco Stereo 70 theme. While I've never heard one that I *didn't* like, there are big differences between them. Some have a softer, warmer presentation and definitely embellish more than others; the original ST 70 is the prime example of that voicing. With these types of amps, your best recordings don't sound much better than your worst, but everything sounds somewhat liquid and dreamy—not a bad place to hang your hat if you have a modest system, or a lot of MP3s. (continued)

Emerge From the Darkness

DIGITAL (r)EVOLUTION...*again* from Wadia



Tube Through and Through

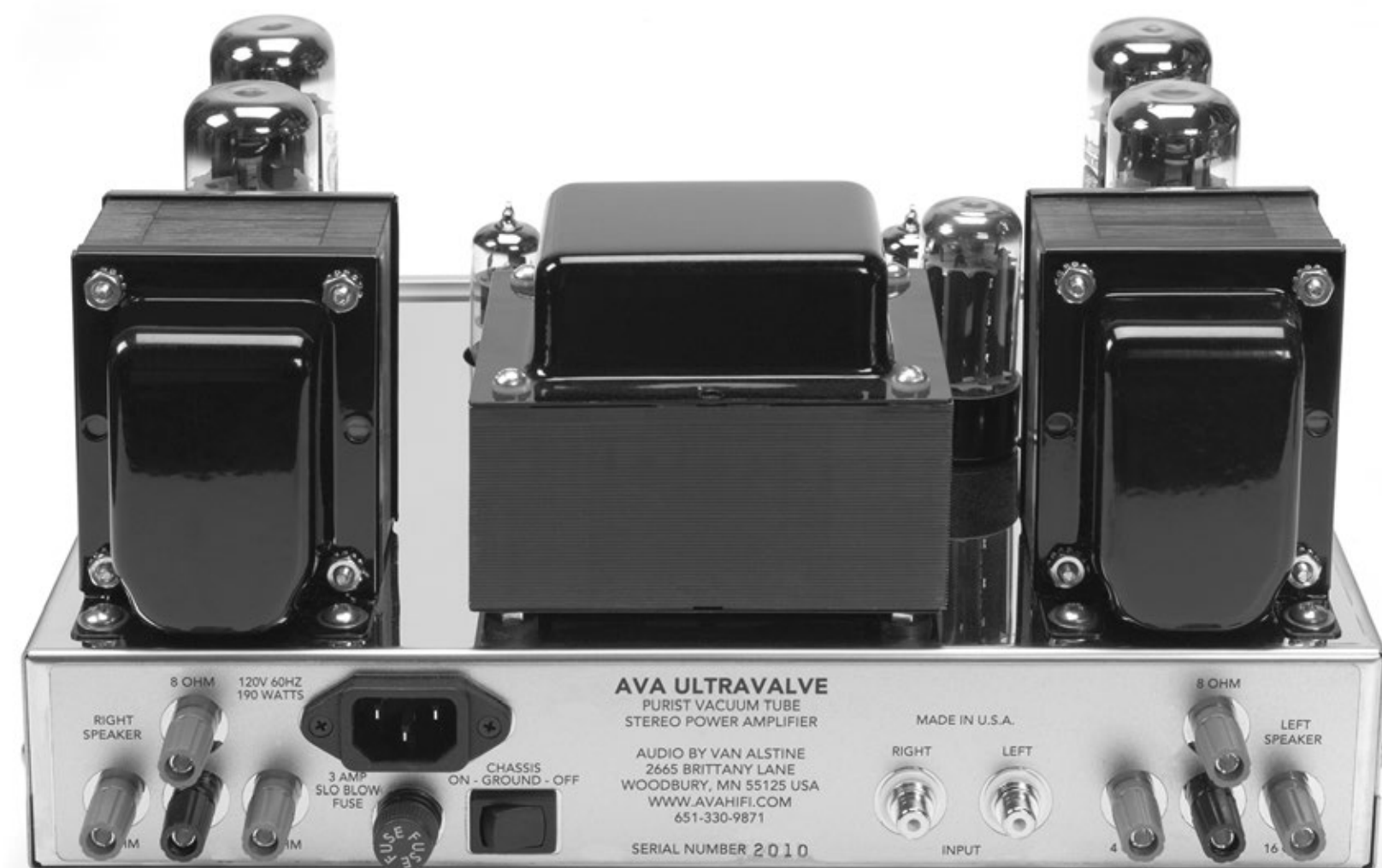
Frank Van Alstine has been at this game for a long time. He started out modding and repairing Dynaco electronics 30-plus years ago, and revamped the ST 70 circuit so much over the years that it is now truly his own design now. The Ultravalve is still based on a pair of 6CA7 output tubes (EL34 or KT77 tubes can be used as well), but it does not have a switch for triode mode, fancy power output meters or anything that distracts from the amplifier's performance. And its price is right: \$1,999 puts one in your hot little hands.

Like the original ST 70, the Ultravalve uses a 5AR4 rectifier tube and a pair of more readily available 6GH8A small-signal tubes in place of the now long-obsolete 7199 tubes in the ST 70, which is fetching premium prices online. The Ultravalve is one of the first power amplifiers I've listened to with which I just don't feel the need to roll tubes. It sounds just fine as is, and a little bit of research shows that there aren't a lot of variations on the 6GH8A tube anyway. Perusing Mr. Van Alstine's board on the Audio-Circle forum shows him to be a practical man, so I just enjoyed the amp's stock tubes.

I do upgrade the power cord to a Cardas Clear cord for my review, only because that's what I use with everything else and we value consistency here. The Ultravalve does benefit slightly from the upgraded power cord and from being plugged into a Running Springs Dmitri power conditioner. But keep in mind that none of this is necessary to enjoy the Ultravalve. *(continued)*

REVIEW





Removing the bottom panel of the highly polished stainless steel chassis reveals tidy workmanship throughout, again showing that AVA sticks to the basic layout of a ST 70: driver circuitry on a well-thought-out PC board and the rest of the amplifier wired point to point. There is a switch on the rear panel to float the ground, as well as three binding posts for 4-, 8- and 16-ohm speakers; this is my only gripe with the Ultravalve. It really could use some beefier binding posts for those of us with bigger speaker cables. My solution is just to re-terminate with bananas plugs.

Ace of Bass and Dynamics

Bass control is a big part of the equation here. The original ST 70 has a puny power supply and it shows up in the playback, with the bass response lacking dynamics and sounding wild and wooly. An original Conrad-Johnson MV50 isn't much better. An original Marantz 8B has a more liquid midrange but still falls short down under.

As brilliant as the Sonus faber Guareri Evolution speakers are, like any high-performance Italian product, they are a bit picky about what you feed them. *(continued)*

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Just like my Fiat Abarth getting grumpy when filled with anything less than premium gas, the Evos need current and control to give a stellar performance and sound as big as they should.

And when delivering Nine Inch Nails' "Help Me I Am in Hell," the Ultravalve sounds *big*. I move the amp out into room one, with the KEF Blades (with their 90-dB-per-watt sensitivity), and it sounds damn big, with guitars floating around the soundstage and the heartbeat at the end of the track filling the listening room. Upping the game with a much more densely recorded track, "Mr. Self Destruct" from NIN's album *The Downward Spiral*, I find that the Ultravalve not only keeps the groove of the driving synth bass well intact, but it also does not lose the focus. The amp starts and stops on a dime as Trent Reznor brings the music to barely a whisper, only to audibly assault us again and again with a huge ball of sound and dynamics.

It's still hard to believe I'm listening to a \$2,000 amplifier. For those of you in the audience thinking that it's sheer insanity to put an amplifier like this in a system like this, I submit that it's the only way to see what its performance envelope truly is. Daft Punk's *Homework* lights up the Blades and I can turn the volume up to the point where I feel like I'm back in New York at Fashion Week. All that's missing is the catwalk.

The Ultravalve carefully follows Stanley Clarke as he rips up the fretboard on "Bass Folk Song No. 7," clearly demonstrating its ability to keep the Blade's 9-inch woofers in control. The amp reveals Clarke's

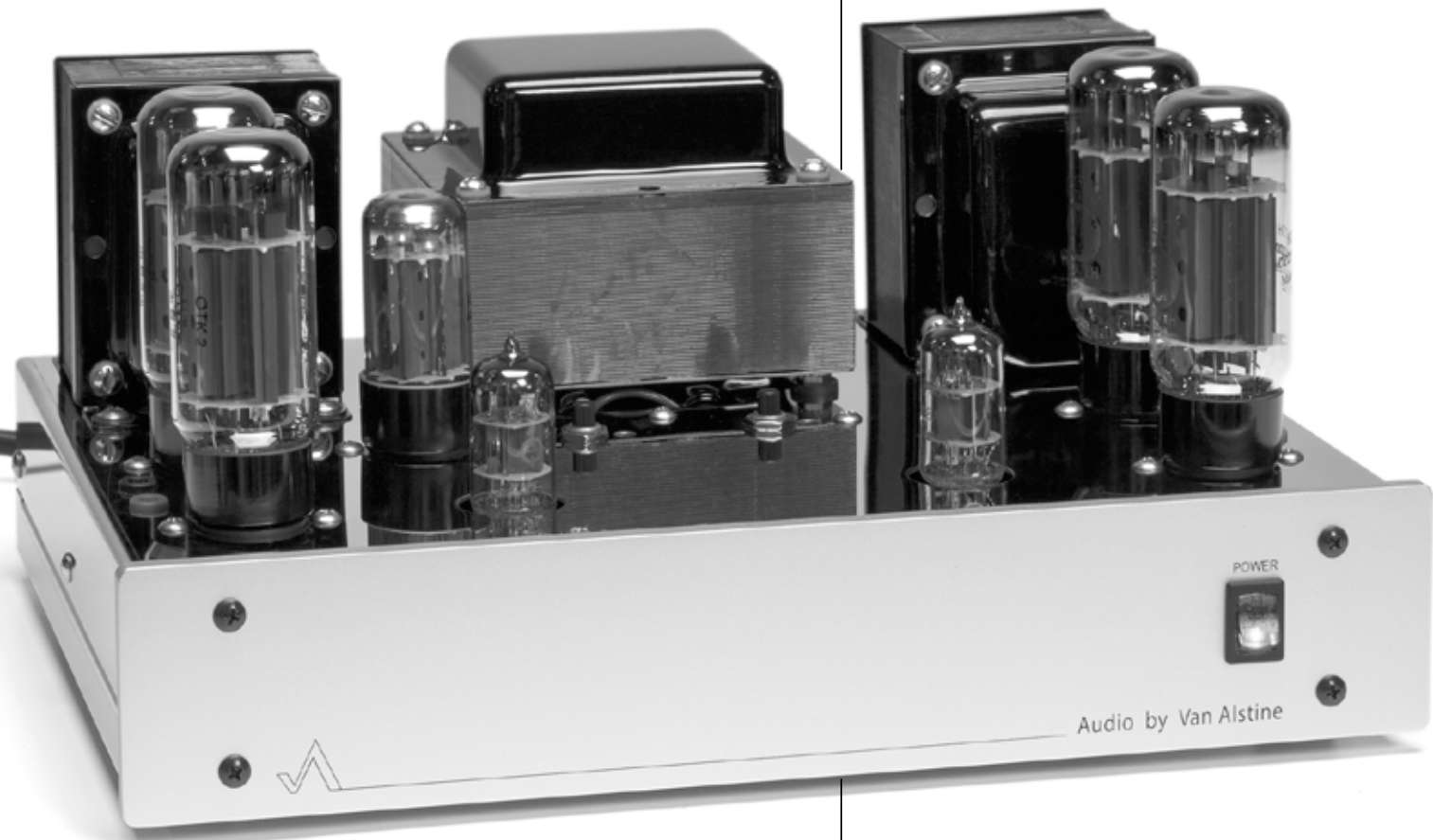
delicate touch on the fretless bass, and it never gets sloppy, slow or wooly.

It's also Got Top

The Ultravalve is ultra quick, even when playing a less-than-superb recording, like The Stooges self-titled album, on which the amp keeps its composure, provided you don't turn the volume past the point of soft clipping. Rather than getting harsh, like many other low-powered tube amplifiers we've auditioned, the Ultravalve begins to suffer from a collapsed soundstage. This degradation is slow at first, but the amp then quickly slides into the same flat, brick-walled sound that plagues many of today's digital recordings. But if you keep the Ultravalve within its comfort zone, you'll be handsomely rewarded.

Miles Davis' "Diane," from *Steamin' with The Miles Davis Quintet*, proves open and spacious, with Philly Joe Jones' brushwork on the drums exquisitely rendered, as Davis floats through the soundstage. This amplifier becomes more convincing the longer you listen; about an hour is required for it to open up completely, but it is still damn good two minutes after initial turn on.

Perhaps the only stretch for the Ultravalve while paired with less than highly efficient speakers comes when asking it to reproduce large-scale orchestral pieces or electronica at club levels. Prokofiev's suite from *The Love for Three Oranges* taxes the Ultravalve as the large kettle drums reach full throttle, requiring listening at less than what might be considered a live level—but how often do you do that? (*continued*)



Back to Earth

Using the Ultravalue with similarly priced components is highly rewarding. It is fully capable of anchoring a modestly priced but high-performance system. Mating the amp to a Conrad-Johnson PV-12 preamplifier (with CJ's recent capacitor updates), an Oppo BDP-105 universal player and the Rega RP6 turntable, with a pair of KEF LS50 speakers, proves breathtaking—especially for a relatively inexpensive system like this one. But you'll be surprised just how damn good the Ultravalue sounds as part of a no-holds-barred system.

While the 35 watts per channel of the Ultravalue may not be enough juice for everyone, if that much wattage will work for you, I cannot recommend this amp highly enough. The level of resolution, tonality and bass control this amplifier offers for \$1,999 is unmatched by anything I've ever experienced at this price point. I am very proud to award the Ultravalue one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2013. I'm keeping this one! ●

AVA Ultravalue Vacuum Tube Amplifier
MSRP: \$1,999

MANUFACTURER

Audio by Van Alstine (AVA)

CONTACT

www.avahifi.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source SME 10 turntable, Sumiko Palo Santos cartridge, Aesthetix Rhea phonostage

Digital Source dCS Vivaldi stack, Oppo BDP-105

Preamplifier Conrad-Johnson PV-12c1, Nagra Jazz, Robert Koda K-10

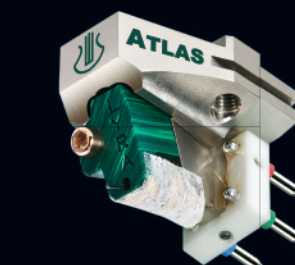
Speakers Dynaudio Confidence C1, KEF LS50, KEF Blade, GamuT S9, Sonus faber Guarneri Evolution

Cable Cardas Clear

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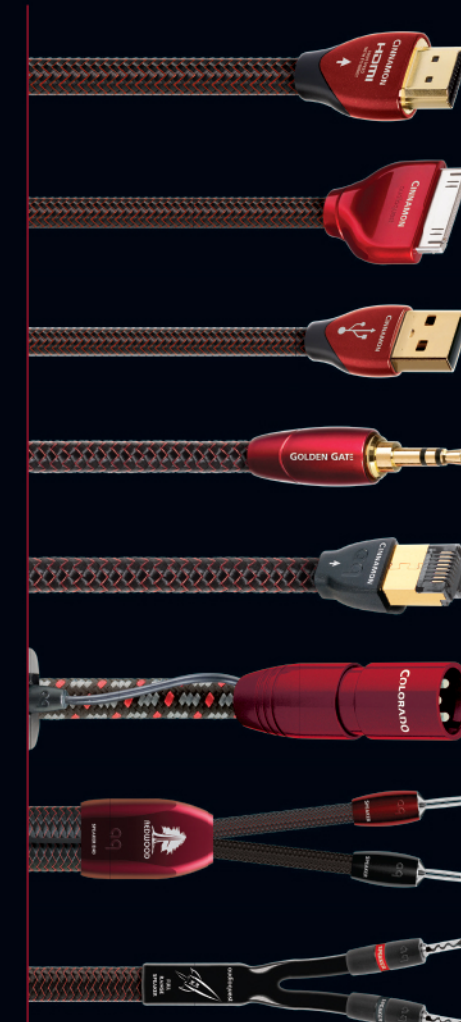
TITAN i



TITAN MONO



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IQ Audio M300 Monoblocks

Giving Your Stereo the One-Two Punch

By Rob Johnson

As class-D amplifiers continue to evolve, it's exciting to have the opportunity to test examples such as IQ Audio's new monoblock, dubbed the M300.

While each M300 is very compact—7.75 inches wide, 7.75 inches deep and a 3.25 inches tall—the amps should not be taken, well, lightly. Their physical size-to-sonic-punch ratio makes them a bit like the Sugar Ray Leonard of the amp world. The M300s deliver a hefty 150 watts into 8 ohms, and 300 watts into 4 ohms. According to IQ's literature, the M300s can also handle loads in the 2-ohm range. So at this price point—\$1,495 per pair—you get a lot of watts per dollar.



Weighing In

My lower back confirms that the modest dimensions of the M300s make them a cinch to move and integrate into my audio system. At a mere 7 pounds apiece, the M300s are easily tucked under each arm, leaving me with spring in my step as I move them to the listening area.

A Mark Levinson No. 335 amplifier, which weighs a spine-warping 150 pounds, normally inhabits the lowest shelf in my audio rack. I prefer not to move this behemoth out of the way for review equipment if I can avoid it—as long as my guest amplifiers have a place that allows them good ventilation and vibration control. The M300 packs a lot of technology into a small package. The M300 uses a software programmed micro-controller input and buffer stage, and a SMPS power supply that enables the M300 to deliver FTC rated power into both 4 and 8 ohms, i.e. not just peak power.

The tiny size of the M300 offers many placement options that larger amps do not. In my case, each amp has a temporary residence perching atop a 26-inch-tall bookshelf speaker stand. These improvised amp pillars present each of the M300s quite nicely as they display the subtle blue LED

power-up ring complementing the amps' matte-black facades. After a few minutes examining and admiring my sonic visitors, the process of connecting them to the rest of the system begins.

Against the Rope

The M300s use the manufacturer's IQ-torque binding posts, which enable easy and solid connections for spade speaker-cable terminations. It's worth mentioning that these binding posts are similar to the ones used on much more expensive Boulder and Pass amplifiers, and so much easier to work with than those plastic coated ones featured on many amplifiers today. IQ principal Bruce Weisberg mentions that they chose these binding posts for their sonic qualities as much as convenience – a nice touch for a \$1,500 pair of amplifiers. Rather than twisting a small 5-way binding post by hand and then tightening it further with a post wrench, I'm able to easily tighten the M300s' large key-shaped posts without using extra tools. As I twist the posts, I can't help but recall some of my favorite childhood wind-up toys. Gentle ribbing aside, I personally love the choice IQ made with these posts and the firm connection they facilitate. Once they are cranked down, nothing is coming loose. *(continued)*

REVIEW

However, this connection type may present a problem for some users: First, there is no accommodation for banana plugs; and second, with such a low amp height, there is little space between the binding posts and the surface the amp rests on. As a result, thick cables may require mounting to the binding post in a way that leaves the cables pointing outward or upward from the amp, providing the M300 with something of a rooster-tail. With that in mind, other users may find that speaker stands like mine aren't such a bad idea.

Accompanying the binding posts on the back panel of each amp are both RCA and balanced inputs, as well as plenty of room for the power cable of your choice and two 12-volt triggers. Because of their versatility, these amps can evolve with your system as you acquire or replace new components. And the M300 comes with the IQ-kord power cable, which is a 15A power cable featuring hospital grade IEC plugs and EMI / RF isolators.

And for some economic and environmental peace of mind, the M300s have an Energy Star-rated efficiency. They do not get warm and the power-handling technology that IQ built into them enables them to consume very little power while at idle. *(continued)*



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Ring the Bell

The first thing you notice sonically about the M300s is the non-fatiguing way they present music. Regardless of musical genre, the M300s avoid stridency. They render jazz, classical, rock, and electronica very well, allowing the listener to sit back and enjoy the musical experience without the “wince factor” that some equipment creates. I put these amps through the Four Johns test—that is, listening to Cash, Coltrane, Digweed and Philip Sousa—and the music retains the heart of the performances without harsh sonic artifacts.

The M300s bring to life the guitar plucks on “Give My Love to Rose,” from Johnny Cash’s *American IV*, with delicacy and richness. While the amps tend to place the vocals into the mix a bit, they do render the song’s emotional content very well, accurately portraying the age and gravelly roughness in Cash’s voice.

They also render John Coltrane’s saxophone with clarity and grace. Those who have sat near a live saxophone performance know that the sound can have a natural sharpness in some cases. The M300s manage to reveal the detail of Coltrane’s performance without adding any harshness beyond that already inherent in the recording. Through the M300s, the jazz legend’s album *Blue Train* is both engaging and relaxing.

Ready to Rumble

Fans of electronica know that bass punch and depth are necessary to get people out on the dance floor.



IQ claims a frequency response of 5 Hz to 45 kHz for the M300s, plus or minus 3 dB. As I’m not able to get the dog next door howling at notes beyond the upper range of my hearing, I can’t verify sound above 20 kHz. I can say with conviction, however, that the bass indeed goes very deep. In addition to low-frequency test tracks verifying an audible and tangible 20 Hz rumble in my room, John Digweed’s remix of “Warung Beach” illustrates the M300s ability to provide plenty of get-up-and-go.

Recordings of “The Stars and Stripes Forever” conducted by John Philip Sousa offer varying degrees of audio quality, so I cheat a bit on my theme by deferring to recordings by modern conductors. Here, the M300s do a very nice job of revealing the dynamic contrasts of the various instruments. Flute notes dance through the air with delicacy; cymbals have a solid crash and a slow decay; and brass instruments are easily identified. In a recording like this, adequate power is necessary to get the heft of the performance through my speakers—and the M300s do not disappoint.

Facing Heavyweight Contenders

So what’s the downside? Unfairly comparing the M300s with my \$8,000 reference amplifier (over five times the price of the IQ pair) reveals a few shortcomings that seem aptly illustrated with an analogy:

Viewers can appreciate Monet’s lily paintings differently depending on their distance from the canvas. At 20 feet away, the colors, shapes and scenery are pleasant to experience as a whole. But when viewed from just a few feet away, the painting’s impressionistic brush strokes reveal a texture and detail not detectable from further away, allowing for a deeper and more nuanced level of appreciation. Once seeing the painting up close and in person, it’s difficult to appreciate scaled-down images of the same painting in a book, which do not portray the detail that you know is there. *(continued)*

Similarly, the M300's sonic portrayal places the listener a metaphorical 20 feet from the music, leaving him or her a well-rendered sonic picture, but one that lacks some of the detail that my reference amp provides: organic realism, pinpoint imaging, a three-dimensional soundstage with width and depth, ambiance and front-to-back layering of instruments and vocals, along with a very quiet, black background.

While the M300s do an exceptional job delivering very deep bass, these low-register responses are not as tight, defined or tuneful as those delivered through my reference amp. Again, these characteristics are something I'd expect from amplifiers at a higher price point. I do not expect the same level of quality from a pair of monos in the \$1,500 price range.

The Verdict

For everything that they do well, the M300s provide great value. IQ made smart decisions in the designing and voicing of these amps. They offer durable ease of use, stellar energy efficiency, enjoyable and non-fatiguing portrayal of music, the power needed to drive challenging speaker loads, and a neutral sonic profile that renders all types of music quite well.

At \$1,500 per pair, the M300s are certainly worth an audition. And the great news is that IQ sells direct from its website and stands squarely behind its products with a 30-day audition period for anyone who makes a purchase. With this risk-free guarantee, why not decide for yourself if the M300s are a good fit for your system? For this price, I think you'll find that this pair of amps is a knockout.



Additional Listening

By Jeff Dorgay

Rob has made excellent points, and after some time with these tiny amplifiers, I concur with his assessment. However, here are a few more points to ponder:

When purchasing a power amplifier in the \$1,000-to-\$2,000 range, there are always tradeoffs to be made. And though there are a few integrated amps, like the Naim UnitiQute or the Rega Brio-R, that come across as slightly more palpable—especially through the midband—there's no substitute for cubic inches (or, in this case, power).

More power on tap gives you more speaker options. The M300s can drive a pair of Magnepan MMGs or 1.6/1.7s, while the two others either can't (Naim) or only can to a point (Rega). Sure, Class D amps, while having come a long way tonally in the last few years, can still sound a little sterile—and there's nothing like a great tube preamplifier to warm that up a bit. The IQ 300s actually use selected discrete mosfets in the output stage, another contributor to their musical nature. So I did just that, with the recently rebuilt Conrad-Johnson PV-12 and its full compliment of CJD Teflon capacitors under the hood. The extra body of an older tube pre like this one goes a long way to bridge the timber gap between the M300s and my Magnepans. The result sounds fantastic, especially in light of the M300's price. ●

IQ Audio IQ M300 Monoblocks
MSRP: \$1,495 per pair

MANUFACTURER

IQ Audio Corporation

CONTACT

www.iqaudiocorp.com

PERIPHERALS

Speakers

Piega P10

Amplifier

Mark Levinson 335

Preamplifier

Coffman Labs G1-A

Analog Source

Marantz TT-15

Digital Source

Audio Research CD3 MKII, dCS Purcell processor, EAD 9000 MKIII DAC, Genesis Technologies Digital Lens

Cables

Jena Labs Valkyrie and Symphony interconnects, Jena Labs Twin 15 speaker cables

Power Conditioner

Running Springs Audio Haley

Power Chord

Cardas Golden, Golden Reference/Mongoose

Accessories

Mapleshade SAMSON racks and shelves, ASC TubeTraps, Cathedral Sound room-dampening panels

HI-FI AUDIO FUSION

Rogers EHF-200 MK2 Integrated Amplifier

By Jeff Dorgay

It's easy to build a tube amplifier, relatively speaking. I did it in high school electronics class. It played music and buzzed like hell, but it sounded fairly good compared to the JVC receiver my parents owned. There was just something unmistakably yummy about the way acoustic instruments and vocals sounded through my old-school AR speakers that hooked me on tubes forever.

It's not so easy to build a great tube amplifier, though. I've got no skills in that arena. Many of today's tube-amplifier manufacturers follow one of two paths: rebuild a classic from the vintage era (1940s and 1950s) with good success, or embrace more modern technology and tubes to produce an amplifier with the best characteristics of legacy and current thinking. Put the EHF-200 MK2 from Rogers High Fidelity squarely in the latter camp.





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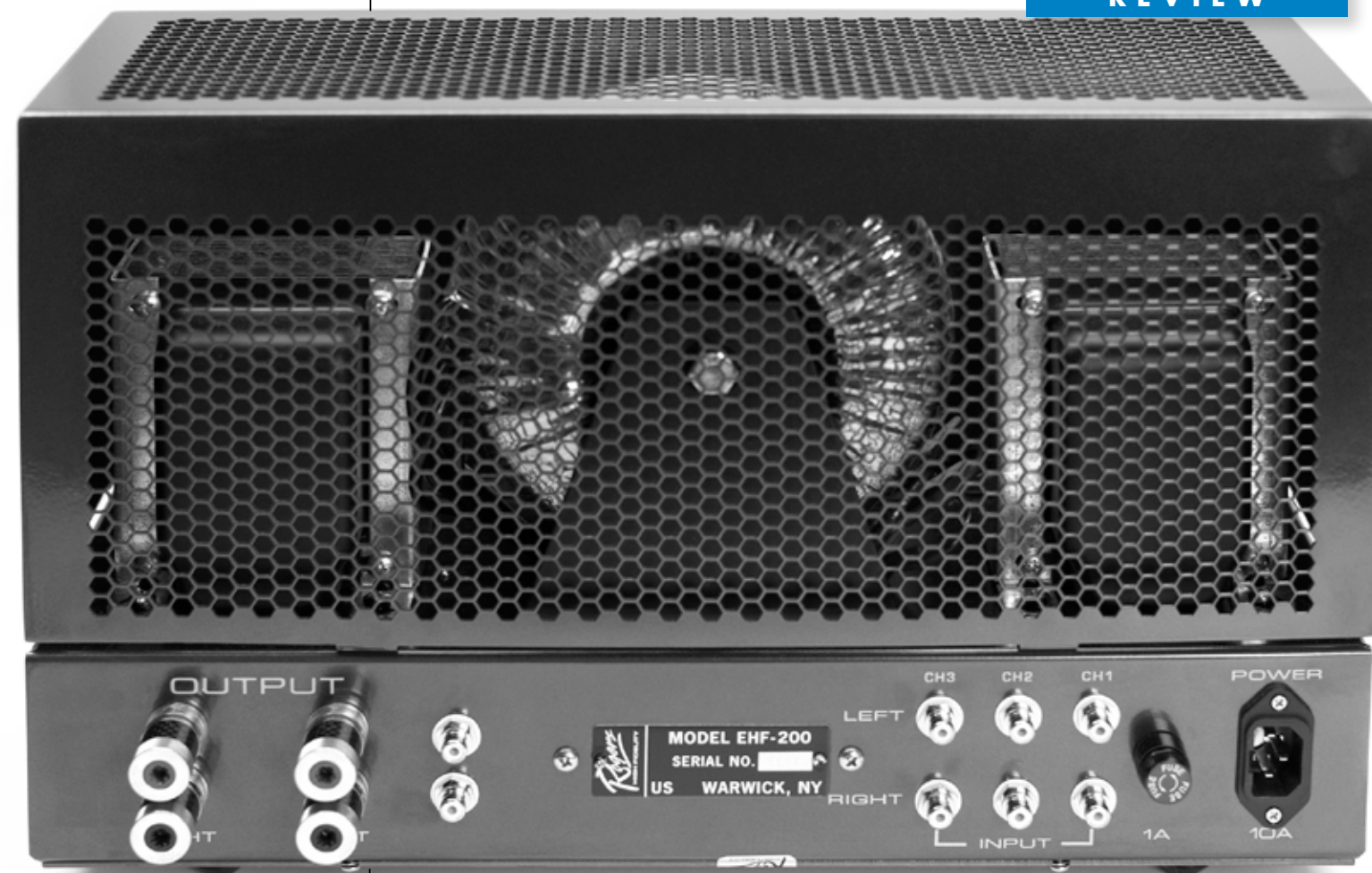
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This amplifier takes full advantage of company principle Roger Gibboni's years of engineering expertise in the world of communications and radar technologies. The amp combines solid circuit design and meticulous point-to-point wiring with high-quality current parts, like a massive 1100VA toroidal power transformer and beefy output transformers, to create an instant classic. Gibboni says on the Rogers website that one of the company's goals was "to create an amplifier that your kids will fight over when you're gone." And with a lifetime warranty, the EHF 200 MK2 should outlive you.

He has succeeded brilliantly, and if the beautiful casework doesn't convince you, then remove the bottom cover and gaze at the workmanship. It's instantly obvious that this amplifier is built with a lot of TLC—and built to last more than one lifetime. Only the highest-quality, tightest-tolerance parts lurk under the hood. MSRP for the MK2 model, which includes preamplifier inputs and a variable-level output, is \$14,000 even. (The standard EHF-200 model does not have this flexibility and so it is priced slightly less at \$11,500.) The MK2 features three single-ended RCA inputs on the rear panel, along with another set on the front panel. *(continued)*

Spacey Indeed

The Radiohead classic “High and Dry” instantly reveals the spatial abilities of this amplifier. *(continued)* Lead singer Thom Yorke is firmly anchored in the mix, with some strong guitar bits and a few layers of synthesizers perforating the mix in a highly obtuse but effective and three-dimensional way.

Springsteen’s “4th of July, Asbury Park (Sandy)” comes through my vintage Acoustat 2+2s with a fervor that I’ve never experienced since having the speakers expertly rebuilt. There’s an unmistakable magic that has always existed between tubes and electrostatic panels that always seems to make the world stop for a while as you drink it in. Thanks to the drive this amplifier possesses, triode mode rules the day, and so young Springsteen’s voice is buoyant between the 8-foot-tall panels. And thanks to the subwoofer outputs, driving a pair of powered subs is a cakewalk—a valuable feature often overlooked on many integrated amps.

Major Style Points

The EHF-200 oozes style, from the deep red color of the chassis to the cool blue power meter on the front panel. And, of course, glowing vacuum tubes are always a hit with music lovers and audiophiles alike. The amp comes with a billet remote that is a piece of sculpture, and Rogers also includes a microfiber towel with the company on it logo to keep your amplifier free of fingerprints and scratches.



From the amp’s carbon fiber and rhodium speaker binding posts to the finely machined controls, it’s clear that the amount of thought that went into this product is indeed high. Its built-in headphone amplifier works symbiotically with the usual suspects in my headphone arsenal, which includes Grado, Sennheiser and Audeze phones. Each Rogers amplifier even comes with a handwritten note from the person who assembled it, telling you to enjoy your purchase—a nice personal touch.

It’s worth noting that there is a pair of RCA input jacks on the front panel, a reviewer’s dream if there ever was one! No more fishing behind the equipment rack to find the remaining input. Active audio hobbyists who switch and compare gear on a regular basis will really appreciate this feature.

Every aspect of the EHF-200 operates with extreme silence, from the subtle clicking of the volume attenuator to the switching back and forth between triode and ultralinear modes. Some amplifiers we’ve auditioned clunk fairly dramatically when changing modes, requiring the amplifier to be turned off every time, but the EHF has no such problem. You will immediately notice more gain in ultralinear mode, but this reviewer finds the extra sweetness of triode operation to be worth the small increase in gain required for full output. My reference dCS Vivaldi has 6 volts of output, so this was no problem at all. *(continued)*

Major Performance, Too

Style without substance is meaningless—and when the pedal goes down, the EHF-200 MK2 fires up. With a quartet of KT120 tubes, (two per channel), the EHF produces 117 watts per channel into 4 ohms in ultralinear mode and 80 per channel in triode mode; just flip a switch on the top panel to change modes. The power tubes are all biased automatically, so there is no need to worry about adjustments or scouring the earth for matched quartets. This should make the EHF as trouble free as a tube amplifier can get.

The applause in Cheap Trick's "Day Tripper" hints at the EHF's ability to reproduce a large soundstage. This amplifier paints a musically accurate picture that still renders a hint of tubeyness. The EHF's overall tonality reminds me of the much more expensive Octave Jubilee monoblocks that we recently reviewed. The EHF is not as warm as a Conrad-Johnson amplifier, but it's not quite as reserved as my Audio Research REF 150. And though the REF 150 has a bit more power (150 wpc versus 117 wpc), the EHF is a thousand bucks less for a *full integrated*.

Though the Acoustats have a sensitivity rating of only 82 dB per watt, the EHF has no trouble driving them to more than adequate levels, even in triode mode, which again is absolutely dreamy. The rest of the speakers at my disposal are all considerably more efficient, so the EHF

never runs out of steam, unless I play music so much louder than is reasonable and prudent. And even then, it clips so gently that there is only a slight compression of the soundstage to warn you that you've gone too far—that is, if you aren't paying attention to the little blue meter on the front panel.

Wendy Lewis' lead vocal on the Bad Plus' *For All I Care* is positively goose-bump inducing, especially her detached rendition of the Bee Gees classic "How Deep is Your Love." The EHF is a tonemeister, always straddling the line of perfection, never embellishing too much, yet it is always musical and engaging. The subtle harmonics on both ends of the frequency spectrum from Charlie Hunter's eight-string guitar on his *Bing, Bing, Bing!* album bounce around the room in a spectacular manner, with decay that seems to go on forever—another hallmark of a great tube amplifier.

I move the EHF to room one and pair it with the 90-dB-per-watt KEF Blades, and it continues to dazzle with its ability to generate serious low-end grunt. Cranking the latest effort from Kanye West illustrates how well this amplifier not only generates serious LF information, but how much control it also exhibits. Keeping the party rolling with Genghis Tron's *Board Up the House* disc adds layer after layer of highly distorted guitars to the driving beats, neither of which cause any difficulty for the EHF.

Tonality is beyond reproach, as hours of listening to audiophile classics will verify. Those living on a steady diet of female vocalists and plucky acoustic guitar records will surely wet themselves over the EHF's presentation. And those who like to rock (I salute you) will dig the dynamics that the EHF brings to the table. Its robust power supply allows it to play louder than its size and specs would suggest. Cranking up the live version of the Tubes' "I Was a Punk Before You" is exhilarating, as is Jeff Beck's album, *Live at Ronnie Scott's*. There's just something about tube amplification that lends itself to raucous rock—and the EHF delivers in spades.

Tube Choices

Some will argue about the sonics of the KT120; yet, after living with this tube in a number of other amplifiers, I am in the *love it* camp. The EHF works well with the KT120, offering more than enough delicacy to make the most devout tubeophile happy. It offers better dynamic contrast and impact than the KT88/6550 is able to muster. And we're only talking four power tubes here, so when it is time to re-tube, it won't cost a fortune.

With the 12AX7 in good supply, the sky is the limit for those feeling the need to tube roll. The EF86 tube is NOS with no major substitutions, so if your taste doesn't go to the exotic, re-tubing the EHF will be painless. *(continued)*



After trying a handful of different 12AX7s at my disposal, sticking with the stock JJs proved a great place to hang my hat. Stick with the stock tubes and enjoy, I say. And stick with the packaged Quiet Cable power cord too - this would easily set you back a thousand bucks, for something equivalent from one of the majors. I tried my favorites from Shunyata, Cardas and Audience with no improvement whatsoever, so use the one in the box with confidence.

An Elegant Solution

With so many people trying to simplify their lives, the Rogers EHF-200 MK2 is a refreshing solution. Of course, \$14K isn't exactly play money, but the sound quality delivered by this amp easily equals

or betters most amp/preamp combinations that are similarly priced. And remember, going with a combo solution will require at least one premium interconnect and a pair of power cords, so if you're playing at this level, plan on dropping *at least* a few extra thousand on wire just to be on par.

With the EHF-200 MK2, Rogers offers a world-class solution in one box. Add your favorite digital and analog sources (should you be so inclined) and you've got a super system that fits on a single rack.

This is an amplifier we thoroughly enjoy. If you've been looking for something a bit out of the ordinary and a bit more bespoke that offers the full-on tube experience, look no further. The EHF-200 MK2 is fantastic. ●

Rogers EHF-200 MK2
Integrated Amplifier
MSRP: \$14,000

MANUFACTURER
Rogers High Fidelity

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PERIPHERALS
Analog Source SME 10 turntable, Sumiko Palo Santos cartridge, Aesthetix Rhea phonostage

Digital Source dCS Vivaldi stack, Sooloos Control 15

Speakers Acoustat 2+2, KEF Blades, Dynaudio Confidence C1 II

Cable Cardas Clear Light
Power Running Springs Dmitri

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We know. Sorting through the jungle that is pre-owned hi-fi gear can be tough. Myriad Internet forums and online shopping sites just don't offer the expertise required to make sound decisions.

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Bravo Indeed!

Viola's Double-Box Delight

By Jeff Dorgay



VIOLA

BRAVO II

REFERENCE AMPLIFIER

As I tear through some of my favorite reference tracks, I'm not only taken by the Viola Bravo stereo power amplifier, which I've heard sound fantastic at a number of recent hi-fi shows, but I'm also amazed at how much it shares with the best solid-state amplifiers I've heard, particularly the big Boulders. We have here a new contender for the top of the mountain, complete with glowing green power indicators.

Rather than opt for a monoblock design, Viola takes a different tack by going with a dual-chassis configuration. One of the boxes holds the majority of the power supply, including a 2-kV power transformer, and the other contains the amplification circuitry, with strategically placed 80,000-uF capacitors located near the output-stage nodes to keep power close at hand. This setup works brilliantly; the Bravo produces a fast, clean sound, without sounding harsh or grainy.

This approach also makes for a sound not unlike that provided by a pair of monoblocks: a huge soundstage combined with amazing stereo imaging and precise placement. As Prince walks between the channels on "Shy," the speakers momentarily melt as the volume of the guitars gently increases and the other instruments join in. This is a special amplifier indeed.

Viola Labs' principals Paul Jayson and Tom Colangelo spent part of their early careers at Levinson, and the Bravo definitely has the trademark solid bass response of the best Levinson designs of yore, but with a much more palpable midrange and even more natural highs. The bass line in the title track of George Michael's *Older* goes straight to the gut, controlling my KEF Blades as few amplifiers in recent memory have. Only the massive Pass monos have more grip in my system, but it's really a close call. Viola claims that the Bravo needs a 25-amp line to deliver the absolute maximum power, but we only have dedicated 20-amp circuits here, so we'll take them on faith. It is worth noting that the Bravo never feels strained in the least, even on a dedicated 20-amp line.

Put On Your Kidney Belt

With the power supply weighing in at about 125 pounds and the amplifier weighing about 90 pounds, you'll need a friend to help you unpack and place these fairly large enclosures (17 inches wide by 9.6 inches high by 26 inches deep). The duo also tips the price scale at \$58,000, so if you are paying in small coins, you'll need strong biceps there, as well. *(continued)*

REVIEW

These tidy enclosures eschew exposed heat sinks in favor of fan-cooled operation, with a massive umbilical cord joining the two boxes. These two elements are the only shortcomings of the design. The umbilical cord, which is connected via spade links on each box, can present a problem, especially if you're among the 8 percent of people with some form of color blindness. Either way, attach the umbilical carefully, one wire at a time, to avoid a loud (and costly) boom at turn on. As far as the fan goes, it's not completely silent. Those living on a steady diet of rock, jazz and hip-hop (like yours truly) will never notice it, but if your taste turns more towards string quartets at low volume, the fan will be invasive. The Bravo's fan is not as quiet as the one in my ARC REF 150, so I'd say it could use some improvement.

The Bravo delivers 350 watts per channel into 8 ohms. If that's not enough juice for you, the power easily doubles as the load is halved, thanks to the Bravo's true-voltage-source design. Taking things a step further, the amp's fully balanced design allows it to be configured in bridged or parallel mode for higher power. The bridged mode is better for situations requiring higher voltage output (i.e. higher impedance speakers), while the parallel mode is better for speakers with higher current demands. You can even link four pairs of amplifiers together to get 3,600 watts per channel into one ohm! Viola certainly gets big points for being infinitely flexible with this amp's configuration options.

(continued)

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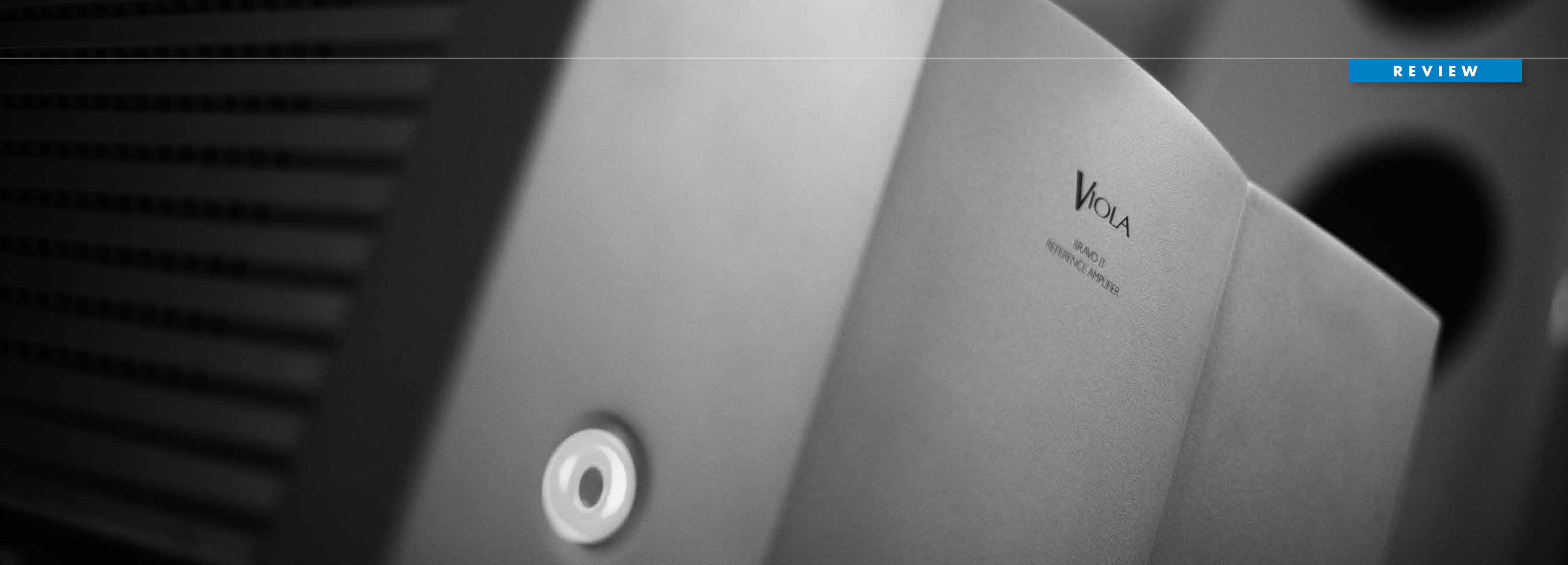
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Because it is a fully balanced amplifier, the Bravo offers only XLR inputs, which do not present a problem for the reference preamplifiers at my disposal from Simaudio, Nagra, Burmester, Robert Koda and Audio Research. Whether running through a short length of Cardas Clear cables or a 20-foot pair, the Bravo works flawlessly.

The manual could use some photos to better describe the differences in operation, but it is well written. One would think that paying almost 60 large for the amp would warrant a little more thought in this area (à la Sonus faber), but Viola is no more guilty on this front than most. However, a well-written and well-illustrated manual is

an essential part of the ownership experience at this level.

Nits Aside

You'll forget about these minor points the minute you begin listening. And while you'll forget about the 40 matched output devices, you won't be able to lose track of the control this amplifier brings to bear on your favorite music. From the first track, you can tell this one is very special. Where my Pass Xs amplifiers take on an almost tubey sound, the Bravo is extremely neutral, with no detectable sonic signature. It is part of a miniscule subset of solid-state power amplifiers having no character, no grain and no coloration whatsoever.

All of the large speakers at my disposal (Gamut S9, Dynaudio Evidence Platinum, KEF Blade, and Sonus faber Aida) are phenomenal matches for the Bravo, and thanks to its highly resolving nature, it easily showcases the differences in character between said speakers—making it a true reference-quality component. The S9s and the Aidas in particular both have potent low-frequency reach and they both play to the Bravo's strong points of extension and control.

A quick trip down memory lane to Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* and *Wish You Were Here* proves highly illuminating. The heart-beat at the beginning of *DSOM*

bores into my soul at high volume; the elevator at the beginning of "Wish You Were Here" is equally overwhelming as it blasts across the soundstage, reminding me just how great these recordings still sound, even after all these years. I had an equally fun experience listening to the Bravo in January at the Consumer Electronics Show, when Genesis speaker designer Gary Koh was playing Infected Mushroom at discotheque levels. Awesome!

We can go on and on about the complete lack of background noise present with the Bravo, but that's selling it short. What you really notice instantly is the tremendous dynamic swing that it is capable of producing.

Several major Music Matters Blue Note listening sessions keep me coming back for more. The explosive nature of these records, not held back in the least by the Bravo, makes drums, percussion and horn blasts all the more exciting and all the more real. I'll even go as far as to say that it sounds better than when I was listening to a few of these albums via the master tape at Kevin Gray's studio.

This astonishing level of dynamic clarity is even more persuasive with music that is limited in this area. Records that you thought were somewhat limited (like the recent Slayer box set) still are, but with this much range at your disposal, they do come more alive than ever before. *(continued)*

And thanks to the Bravo's effortless delivery of high power, you can really blast these tracks without fatigue.

Of course, lovers of big orchestral music will be in heaven playing their favorite large-scale masterpieces through the Bravo. Make sure your speakers are capable, though! While it is not an audiophile classic by any means, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's rendition of *Pictures at an Exhibition* on DG is still a fun test track, with the end of the first movement coming to a major crescendo that almost always has the extreme dynamic peaks compromised. Here, the Bravo sails through effortlessly.

All About Power

Again, thanks to the amp's complete lack of grain, the level of timbral accuracy that the Bravo provides is incredible; yet, its ability to resolve the minutest details gives the last bit of realism to recorded music, doing so in a way that few amplifiers can match. I firmly believe that this is what allows your brain to stop thinking about the gear, the system and the presentation, and just get further into the music and the performance.

Whether listening to Van Halen or Vivaldi through the Bravo, I never find myself entering the analytical reviewer mode. This is something only the world's finest components can do, and it is a rare treat.



Having spent a lot of time with great amplifiers large and small, I still prefer large—just as I'd rather drive a car with massive horsepower than one without. Big power done right tends to eliminate many of the shortcomings of various speakers, because of the control it provides.

It's also worth mentioning that the Bravo is one of very few amplifiers we've tested that does *not* respond to any kind of power-line conditioning whatsoever. Its massive choke-based supply has a power-factor correction of .96 (very close to the ideal PF of 1), providing plenty of current on musical peaks. Connecting the amp to a dedicated 20-amp line is more than sufficient, and adding the Running Springs Maxim line conditioner or IsoTek Super Titan offers no improvement—a major testament to the Bravo's power-supply design.

Top of the Heap

The Viola Labs Bravo power amplifier is, in every way, one of the finest we've had the opportunity to audition; it is definitely a destination product. If your mindset is in sync with the Viola design ethos of the amplification being dead neutral, neither adding nor subtracting anything, this is a droid you should audition. Build quality is equally superb and the amp carries a prestigious design pedigree, brought to life by two of high-end audios most respected men. Just get a good workout in before you unbox it! ●



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REVIEW

Viola Labs
Bravo Power Amplifier
MSRP: \$58,000

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PERIPHERALS

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cartridge

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Digital Source
dCS Vivaldi stack

Preamplifiers
Audio Research REF 5SE,
Burmester 011, Robert
Koda K-10, Nagra Jazz,
Simaudio 850P

Speakers
Dynaudio Evidence
Platinum, GamuT S9, KEF
Blade, Sonus faber Aida

Slummin'



Luxman L-85v Integrated

\$40, Estate sale

New writer Jaime Lee Fritze is getting right in the groove, finding cool stuff at yard sales. With two MM phono inputs and wildly adjustable tone controls, this baby is a steal for 40 bucks. With about 80 watts per channel on tap, it should be able to easily drive any pair of vintage speakers you throw its way.



Pioneer SX636 Receiver

\$30, Garage sale

What's the difference between an "estate sale" and a "garage sale?" Usually the prices are higher and the garages are in a nicer neighborhood, which was exactly the case here. However this Pioneer classic is tough to beat for 30 dollars, and everything works splendidly, even down to the back lit tuning dial and meters. Unlike earlier Pioneer receivers, this one does not require those special, polarized speaker output connectors.

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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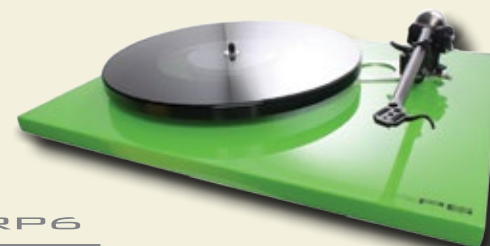
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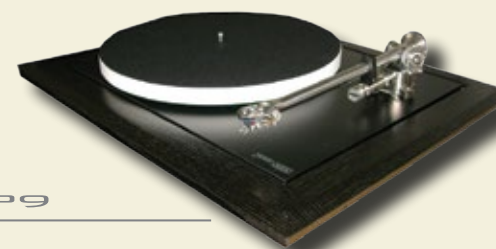
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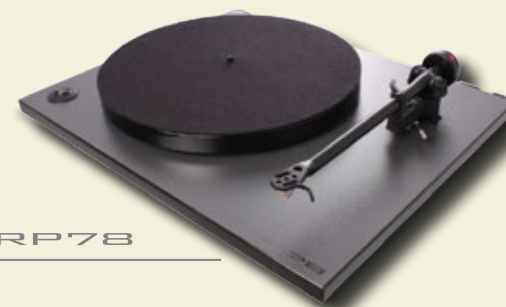
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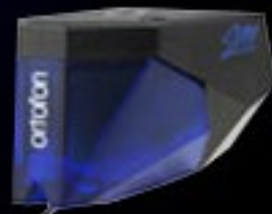
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