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By Liza Donnelly



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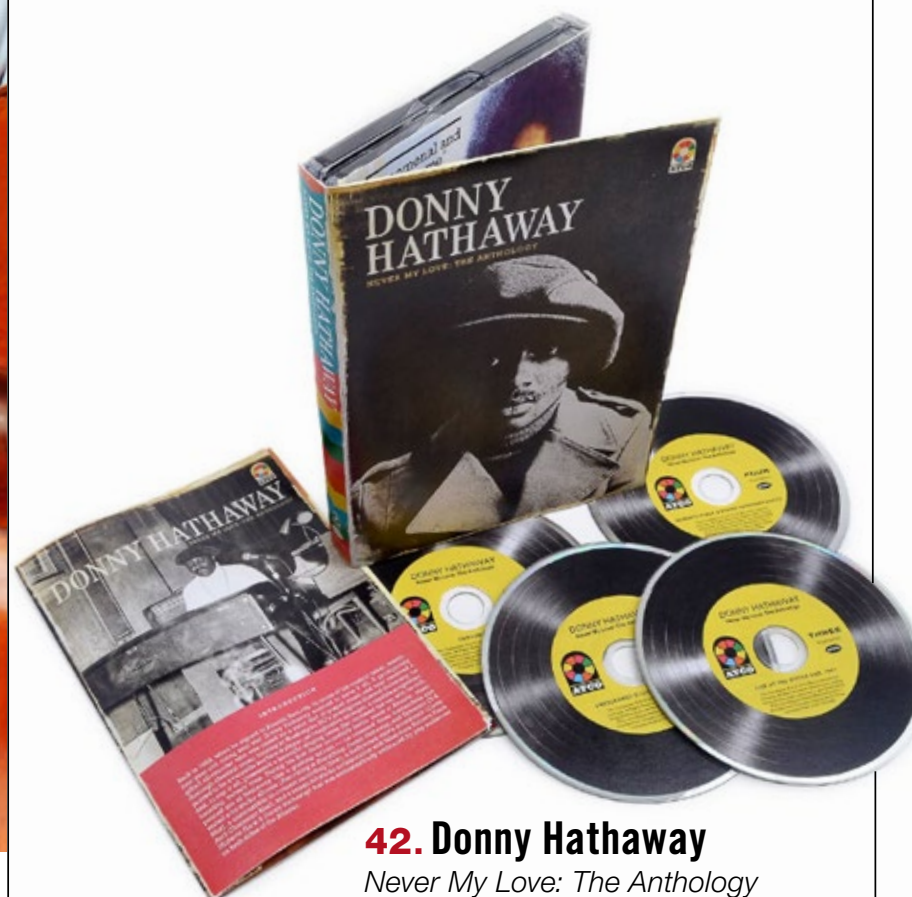


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PUBLISHER'S LETTER



It's that time of the year again. Whether it's holiday cheer or holiday dread is up to you, but it's Product of the Year time for us again, regardless. We always try to keep the award thing to a minimum, because if you give everyone a trophy, no one really feels like a winner at the end of the day.

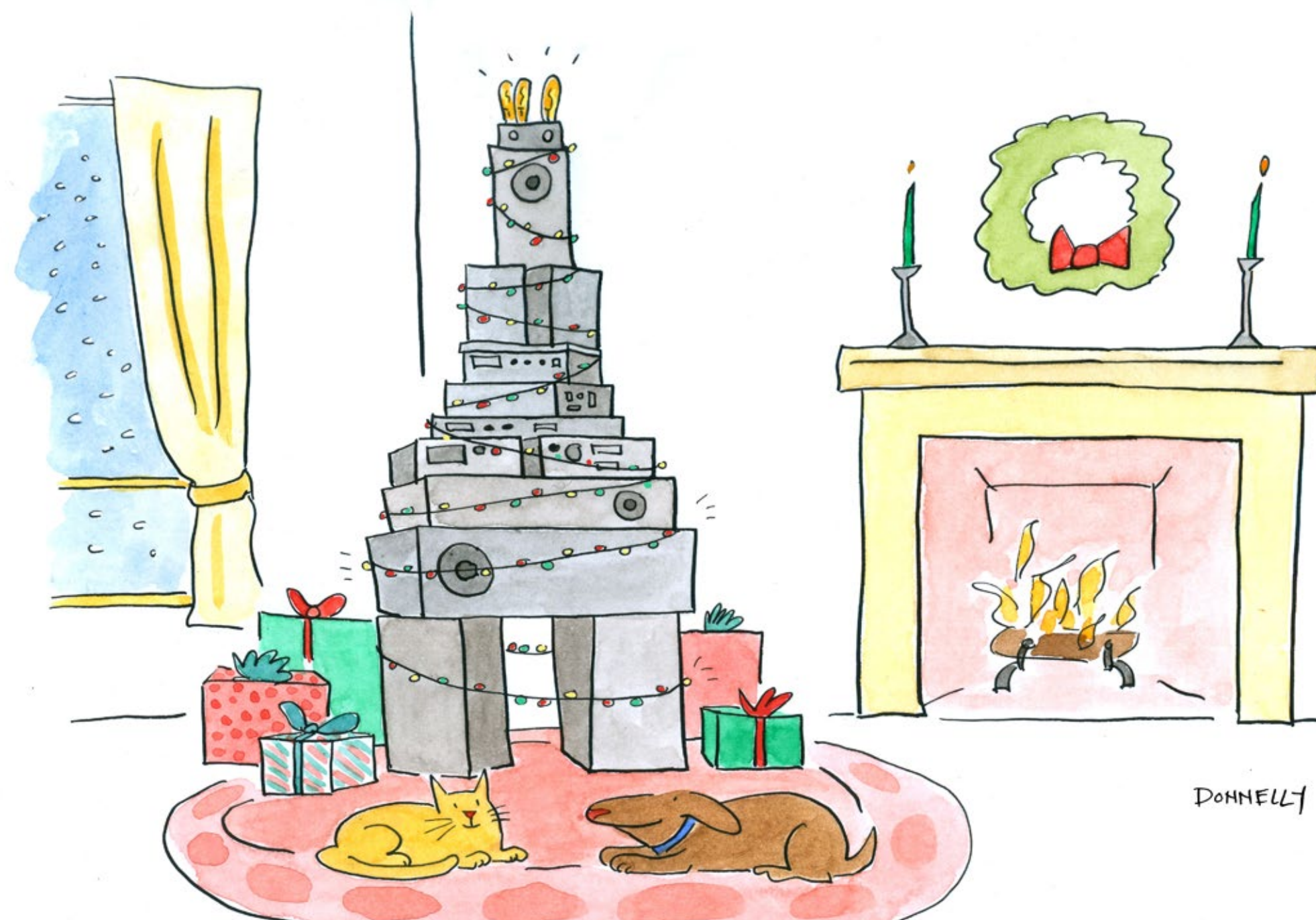
We review about 120 components in the course of the year, give or take, and the ten products that receive a POY award are the ones that we feel are head and shoulders above the rest in their respective categories. This is not always a price-driven category, though often these awards go to products that represent the cutting edge of technology, like the Focal Maestro speakers at \$60,000 per pair.

In the case of our 2011 POY award to the Rega Brio-R, we had a product that offered performance so far beyond what would ever be expected for the price asked, we had another clear winner at the opposite end of the price spectrum.

So, love our choices or hate 'em, but feel free to discuss. There is still so much great gear out there that we don't have time to get to, so don't consider any of this definitive – and by all means, go to a dealer and listen! While we try our best to be your concierge, it is a journey, albeit a great place to start.

We hope that you have all had a happy and relaxing holiday season, and we look forward to delivering more fun next year. Thank you for your continued support and do stay tuned!

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink.



May your days be merry and bright, from all of us at Tone!

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Super Budget!

Dynaco's PAT-5

By Jerold O'Brien

Back when our publisher and I were Bart Simpson-like teenagers disrupting our high school electronics class, we still wanted a great system but had no dinero. The few things we had breadboarded together hummed like a swarm of bees when a turntable was brought into play, and we scratched our heads. The doofus who was our electronics teacher wasn't much help, so we turned to the world of kits, figuring someone had built it right once, right? So we had to be able to make this work.

A hundred bucks back in 1976 was almost a month's worth of flipping burgers. Fortunately gas was only about 40 cents a gallon, so our publisher scraped together the dough to buy the PAT-5 kit, which would be replaced the following year by the PAT-5 bi-FET version, which swapped the op amps for ones with FET transistors in the input stage. Yes, audiophilia began at a very early age.

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FEATURE

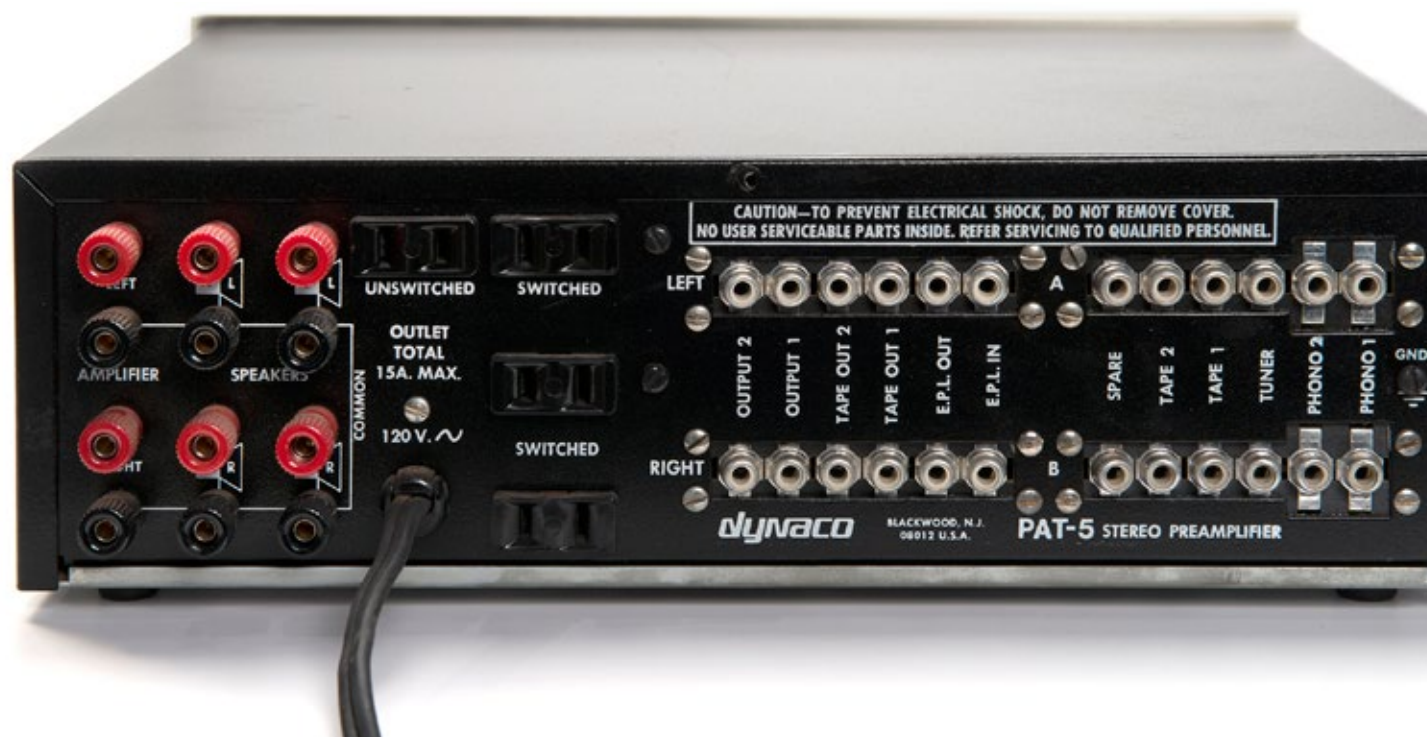


The preamplifier was straightforward to assemble, and the press of the day gave it rave reviews, claiming it a “major improvement” over the PAT-4 preamplifier, introduced in 1967, which used bipolar transistors. FETs were all the rage in the mid to late ‘70s, with most manufacturers spouting that FETs would be the logical replacement for vacuum tubes. And being nerdtroons at the forefront of science, we certainly didn’t want vacuum tubes in our stereo system. Hah.

The clean example you see here was purchased on eBay for 40 dollars, (with free shipping) and miraculously fired right up on arrival. Its gold faceplate is in excellent shape, and a “kit” sticker on the chassis underside indicates that someone actually built this thing. The job is a tidy one, which probably accounts for the quiet phono stage – but I digress.

There are plenty of old electrolytic capacitors that *could* be replaced, but a few more beers sound like a lot more fun. Perhaps during one of these rainy winters in the Pacific Northwest, I’ll talk our publisher into helping me. Just like the old days. *(continued)*

FEATURE



Back to the future, I mean present

Today the humble PAT-5s have been eclipsed, but you can find them in the used bins for about 60 dollars. Not bad depreciation for almost forty years. And speaking of audiophililia, Frank Van Alstine, the man behind Audio by Van Alstine, was just beginning to make a name for himself providing updates for Dynaco components – one of the first modders to be sure. He's still at it, offering his Insight update for the PAT-5, with virtually all of the internals upgraded, to provide a smashing preamplifier for only \$799. We'll be

examining that in the near future, so stay tuned.

But for the tight-budgeted music lover who craves good sound, a PAT-5 is still a great way to begin your audiophile journey, especially if you're trying to add a turntable to the mix. The MM stage in the PAT-5 is way better than anything you're going to find for 150 bucks at retail.

Tone controls?

That's right, tone controls. Fortunately, they are switched out of the circuit by default and the old carbon potentiometers add a fair amount of darkness to the overall sound, so un-

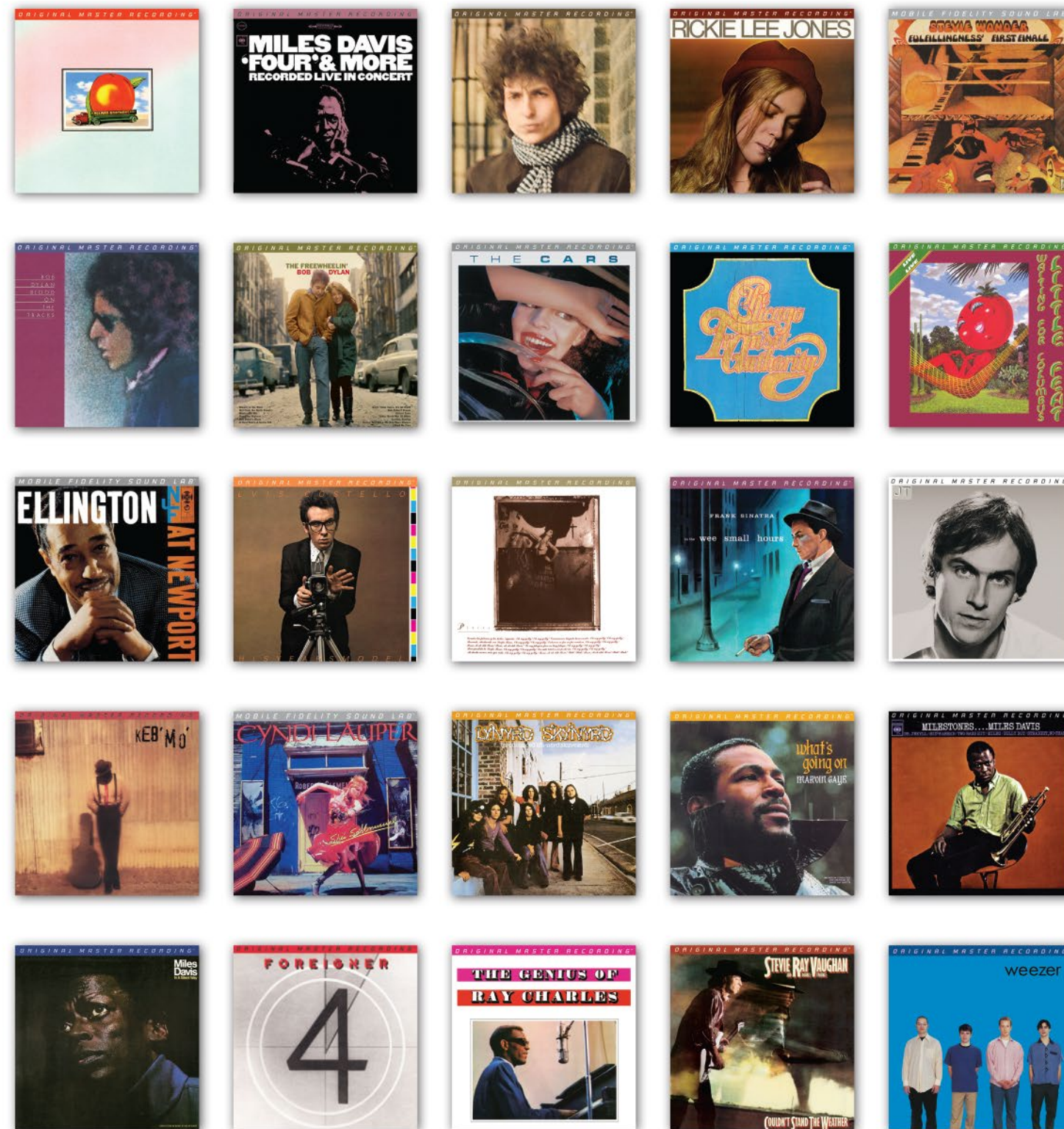
less you have really shabby speakers, just forget about these.

But what the PAT-5 lacks in neutrality, it more than redeems itself with major control flexibility. You can plug in two turntables and four high-level sources with dual tape monitoring functionality. There is even a high-level speaker selector, so you could run two pairs of speakers from your power amplifier via the PAT-5. Pretty cool for those running a garage or retro man-cave system. Now you can switch between your JBL L-100s and Pioneer HPM-100s with ease. All that's missing is a neon Bud sign. *(continued)*

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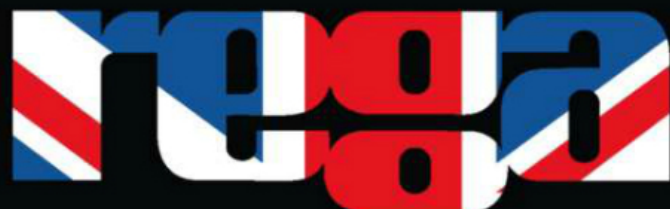


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FEATURE

Our readers who are more inclined towards personal listening, i.e., with headphones, will be pleasantly surprised by the onboard headphone amplifier lurking under the hood of the PAT-5. Again, way better than anything you're going to find for 60 bucks new.

Jewel in the rough

Add your favorite inexpensive power amplifier, some cool vintage speakers and you're rocking the casbah.

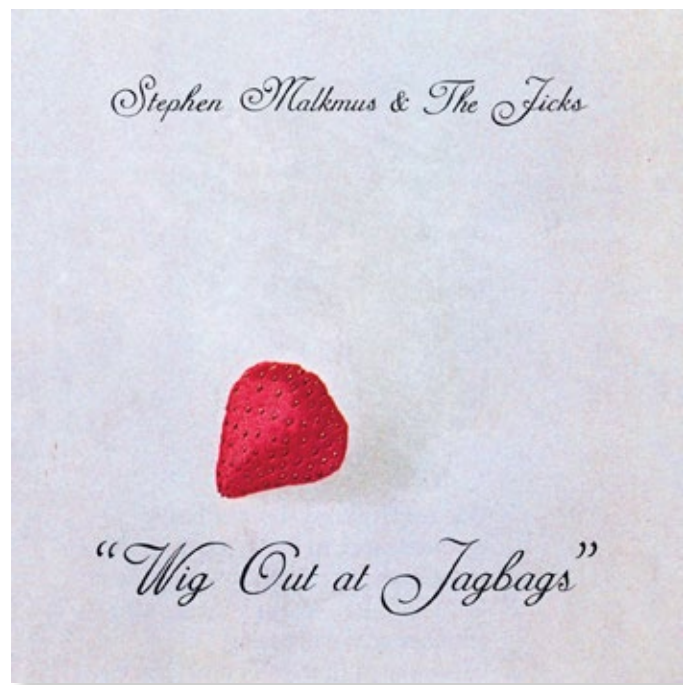
This particular PAT-5 is annoying my

neighbors happily via a pair of JBL L-166s and an SAE 2200 power amplifier, with a total system cost of around 500 bucks, including the cost of the Technics SL-1200 table I picked up at a garage sale.

Looking to start a hifi journey on a happy-meal budget? I highly suggest grabbing a PAT-5. They are cheap and plentiful. Not a bad way to start your audiophile journey, or learning the ropes on modding hifi gear. Who knows, you might just become the next Frank Van Alstine. ●



NEW RELEASES

**Stephen Malkmus & the Jicks***Wig Out at Jagbags*

Matador Records, LP or CD

● Purchase LP from Music Direct

One little reunion has done a lot of good for Stephen Malkmus. After the architect of 90s indie-rock champions Pavement got the band back together for a pat-on-the-back tour in 2010, his solo work in the Jicks has felt sharper, more melodic, and as focused as songs built out of fragments possibly can be. A piano waltz one minute, a prickly rumbling bass rocker the next, and a wailing classic-rock guitar solo bombed in from 1974 generally fall all over the place.

©Photo by Leah Nash



That's what, largely speaking, Malkmus fans have come to expect. His is actually a carefully orchestrated approach to songwriting that comes off as casual, where a clever turn of the phrase results in a flip of the musical script.

Even so, *Wig Out at Jagbags* offers welcome twists on the formula that should please—and poke a little fun at—the most nostalgic of Pavement fans. Throughout, the album brims with goofy, grown-up bile. “This one’s for you, grandaaaaads,” someone shouts at the start of “Rumble at the Rainbo,” a sweet little pop-punk ditty with bright keyboards and cooing background vocals about rocking out in the “punk rock tomb” of the reunion circuit. It’s good for a few laughs (“the new material, just cowboy boots”) and reflective of a record that ages with self-deprecation.

“We grew up listening to music from the best decade ever,” Malkmus sings during the ringing guitar-pop of “Lariat.” Think he is serious? The title of the song is a rope built for hanging. “Houston Hades” goes even further to shake up any comforts. A guitar ruckus gives way to a sing-along jaunt, with skipping “do, do, dos” carrying

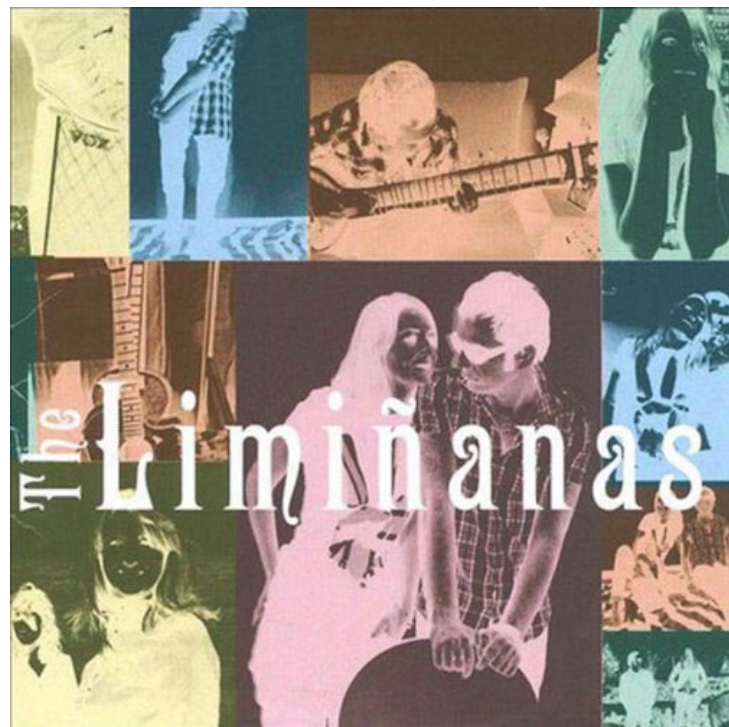
an anthem that may or may not be a rant against an entire generation procreating.

The tone isn’t completely venomous. These are songs built for a laugh, where the teenagers are “surreal,” the cultural references are to Eminem and Condoleezza Rice, and the occasional lyric sports Weezer-like corniness (see the use of “homies”). There are moments of dour reflection—the not-getting-younger winsomeness of “The Janitor Revealed”—and there are moments of bluesy, upper-class workouts (“Cinnamon and Lesbians”).

But what to make of “Chartjunk”? It is, perhaps, the catchiest song here, with a not-so-subtle nod to Billy Joel’s “It’s Still Rock and Roll to Me” and a horn section that seems to be time-traveling from an era of wood-paneled decor. It’s also Malkmus at his most forceful.

“I don’t need your winbag wisdom,” he stomps, as if he’s a general going to battle against a midlife crisis. *Wig Out at Jagbags* has a blast at fighting it off.

—**Todd Martens**



The Liminanas

Costa Blanca

Trouble In Mind, LP or CD

● Purchase LP from Music Direct

The Liminanas emerged in 2010, billing themselves as “new French pop music for the next millennium”—an odd disclaimer for a band so steeped in 1960s retro-cool.

On its third album, *Costa Blanca*, the husband-wife duo continues to churn out hypnotic, vaguely psychedelic rock that conjures images of Serge Gainsbourg sharing a joint with the Velvet Underground in a dimly lit, velvet-appointed lounge. Opener “Je me souviens comme si j’y étais,” which translates as “I remember as if I were there,” sets an evocative tone, Lio Liminana whispering incantations atop a droning sitar, prowling bass line, and jangly guitar that could have been airlifted from a *Nuggets*-era recording.

Both Lio and wife Marie take a leisurely approach to vocals, and songs like “My Black Sabbath” (a moody tune far removed from the Ozzy-fronted crew) sound like they were laid to tape in the wee hours of the morning without causing the slightest ripple in nighttime stillness. *(continued)*

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While the music often evokes the 60s, the Liminanas don't come on like retro fetishists. "Votre côté yéyé m'emmerde," for one, finds the two rattling off a litany of celebrities, songs, and icons (John Belushi, les Rolling Stones, "Louie Louie," and so on). It could have passed as an homage if the exaggerated eye-roll of a title didn't essentially translate to "fuck them." Although the group undoubtedly takes inspiration from the past, it's clearly in no way indebted to it.

Elsewhere, the pair turns out droning cuts that come on like lost tracks from VU's *White Light/White Heat* (the icily repetitive "Cold Was the Ground"), stomp through rickety garage nuggets ("BB"), and ease into sophisticated instrumentals like the organ-driven "Alicante," a sleek tune that could double as new theme music for fictitious French agent Hubert Bonnisseur de La Bath of the OSS 117 spy series.

Weaker moments occur when the duo invites outsiders, breaking up the album's hard-won intimacy. Francesca Cusimano takes the lead on "Votre côté yéyé m'emmerde," for example, and her severe vocals emerge akin to sharp corners on an album largely constructed of fuzzed-out edges. Better are numbers such as the gently ambling "La mélancolie," where the couple allows its voices to mingle and drift atop the track. It's gorgeous stuff, and quite possibly the closest thing to time travel most will experience in this lifetime. —**Andy Downing**

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AUDEZE

Lydia Loveless gained plenty of notice with her 2011 song “Steve Earle,” about a stalker-like fan that fancied himself a version of the real-life Americana artist. The tune encapsulates much of what makes Loveless such a fresh voice. She’s a belter with an idiosyncratic perspective, independent spirit, and a good chunk of punkish chutzpah.

Her third full-length release, *Somewhere Else*, solidifies her position as one of the most promising progressive country newcomers. Loveless, a twenty-something singer-songwriter from Ohio, counts some of the strong female roots artists of the past 30 years as her main musical antecedents.



©Photo by Paula Masters Travis

She would have fit snugly in the west coast cowpunk scene of the late 70s and early 80s, and equally well in the alt-country scene of the early 90s. At times she echoes the clarion call of Lone Justice’s Maria McKee. During others, her melodic but rough-around-the-edges production recalls Lucinda Williams’ breakthrough sound of 1988. But most of all, Loveless seems to take

her most overt cues from an artist of more recent vintage—namely, Neko Case in her early country-rock incarnation. Loveless’ phrasing is frequently so reminiscent of Case’s that she’s nearly a vocal doppelganger for the acclaimed singer.

It’s churlish, however, to criticize Loveless for the similarity, particularly given the strength and cutting beauty of her pipes—and the overall

appeal of this release. Song after song is built on infectious strumming and electric riffs. Her voice is center stage, confidently curving around jangly guitars and punchy drums.

While Loveless’ lyrics are often brash and unexpected, they are also occasionally disjointed. Her words swerve between world-weary observations and the wildly uneven musings of a teenager. But

even when the lyricism is clumsy, she sprinkles songs with shrew details. Her narrators are often lovelorn, self-flagellating, and sometimes prone to drunk dialing.

On “Really Wanna See You Again,” the protagonist does “some blow,” calls her now-married ex-boyfriend, and consults a Magic 8 Ball for advice. During “Hurts So Bad,” a woman clings to a

dysfunctional relationship, smokes cigarettes, and stares at the wall “Like it’s a TV/Just like I did when I was 17.” Loveless genuinely shines as a songwriter at such moments, and akin to the great majority of *Somewhere Else*, these occasions reflect the enormous promise and continued growth of an artist deserving of everyone’s attention.

—**Chrissie Dickinson**



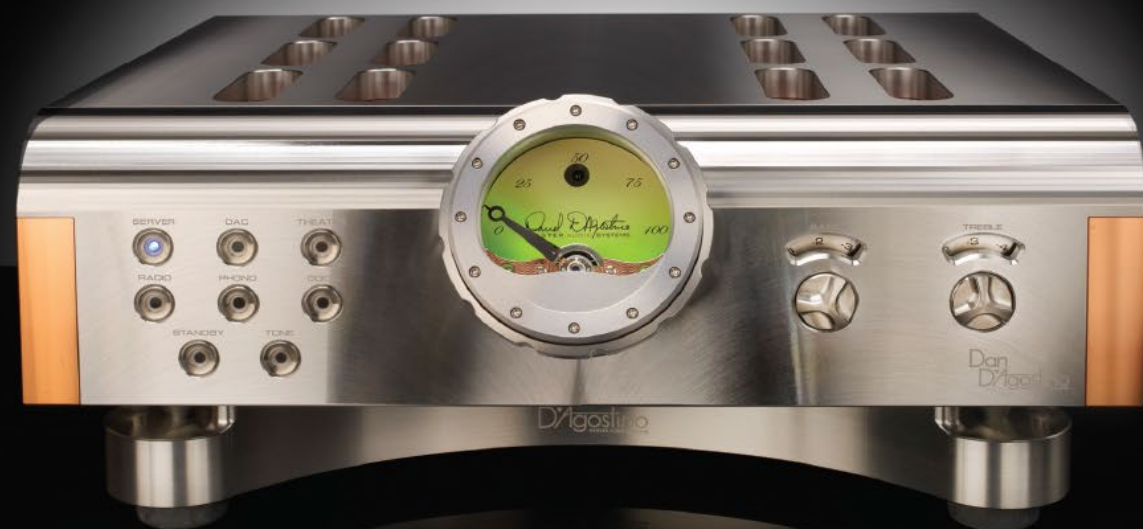
Lydia Loveless

Somewhere Else

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MUSIC



Warpaint

Warpaint
Rough Trade Records, LP or CD

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There's only one true moment of clarity on Warpaint's self-titled second album, and it's an apology. A few seconds into the record—after listeners hear a guitar bellow and a rhythmic stutter—the sound of what appears to be vocalist/guitarist Emily Kokal saying sorry interrupts the slowly enveloping melodic churn. It's the first and last intrusion of the real world—a final moment of levity, perhaps—before the one conjured by this Los Angeles quartet gets slowly, purposefully forged.

Like running in water, the members of Warpaint are fond of saying of the band's sound. The phrase implies a level of force as well as a bit of helplessness, and it's a line Warpaint walks on the follow-up to its 2010 debut, *The Fool*. Songs are heavy, but not necessarily hard, and the mood, with one or two rather groovy exceptions, is slow but not necessarily languid. "Don't you battle, we'll kill you," the group harmonizes late in the set. Yet Warpaint isn't out to force a surrender so much as to hypnotize.

There's an immediate difference between *The Fool* and this release: structure. The former possesses more of what can be considered songs, at least in the traditional sense. Clear guitar lines unfold on fare such as "Undertow," and strumming is even audible on a track such as "Baby." The well-connected band works here with Flood and Nigel Godrich, studio technicians whose resumes include The Jesus and Mary Chain and Radiohead (no doubt spiritual advisers if not direct influences). This time out, Warpaint goes after something more abstract, resulting in a patient, ambitious, and rewarding listen. *(continued)*

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MUSIC



It is, as the band has long desired, fluid. Where one song begins and ends isn't always quite clear, and the group crafts an experience that ever so slightly shifts and churns. If a song such as "Love is to Die" didn't feature drummer Stella Mozgawa pounding it to a finish near the five-minute mark, it's quite possible it'd still be playing as vocals shadow one another, guitars drip as if from a faucet, and the hook seems fashioned out of a distress call.

Throughout, the band takes a spherical approach to song-

writing. "Teese" swarms around Jenny Lee Lindberg's casually trotting bass and Kokal's choral-like vocals. On "Go In," Mozgawa tip-taps around her drum kit in jazzy fashion while the underlying push-and-pull of the song feels fashioned from a tuba. "Drive" boasts more urgency, courtesy of bubbling guitar notes that warmly and ornately blossom around the group's soothing harmonizing.

Warpaint's lyrical approach is also one increasingly built around dream-like moments. The determined parent stand-

ing amid garden imagery in the piano heartbreaker "Son," the world as colors and the sharp zigzag guitars of "Biggie," and the promise to grow up in a "starry state" in the sultry "Feeling Alright." Screams, howlers, and panting decorate the darkly manic dance of "Disco / Very," where Kokal introduces us to her "friend with a melody," only to seconds later tell us she's "like cyanide."

If it's a warning to stay away, even Warpaint at its most conceptual doesn't heed its own advice. —**Todd Martens**



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AUSTRALIAN AUDIO&V SHOW 14
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Hospitality

Trouble

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W

hen a rock band goes looking for poeticism in an afternoon spent fishing, there's cause for skepticism.

Staring into a vast watery expanse for hours on end can arouse the inner Walt Whitman in even the most hip of young rockers, but New York trio Hospitality emerges from the day trip largely unscathed. The creepy-crawling rhythms in verses and hefty synthesizer-guitar crests in a chorus help, of course. Yet there are still some hints at "what does it all mean" pondering in "Nightingale," the first track on the group's second album. Transcending the self-seriousness of the situation is no-nonsense vocalist and lead songwriter Amber Papini, who is most intrigued by life's smaller moments.



©Photo by Will Mebane

That is, the nostalgic memory of reeling in a catch on "Nightingale," the bittersweet ritual of getting dolled up to go looking for love on the demure "Going Out," the dread of sitting on a plane after saying goodbye to someone dear on the stop-and-start pop-rock raver "I Miss Your Bones," and the failure to receive the recognition one deserves for folding someone's laundry on the cozily paced "It's Not Serious." Throughout, Hospitality accentuates its observations with small orchestral diversions such as a daydreaming flute or intimate bongos, the latter of which create the rhythm-like effect of bare feet on a hardwood floor.

These are the moments born in urban apartments, the oft-overlooked details that fill the lives of twenty- and thirty-somethings with day jobs rather than careers. When Papini sings knowingly that a perfect date won't last long, she does so amid a hopscotching bass and starlight-bright keyboards, instruments already set up for a trip and a fade. "Is this my fate?," she asks, more angry than nonplussed on "Inauguration," where a static buzz mirrors her agitation at a boy that left her watching an international news event alone.

If Hospitality's 2011 debut is more airy and polite-sounding, *Trouble* reconciles with the idea that edges of everyday life don't need to be smoothed out. "I wouldn't take for granted men who cheat or work or want a wife," sings Papini on "Last Words" where a trumpet gets obscured by warmly pulsating synths (cue Fleetwood Mac comparisons). Her line is more or less a mission statement. Those descriptions, of course, fit nearly every man. Hospitality is a reminder that the familiar doesn't mean mundane. —**Todd Martens**

Emerge From the Darkness

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



MUSIC

Hard Working Americans is an ideal name for this no-frills, punch-the-clock crew. Singer/guitarist Todd Snider initiated the project, inviting a slew of veteran musicians to complete the lineup: Duane Trucks (Col. Bruce Hampton's School of Music), Dave Schools (Widespread Panic), Neal Casal (Chris Robinson Brotherhood), and Chad Staehly (Great American Taxi).

Despite the players' obvious jam-band pedigrees, songs here don't linger. Only a slow, searing take on Drivin' N' Cryin's "Straight to Hell" stretches beyond five minutes, and most tracks hover around the three-to-four-minute mark. Instead, the band approaches the all-covers album, which finds it taking on songs by a host of Americana- and roots-leaning acts both celebrated (Lucinda Williams, Gillian Welch) and overlooked (Hayes Carll, Bottle Rockets), with an endearingly workmanlike mentality. Indeed, it's a credit to all involved that songs are never overdressed. And it's clear the musicians came to the project with egos in check, determined to let the material speak for itself.



Hard Working Americans

Hard Working Americans

Melvin Records/Thirty Tigers, LP or CD

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©Photo by James Martin

This blue-collar approach is further reflected in the track selection. A majority of tunes touch on harsh economic realities facing the working class, political ineptitude, and the ever-widening chasm between the haves and the have-nots. Considering all the songs were written in the last decade, it's fair to say these bleak modern times have in the very least inspired some beautiful music.

A handful of cuts hew close to the way the originals sound. The band slightly dials back on the stompin' and hollerin' of Hayes Carll's "Stomp and Holler," but the more straightforward rock reading doesn't stray far from the native Texan's twangier take. Other songs, however, are decked out in entirely new garb. The players transform Randy Newman's "Mr. President, Have Pity on the Working Man" into a bluesy, boozy sing-along and strip Gillian Welch's "Wrecking Ball" down to the studs

to better highlight the devastation in her words.

Elsewhere, Kieran Kane's "The Mountain Song" could pass for precisely that, with the band conjuring images of the West Virginia foothills by layering the track with lush vocal harmonies, windswept piano, and insistent banjo. A bluesy take on Will Kimbrough and Tommy Womack's "I Don't Have a Gun," in turn, shows the kind of restraint most hope to see in the staunchest Second Amendment defenders, simmering for a cool four minutes without once boiling over.

Then there's a harrowing take on Frankie Miller's "Blackland Farmer," a tune nearly as tough as its beaten-back narrator, a hardened farmer that still manages to find some glory in a hard day's work, much like the grizzled gang laying down these unfussy tunes. —**Andy Downing**

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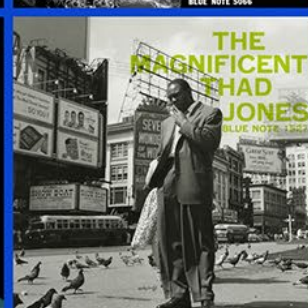
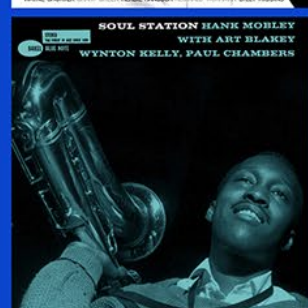
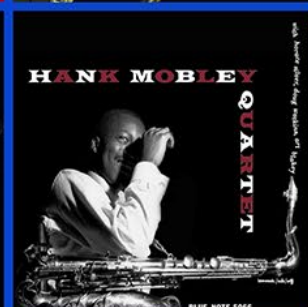
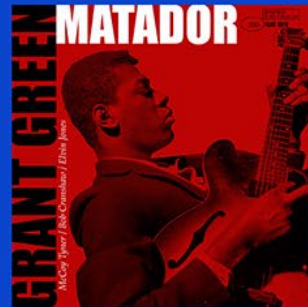
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Shaver

Shaver's Jewels (The Best of Shaver)
New West Records, CD

When it comes to songwriters, Texas does not grow them small. There's a long list of big talent, including Cindy Walker, Willie Nelson, Townes Van Zandt, Butch Hancock, Jimmie Dale Gilmore, and Rodney Crowell. It's no small feat that Billy Joe Shaver resides near the top of this stellar list.

In the ranks of the outlaw elites, Billy Joe, now 74, is a songwriter's songwriter. The career has been small-ish, the talent outsized, the peer reverence very real. Waylon Jennings recorded nearly an entire album of his material. His songs have also been covered by the likes of Nelson and Kris Kristofferson.

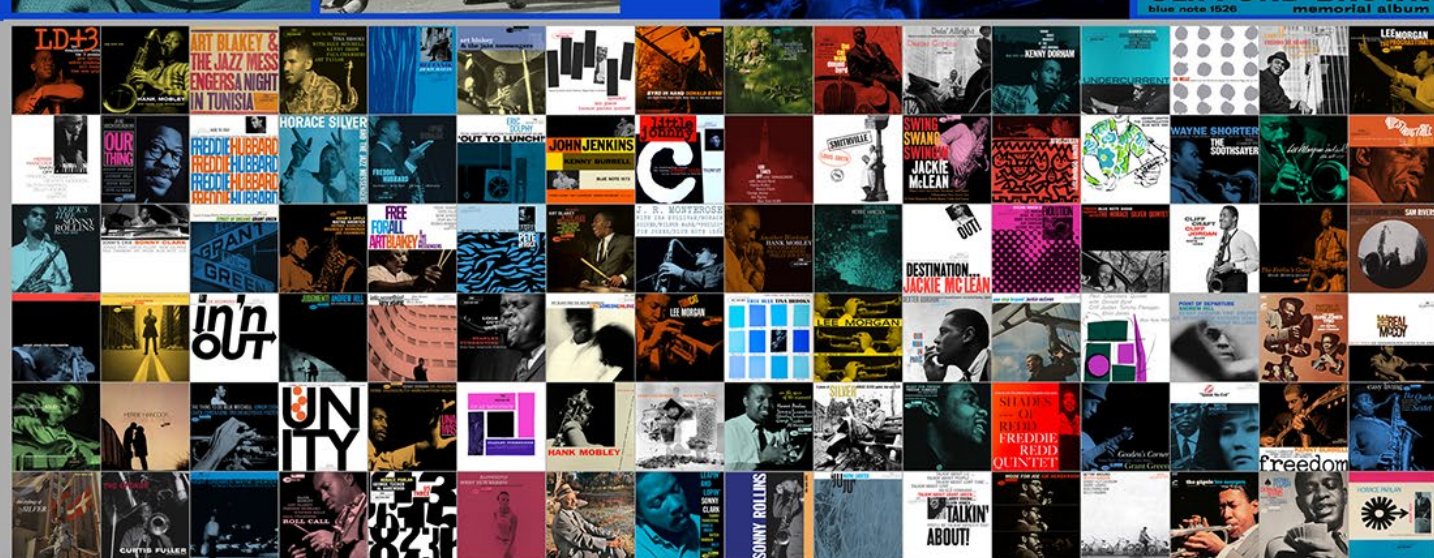
From 1993 to 2000, Billy Joe teamed with his guitar-ace son Eddy while making five albums in the band known as Shaver. *Shaver's Jewels (The Best of Shaver)* cherry-picks 17 tracks from that era in which Billy Joe is the rough-hewn poet laureate at the mic while Eddy is the virtuosic country-rock version of Eddie Van Halen. They deliver melancholy acoustic ballads and full-tilt electric rave-ups. A number of cuts are magnificent. They are also heart-breaking. Eddy died of a heroin overdose in 2000 at the age of 38. This compilation stands as a reminder of a terrific talent cut short and the fruitful artistic partnership he forged with his father.

Billy Joe's best songwriting tackles his complicated past with a mesh of rural vernacular, confession, humor, and spiritual insight. He's a roadhouse firebrand, a rueful sinner that regrets his failures as a husband and father, a badass that cries, an aging son that yearns for long-gone ghosts. As Eddy unleashes blistering machine-gun riffs on the kick-ass country-rocker "Georgia On a Fast Train," Billy Joe's hardscrabble lyrics tumble out in a torrent: "I just thought I'd mention/My grandma's old-age pension/Is the reason why I'm standing here today."

Unfortunately, not everything here lives up to Billy Joe's gold standard. A stronger curatorial hand would have edited out the throwaway joke "Leavin' Amarillo." The father-son duet "Blood Is Thicker Than Water" addresses old angers but feels subpar and crudely drawn.

Thankfully, such sour notes are few, with the nostalgic ode "Tramp On Your Street" and a capella prayer "Son of Calvary" making up for any missteps. On "Live Forever," Eddy gently picks guitar while Billy Joe stretches into a poetic dream about eternal life. "I will always be around/Just like the songs I leave behind me," he sings in a muted, parched twang.

He's right. The song, along with the most memorable cuts collected here, comprise a timeless musical legacy. —**Chrissie Dickinson**



BLUE NOTE The Definitive 45 rpm Reissue Series
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Photo courtesy of Atlantic

Donny Hathaway's voice was a commanding high baritone, and even though he had almost perfect control over that instrument, he used it to express deep vulnerability. While his work may not receive the same amount of crossover acclaim as some of his R&B contemporaries, Stevie Wonder, Curtis Mayfield, and Aretha Franklin have praised his brilliance as a composer, producer, and keyboardist. So have artists as diverse as Amy Winehouse and Herbie Hancock.

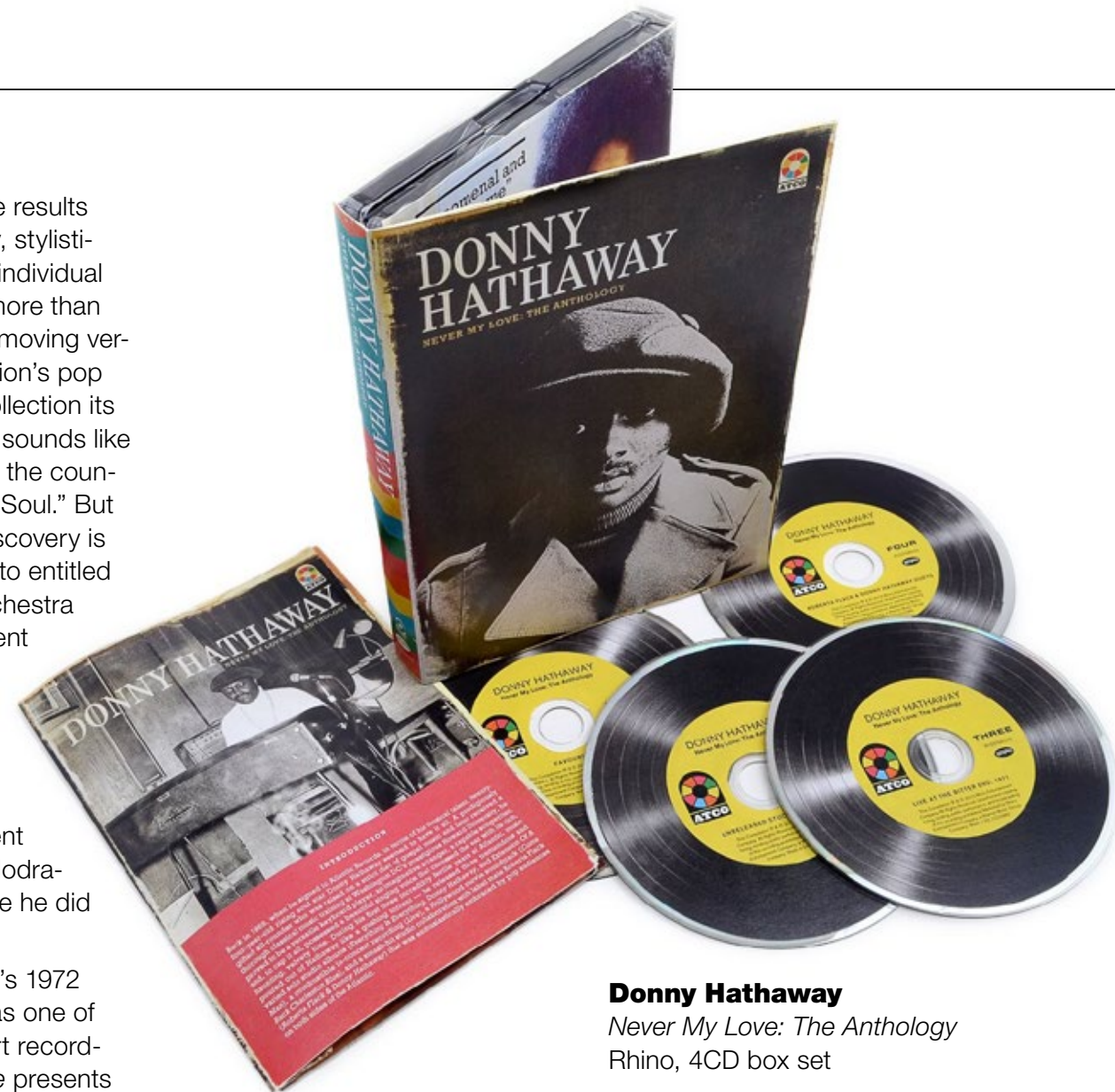
Had just Hathaway's scant recordings been collected in one box, it would have been a fine tribute. But the four-disc *Never My Love: The Anthology* goes further. It contains 13 recently unearthed studio tracks and an unreleased concert from 1971. A disc containing his more familiar songs presents them in acoustically superior mono mixes and singles' versions. The contents make this assemblage essential, even for fans that own all of his previous albums.

Hathaway's 1969 duets with June Conquest (songs he co-wrote with Mayfield) open the set as the first disc highlights his stunning creative streak when he was in his mid 20s. Written with Leroy Hutson, Hathaway's "The Ghetto" is a soul-jazz mini-epic built up from the bass line. His "This Christmas" from 1970 remains the ultimate R&B seasonal anthem. Constant December radio airplay has not dampened its warmth. While Hathaway wasn't the first to perform "A Song For You" and "Giving Up," his soaring gospel-trained voice still owns them.

The second disc, comprised of Hathaway's unreleased studio recordings, is fascinating, even as the reason why they've been left on the shelf remains heartbreaking. Crippling depression prevented the singer from completing albums throughout much of

the 1970s. While the results are, understandably, stylistically scattered, the individual performances are more than solid. He delivers a moving version of the Association's pop hit that gives this collection its title. Hathaway also sounds like he's having fun with the country-tinged "A Lot Of Soul." But the most striking discovery is a 20-minute concerto entitled "ZYXYGY." A full orchestra roars through different contrasting movements that glide between surprising key changes. As a conductor, Hathaway sounds confident enough to keep melodrama in check, just like he did as a singer.

While Hathaway's 1972 *Live* album stands as one of the key R&B concert recordings, *Never My Love* presents an alternate version. *Live* was pieced together from concerts that Hathaway and his group performed at the Troubadour in Los Angeles and Bitter End in New York during the summer and fall of 1971. This set presents other takes from the Bitter End, some of which are performed at a more moderate tempo. Slower pacing seems to highlight Hathaway's electric piano improvisations on his cover of Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On." His mournful tone adds a new dimension to Gary McFarland's "Sack Full Of Dreams" (not included on *Live*).



Donny Hathaway
Never My Love: The Anthology
Rhino, 4CD box set

And Hathaway's band sounds just as strong here. Guitarist Cornell Dupree answers the leader's vocal lines with the kind of bluesy fills he delivered on Franklin's *Amazing Grace* a few months later. Drummer Fred White and percussionist Earl DeRouen lock down the polyrhythms while Willie Weeks' solos redefine the bassist's role in R&B.

Of course, Hathaway was also a soul traditionalist, especially in his popular duets with Roberta Flack, which fill

the fourth disc. Their "Be Real Black For Me" is a plea; lesser singers would've turned it into a demand. Charles Waring's excellent liner notes include Flack's recent recollections of her reunion with Hathaway to record what became his final tracks. After their session on January 13, 1979, he fell to his death from a New York hotel room at age 33. *Never My Love* suggests his potential may have been just beginning.

—**Aaron Cohen**



Purple Snow: Forecasting the Minneapolis Sound

Numero Group, 4LP box set or 2CD

● Purchase LP from Music Direct

A

musical revolution doesn't happen in a vacuum, even when artist at its center is Prince. Like the Beatles and Liverpool or Nirvana and Seattle, Prince and Minneapolis constitute one of the few artist/city relationships where sound and location are intertwined. Paisley Park, First Avenue, Calhoun Square: Prince's catalog offers an aural tour of the city and its surroundings. And since the release of *Purple Rain* in 1984, a very distinct Prince mix of R&B, funk, and rock n' roll has defined the Minneapolis sound.



Flyte Time

Chicago reissue house Numero Group seeks to unravel more of the connection. The 32-track compilation *Purple Snow: Forecasting the Minneapolis Sound* starts a few paces back from when Prince became a cultural force and looks at what happened with Minneapolis funk and R&B before, during, and just after Prince began starring in Hollywood films. Equally messy, sexy, loose, and groovy, the anthology celebrates a community—one that even at its most amateur is still beautifully freaky and weird.

Little-known gems abound, such as the Prophets of Peace's "Get it On" during which it sounds as if the whole town is invited to share in elastic grooves and a saxophone-inflected good time. Elsewhere, Quiet Storm's "Can You Deal With It" is minimalist guitar rap, a song that feels like an early blueprint even if its tone is that of a basement recording. Hardly a song goes by without some intergalactic keyboard work, be it squiggly, springy sounds of The Girls' "I've Got My Eyes on You" or the hypnotizing, repetitive alarms of the Styfle Band's "If You Love Me."

(continued)



Andre Cymone Group

The enthusiasts at Numero Group are musical archeologists of the highest caliber (a 144-page hardbound book is included in the vinyl set), and many moments on *Purple Snow* show the early strands that would define numerous hits throughout the 80s—either from the Purple One himself or one of his star-making peers, such as songwriters Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis.

“Somebody Said,” from a teenaged Andre Cymone, a one-time Prince collaborator, illustrates early invasions of synthpop on the scene while tracks from *Flyte Time* and *Mind & Matter* boast credits from Jam and Lewis.

Sure, a before-they-were famous curiosity is at play, but it’s funk balladry and it swings. While it may be impossible to re-define a myth, Numero Group provides plenty of worthwhile music was simmering outside the Paisley Park gates. —**Todd Martens**



Etna = Time Travel



Lyra designer Jonathan Carr is his own worst taskmaster. Two years ago he drove himself to create Atlas, a new phono cartridge which would surpass even his previous world-renowned Titan i. No sooner was this accomplished, than Jonathan set about following the smashing success of Atlas with a lower-cost design whose performance would also recalibrate the world’s understanding of the LP, and just how convincingly a phono cartridge can reach into the groove and serve up life, love and music.

Etna is the proud result of Jonathan’s insight, inspiration and very hard work. Brought to life by Lyra master craftsman Yoshinori Mishima, Etna features the most sophisticated application of Lyra’s core technologies, including the asymmetric design and X-shaped coil formers which debuted in Atlas. Etna is built from a solid titanium core encased in an outer body of aircraft-grade aluminum. This “constrained-layer” construction ensures that no single material’s sonic signature rises to aural awareness.

Etna is another astonishing advance on the always-moving frontier of LP playback, a ‘time machine’ of a moving-coil cartridge, bringing a previous musical performance to living, breathing life in the oh-so-beautiful here and now.



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ATLAS



TONE MUSIC EDITOR BOB GENDRON'S TOP ROCK AND POP ALBUMS OF 2013

It's that time of year when music critics of every stripe pick what they consider the best records of the past 12 months. At *TONE*, we're no different. Here are the 25 studio albums from 2013 that Music Editor Bob Gendron feels you should hear again and again—and five big-name releases you should avoid.

25. Mark Lanegan *Imitations*
24. Pistol Annies *Annie Up*
23. Bad Sports *Bras*
22. David Bowie *The Next Day*
21. Savages *Silence Yourself*
20. Sky Ferreira *Night Time, My Time*
19. Rhye *Woman*
18. Neko Case *The Worse Things...*
17. Superchunk *I Hate Music*
16. Windhand *Soma*
15. Trombone Shorty *Say That to Say This*
14. Disclosure *Settle*
13. Kurt Vile *Wakin' on a Pretty Daze*
12. Mudhoney *Vanishing Point*
11. Chance the Rapper *Acid Rap*
10. Blood Orange *Cupid Deluxe*
9. Waxahatchee *Cerulean Salt*
8. Bombino *Nomad*
7. Richard Thompson *Electric*
6. Queens of the Stone Age *...Like Clockwork*
5. Daft Punk *Random Access Memories*
4. Mikal Cronin *MCII*
3. Kacey Musgraves *Same Trailer, Different Park*
2. Arctic Monkeys *AM*
1. Jason Isbell *Southeastern*

Year's Biggest Disappointments:

Flaming Lips *The Terror*
 Lady Gaga *Artpop*
 M.I.A. *Matangi*
 Nine Inch Nails *Hesitation Marks*
 Pearl Jam *Lightning Bolt*

FEATURE

MAJOR FLEXIBILITY

The Ortofon TA-110 Tonearm

By Jeff Dorgay



The further you go down the analog rabbit hole, the more you realize that there isn't one perfect setup to accommodate your ever-growing record collection. There are mono records, records with pre-1960s EQ, perfectly mastered records and dreadfully mastered records, and that's only scratching the surface—literally.

Having the ability to use more than one phono cartridge to accommodate these varied conditions makes it easier to more fully enjoy your record collection, or it might drive you to madness. If the former intrigues you, consider the TA-110 tonearm from Danish manufacturer Ortofon, which is priced at about \$1,970 (€1,450). It's gorgeous, it works well and it's easy to setup. Plus, it accepts a wide range of screw-in headshells (just like the ones that you see on a Technics SL-1200). And Ortofon has a variety of these for you to choose from, allowing you to further customize your table.

FEATURE

**Mega Versatility**

We've been using the TA-110 for the better part of this year on the AVID Ingenium turntable with excellent results; we've also tried it on the AVID Volvere SP and a modded Technics SL-1200. Much to the horror of Thorens TD-124 users who swear by vintage tonearms, the TA-110 also makes a great mate for this table and is a fantastic vehicle for Ortofon's SPU series of cartridges. This is a cracking tonearm indeed.

Instead of using one big-bucks phono cartridge, I submit that three or four cartridges with different tonal characteristics will help you enjoy a wider cross section of records. Think of your phono cartridge as your system's tone control—which may be heresy to some, but don't you want to have fun with your vinyl collection? Exploring some different options is definitely the

way to go. And the removable headshell option with the TA-110 makes it a snap to swap cartridges and reset your table. Besides, those carbon fiber and wooden headshells just look so damn cool.

Consider using two of the same cartridge, with one a mono version. That way, instead of resetting VTA or tracking force, you can just make a quick swap. Going back and forth between the Lyra Kleos and the Kleos Mono cartridges makes it so easy to enjoy some vintage jazz recordings and some early '60s mono rock records—and it makes seeking out mono pressings all the more intriguing. Convenience is the way to enjoyment, my friends. There are a handful of other cartridges that exist in mono and stereo versions, and the TA-110 make swapping them a breeze. *(continued)*



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FEATURE



Easy Setup

Most major turntable manufacturers will supply a mounting plate for the TA-110 (if necessary), or you can use the template supplied to mount it to the table yourself. This is very easy on the Thorens TD-124 and TD-125, as they use wooden arm boards.

The Ortofon TA-110 is a 9-inch tonearm, with an effective arm length of 231 mm, so it's not outside the realm of adjustability. We follow Ortofon's suggestion of working with the Baerwald alignment parameters and achieve excellent results. The standard arm is optimized for setting a tracking force of 0 to 3 grams, but for those

wanting to take advantage of Ortofon's SPU MC cartridges with integral headshell, there is an additional weight that slips around the standard counterweight. This then allows up to 4 grams of tracking force, which is necessary for the SPU to be applied.

All parameters are easily adjustable—VTA, VTF and overhang—thanks to a good alignment tool and particularly good instructions. Ortofon should be complimented on going the extra mile to provide a well-written manual. Even if you are a novice turntablist, you should be able to set up the TA-110 on your own if you take your time.

The Sound

Thanks to the custom-designed rubber insert inside the arm tube, the TA-110 is very inert and does not exhibit the ringing that other similar-looking arms have produced in the past. While its S-curve shape is reminiscent of the tonearm on a Technics SL-1200, the similarity is only visual; the sound is in another universe entirely.

Some tonearms with removable headshells have a tendency to exhibit a bit of an upper bass suckout due to lack of rigidity, but the TA-110 does not suffer from this. Playing a handful of bass-heavy tracks at the beginning of

the listening sessions proves the tonearm to be a stellar performer. The opening track to the self-titled SBTRKT LP, "Heatwave," has the six 13-inch woofers of the GamuT S9 pair shaking the room with authority. During a recent visit to the Ortofon headquarters, Louis Dorio reminds me that Ortofon is the only cartridge manufacturer that makes their own rubber and rubber parts. This made the custom design of the internal damping on their arms very easy to accomplish in-house.

Moving along to some classic rock from Genesis and Pink Floyd confirms the initial impressions that this arm provides a great platform for a wide range of cartridges, and

it is a joy to swap between them quickly to sample different flavors of audio with ease.

Though the TA-110 is a thoroughly modern turntable in every way, its performance with the Ortofon SPU MC cartridge, the company's first design from the 1950s, will give you pause about wanting a modern cartridge, especially on the Thorens TD-124. This is a combination I keep coming back to, flipping through my favorites from the '60s. The Doors' "The End" sounds absolutely creepy when reproduced with the TA-110/SPU combination. The sound has plenty of air and weight, with a driving, almost torquey feel to it. *(continued)*

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FEATURE



Much like the difference between a 600 cc motorcycle and a full litre bike, the force behind the music is just so much greater. If you have a fair collection of records from this time period, I encourage you to investigate an SPU, should you invest in the TA-110 arm.

An Arm You Can Live With

Sure, there are much more expensive and exotic tonearms available, but we submit that the Ortofon TA-110, at less than \$2,000, is a wonderful balance of price and performance. You can easily mount it on another table

as your budget and record collection grow. And with a wide range of headshells, the TA-110 lets you investigate as many different cartridges as your wallet and patience allow.

Pairing top build quality and Ortofon's excellent customer support with a reasonable price tag (along with the company's own great line of highly compatible cartridges) makes for an award-winning combination. We are happy to give the Ortofon TA-110 tonearm one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2013. ●

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20 Music Treasures to Savor from 2013

By Bob Gendron

Digital music sales may have surpassed physical sales for the first time in history, but that didn't prevent imprints big and small from issuing a number of shelf-worthy box sets and deluxe reissues to which listeners will want to return for years to come. Music-leaning bibliophiles also have reason to celebrate. Amidst a glut of flawed releases, a handful of books shed new light on their topics by enhancing our connection to and understanding of the artists, producers, and labels responsible for making enduring music. Without further delay, here are the 20 treasures that most stood out in 2013.



Jacques Brel *Suivre l'Etoile*

Serge Gainsbourg reigns as France's pop provocateur and lusty experimentalist, but the Belgian-born Jacques Brel remains the king of the chanson. His songwriting influence continues to range well beyond francophone borders while the quality of his voice and phrasing place him on a platform with the greatest singers in history. Completely remastered and available as an import from Canadian retailers, the numbered and limited 21-disc *Suivre l'Etoile* (Barclay/Universal) collects nearly everything he recorded and adds extras along with gorgeous packaging and informative French-language book. Quintessential. This is the 2013 box set to grab if space or budget limits you to just one.

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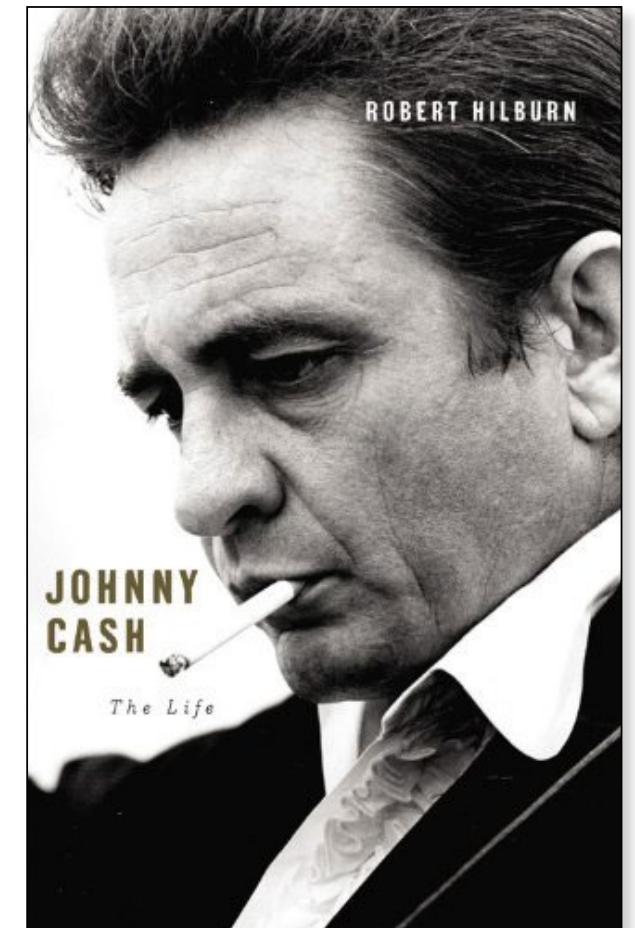
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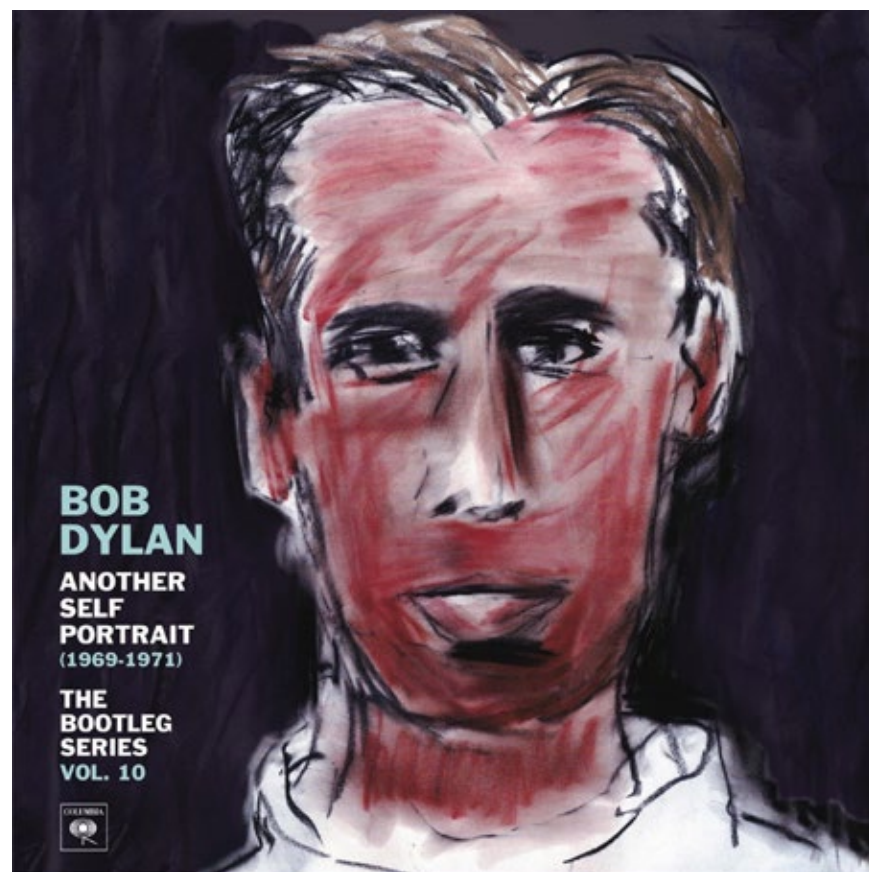
Johnny Cash: The Life

Written by Robert Hilburn, who spent three years researching and writing, the 688-page brick *Johnny Cash: The Life* (Little, Brown and Company) comes as near as the public will ever get to seeing an authoritative biography on the celebrated albeit conflicted country icon. The former Los Angeles Times music critic approaches his topic with requisite balance, accessibility, and context, exposing Cash as a human being and delving deep into his music. Along the way, Hilburn exposes popular myths and reminds readers there's no substitute for in-depth reporting, savvy editing, and comprehensive interviews.



The Clash Sound System

Designed as the end-all-be-all last word on the Clash, *Sound System* (Sony Legacy) collects all but one of the seminal English group's studio albums and adds several discs filled with outtakes, B-sides, demos, and live performances. Everything is newly remastered and packaged in a box that resembles a boom box. A smaller, more manageable and self-descriptive *5 Album Studio Set* is also available, but as *TONE* contributor Todd Martens concludes in his think piece on the 12-disc extravaganza in Issue 57, *Sound System* is the anthology that best makes the case for why the Clash still matters.



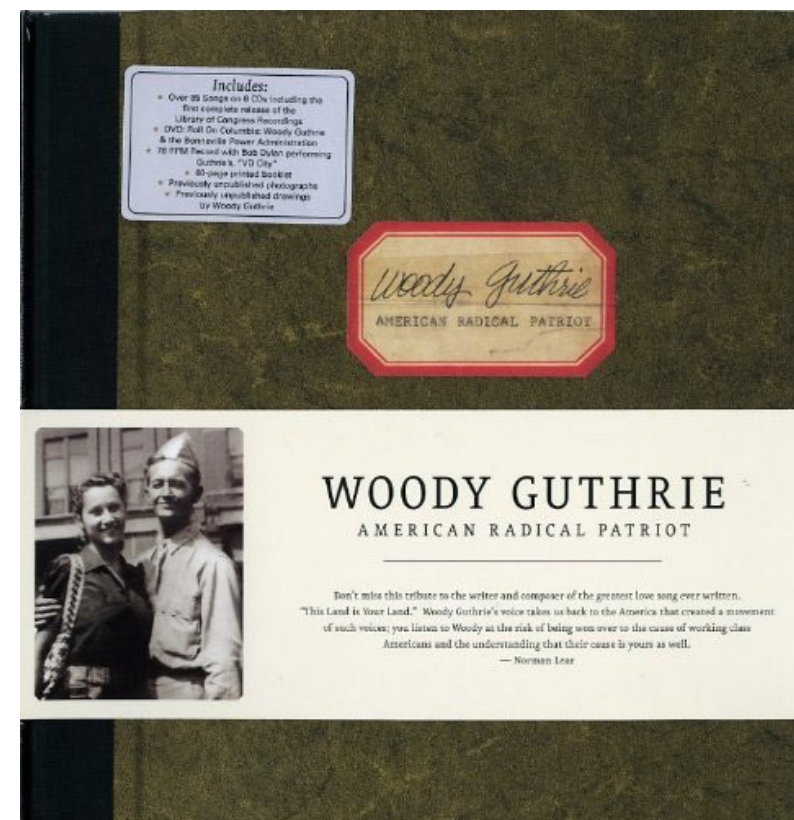
Bob Dylan *Another Self Portrait (1969-1971): The Bootleg Series Vol. 10*

Bob Dylan's latest Bootleg Series installment shows exactly why the Bard remains music's most confounding figure. Assembling outtakes, demos, and alternate versions recorded during the period when Dylan made the splendid *Nashville* and followed it with 1970's dreadful *Self Portrait* and mostly forgettable *New Morning*, *Another Self Portrait (1969-1971)* (Sony Legacy) unfurls with acoustic simplicity, charming intimacy, and stripped-down rusticity that advance the emotions of the songs with supreme sincerity. Why didn't he release what's here instead of committing self-sabotage? This two-disc compendium draws you closer to the educated guesses behind his rationale.



Grateful Dead *Sunshine Daydream*

More than 20 years after the Grateful Dead began releasing archival concerts, the most-requested show from its canon finally emerged in the form of the sonically astute three-CD *Sunshine Daydream* (Grateful Dead/Rhino). Viewed by Deadheads as one of the five-greatest performances of the band's career, the August 1972 gig finds the San Francisco ensemble playing a benefit for the Springfield Creamery amidst record-setting heat in Oregon. Seemingly spurred on by searing temperatures that warp the tuning of its instruments, the sextet goes for broke and comes up roses. An accompanying DVD includes a concert film and slew of hippie nudity.



Woody Guthrie

American Radical Patriot

American Radical Patriot (Rounder) isn't the year's most ballyhooed "historical" box set. That designation belongs to *The Rise & Fall of Paramount Records, Volume One, 1917-1927* (Revenant/Third Man), for which \$400 gets you six LPs, books, 200-plus restored ads and images, an oak cabinet container, and access to 800 digital tracks. As scholarly items go, it's a veritable curiosity shop. Yet this six-disc offering of Woody Guthrie's first recordings—songs and interviews, many unreleased—for the Library of Congress and several government sponsors wins out by way of transcending niche markets and speaking to human conditions that resonate today.

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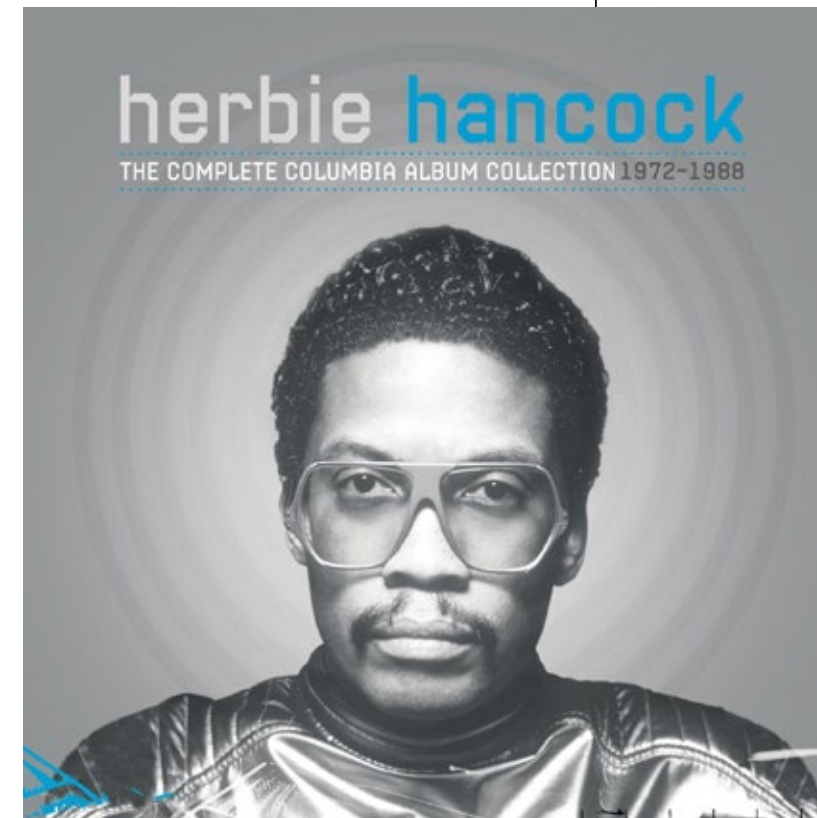
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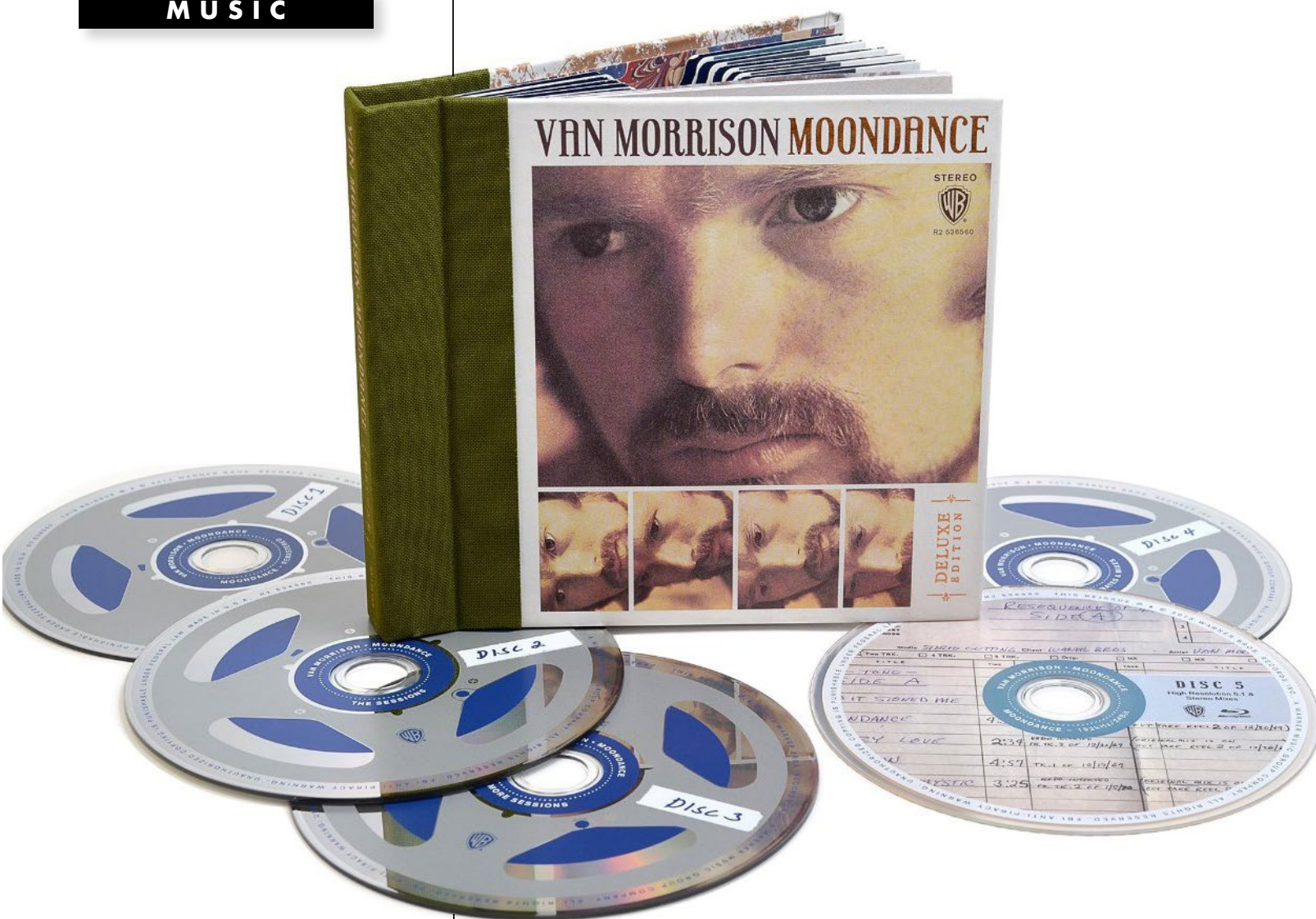
Herbie Hancock *The Complete Columbia Album Collection 1973-1988*

Caveat emptor: Save for hardcore Herbie Hancock devotees, anyone that listens to every note of the 34 discs in *The Complete Columbia Album Collection 1973-1988* (Sony Legacy) will undoubtedly find a few clunkers scattered amidst a wealth of creative genius. Such sense of discovery and wonder is part of the enjoyment afforded by this mind-boggling box set that holds 28 single albums and three double albums, eight previously only available overseas. Picking up where Miles Davis left off, Hancock surveys fusion, African music, funk, soul, and nearly everything in between on the way to charting a nonpareil career that eradicated limits and exploded possibilities.



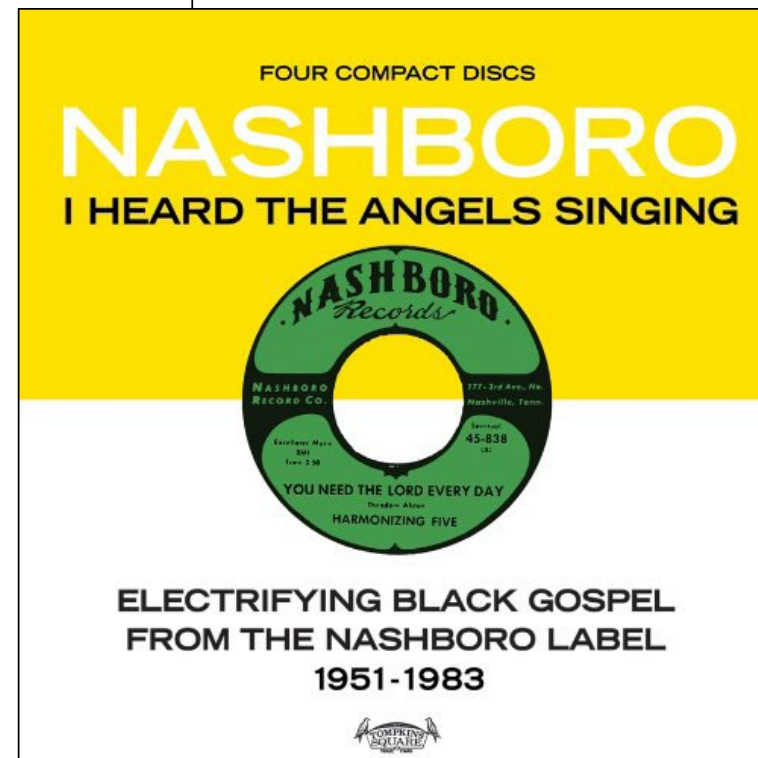
Donny Hathaway *Never My Love: The Anthology*

In his review of *Never My Love: The Anthology* (Rhino), esteemed TONE contributor Aaron Cohen notes Donny Hathaway never attained the first-name recognition of contemporaries such as Stevie Wonder and Marvin Gaye. Yet, as this smartly assembled box illustrates, the Chicago native belongs on the same pedestal afforded the familiar greats. Demonstrating why organization remains central to collections, the four-disc set showcases Hathaway as a six-tool player—an R&B hitmaker, bandleader, performer, musician, songwriter, and duet partner—by dividing his talents according to disc. Forget about crate digging for obscure soul treats; Hathaway is better than any local gem any reissue label could mine.



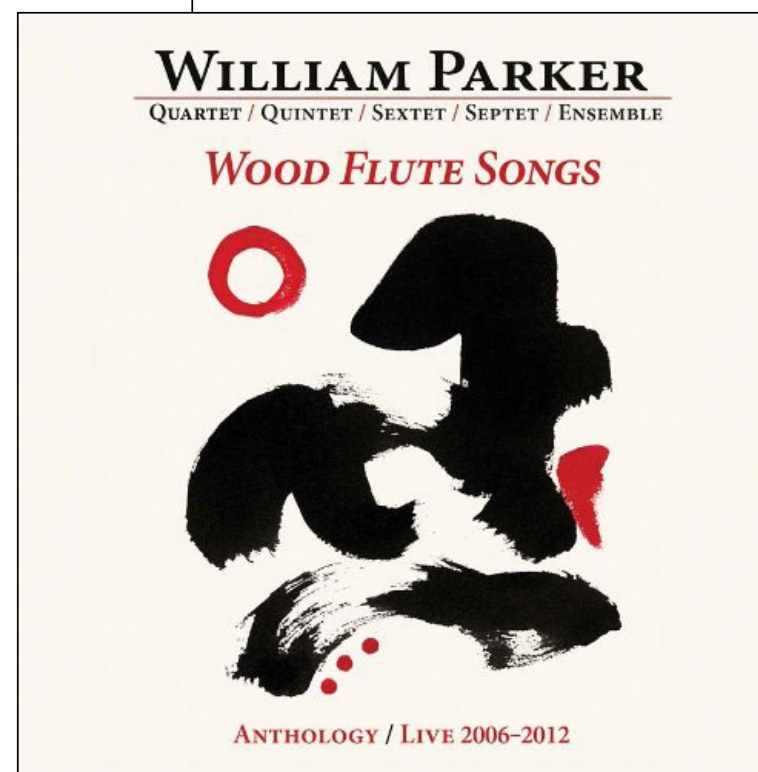
Van Morrison *Moondance: Deluxe Edition*

When an artist protests a label's decision to release an artifact, it's usually a sign that imperfections abound and that diehards stand to gain insight from the decision to raid the vaults. And so it goes with *Moondance: Deluxe Edition* (Rhino). Presenting the 1970 classic alongside 50 unreleased tracks, the five-disc set follows a tact similar to the Stooges' *Complete Fun House Sessions* and showcases differences—some minute, others significant—as the material evolves in the studio. A Blu-ray of *Moondance* whets audiophile appetites with high-resolution 24-bit/48k PCM stereo and DTS-HD Master Audio 5.1 surround.



I Heard the Angels Singing: Electrifying Black Gospel from the Nashboro Label 1951-1983

From the tiny label that delivered the excellent *This May Be My Last Time Singing: Raw African-American Gospel on 45RPM, 1957-1982* comes another stellar find. Featuring gatefold-LP packaging, *I Heard the Angels Singing: Electrifying Black Gospel from the Nashboro Label 1951-1983* (Tompkins Square) functions as an overview of the Nashville-based Nashboro Label owned and operated by Ernie Young during a period when gospel resounded in all corners of America. Gritty, energetic, and explosive, the music shouts with conviction and stomps with soulfulness. A majority of the artists are obscure, but that doesn't take away from the potency.



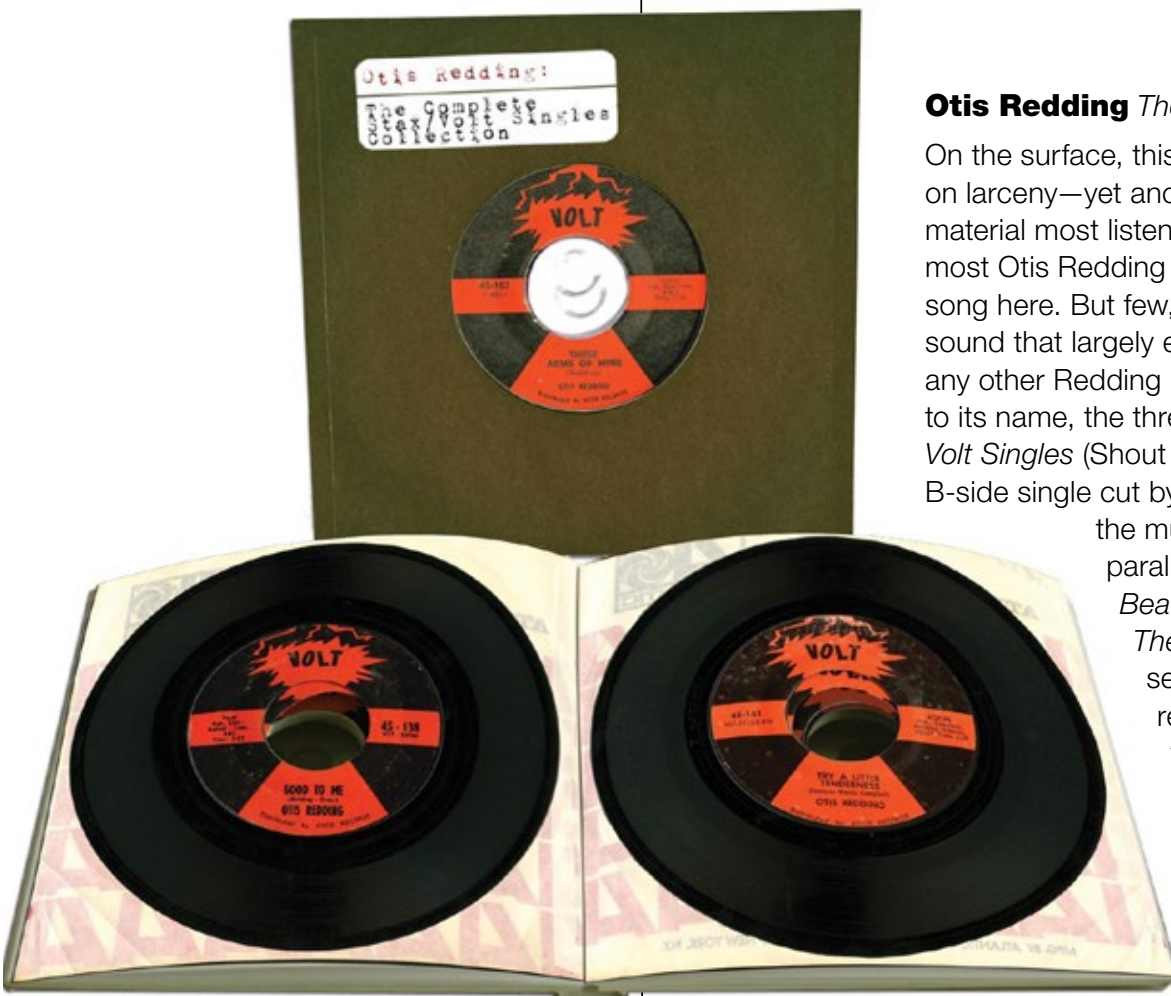
William Parker *Wood Flute Songs: Anthology/Live 2006-2012*

At its core, *Wood Flute Songs: Anthology/Live 2006-2012* (Aum Fidelity) comprises six brand-new albums from the renowned composer and bassist. Yet the eight-disc set is more—a thrilling oeuvre of the boundless creativity, abstract thinking, and daring innovation erupting in the modern jazz world. Surrounded by drummer Hamid Drake, saxophonist Rob Brown, and trumpeter Lewis Barnes on every outing, and joined by an assortment of similar adventurers for other live performances, Parker chases breathtaking beauty across songs that demand close listening and reward with repeat excellence.



Purple Snow: Forecasting the Minneapolis Sound

Reviewed by *TONE* critic and *Nirvana: The Complete Illustrated History* co-author Todd Martens in this issue, *Purple Snow: Forecasting the Minneapolis Sound* (Numero Group) should be a front-runner for the Best Album Notes Grammy Award. Augmented by a hardbound book and exhaustively researched 30,000-plus-word essay, the project documents the Twin Cities' funk scene during Prince's ascent in the late 70s. Spotlighting the Purple One's collaborators and songs from the bands of future chart-dominators Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis, pre-Time outfit Flyte Tyme, and numerous keyboard- and glam-soaked hopefuls, the four-LP (or two-disc) set contributes a worthwhile new chapter to America's ever-thickening soul history.



Otis Redding *The Complete Stax/Volt Singles*

On the surface, this three-disc volume borders on larceny—yet another repackaging job of material most listeners already own. And yes, most Otis Redding fans probably have every song here. But few, if any, possess it in mono sound that largely exceeds the fidelity present on any other Redding release, vinyl included. True to its name, the three-disc *The Complete Stax/Volt Singles* (Shout Factory) collects every A- and B-side single cut by the soul giant. Experiencing the music in its original, pure mixes parallels the impact made by *The Beatles in Mono* and Bob Dylan's *The Original Mono Recordings* sets. The sonics are comparably revealing, present, and lifelike, while the timeless songs define a style.

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Respect Yourself: Stax Records and the Soul Explosion

Author Robert Gordon realizes the secret to any good book is a fascinating story told spun with compelling prose and skillful narration. His *Respect Yourself: Stax Records and the Soul Explosion* (Bloomsbury USA) succeeds on both counts, ridding on the entire history of the Memphis label that birthed the raw soul style that countered Motown's splashier variety. While the 480-page book might be too involved for casual observers, Gordon wades into the promotional tactics and collective ethic that made the integrated Stax more than a label and an advocate for the racial and social changes that would later come.



Sly and the Family Stone Higher!

Miles Davis looked to Sly and the Family Stone when he began assembling the ideas that resulted in *Bitches Brew*, the epic 1970 double album that, for better or worse, stands as the signpost for jazz fusion. Indeed, as evidenced by this engrossing four-disc anthology of classics and a few rarities, the multi-racial and co-ed band blended funk, gospel, rock, dance, and soul elements in transformative fashions equaled by few before or since. *Higher!* (Sony Legacy) also contains a wonderfully annotated 104-page book that puts the group in proper perspective. As prominent scribe Andy Downing states in Issue 57 of *TONE*: "*Higher!* is a long-overdue reminder of why Stone deserved far better than his current standing suggests."



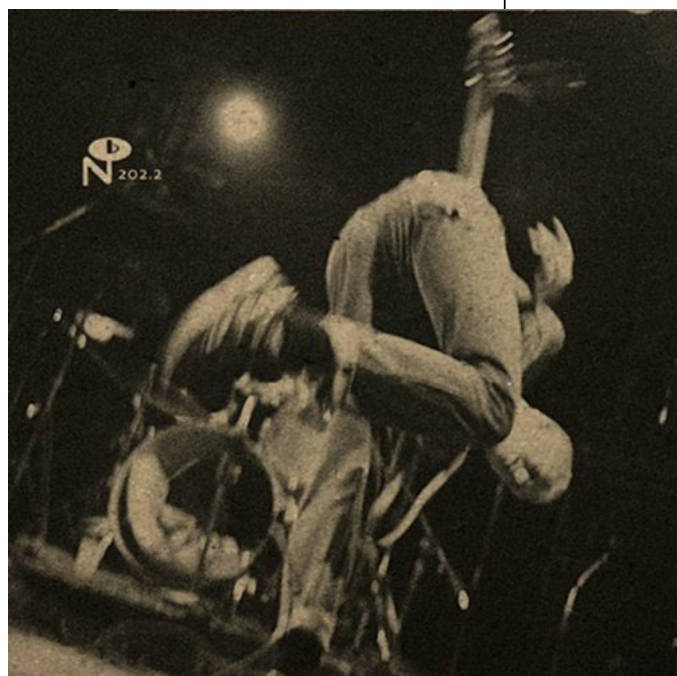
Paul Simon The Complete Album Collection

Provided the 72-year-old Paul Simon doesn't make another record, *The Complete Album Collection* (Sony Legacy) will endure as one-stop shopping for his sparkling solo catalog. Spanning 1965's oft-forgotten *The Paul Simon Songbook* through 2011's well-received *So Beautiful or So What*, the 15-disc pint-sized box adds a few extras and studio releases absent on 2004's Rhino-issued *The Studio Recordings 1972-2000*. A 52-page book and 37 previously unreleased cuts seemingly cover all the necessary bases. But, no: The lack of the original version of "Slip Slidin' Away" is inexcusable given the otherwise admirable breadth on display.



Smashing Pumpkins *The Aeroplane Flies High*

Reinforcing the original 33-song five-EP set with a whopping 71 new tracks, the recent deluxe edition of *The Aeroplane Flies High* (Virgin) is the latest head-turning entry in the Smashing Pumpkins' ongoing reissue series. Not only does the six-disc volume make the case that the group managed to release two first-rate double albums within the span of a year, the strength of most of the material and performances argues on behalf of the band outshining all of its contemporaries with a burst of creativity, ambition, and playfulness that now borders on extinction in an age when most artists can't even concentrate on delivering one single great album. Billy Corgan's track-by-track liner notes are honest, insightful, and humorous.



Unwound *Kid Is Gone*

Chicago-based Numero Group goes about reissues the right way. That is, the imprint aims for obsessive completeness or it doesn't do the project at all. How else to explain the decision to release four volumes chronicling the output of Unwound, a noisy band beloved by a cult following and yet off the radars off "alternative" stations during its decade-plus-long career. For the uninitiated, the three-LP *Kid Is Gone* (Numero Group) serves as a primer of the post-hardcore angularity, dissonance, and abrasion that epitomized Olympia's 1990s D.I.Y. sound. Radio broadcasts, basement recordings, 7-inch singles, cassette-only demos, and the band's debut occupy the series' initial entry, warehoused in a chipboard box.

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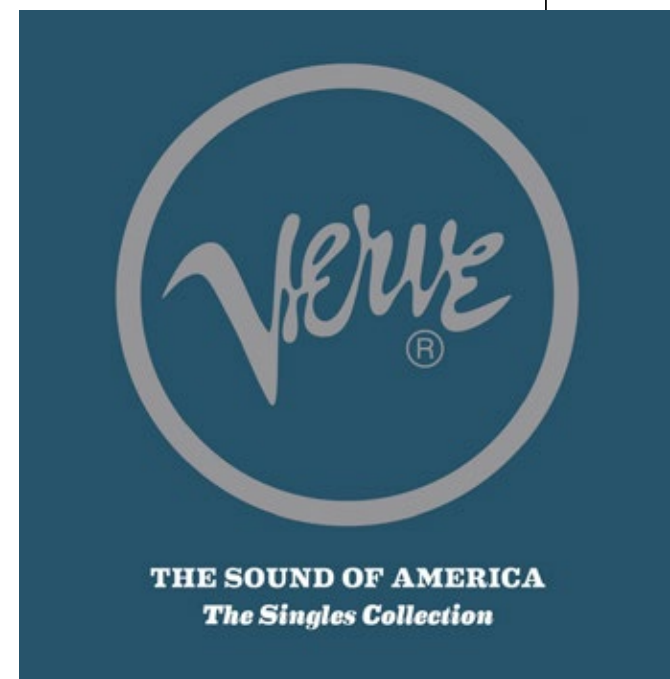
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MUSIC



Velvet Underground *White Light/White Heat 45th Ann. Super Deluxe Edition*

Lavish reissues of individual albums have become de rigueur in an industry desperate for new sources of revenue and eager to capitalize on nostalgia. The Velvet Underground's colossally influential sophomore record is one efforts warranting such treatment. Developed with the cooperation of band members John Cale and the late Lou Reed, *White Light/White Heat 45th Ann. Super Deluxe Edition* (Universal) is available as both a two-LP set and three-disc collection. The latter wins out on the basis of its 56-page hardbound book, four previously unheard 1967 performances, and mono and stereo configurations of the original album. Run, don't walk, when presented with the opportunity to hear "Sister Ray" live.



Verve: The Sound of America

Make room on the coffee table. Verve: *The Sound of America* (Thames & Hudson), Richard Havers' 400-page plunge into Norman Granz' famed jazz label, is the kind of tome that encourages late-night listening sessions and extended explorations of catalogs. The home of Ella Fitzgerald, Charlie Parker, Billie Holiday, and dozens of other luminaries comes to life through exemplary photographs and memorabilia ranging from contracts to seven-inch singles to 78s. Artist biographies, annotated histories, and quotes supply journalistic substance to coincide with the sexy, visual-heavy presentation. Worth it alone to peruse the countless album covers reproduced in exquisite detail. ●

THE WINO

By Monique Meadows

The Wino's Post-Holiday Picks

Chances are you've spent a good portion of this holiday season sipping buckets of generic Chardonnay or mass-produced red Zin blends at all the parties and gatherings. Interesting wines don't always come out for the high-volume festivities. Also during the holiday season, I find that my customers gift their friends and family nice wine while selecting for themselves something low-cost to balance out the holiday shopping budget, all the while lusting after more expensive or intriguing bottles. So here are four wine picks – two from California, two from Washington State – for that post-holiday time when you've either spent almost all your cash but have enough for one nice bottle because you're worth it, or you've got extra to splurge and you're feeling bold. Start your New Year with a bit of self-appreciation and wine adventure.



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TONE STYLE

**Hobo Wine Company
Folk Machine**

Chenin Blanc 2012

Mendocino, CA \$17



Kenny Likitprakong makes wine without his own winery nor his own vineyard. Avid skateboarder/snowboarder turned adventurous and respected winemaker, he sources only organic grapes from the best sites and makes wines in small lots at select wineries. He sells his wines under three labels – Banyan Wines, Hobo, and Folk Machine – under the Hobo Wine Co. umbrella and cherishes a sort of “hobo spirit” to his endeavors. “Hobo is my tribute and homage to a freedom and an era that I grew up romanticizing,” states Likitprakong. “The hobo had become a relic in the story of our expanding country. Like all good heroes, I figured they deserved their place in history and on wine bottles. Instead of becoming a hobo, I became a ‘Hobo Winemaker.’”

Chenin Blanc from California? Yes, indeed! While the grape's home is France's Loire Valley, Kenny's Chenin Blanc grapes are from a 40-year-old vineyard at a 700-foot elevation in Mendocino. His Mendocino bottling is a nice pick in a sea of West Coast Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc offerings, and gives crisp acidity, flavors of apples and quince, and fantastic versatility with food.

K Vintners

Viognier 2012

Columbia Valley, WA \$22

When a winemaker's notes describe a wine as having "a seductive nose with Meyer lemon, sandalwood giving way to a rich palate of confectionary fruit, dried orange rind, honeydew melon and beeswax," you take notice. Then again, anything winemaker Charles Smith does is hard to ignore. Former rock band/concert manager turned artisan/pioneer winemaker, and 2009 *Food & Wine* Winemaker of the Year, Smith has given a French grape a dose of Walla Walla hospitality. Not familiar with Viognier? Meet an aromatic, sexy white wine that stands out from the usual white wine suspects at cocktail parties and dining tables. I recommend it often when someone is looking for an interesting white that will work effortlessly at a gathering and navigate a vast mix of personalities and food. Viognier is like that intriguing party guest who quietly surprises, impresses and leaves people asking, "who was that?" This 2012 is barrel-fermented for three months, and the lees are stirred to give it minerality and complexity. Smart label graphics and boldly individualistic wines are a Smith trademark. High scores from wine critics usually follow. The 2012 just received 90 points from *Wine Spectator*.



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Robert Harley
The Absolute Sound, February 2014

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What HiFi, December 2012

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TONE STYLE

**Red Dog Vineyard
Talisman Cellars**

Pinot Noir 2008

Sonoma, CA \$48

If you've been longing for a well-made American Pinot Noir, possibly one made on a small scale with devotion to the vineyard, the soil and the grapes, treat yourself to a Talisman Pinot Noir, made by husband and wife team Scott and Marta Rich. Bottlings are typically only 300 cases per wine; 335 were produced of the 2008 Red Dog Vineyard. Each vineyard site is selected for its unique characteristics. Red Dog, a sustainably farmed vineyard, sits high on the northwest side of Sonoma Mountain and sees almost daily coastal fog and cool Pacific air, the kind of home where the Pinot Noir grape thrives. The 2008 Red Dog Vineyard Pinot was barrel-aged for 20 months, 60% of which was new French oak. Cherry and dark berry aromas and flavors mingle with complex spice and smokey notes, leading to a lingering finish. This silky, smooth Pinot Noir is anticipated to age extremely well, possibly not hitting its peak for 8–10 years. I wouldn't wait that long to enjoy this wine. It opens up in the glass to deliver a deliciously rich, dense Pinot. 94 points Pinot Report, 90 points Stephan Tanzer's *International Wine Cellar*.



Charles Smith Wines
"King Coal Stoneridge Vineyard"

Cabernet/Syrah 2009

Columbia Valley, WA \$99

Charles Smith's "King Coal" blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah is both an indulgence and an adventure in intensity and complexity. Grapes for this intriguing powerhouse are sourced from the Stoneridge Vineyard northeast of Washington State's Wahluke Slope AVA. Its rocky soils are made up of six different types of soil, including large rocks of fractured basalt, all lending character to the vineyard's fruit. The 2008 inaugural vintage of King Coal received 96 points from *Wine Enthusiast* describing it as "a unique and delicious wine, seamless and complex. The flavors are amazingly detailed, with layer upon layer of candied fruit, raisins, Bourbon barrel, Asian spice, ginger, toast and more." The 2009, aged for 26 months, partially in new French oak barrels, continues the sensory experience with deep, intense color, beguiling aromatics and notes of herb, tobacco, currants and black olive. This is a big wine with oak, tannins and structure, led by 70% Cabernet Sauvignon complemented by 30% Syrah, and garnered 95 points from *Wine Enthusiast*: "Silky and seamless on entry, it pushes into a wine of power and punch." If you're thinking of putting one of these bold Charles Smith-designed bottles on your wine rack or in your cellar, it should age well. ●



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Nikon Df

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Nikon heads down the vintage camera trail with the new Df, borrowing heavily from the aesthetic of the old, fully manual FM, which many of us grew up with, and then borrowing further from the new F4, taking its 16 megapixel FX-format CMOS sensor to make up the heart and soul of this camera. For those not familiar, FX format is full frame, so all of your Nikkor lenses paint the same-sized picture that they would on a 35mm film camera.

The resulting hybrid is a winner on all levels but one. It functions beautifully, but the body is decidedly lightweight and a bit plasticky feeling. Granted, your Dad's FM didn't go up to ISO 12,800, but you *could* pound a nail into a 2x4 with it, and that does say something about mechanical robustness. We'll see just how well the Df holds up long-term in the TONE workflow, shooting in and out of the studio. One thing is for certain: the image quality is fab, and this month's cover image of the VPI Classic Direct a perfect example.

Hopefully, by the time you read this article, Adobe will have updated the RAW Capture plug-in so that you can take full advantage of shooting in this mode. For now, those wanting to shoot in RAW mode will have to do so via Nikon's somewhat clunky NX Capture software.



Well-suited to legacy lenses, the Df allows you to preset the type of lens by focal length, aperture and whether it is an AI or non-AI lens, so the metering system can work correctly. Non-AI lenses work with spot and center-weighted metering only, but still work perfectly, which is not always the case with the D800. There's a lot of life left in that old glass, and for a while you should still be able to pick up some of these manual focus lenses for a song on eBay. It's amazing how sturdy these lenses feel compared to the composite materials used for the barrels of modern Nikon lenses.

Proof in the pictures

As mentioned in the beginning of this review, what makes the Df really shine is the 16.7

megapixel, full frame FX sensor, lifted directly from the F4 camera. The Df does not share the F4's 11fps shooting speed, only shooting 5fps (which should still be just fine for those not shooting major sports events) but it does offer the same extended tonal range and the ability to shoot in almost no light without peril.

Jacking the ISO dial up to 25,600 (really!!) allows photos by candlelight and still produces useable images, though contrast starts to build in the extreme highlights and shadows. Seriously, this is the kind of performance top DSLRs were turning in at ISO 400 four years ago. Images captured at ISO 3200 are absolutely gorgeous, with a very full tonal scale and lack of image noise. If you like shooting in low-light situations, the Df will thrill you to no end. *(continued)*

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Paul Rigby, *Hi Fi World*, March 2013



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TONE STYLE



As good as the Df is at high ISO, it shines more brightly at low ISO. The images captured at ISO 100 eclipse not only the ones shot with the D800, but also the ones shot with the \$9,000 Leica M. Tonal range, lack of noise/grain and color fidelity are spectacular with the Df.

Much like an analog-to-digital converter that turns in better performance at 24/96 resolution than it does at 24/192, the Df takes more realistic photographs with a 16 megapixel sensor (than the D800 does with a 36 megapixel sensor), proving again that size is not everything – execution is. This is where the Df excels.

Ease of use

Perhaps the biggest joy for legacy Nikon users will come from the user interface. Unlike the menu-driven cameras in the rest of the Nikon line (and for that matter, most other DSLRs) the Df's controls reside on the outside of the camera body, just like the FM on which it is loosely based.

Advanced camera functions still operate via onscreen menus, but all vital functions – shutter speed, lens aperture settings, ISO, exposure mode and exposure compensation – are quickly set from the conveniently placed and easily marked dials. *(continued)*

tone style

The current crop of digital photographers raised on menu-driven cameras will need a while to adjust, but those with more of an analog bent will feel right at home. Much like the Leica M series, the Df is a highly intuitive photographic instrument, once you become thoroughly familiar with its ways.

The only thing to forget is the Wu-1a digital adaptor. In theory, it is supposed to transmit images, as you are shooting, to your iPhone, iPad or Android phone. All three were unsuccessful here, and after hours of screwing around, loading and reloading the app, the best we could muster was “your Wi-Fi network is unstable.” And this, with the phone sitting six inches from the camera. Consider this technology not ready for prime time, though a great concept.

What you don't get

In keeping with the concept of no free lunch, the other feature surprisingly absent from the Df is the ability to shoot HD video, which is all the rage, and something the D800 excels at. The Df is a photographer's camera, not a videographer's camera, so if ultimate versatility is your goal, the D800 remains a better choice for approximately the same price tag. However, if you live solely for the still image, the Nikon Df could be one of the best cameras ever produced. It's certainly become my new favorite. ●

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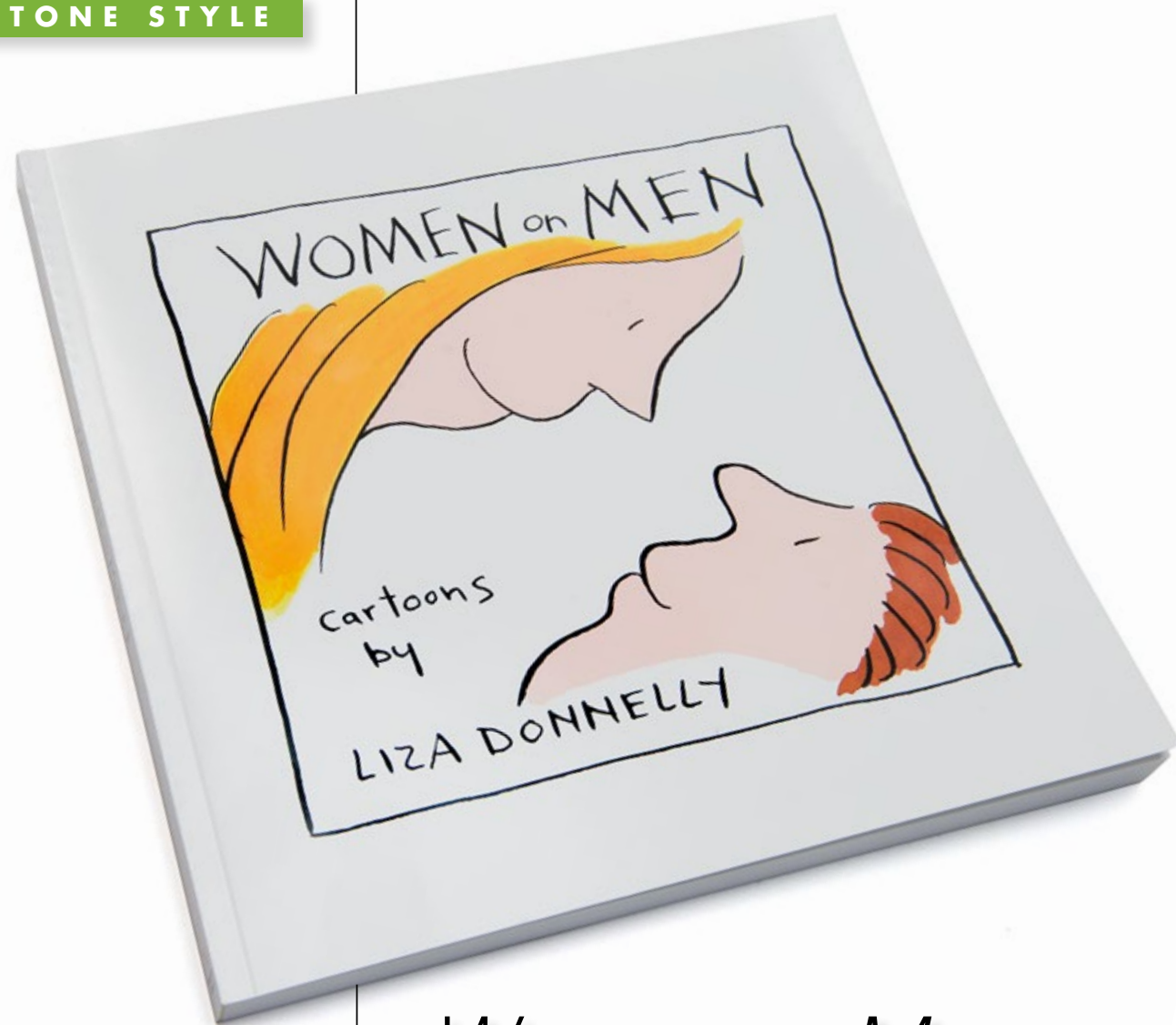


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Women on Men

by Liza Donnelly

\$62.95 www.narrativemagazine.com (Kindle edition, \$12 - Amazon)

Much as we'd love to claim Liza Donnelly for ourselves, she's been a staff cartoonist at *The New Yorker* since the 80s and her work has appeared quite a few other equally cool places. She's also a cultural envoy for the State Department, has spoken at numerous TED conferences, and writes a weekly column for *Forbes*. In short, Liza Donnelly is an intellectual and humor powerhouse.

Her latest book, *Women on Men*, takes a healthy poke at men, and her insight is razor sharp. So, whether your one of our female readers that could use a great laugh, or one of our male readers that wants to score major points with your female friends, grab a copy of this book. It's fantastic.

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\$299/pair www.etymotic.com

Sure you can get a handful of those foamy things at Walgreens for a couple of bucks, but because the frequency range is cut back so much, it just sounds like a giant transistor radio at a live performance. For years, this was your choice, save your hearing and miss out on the show, or let it rage and have major hearing loss in your 50s. Now you can have it all.

The Etymotic Music Pros will cut sound by 9-15db (with an equivalent noise reduction of 35db if you were using the foam ones) and allow the full frequency range to come through, making a live performance feel live, but not painful. Using them at a recent concert was a revelation, great sound, and no buzzing afterwards.

If you've been avoiding live music in fear of ear damage, grab a pair of Music Pro earplugs. Better yet, buy your kids a pair and demand that they wear them.



Senz “Smart S” Folding Umbrella

A new approach to an old problem

For Portland, Oregon, residents like me, rain is a not just a common experience, it's a way of life. The word “rain” actually proves too generic and inadequate here because experiences with liquid precipitation vary so much. We've become accustomed to a creative system of rainfall classification based on the volume of water that clouds decide to unleash. In order of increasing wetness, descriptors include mist, drizzle, light rain, scattered showers, showers, rain, steady rain, heavy rain and, well, *deluge*. Portlanders generally don't even notice the first two categories when they occur; more wet conditions, however, demand acknowledgement and some shield strategy when heading outdoors.



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.



verityaudio.com

TONE STYLE

These weather conditions fuel my ongoing quest for the perfect umbrella, which must meet three requirements: a very compact folded size that fits into a computer bag, a deployed size that provides adequate water protection, and a durable design that allows use in fairly windy conditions. All this led to my experimental purchase of a Senz "Smart S" umbrella. "S" stands for "small" versus the larger sizes Senz sells.

Made for one person, the most eye-catching feature of this umbrella is its unconventional canopy design. While the Senz, compared to my other travel umbrella, has roughly the same square footage of rain protection the canopy shape is quite different. Unlike the traditional round umbrella shape the Senz sports a squared-off, teardrop-like shape with a roundish front, a wider shoulder section, and an elongated tail. In addition to water protection, Netherlands-based Senz describes the oblong shape as superior for use in windy conditions.

Closed, the Smart S is about 9.5" (24cm) long and it deploys manually. Once open, dimensions are roughly 34" x 34" (85 x 85 cm). For a foldable, the build feels quite durable with metal parts for added strength.

It didn't take long for perfect wet and windy weather to hit Portland late this fall, so the Senz and I teamed up and embarked on a few errands. I'm accustomed to a round umbrella, so at first I was skeptical about the Smart umbrella's shape and its theoretical benefits over a more conventional design. *(continued)*

TONE STYLE

The handle, positioned more toward the front of the teardrop, gives the umbrella an unusual and off-balance profile. During a brisk walk in the rain, however, the genius of the shape becomes clear. The rounded front keeps the front of your legs and shoes dry. The wider shoulder section offers good shielding for the bulk of the body. The "tail" on the Senz directs runoff further behind me than a round umbrella does. Ultimately, this means the back of my pant legs stay drier. In addition, the narrower overall shape accommodates pedestrian sidewalk traffic better than my round umbrella does.

The Senz also handles wind with aplomb just as advertised. Even in gusts, the umbrella never flipped or inverted. Smart S is designed to withstand a 35 mph (60 km/hr) wind. I have not tested that yet, but in moderately windy conditions it does better than other umbrellas I've owned.

Because the Smart S is so compact, it works best when aimed in the direction of travel. I find that wind-driven rain, perpendicular to my walking direction, causes more of a challenge. For maximum dryness, I need to twist the Senz a bit so the leading edge angles toward the wind and rain, or else accept a damp side of my body. I'm sure a larger Senz model would reduce this problem. Repositioning the Smart S umbrella reduces rain exposure for me, but the elongated back creates a greater eyeball hazard for passers-by on busy sidewalks. However, most others were so intrigued by my unusual Senz silhouette

that their eyes found the umbrella before it found them. If you are worried about visibility, the S comes in red as well as black and white.

The Senz Smart S is not cheap at around \$40, and if you are prone to losing umbrellas, it could prove an expensive habit. For all the use I'll get from it, though, I feel the Senz offers price performance. This well-engineered umbrella is my go-to for city use. The unique canopy shape proves effective in more cases than does a round design. For those on-foot folks who want to be prepared for wet weather conditions, the compact size and durability of the Senz Smart S make it a great option.

—**Rob Johnson**

Senz "Smart S" Umbrella
www.senzumbrellas.com

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Want You (Blue)

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When we're not writing about music, art or other cool stuff, most of the TONE staff is out exploring other creative ventures, and our co-host of *Sh*tty Album Fridays* and *TONE* contributor Kristin Bauer is no different.

A well known fine artist in Scottsdale, Arizona, Bauer's most recent work is one of a series of five paintings around this central theme, but all five of the edition are hand painted, with a different color scheme, so each is essentially an original. Bauer says that her work incorporates her background in fine art, psychology and therapy, combined with her influences in social influence theory and pop culture.

She often juxtaposes iconic references and original material, ranging from Renaissance sculpture to Cheap Trick, as you can see here. And the 26 x 56 inch format has a commanding presence in any room.



Hello Kitty Bluetooth Speaker

\$49 www.target.com

Listening to mono was never more cute and cuddly than this desktop Hello Kitty speaker system. According to the instructions, there is “no assembly required.” With one speaker, four watts of power and an auxiliary jack for those having a really old school iPod, this baby will fill the room with sound, albeit not terribly high fidelity sound.

You know you want one. ●

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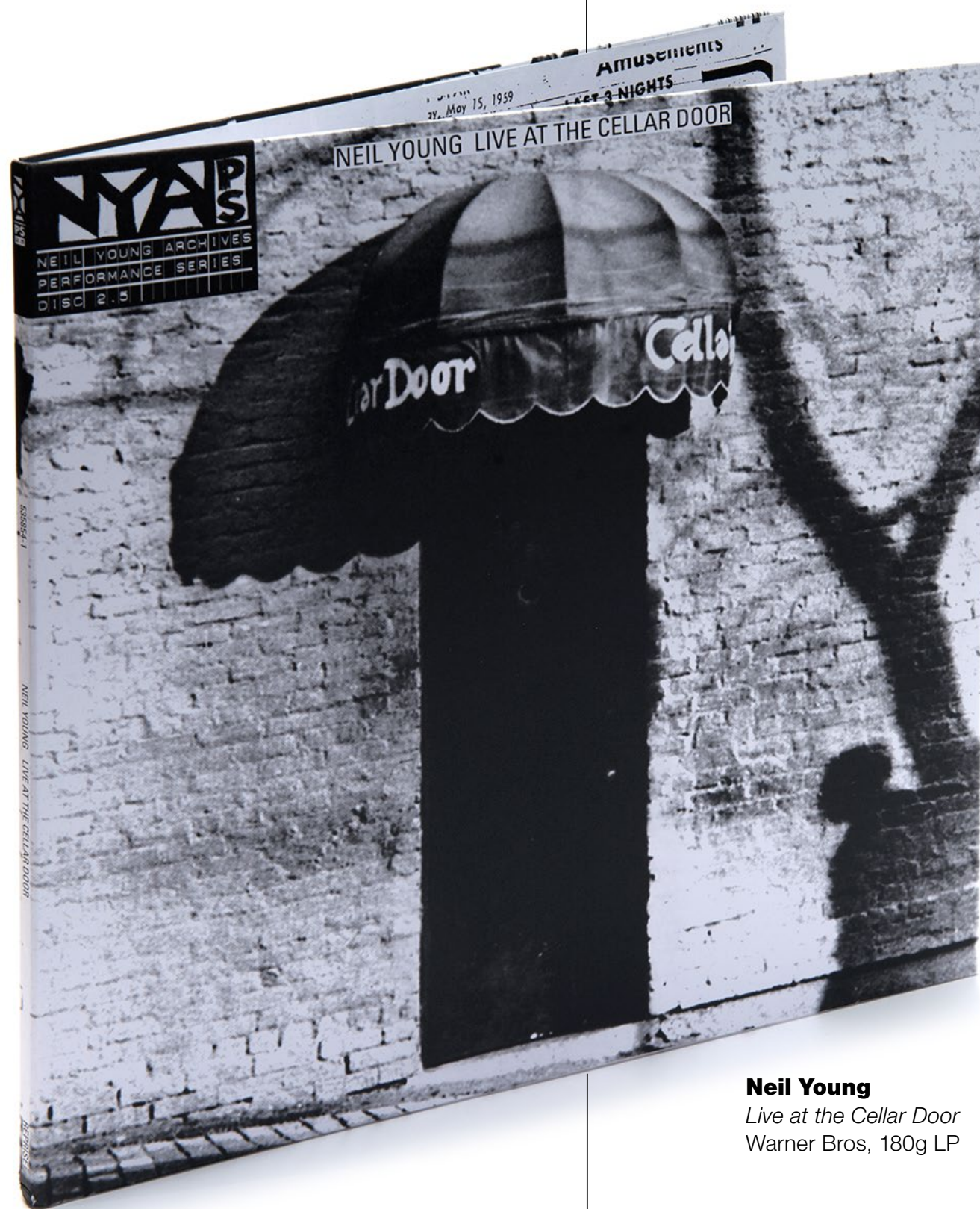
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AUDIOPHILE PRESSINGS

By Jeff Dorgay



Neil Young

Live at the Cellar Door
Warner Bros, 180g LP

Neil Young

Recorded at the Cellar Door in Washington DC over a three-day period from November 30 to December 2, 1970, the latest in Neil Young's "archives" series hits the record store shelves in vinyl format, lagging the CD by a few weeks. If you were patient enough to wait, you will be highly rewarded.

Music editor Bob Gendron gave the digital version of this performance a highly insightful review in Issue 59, but we did not have a vinyl copy at that time to comment on. I concur 100% with Gendron's assessment of the performance, and the sound quality of this vinyl version is outstanding. Mastered by Chris Bellman at Bernie Grundman's studio, it is easily the equal in fidelity of the *Live at Massey Hall* and *Live at The Fillmore* albums.

The epitome of sparse production, the tracks all feature Young on guitar or piano, and while a hint of tape hiss creeps in from time to time, his voice is vibrant, dripping with decay and overtones, in the way that only a magnificent analog recording can – warts and all. Fortunately, the warts are very few, and on one level, kudos to Young for leaving them in. If this were a Katy Perry album, it would all be pristinely pitch corrected.

Here's to a great glimpse into the past of such a great artist, and here's to hoping Mr. Young will pull a few more recent performances out of his vaults in the months to come.

Joni Mitchell



Joni Mitchell

The Hissing of Summer Lawns
Don Juan's Reckless Daughter
 24bit/192khz Downloads, HD Tracks

In the three years that followed Joni Mitchell's most successful album, *Court and Spark*, she took a distinct about-face from the more straightforward singer/songwriter/folky style that put her on the map and charged down a more avant-garde path. Her next three albums – *Hissing of Summer Lawns*, *Hejira*, and *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* – all featured some heavy duty jazz cats; she even went on tour right around this time with Pat Metheny, Lyle Mays and Jaco Pastorius in her band.

History hasn't always been kind to Mitchell for these records, and HD Tracks has brought two of them back to life with stunning results. The original vinyl of both of these records is flat, lifeless and slightly harsh on top, but the 24/192 versions are fabulous.

Even though the distortion at the beginning of "The Jungle Line" is still there (but minimized), the rest of Mitchell's vocal distortions present on the LP are gone. This record now has a prodigious soundstage, where it was practically one-dimensional before. Layer upon layer of detail is now available to the listener, exposing more instrumental and percussion excursion. The bottom end is firmed up and extended throughout, giving the record a lot more weight and presence.

Cymbals at the beginning of "Edith and the Kingpin" are silky smooth, and Mitchell's keyboard playing as well as her multilayered vocals just float throughout the listening room. The rest of the record reveals similar treats. An equal improvement is available on *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*.

Jaco Pastorius' first bass note on "Jericho" resounds with far more authority than it does on LP, and this time-worn test track sounds more exciting than it ever has. The rest of the album is equally scrumptious sonically. While we might argue whether 24/192 is sonically superior as a format, or that it may just be the mastering – no matter, these two slightly off-the-beaten-path Joni Mitchell albums have turned out swimmingly. If they happen to be on your favorites list, they are a must to add to your collection.

Elvis Costello



Elvis Costello

King of America
 MoFi, 180g. LP

Mobile Fidelity continues their excellent job of remastering the Elvis Costello catalog with his tenth album. Never charting higher than #39 in the US, this record received more than its share of critical acclaim. Though it was not terribly successful for EC in terms of sales, it joined a string of quirky releases going forward, with only the 1989 *Spike* showing much chart activity (*Spike* would be Costello's last gold record of his career). This record is also pivotal in the sense that it features a bit more of a country groove, something else that he would dabble in going forward, including an interesting and somewhat eclectic rendition of the classic "Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood."

MoFi is to be commended for taking this imprint much further than my original 1B Columbia pressing. It features more air and a wider soundstage throughout, with the mix more opened up, though it is still somewhat lacking in front-to-back depth. The only complaint with this one, especially in light of the fact that it is an "Original Master Recording," (which means MoFi used the original master tape in its production) is this: while dynamics are improved over the original, as well as overall tonality – especially the acoustic guitars – is that they didn't split this up into two slabs of vinyl as they did on *Get Happy*. ●

DEALERS THAT MEAN BUSINESS

HIFI HAWAII

By Jeff Dorgay

Just a few blocks from Honolulu's Chinatown is a true audio oasis: HiFi Hawaii. Taking up just over 4,000 square feet, their multiple showrooms are a tribute to all aspects of music and video reproduction. Owner Shane Drew takes the approach that you have to have the gear on the floor to generate interest. He says with his trademark grin, "I built the hifi store I wanted to hang out in." And the closer you investigate the store, it's really more like a playhouse than an audio showroom.

Just inside the front door is a massive pair of three-way speakers that Drew and a friend built last year "just for kicks." Each of the demo rooms contains multiple choices from major brands: Audio Research, McIntosh, Sonus faber and Magico, just to name a few. This is a showroom like few others, where you can take in multiple alternatives. Another plus – Drew has most of this stuff in inventory, so that if the bug bites, you can take it home with you.



In business for twenty years, Drew started with about 1,000 square feet and has been in the current location for the last seven years. The key to their success has been measured growth on one hand and Drew's boundless enthusiasm on the other.

This loyal customer base has returned again and again to keep upgrading, which is the lifeblood of a great hifi store. Drew smiles and says, "I've still got a lot of my original customers from the first year I opened the store. Many of them become friends and it seems like there's always an entourage around. Saturday is hang-out day. We often get together with ten or twenty customers, just having a few drinks and moving components around for the whole day, just seeing 'what if?'"

This enthusiasm comes from Drew's audiophile nature; he's always mixing and matching components to help his customers put together the best possible systems, mirroring their passion. This passion is the true key to HiFi Hawaii's success.

Location, check. Massive inventory, check. An abundance of enthusiasm, double check. If that weren't enough, Drew has a wealth of set-up knowledge, essential to selling \$200,000 speakers on a regular basis. Back when he was a Wilson Audio dealer, he managed to gain the company's top sales award not one, but two years in a row. He fully expects even better results now that Magico is one of his premium speaker lines.

Drew not only understands the essential concept of system synergy, but how to accommodate and anticipate customer needs. *(continued)*



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FEATURE



And while this is essential to every customer (while I spend some time in the store, I watch him demonstrate a Naim Uniti Qute2 with equal fervor as he does a stack of Audio Research Reference gear), being able to get out to the customer's home and set this stuff up properly is essential. Drew makes it clear that his customers depend on his expertise to walk them through the jungle of not only choosing the right gear, but really being able to make it sing on startup: "You rarely get another chance to make a first impression." The customers I interact with during my two store visits all consider Drew much more than a hifi sales guy; he's their bud. Dinner at the local pizza joint turns up a number of good customers, one of whom has to take me out to his truck to give me a quick demo of his all-McIntosh car audio. A fun bunch to be sure.

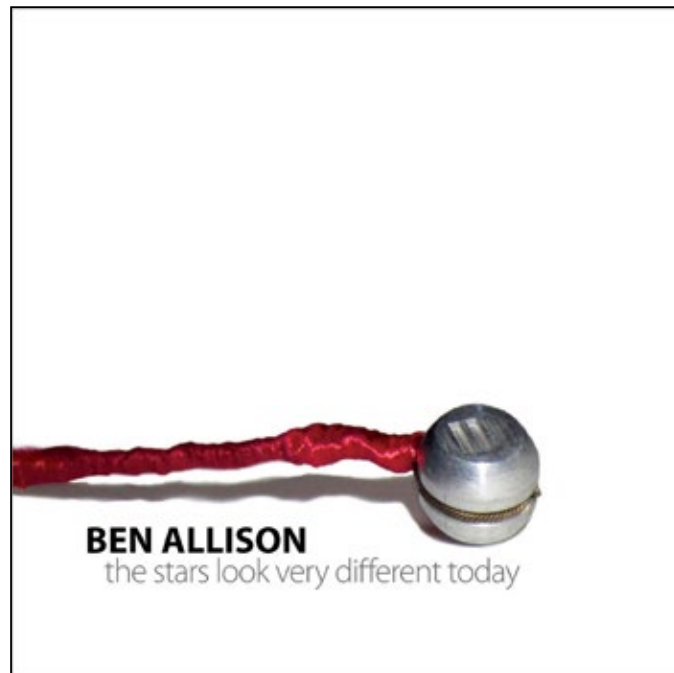
The final key to HiFi Hawaii's success is their outreach to their community. Thanks to tapping into other like-minded luxury goods

vendors on the island, it's not uncommon for Drew to attract 300–400 people, sometimes more, to one of his events. Again, the laid-back island mentality is what makes these events so special, because Drew does not use these events to go in for the kill – quite the opposite. But this counterintuitive approach pays off in spades. He makes it very clear: "It's about the music and I want my customers to have a *good time*. They all know where to find me when they are ready to pull the trigger. It's a nice way for me to thank them for their business throughout the year."

The market has taken notice. HiFi Hawaii was chosen to be the world's first Fine Sounds Experience Center in 2014, showcasing all of their brands in a way that has never been done before.

We look forward to teaming up with Shane Drew and HiFi Hawaii to host our first TONESalon event in February of 2014. We hope that you will join us for a great evening of music and fun. ●

JAZZ & BLUES

**Ben Allison**

The Stars Look Very Different Today
Sonic Camera, CD

Ben Allison cribbed the title of his quartet's new disc from David Bowie, but the bassist's inspiration comes more from his own fascination with science and films (passions that the former Thin White Duke undoubtedly also shares). Those obsessions come out in the way the group uses studio-driven tape loops—especially on the closing “Improvisus”—or multi-layered mini-scores that nod to movie themes and characters. Yet there's nothing ethereal about *The Stars Look Very Different Today*: All the aforementioned ideas and effects serve Allison's immediately striking compositions and, after more than a year of heavy touring, his cohesive working band sounds just as spirited.



Allison's quartet features his longtime collaborator guitarist Steve Cardenas alongside Brandon Seabrook, who doubles on guitar and banjo. It's an uncanny lineup for a jazz group, and the band makes the most of its distinctive instrumental resources. Drummer Allison Miller, the most recent band member, is a subtle—and sometimes direct—powerhouse that holds tightly to her innate sense of swing.

The level of intuitive dialogue within the group adds

up to commanding dynamics, particularly in the way a piece like “D.A.V.E.” builds itself up. (Leave it to listeners to imagine how the piece connects to *2001: A Space Odyssey*.) Although Cardenas and Seabrook's solos are the ostensible focus on “Dr. Zaius,” Miller says just as much when her cymbals sound like they're changing the direction of the composition.

On “No Other Side,” an initially somber tone is offset with mysterious electronic effects, but the song

explodes when it sets up the two contrasting electric guitars. As Cardenas quietly holds down the melodic lead, Seabrook unravels the kind of fragmented twists on surf lines that echo how Robert Quine sounded alongside the late Lou Reed. Clashing guitars also provide a sudden divergence from the otherwise sunny melody of “Neutron Star.” Allison keeps a similar guitar stomp on “Kick It Man” from riding off the track while also inventing a different sound on the bass: twisting the strings that give it a buzzing similar to a jaw harp.

Throughout, Seabrook reaffirms he is not only reclaiming the banjo for jazz, but taking the instrument in directions that haven't been heard since Malachi Favors Maghostut brought it to the Art Ensemble Of Chicago. (Seabrook also has his own group, Seabrook Power Plant.) While his arpeggios take the lead in the spacious and loping “The Ballad Of Joe Buck,” he also holds his own on the stomping “Swiss Cheese D.”

Although *Stars Look Very Different* is Allison's eleventh disc as leader, it's his first mixing and producing. There's such clarity throughout the CD, it's a wonder why he didn't take on those jobs years ago.
—**Aaron Cohen**

MUSIC

It's fun to hear jazz players careen off each other. The music's physical aspect is one of its most compelling attractions. But poise will always have a permanent place in improv. Grace is a blessing, whether it's tempering otherwise blustery maneuvers or acting as the dominant guide through a performance, as it does on this luminous ballads album by Jane Ira Bloom.

The soprano saxophonist has a plush tone, but it's the fluid way she crafts her lines that makes her music resonate with such warmth. Calibration is primary here; the well-considered weight she applies to each phrase reveals the amount of engagement she brings to her performances. That's what you hear on *Sixteen Sunsets*: it's the sound of deep equilibrium. The lineup—pianist Domenic Fallacaro, bassist Cameron Brown, and drummer Matt Wilson—provides a comfy background just as much as it does an assertive counterpoint. The players' role of serving the melodies also winds up enhancing Bloom's swooping horn trajectories.

In the large, this is a standards program. The saxophonist's long tones in "Out Of This World" and "Left Alone" parallel the well-known lyrics and milk the emotions at hand, whether joyous or forlorn. As Bloom's horn glides through this airspace, you truly get the idea that she's a vocalist of sorts as well. "The Way You Look Tonight" and, especially, the solo "My Ship" sing in their own unique way. Each feels like a soft caress.

Bloom's originals are snuggled into the concept, too. "Ice Dancing (For Torvill & Dean)" picks up the tempo but still resounds with the wise lyricism that marks the entire album. By the time "Bird Experiencing Light" closes the set, its gentility seems cut from the same cloth as the classics that precede it. Like the MJQ's most sublime moments, *Sixteen Sunsets* yields the kind of elegance that always sounds heartfelt. —**Jim Macnie**



Jane Ira Bloom
Sixteen Sunsets
Outline 141, CD

Products clockwise from top: Feickert Woodpecker (piano black), Okki Nokki Record Cleaner, Blue Horizon ProFono, Acoustical Systems SMARTactor and Feickert Firebird (rosewood)



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Acoustical Systems produces both the most accurate setup protractors available as well as the revolutionary *Axiom* tonearm and *Arché* headshell. Blue Horizon produces a fine line of audio accessories ranging from a simple anti-static record brush to their *ProFono* phono preamp. From Okki Nokki we have their second generation *Record Cleaning Machine*. This new record cleaner features greatly improved vacuum power as well as better aesthetic fit and finish.

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Trumpeter Takuya Kuroda has traveled the world as an onstage foil and horn arranger for vocalist José James. The singer has now returned the favor and produced *Rising Son*, Kuroda's major-label debut. With most of their colleagues from James' working band onboard, it's reasonable to expect considerable musical connections to James' 2012 Blue Note album *No Beginning No End*. And there are a number of affinities, including a shared appreciation for contemporary R&B and generally relaxed tempos. But Kuroda also proves he has a voice of his own.

That voice mainly comes through Kuroda's solid composing. He wrote six of the disc's eight tracks; the other two are interpretations of soul-jazz forefather Roy Ayers. Like Ayers (and, for that matter, James and Robert Glasper), these pieces often sound centered around deliberately paced Rhodes or synth lines. The relaxed vibe and repeated melodic themes of the title track are clear examples. Yet Kuroda turns things around and shows off influences that have not shaped his contemporaries' work.



On "Afro Blues," Kuroda brings in ideas from when he played in the New York Afro-beat ensemble Akoya. While the smooth results sound far removed from the righteous anger of, say, Fela Kuti, the quick rhythmic changes provide a revitalizing energy. Guest guitarist Lionel Loueke sounds especially invigorating. His percussive lines challenge bassist Solomon Dorsey and drummer Nate Smith, who are more than up for the

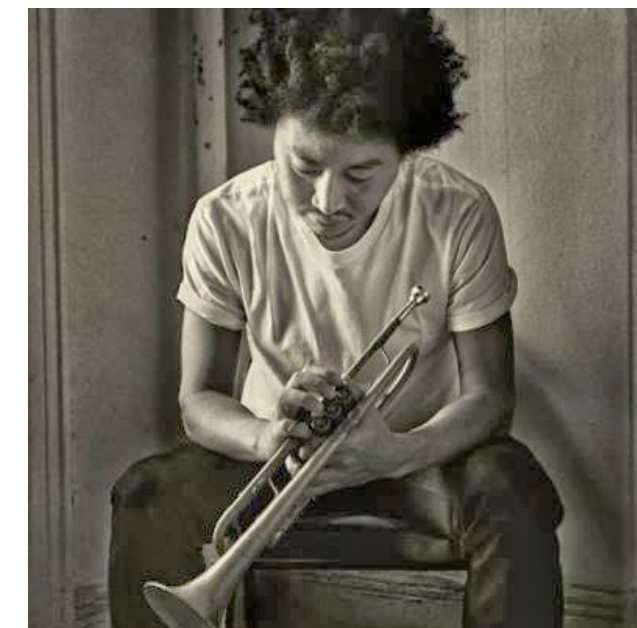
match. Smith also tempers his forward attack by shifting around patterns more subtly, particularly on "Piri Piri."

James' sole performance here arrives when he sings the group's rendition of Ayers' 1976 hit "Everybody Loves The Sunshine." As on his own records, he sounds laid back, singing way behind the already slow beat. It's effective, but this tune could have also worked as a vehicle for Kuroda to take bigger impro-

visational risks—especially considering his band includes the inventive keyboardist Kris Bowers. On the other Ayers cover, "Green And Gold," Bowers' solo sounds simultaneously busy and low key as he plays off of Smith's patterns.

The group's most direct connection to the R&B tradition comes via Kuroda and trombonist Corey King's tightly choreographed lines. Even here, however, there's

a twist: Without a saxophone, the bottom sounds heavier than in a standard horn section. The two of them also worked together in the planning stages, both being credited for the lyrical arrangement on the slightly edgy "Sometime, Somewhere, Somehow." Since they move mostly in unison throughout the disc, it would have been interesting to hear how King and Kuroda would sound in heated soloists' exchanges.



Takuya Kuroda

Rising Son
Blue Note, CD

When Kuroda does solo, his muted tone comes through within a sparse number of long-held notes. He sounds especially strong when set against Smith's rapid drumming on "Mala" and Bowers' synthesizer on "Call." Kuroda conveys the impression of continuously building tension seeking an inevitable release, which is all the more reason to anticipate his follow-up. —**Aaron Cohen**

FEATURE

AUDEZE LCD-X HEADPHONES

The Stuff of Myth

By Rob Johnson

Audeze pronounces their name “Odd-eh-zee.” Now when seeing the same, I find it hard not to reflect back on my high school English classes and studying stories from ancient Greek mythology. Other than Homer’s *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* may be the best-known story which chronicles the perilous journey of Odysseus and his efforts to return home after the Trojan War. (Yes, the Trojan Horse was his idea.) I’ve read that Odysseus means “trouble” in Greek. How ironic. Every time I hear a pair of Audeze headphones I find myself in trouble, wanting to reach into my wallet to buy a pair.



FEATURE

After releasing the highly successful LCD-2 and LCD-3 open-back headphones, Audeze refuses to rest on its laurels. Their latest headphone incarnations, the LCD-X series, include both an open-back and a closed-back design dubbed the LCD-X and the LCD-XC respectively. We enjoyed the chance to hear the LCD-X, and with their other open-back models on hand, it’s a delight to hear them head-to-head – *literally*.

Setting Sail

On arrival, the LCD-X comes in a black, foam-lined Pelican case, ready for travel and abuse while protecting the precious cargo within. For versatility, Audeze also includes two sets of 8' (2.5m) headphone cables. One set is a balanced 4-pin to 2x4-pin mini XLR. The other cable is a single-ended version with 4 pins on the headphone end and a standard 1/4" termination on the other. Finally, a 1/4" to mini-jack adapter leaves the listener wired for sound with any headphone amplifier on hand.

At 1.3 pounds (600 grams) the X is hefty indeed and there’s no mistaking the weight on one’s head. After an hour or two of listening, I’m generally ready to free my head from the velvet vise for a short break, but that’s a small tradeoff for its great sound.

(continued)

FEATURE

The wide headband and large, comfy earcups distribute that weight well and when you have them on, physical heft certainly yields to the delicate sonics.

Scylla and Charybdis

Audeze's headphone designs are dangerously attractive indeed. Like the famous hazards Odysseus attempted to navigate, it's difficult to avoid their pull. Although there is a generally similar appearance to the earlier headphone models, the LCD-X takes a departure from the familiar wood-laden earcups. The Xs offer anodized aluminum enclosures, with a choice of either black or grey rings around the 'cups. There's also a choice of padding: either a black lambskin leather, or a non-leather microsuede. In either case, as with earlier headphone designs, the foam underneath gives the earcups a slight slope, canting them forward when worn and projecting the sonic image forward a bit. Throughout listening sessions, the ear pads proved generally comfortable. I find the leather cups do get a little warm and tacky against the skin, so the microsuede may be the preference of some. I realized also that trying to wear glasses at the same time as the LCD-Xs is an uncomfortable pairing, so these aren't the best 'phones for those farsighted folks like me who enjoy music while working on the computer.

Not fixing what's not broken, LCD-X retains familiar design elements of planar magnetic transducers and Neodymium magnets as with the past headphone versions. The LCD-X headphones differ from their siblings through the use of a new transducer, though, made of a lighter and thinner material plus what Audeze dubs "Fazor" technology. The company claims these alternations manage the flow of sound through the headphone facilitating better imaging, a smoother frequency

response, and greater frequency extension. Listening to the new cans, I see that Audeze doesn't exaggerate. They also claim the capability of frequency response exceeding the 20Hz–20kHz range of normal human hearing, dropping down to 5Hz and with information transfer up to 50kHz. Without an elephant and a porpoise on hand, I'm not able to verify the extremes, but what does reside within my audible range proves magnificent.

Song of the Sirens

As with the other LCDs, bass is a strong attribute. I have not heard another open-back design that offers the depth, weight and punch that Audezes do. Percussion is portrayed marvelously, and these headphones can rock. I'm surprised by the level of heft these open backs produce. Only with custom IEMs have I heard the level of tangibility of drums interacting with my eardrums. Bass, snare, toms, tambourines and cymbals all have an extremely convincing level of impact, resonance and decay. In addition to jazz tracks, I tossed Electric Six's "Fire" into the mix for fun. The song's heft though the LCD-Xs is an absolute joy and completely immersive experience. Green Day's "St. Jimmy," another favorite rock track, startled me to the point of a physical lurch when the first notes burst forth from silence. Nice!

These headphones are capable of great delicacy as well. Vocals sound incredible through the X. They strike the right balance between capturing every nuance while avoiding stridency and sibilance that often accompanies them. As with Shiver's "Who's Got Trouble" the LCD-Xs reveal the sound and palpability of Ambrosia Parsley's breath in anticipation of vocal passages. When the first note rings forth with clarity and refinement there's certainly no disappointment. *(continued)*



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FEATURE

With the LCD-2s the soundstage is well rendered, but as with the LCD-3, the LCD-X improves on this somewhat with better ability to project outward those recorded instruments panned to the far left and right. Sounds at the far edges of the soundstage wrap out and slightly behind the center plane of my head. Instruments are layered well in the X's presentation and it's easy to pick them out in the mix. Similarly, naturally (and artificially) created reverberation is quite evident as it reveals a sense of the original recording space. Dave Matthews and Tim Reynolds *Live at Luther College* provides a good sense of the live performance, especially the applause, shouts and song requests from the audience as the stage mics capture them. Compared with my reference hifi system, the LCD-X makes the concert sound more like an intimate club setting rather than a larger concert space, but it's no less convincing or enjoyable.

Suitors for the Ears

So how does the LCD-X compare with its siblings? In most meaningful ways, the LCD-X exceeds the very good LCD-2's capability. The battle for the open-back Audeze kingdom rests with the LCD-3 and the LCD-X. Things get tricky comparing these two, because they are both wonderful and there's far more similarity than difference.

Ultimately, it's a slight, nuanced "flavor" change rather than one headphone being superior to the other. Rather than go into a lot of detail about the LCD-3 which Jeff Dorgay reviewed [here](#), I'll just focus on the small differences I hear between the two sets of cans. *(continued)*

FEATURE

In most of my test recordings, the LCD-X gives a slightly increased sense of palpability. Bass feels a touch more punchy too. Perhaps this is the result of their new Fazor technology. On the upside, there's a great degree of connection to the music and a "live," nimble sense to it. On some recordings it can be a little intense. The LCD-3s also give the listener an exciting, engaging musical experience with extended bass, but the tangible intensity is taken down one notch, and it's easier to relax into the sound.

In parallel with the above characteristic, the X is slightly more revealing of recordings in general. Especially listening to digital recordings, that can imply both upsides and downsides depending on the quality of the recording. Those who prefer to have every musical detail revealed – or those like recording engineers who need to hear every detail – will love the X's prowess. By comparison, the 3s are a touch more forgiving and lean just slightly to the side of warmth. I find this most evident in female vocal passages or in some recordings of horns.

The last subtle difference is hard to describe and best offered as an analogy. Imagine that the music heard through each set of LCDs is filtered through a set of sunglasses. The X has a very neutral grey lens, and the 3 has a slightly rose-colored lens. Each LCD has its own way of portraying – and enhancing – all that comes through it. There's no right answer. Depending on a listener's musical selections, associated amplification, sources, and personal preferences, either headphone could find itself welcome in an existing system.



FEATURE

If Marooned...

On the very slim chance I'm shipwrecked and stranded like Odysseus, there are a few things I'd hate to be without. After chap stick, the top of that list is music, and a means with which to hear it. While my first love is the sonic experience from a full-sized stereo system, the sound and presentation of music with the Audeze LCD-X headphones is beguiling enough that it could serve as a worthy substitute. It's a marvelous addition to their headphone lineup.

Pricing for the LCD-Xs is \$1,699 placing it between its other open-back siblings, the LCD-2 and -3 costing \$1,145 and \$1,945 respectively. That's certainly not cheap, but considering the X's build quality and sonic value in comparison with a big iron system, think about it in the cost-context of a good set of speakers. You will need a good amplifier to get the most out of these headphones, so that should be factored into your budget at some point. With that and your favorite source, you have a very musically satisfying personal sound system.

If you are considering headphones in this price range, the LCD-3 and the LCD-X are enthusiastically recommended, and currently my favorite open backs. After many hours comparing the two, the X won over my ears with their punchy, highly resolving and neutral nature. The LCD-X sonics, for me, left little to be desired. I purchased the review sample as my open-back reference headphone and that's the best compliment I can give.

FEATURE

Additional Listening

By Jeff Dorgay

It's tough to pick a favorite between the LCD-3 and the LCD-X. Both are incredibly compelling, and while I'd give the nod to the LCD-3 in ultimate smoothness, without sacrificing resolution, the LCD-X might be a better choice for those making their first foray into high dollar headphones.

We can argue to infinity about which presentation is more desirable, however these two fantastic phones are a lot like the Lyra Titan-i and the Atlas phono cartridges, or if you're an old school analog photographer, Kodachrome and Ektachrome. The LCD-X has a little more contrast, a little more edge sharpness if you will and the other one has a touch more ultimate resolution.

The ultimate decision will be determined by your listening taste and of course, your headphone amplifier. Personally, I prefer the LCD-3 with solid state amplification and the LCD-X with my ALO Audio Studio Six. But the bigger story, is that the LCD-X is more easily driven by a laptop, smartphone or iPad than either the LCD-2 or LCD-3, making it the perfect place to start assembling a mega quality personal audio system. Grab a pair of LCD-X's for now and add a big daddy headphone amp later as your enthusiasm and budget allows.

We are happy to make the LCD-X our choice for Product of the Year in the Personal Audio category. It's been exciting to watch Audeze grow and continue to expand their repertoire. ●



Audeze LCD-X Headphones
MSRP: \$1,699
www.audeze.com

PERIPHERALS

Sources Audio Research CD3 Mk2, Light Harmonic DaVinci, PC with Windows 7 and JRiver Media Center 15, iPod Classic Gen 7, Cypher Labs AlgoRhythm Solo, Marantz TT-15

Amplification Coffman Labs G1-A, ALO Audio Rx Mk 2, Van Alstine Fet Valve CF Hybrid, Coffman Labs H2 (prototype)

Headphones Sennheiser HD-650, Audeze LCD-2 & -3, JH Audio JH16, Ultimate Ears UE18

Cables Jena Labs interconnects, Cardas Clear USB

Power Running Springs Audio Haley, RSA Mongoose and Cardas Golden Power Cords

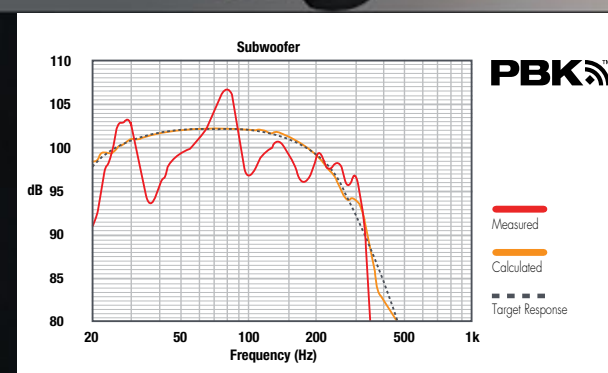
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FEATURE

FEATURE

SENNHEISER HDVD 800 HEADPHONE AMP/DAC

By Mike Liang

For a company to be a market leader or maintain its position as one, it has to be bold and willing to take some risks, challenge its R&D team to go beyond its comfort zone and build a product for a market that didn't previously exist. That's exactly what Sennheiser did with its flagship headphones, the HD 800s. When the HD 800s launched in 2008, there were only a handful of headphones on the market that exceeded the \$1,000 cost barrier. The design of the HD 800s and the engineering that went into producing them were so far ahead of their time that other manufactures are only now starting to catch up.

On the flip side, jumping into a market before it's been tested can be a hasty move. Learning from your competitors' mistakes can save you a ton of money and sometimes brand reputation. This is why Sennheiser waited until recently to enter the headphones amp/DAC market.

Baby got DAC

Sennheiser now produces two desktop headphone amplifiers, both of which are designed and built in Germany—like all Sennheiser products. The \$1,599 HDVA 600 is solely a headphone amp, while the \$1,999 HDVD 800 adds a DAC for compatibility with digital sources. The latter product, which is the focus here, features an internal 24-bit Burr-Brown DAC that supports sampling rates as high as 192 kHz. Both amplifiers are fully balanced in design, with a foolproof front

panel that includes a pair of XLR and a pair of 1/4-inch output jacks, allowing the simultaneous use of as many as four headphones. I enjoy being able to use the XLR and 1/4-inch outputs to compare cable differences on one pair of headphones.

The HDVA 800 combines a sleek design aesthetic with a luxurious feel, and the glass window on the top panel, lit with a bank of blue LEDs, allows a look at the interior workings. The Alps potentiometer has a buttery feel, as do the rest of the controls.





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— Art Dudley
Stereophile



*"... sounds about as
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— Ed Kobesky Positive Feedback Online

*"... it makes no apologies to stereo amplifiers costing three times
as much. It is my current benchmark in integrated tube amplifiers."*

— Dick Olsher The Absolute Sound

FEATURE



A Versatile Machine

Those wanting to connect a CD player or phonostage have the option of balanced XLR analog inputs, while unbalanced RCA inputs offer compatibility with most of your other components. This makes the HDVD 800 a perfect choice for those building a system around their headphones.

Digital sources can be connected to the HDVD 800 via Toslink optical, coaxial S/PDIF, USB 2.0 or high-end digital AES3/EBU cables. If you are using a computer and you don't want to use USB for audio, there are a few manufactures that make USB-to-Toslink, coaxial and balanced digital AES converter boxes. Balanced digital AES may yield some improvements over the other inputs, but you should experiment to see what best suits your needs and listening preferences; the HDVD 800 lets you experiment with ease.

Owners of Sennheiser's high-end headphones (HD 600/650, HD 700 or HD 800) take note: The HDVD 800 was certainly voiced with Sennheiser head-

phones in mind, but it works well with any phones you might have on hand. We'll start the listening impressions with the HD 800 and work our way down.

Feeling a little jazzy, I start my evaluation with Natalie Cole's *Still Unforgettable* (a CD rip) on my MacBook Pro via the HDVD 800's USB input. The soundstage delivered by the HDVD 800 is big and open, not getting in the way of the HD 800 headphones giving the listener an immersive experience. Cole's soothing voice sounds so natural with this combo that it leaves me wondering if high-res files are even necessary.

Although the HDVD 800 is capable of delivering 24-bit/192-kHz files, its ability to transport well-mastered 16-bit/44.1-kHz (CD-quality) files is nothing to sneeze at. This is the case of the marriage between the HDVD 800 and HD 800. Switching over to a more fun album, Roy Orbison's *Black & White Night*, shows this combination at its finest. I'm no longer listening to headphones driven by an amp; I am in the audience with the best seat in the house. The raw energy, dynamics and vibe

of a live performance are here in spades, even though we're talking about headphones.

The experience is even more powerful through the HD 700s, due to their greater focus on the lower frequencies and a lighter impedance load on the amp. The HDVD 800 has enough headroom to drive either set of phones beyond my comfort level, but if you need more gain, there is a recessed dial that allows even higher volume levels. We do suggest that, if you take this path, you proceed with caution to prevent ear damage.

As good as the HDVD 800 performs with Sennheiser's latest headphone creations, those with older models will not be disappointed. Revisiting the older HD 650 headphones, a workhorse for many enthusiasts, also turns in an exceptional performance. Tori Amos' *Little Earthquakes*, for example, is a recording in heavy rotation with the HD 700s and HD 800s, but the resolution provided by the HDVD 800 closes the gap between new and legacy Sennheiser sound.

FEATURE

Additional Listening

By Jeff Dorgay

I found the HDVD 800 to provide a very resolving, detailed sound. Going through our arsenal of phones, I discover it to be similar to most other headphone amplifiers we've auditioned. It is a matter of synergy, however. Here's a quick rundown:

The most difficult phones I have to drive, the HiFiMAN HE-6s, are the least-compatible choice for the Sennheiser amplifier, proving to be too much of a good thing. The sound is almost hyper detailed and somewhat lacking in dynamics. On the other side of the spectrum, the Audeze LCD-2 and LCD-3 both prove an excellent match with the HDVD 800, yielding smooth responses overall, with tight and controlled bass.

Both my Grado PS500 and PS1000 phones are decent matches, as well, with the sonic texture very similar to that presented by the excellent AURALiC Taurus, which we use as one of our reference amplifiers. When matched with the HDVD 800, the Grados offer a neutral and accurate portrayal of music with no embellishment. Those liking the warmer reproduction of a tube amplifier may not prefer this presentation, but those in search of accuracy would do well to seek this one out. Even my vintage Koss and Sennheiser phones work well, and the HDVD 800 has plenty of drive for anything I throw at it—so no matter what phones you have, it should prove up to the task.

Running the DAC through its paces with a wide range of sources from MP3 to 24/192 files is a joy and, if you need a DAC, the HDVD 800 is well worth the \$400 increase in price over the HDVD 700. Whether you are looking to build a second system or a primary system that doesn't take up a lot of space, the Sennheiser HDVD 800 will prove a worthwhile anchor. ●

www.sennheiser.com





Thorens TD 206 Turntable

\$1,499 www.thorens.com

Thorens has been introducing a number of new models over the last two years, and the TD 206, which made its debut in Munich this year packs solid technology and build quality underneath its understated red plinth.

With an all new TP90 tonearm based on their TP92 tonearm, used in the popular TD 309, there is a distinct technology trickle down going on with the TD 206 and it's more conventional shape. Easy to set up and easy to operate, with fully adjustable azimuth and VTA, along with a plinth mounted speed switch, this German beauty promises to provide some serious competition to the great tables now available in this space from VPI, Rega and Clearaudio. We'll keep you posted.



Yamaha A-S3000 Integrated Amplifier and CD-S Digital Disc Player

\$7,995 and \$6,995 www.yamaha.com

After decades of producing competent, mass-market audio products, Yamaha returns to the audiophile world with a fervor. Their new integrated amplifier and disc player (which can also play SACDs and functions as a USB DAC) prove that this prestigious Japanese manufacturer not only recognizes the virtues of the high end, but is back on top of their game, with perhaps their best products ever.

A full review is in progress on both components, but initial listening is proving very exciting.

PREVIEW



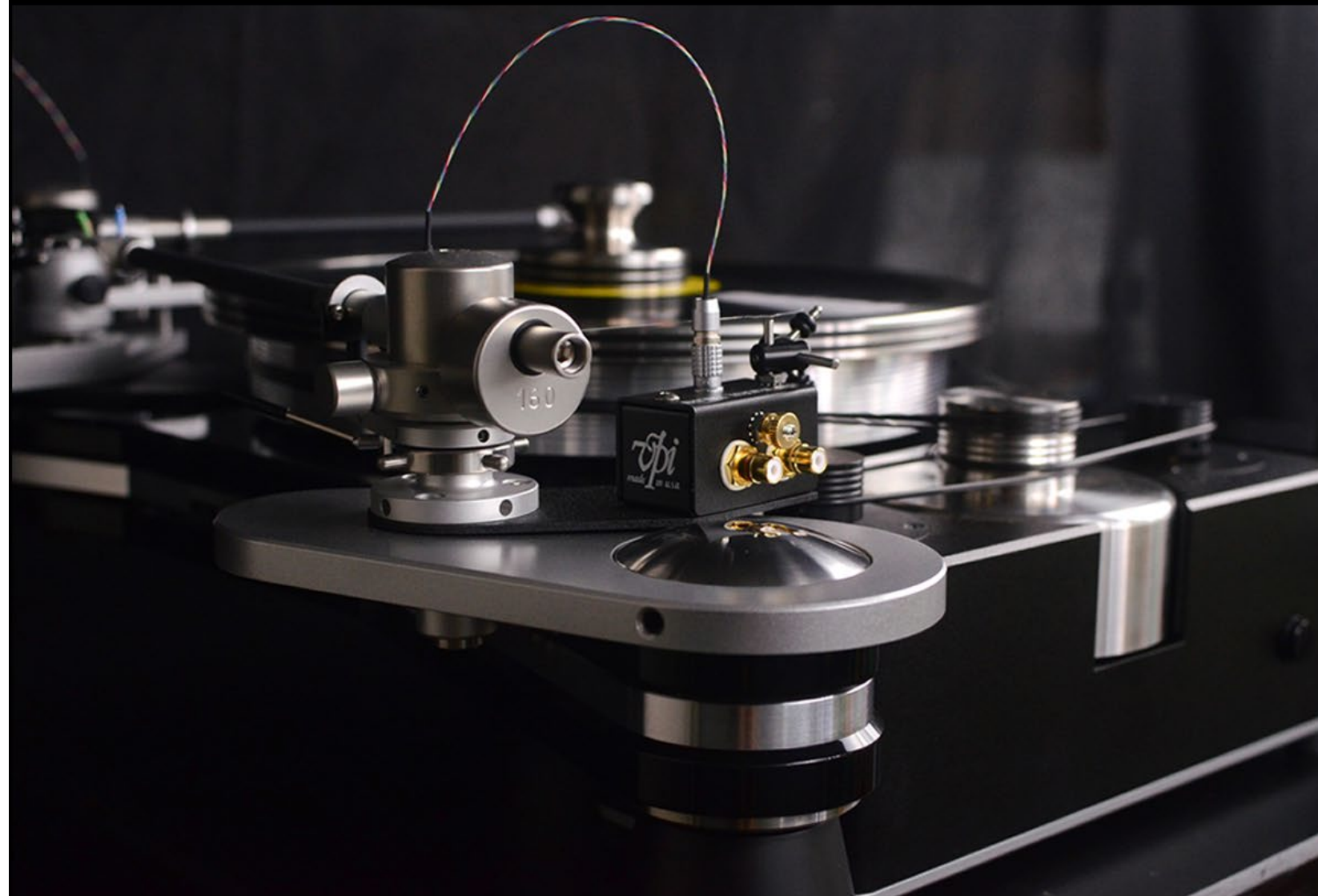
Benchmark ABH2 Power Amplifier

Price: TBD www.benchmarkmedia.com

TTrue to their heritage, Benchmark has developed a power amplifier that combines low noise and wide dynamic range, as well as diminutive size. They are claiming a new topology, that “combines a plurality of output stages, with distortion performance exceeding that of class A amplifiers while the efficiency exceeds that of traditional class AB amplifiers.” Patents are applied for and the amplifier is named after Benchmark’s founder, Allen H. Burdick, who passed away this year.

So out of respect, we didn’t pop the top yet to peek at what’s inside, but the little bugger is stout. Expect a full review of this exciting new development from Benchmark.

Quality engineering...



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VPI Nomad Turntable

\$995 www.vpiindustries.com

VPI refers to the Nomad as a “vinyl playback lifestyle system,” incorporating a moving magnet phonostage, Ortofon 2M Red cartridge, an onboard headphone amplifier and a pair of Grado headphones, all for \$995.

We’re still waiting for a review sample, but perusing the final prototype on our recent visit to VPI proved very exciting indeed. This is just the kind of thing for those wanting to jump onboard with vinyl and would like not only a step-up from all those cheesy USB turntables, but also would appreciate one-stop shopping.

Based heavily on the architecture of VPI’s popular Traveler turntable, this is a table that you’ll be able to live with for some time, upgrading the cartridge and bypassing the phonostage as your passion for vinyl grows. And there’s always a Classic Direct if you *really* get the bug.



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\$1,599 www.anthemav.com

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It's so good, it's like buying a room correction system with a free seven-channel amplifier and 4k upsampler thrown in for free. Watch for the full review in the context of an Anthem/Paradigm system in Issue 62.



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The DiaLogue Premium Power Amplifier

PrimaLuna raises the bar again!

By Jeff Dorgay

Seriously, the only thing I *don't* like about PrimaLuna gear is lifting it. Recent hours at the gym notwithstanding, PrimaLuna amps keep getting heavier. Continuously improving the breed, the Dutch company keeps improving the quality of its parts, which results in bigger capacitors and beefier transformers. The DiaLogue Premium power amplifier now tips the scale just over 70 pounds. Yikes! But listening to Miles Davis' classic album *Bitches Brew* float between the Focal Maestro Utopias (also reviewed in this issue), I'm not worrying about moving these amplifiers anymore. The relaxed yet resolving presentation the DiaLogue Premium amplifiers provide is sufficiently soothing to take my mind off of the manual labor.

For those of you who are unaware, my journey as an audio writer began with PrimaLuna. My review of the ProLogue One integrated amplifier was featured in *The Absolute Sound* just over 10 years ago. Time flies when you're having fun. I bought that little integrated that could, and a decade later (on only its second set of power tubes), it still can. It's been passed on to my niece, and she's still rocking out with it after all these years—a testament to the build quality and longevity of PrimaLuna products. Best of all, the company is building the stuff even better than when I bought that review sample, so your chances of a field failure are slim to none—a great feeling when you're shelling out close to \$10,000 for a preamplifier and a pair of mono-blocks. The DiaLogue Premium amplifiers are \$3,199 each, and the preamplifier will also set you back \$3,199.



They're not quite the budget components that they were in 2003, but in comparison to your favorites from ARC, CJ, McIntosh and VAC, they're still an incredible bargain for the price asked. Those nervous about PrimaLuna being a new company back in 2003 can breathe a sigh of relief. There is now no question that the company has been making all the right moves in terms of building an empire.

The DiaLogue Premium amplifiers are especially cool, because you can start with just one and run it in stereo. Should you want or need more power, add a second amplifier, flip the stereo/mono switch on the back panel and you're rocking. A single amplifier produces 42 watts per channel in ultralinear mode and 25 per channel in triode mode. Switching to monoblocks doubles that, making this amp a nice option for budgeting future system upgrades.

The Magic of the EL34

The enchanting midrange of that first PrimaLuna amplifier always gave me pause, thanks to the EL34 output tubes, but 30 watts per channel isn't always enough to take care of business. Fortunately, the DiaLogue Premiums give you a choice of 82 watts per channel in ultralinear mode or 50 watts per channel in triode mode, configured as monoblocks. And there's just something so scrumptious about using these amplifiers thusly. I suspect you may just seek out slightly more sensitive speakers so that you can always do so.

While 50 watts per channel is enough to adequately drive my 90-dB KEF Blades, the additional 3 dB of sensitivity provided by the Focal Maestro Utopias is just enough to really give the DiaLogue Premiums in mono mode that extra push over the cliff and make them that much more compelling. *(continued)*

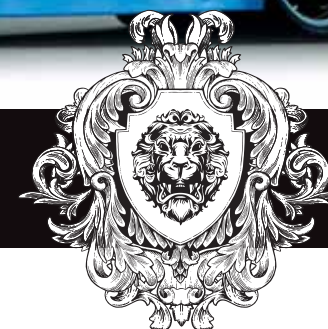
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RUTHERFORD AUDIO



REVIEW

In the context of a system consisting of a dCS Vivaldi stack, Audio Research REF SE linestage and phonostage, along with a pair of AVID Acutus Reference SP turntables, the DiaLogues are in some pretty exclusive company. And they fit right in.

The delicate acoustic guitar at the beginning of the Verve Pipe's "Colorful" is projected well beyond the speaker boundaries, but when the driving bass line kicks in, these amplifiers take impressive hold of the Maestros' woofers. All this from a pair of EL34-powered monoblocks is indeed impressive.

A quick switch back to ultralinear mode delivers tighter bass, but at the expense of less midrange delicacy; the ultimate choice will be yours, but I know what I love and it's all about the midrange with these amplifiers. Whatever your reason for going ultralinear, should you decide that is your path, go all the way and replace the EL34s with a set of KT120s. Even though the power rating is no higher, a simple flip of the switch on the right side of the amplifier resets the Adaptive Auto Bias to the correct range for this tube, eliminating potential midrange distortion. The KT120 tube has a more authoritative feel, with a deeper, tighter bass response. Overall, the amplifier has more drive and slam, feeling more like an Audio Research REF amp. Running the EL34s in triode mode makes the DiaLogue sound more like an AirTight amplifier.

Listeners who find tube amplifiers too relaxed in their presentation may think these amplifiers in triode mode are even slightly more relaxed. But this sonic characteristic works wonders when listening to recordings that are less than perfect—like my favorite records from the Monkees. "Pleasant Valley Sunday" is pretty much rubbish, but the extra sweetness that the DiaLogue Premium brings to the dance



REVIEW

really improves recordings like this (especially in digital form), making a much larger percentage of your music collection not only listenable but enjoyable. There's no such thing as listener fatigue with these amplifiers.

Changes Under the Hood

PrimaLuna has always paid meticulous attention to detail when building its amplifiers, which are reminiscent in quality of the great Marantz and McIntosh tube amplifiers from the 1960s. The point-to-point wiring used throughout is so neatly done that you'd swear robots did it, but this is not the case. The solder joints are all perfection and there is not a hint of untidiness anywhere. These amplifiers are as beautiful underneath their hand-finished chassis as they are above.

In addition to bigger, beefier, more robust power and output transformers, the "premium" designation comes from careful refinement of the circuit, which was executed with top-quality parts—parts you'd expect to see in amplifiers with five-figure price tags. All of the critical wiring is done with Swiss-made silver-clad oxygen-free-copper wire, the input and output connectors are first rate, and there is a plethora of premium capacitors and resistors. No corners have been cut anywhere.

And what fun would a vacuum-tube amplifier be without at least considering a bit of tube rolling? This is a bit tougher with power tubes these days, as vintage EL34s can be difficult to find, and expensive when you do find them. It's not uncommon to spend \$400 to almost \$1,000 on an awesome set of NOS output tubes. Rolling in a set of Siemens and GE 6CA7s (a suitable substitution) proves sweet, eliminating grain from the presentation of the upper registers in a way that today's modern tubes just can't. *(continued)*

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REVIEW

Fortunately, the DiaLogue Premium runs the output tubes very conservatively, and thanks to PrimaLuna's patented Adaptive Auto Bias, adjusting tube bias is a thing of the past. The benefits are multiple: Tube life is extended, distortion is reduced, and the need for a matched quartet of output tubes is eliminated. It's as painless as it gets for a vacuum-tube amplifier. There is even a Bad Tube Indicator, a red LED that lights up, should an output tube fail.

However, if you aren't feeling that adventuresome but still want to get in on the action, consider swapping the small signal input tubes. Past PrimaLuna designs used at least one pair of 12AX7 tubes, which are now becoming scarcer, and consequently more expensive. A single pair of primo vintage 12AX7s can set you back \$300 to \$400, but this amplifier uses six 12AU7s. And these tubes are reasonable, with cool vintage examples available for \$30 to \$50. But remember, standard new-edition 12AU7s are only about \$20 each. Either I'm getting lazy in my old age, or Kevin Deal is supplying these amplifiers with even better tubes than he was 10 years ago. In any event, I just don't feel the need to screw around with the tubes here.

True to the PrimaLuna party line, the Adaptive Auto Bias will let you run different tube types in the various output tube sockets, but having lived with PrimaLuna amplifiers for a long time, I know that they just don't eat tubes, so you'll probably never need to take advantage of this feature. Sure, it does work, but if you have a tube amplifier of any kind, it's not a bad idea to have at least a pair of output tubes of the same type on the shelf, just in case something bad does happen. *(continued)*

Once hefted into place and tubes installed, the DiaLogue Premium amplifiers immediately settle into reproducing music. The harp in Lloyd Cole's "Music in a Foreign Language" floats easily behind the plane of the speakers, sounding almost like it's in another room, well separated from Cole's voice and acoustic guitar. Even in the 15 minutes it takes for these amplifiers to warm up, the magic is there. Unlike a few megabuck tube amplifiers we've used that take hundreds of hours to sound their best, we only noticed a modest change in sound character after about 50 hours. And had we not had a pair of these, so that one could run for 50 hours while the other one just sat there, we'd never know—the difference is pretty minimal. Bottom line, unbox these beauties and enjoy them.

Grab a Pair

If there's been a better success story than PrimaLuna in the high-end audio market over the last decade, I haven't heard it. The Dutch company continues to make top-notch products, while refining its brand and expanding its current offerings.

If you've ever felt intimidated by using a vacuum-tube power amplifier, PrimaLuna takes all the hassle and guesswork out of the process. The more adventurous hobbyists can tube roll to their hearts content, and the rest of you can just use the supplied tubes and dig the music.

We are happy to award the PrimaLuna DiaLogue Premium amplifier our Product of the Year award in the tube-amplifier category. A most excellent amplifier—and I suggest you get two while you are at it. ●



DiaLogue Premium amplifier
MSRP: \$3,199 each

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AVID Volvere SP turntable, SME
309 tonearm, Lyra Kleos cartridge

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OPPO 105, dCS Vivaldi stack

Preamplifier

PrimaLuna DiaLogue Premium,
Robert Koda K-10, Audio
Research REF 5SE

Phonostage

Simaudio MOON 610LP

Cable

Cardas Clear

Power

Cardas Clear,
Running Springs Dmitri

Rogue Audio Sphinx Integrated Amplifier

By Andre Marc



R

ogue Audio, out of Brodheadsville, Pa., has been building rugged tube components since the 1990s, and as a result, the company enjoys a fiercely loyal customer base. Under the direction of owner and lead designer Mark O'Brien, Rogue makes great-sounding, reliable, and fairly priced gear. Half a dozen Rogue products have come through this listening room, and none have failed to impress on a sonic level, and they all offer unusually good value.

Sparing its customer base constant product churn (as well as questionable features and hyperbolic marketing), Rogue offers what it calls "Magnum Upgrades" for a variety of products, which allow owners to make incremental investments in better sound. From the entry-level Titan series to the flagship Apollo monoblock amplifiers, Rogue offers a wide spectrum of components.



Recently, the company introduced a series of amplifiers with rather unique topology. The Hydra and Medusa power amplifiers feature a tubed input stage, with a hyper-engineered class-D output stage, which is built specifically for this tube input. Rogue calls the trademarked circuit *tubeD*. Having spent quite a bit of time with the 100-watt-per-channel Hydra, I am convinced that the Rogue engineers are onto something.

The company has decided to parlay these designs into a pair of integrated amplifiers, the 175-watt Pharoah, and its little sibling, the 100-watt Sphinx, which is priced at \$1,295. The supplied Sphinx review unit is black; silver is also available.

The amp has a bit of a retro-chic aesthetic—a distinct classic American hi-fi vibe is apparent—with beautifully machined front-panel knobs and a matte finish.

It must be noted that the current market for entry-level integrated amplifiers is crowded. Many of these products are made overseas, with off-the-shelf parts and microprocessor-controlled functions. High-powered products made in the USA, however, are quite rare in this market. Rogue, which builds its gear stateside and uses as many American-sourced parts as possible, manages to deliver products priced less than what some audiophiles pay for power cords. So how does it stack up?

Nuts & Bolts

The Sphinx is equipped with three line inputs, a phono input and a headphone jack. The phono section is a MM/MC type for high-output cartridges. Surprisingly, there is a balance control, which is not often seen in this price range. Rogue employs a matched pair of 12AU7 tubes for the input stage. The amplifier runs cool and quiet, and all connectors appear to be high quality. The circuit features a slow start-up when the power button is engaged, to allow the input tubes time to stabilize. Rogue also offers a solidly built metal remote control, which is an option and lets you to change the volume but not select input. (*continued*)

Listening

After breaking in the Sphinx for a week, I am treated to vivid, spacious and engaging sound, regardless of source or genre. The amp has absolutely no problem driving either a pair of KEF LS50s or Genesis G7c monitors to room-overloading levels. The Sphinx keeps its composure, even at high volume, with no graininess creeping in—which is remarkable for an amp at this price point, where speakers as revealing as these typically expose an amp's shortcomings.

If the Sphinx has a sonic signature, it is not easy to detect. After a few weeks of post-break-in listening, I pick up a slightly forward character—not forward as in tipped up, but in the sense that it brings the listener a few rows closer to the action. The Sphinx provides a lovely sparkle to the midrange, which makes voices and strings float beautifully in space. Performances are imparted with a vivid, lifelike and highly enjoyable quality.

An album I stream repeatedly during the review period is Diego Garcia's *Laura*, which showcases the Sphinx's ability to grab the listener's attention and direct it through a clean window into the music. Garcia's lush, romantic ballads, embellished with flamenco guitar flourishes and other exotic touches, sound simply ravishing.



The 2013 remix and remaster of Jethro Tull's classic album *Benefit* is a revelation through the Sphinx. Ian Anderson's voice and flute are startlingly present, especially on the 96-kHz files; the same goes for the excellent SACD remaster of the Moody Blues' *In Search of the Lost Chord*. The Sphinx reveals the superb quality of the DSD transfer overseen by Justin Hayward, and even the previously lesser-known material, like the long last track, "King and Queen," sounds terrific. The Sphinx is capable of subtlety yet can still provide plenty of power when called upon to do so.

As there is currently no turntable set up in my system, I lend the review sample to a trusted audiophile friend who's a vinyl enthusiast. He reports back very positive results regarding the onboard phonostage, noting that it easily competes with other, highly regarded outboard units, and that it is at the top tier in this price range.

I give the headphone jack a whirl with a pair of Grado SR60s, and discover it to be more than just a convenient add-on. The performance is easily on par with several stand-alone headphone amps I have on hand.

I do manage a quick comparison with my reference integrated amp, the 200-watt McIntosh MA6600 solid-state beast, which is laid back compared to the Sphinx's more exciting presentation.

Transparency and midrange resolution are very, very close, with a slight nod to the far more expensive amp—too close for comfort considering that the McIntosh costs *five times* as much. This is certainly a case of a welterweight going toe-to-toe with a heavyweight and not finishing on the canvas.

Perhaps the one complaint I can log is that controlling the volume via the remote is inexact. The volume steps are too large to find the precise setting my ears desire, but this only applies when using the remote. The volume knob on the unit provides all the volume sweep necessary. I will note that the balance control is a nice plus, providing very good tracking, and that the unit works without flaw during the review period. It is also good to know that Rogue offers a 3-year warranty.

At a hair under \$1,300, the Rogue Sphinx sets new benchmarks at this price point. Its sonics, build and feature set are impressive. And while Rogue essentially takes a somewhat classic approach with the Sphinx—aside from the unique class-D and tube design—the end result trumps circuit topology. Pair the Rogue Sphinx with price-appropriate speakers, a source and cables, and for about \$5,000 you have a system that will provide more enjoyment than it should for that much scratch. Hats off to Rogue Audio.

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REVIEW



Additional Listening

By Jeff Dorgay

Seeing a phono input on a preamplifier, let alone an integrated amplifier, is catnip to me. As an audio old-timer, I remember fondly when *everything* had a phono input and everyone had a turntable. It's great to see Rogue including a phonostage on a product that is this reasonably priced.

I certainly concur with Andre on the overall sonics of this unit, so no need to embellish there. But in the day of \$1,000 dollar phonostages being commonplace (seriously, in the day of \$10,000 phonostages being commonplace!!), a great integrated amplifier thrown in with this phonostage is a steal.

Your favorite MM cartridge will make this thing sing. We pair the Sphinx with the MartinLogan Aeries i speakers in room two and a Rega RP6 table, featuring an Exact 2 cartridge, as well as a ProJect Carbon/Ortofon Red combination. Both turn in excellent performances, with a good tonal range, top to bottom, excellent transient response and, best of all, a low noise floor. The Sphinx is in no way outclassed by the nearly \$2,000 Rega combination.

There hasn't been a more versatile entry-level amp to come my way in some time, so I'm happy to award the Rogue one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2013. Well played, Rogue. ●

Sphinx Integrated Amplifier
MSRP: \$1,295

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Rogue Audio

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PERIPHERALS

Amplifier
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CD/SACD player/DAC
Oppo 105

Speakers
KEF LS50,Genesis G7c

Cables
Darwin, Transparent, DH Labs

Accessories
Sound Anchor stands, Audience
aR2p power conditioner

Product of the Year The VPI Classic Direct Drive Turntable

By Jeff Dorgay

In audio, like in so many other things, the seed of a great idea often sprouts before the technology of the time is able to fully express the concept. The direct-drive turntable is a perfect example. Many know of the legendary Technics SP-10 broadcast turntable, though few have heard one. Those who have will remember the remarkable pitch stability and the rock-solid bass. Today, they are coveted and being rebuilt around modern tonearms and cartridges possessing much more resolution than what was available back in the 1970s and '80s, and to good result. However, the cost is high and there are a finite number of spare parts—not to mention precious little support. Great as the SP-10 is, owning one today is much like owning a vintage sports car: It's a ton of fun on a sunny Sunday afternoon, but God forbid you need it repaired in a hurry.

VPI
Classic Direct
H. J. Dorgay



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REVIEW



Enter Harry Weisfeld

A visit to the VPI factory in New Jersey with company founder Harry Weisfeld reveals a massive collection of turntables. Weisfeld is particularly well versed in direct-drive models, especially the classics. His collection includes, among others, the Denon DP-80 and JVC TT-101, as well as other Technics tables. "I believe direct drive is the way to go when it's done correctly," he says. "I've always been a huge fan of the concept, but you can't get a belt or a pulley perfect, no matter how hard you try. A belt-drive turntable consists of multiple mistakes and you're always dealing with multiple tolerance errors. Direct drive eliminates these issues."

Discussing the cost of the new Classic Direct, which is priced at \$30,000, Weisfeld reflects on the SP-10. Because of the manufacturing complexity required to produce the SP-10, he says that, if new examples were being built today, they would be fairly comparable in price, even from a company like Technics.

Weisfeld says that the Kenwood L-O7D and Micro Seiki DDX-1000 were the impetuses for making his own direct-drive table, a process that began in earnest in early 2011. One of the engineers at a firm that produces finely machined parts for VPI, as well as military hardware, and who is a known audiophile, started a major discussion with Weisfeld about the "toughest part of a turntable to manufacture." *(continued)*

The engineer quickly responded that the motor was the toughest challenge, which led to another series of discussions resulting in the design we see here in the Classic Direct, where the platter is actually the main component in the motor. In this case, the motor in the Classic Direct is an AC motor, which Weisfeld prefers over DC motors. He smiles and says, “An AC motor knows where it is, and a DC motor only knows where it was.”

The secret here is that a three-phase motor is used, eliminating the cogging effect that always plagues direct-drive designs. This uneven power delivery results in a slight unsteadiness to the music at worst and a shrinking soundstage at best. These issues are a thing of the past with the Classic Direct, as my listening quickly reveals.

Fortunately for Weisfeld, building the first Classic Direct was a labor of love for the engineers involved—it was strictly a fun project. Reflecting on the nature of the company building the motor, Weisfeld laughs and says, “The reason I won’t tell you who makes the motor for us is not a security reason; they just don’t want to become a supplier for other manufacturers.” He then proceeds to show me all of the measure-

ment data that went into the design, from prototype to final product. “These guys measure *everything*, and they are thorough.” Case in point: Noise level on the Classic Direct is lower than minus 100 dB—impressive.

Blacker than Black

Initial playback of the Classic Direct at the New York Audio Show this past May was exciting, but the prototype, made using a Classic 3 chassis, didn’t really work aesthetically with the 12-inch tonearm, which Weisfeld felt was essential to the ultimate sound of the table. “So we had to do one more round of plinth design,” he says. “But the drive system was final at this time.”

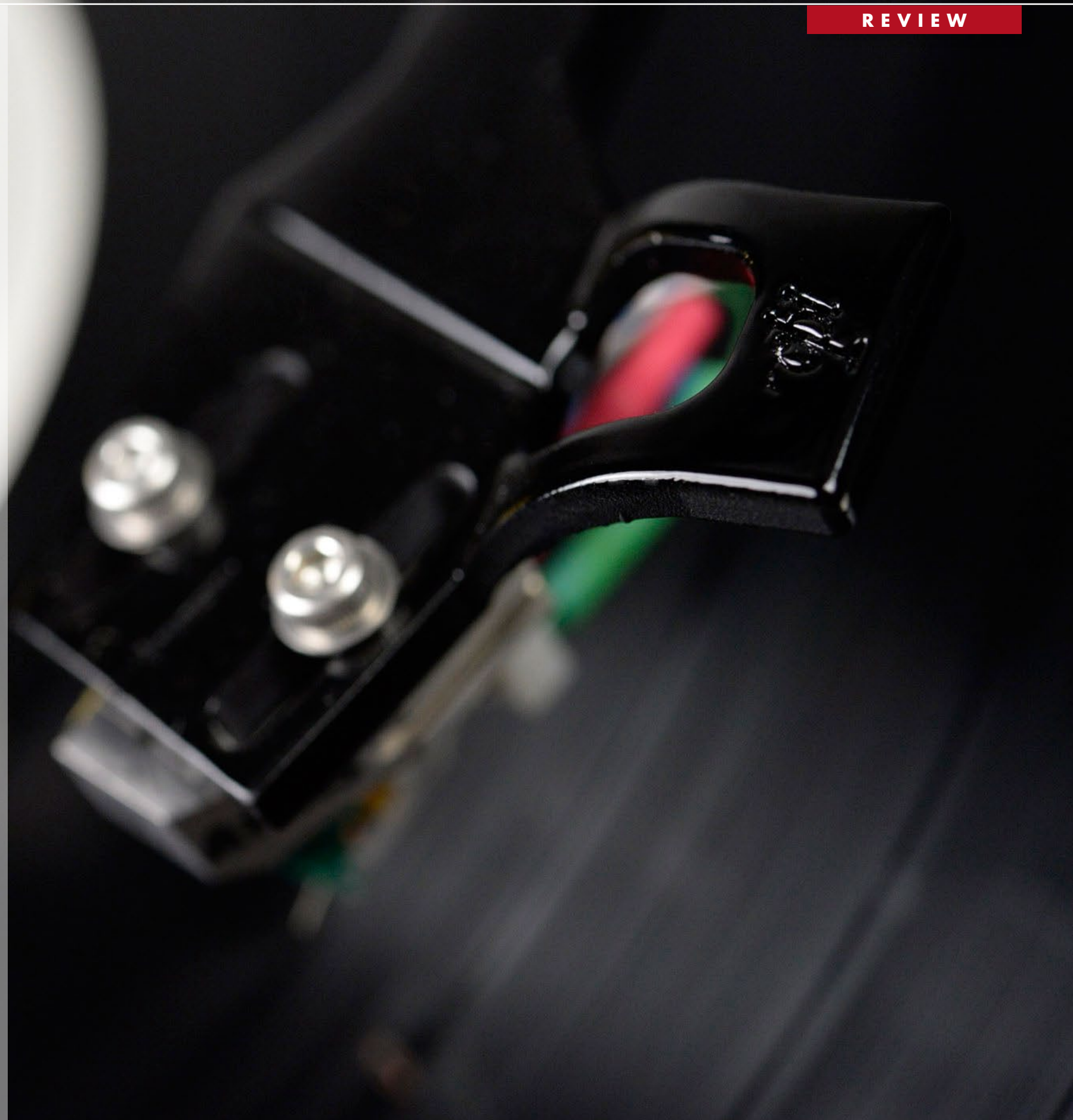
The proof is in the listening. Forget all the audiophile clichés about inky-black backgrounds. The Classic Direct has a complete absence of background; it’s eerily quiet, like listening to a high-resolution digital file with the life of analog. We start our listening sessions with some vintage classical test pressings from the Classic label, and I’m immediately transfixed. There’s something dramatically different here.

Music simply emerges from the dimly lit room through Weisfeld’s reference speakers, the JBL DD6600 Everests. With dynamic range

like few others, the Everests highlight the Classic Direct’s ability to remove itself from the equation and pass the music from the record groove through the speakers without interruption. The Everests sound surprisingly coherent, more like a pair of electrostatic speakers (of which Weisfeld and I are both big fans). I am spellbound by how natural pianos and violins sound in this system.

I’m so taken aback by the cleanliness of the tone that I don’t notice the cartridge mounted to the 12-inch 3D-printed tonearm, which is standard issue with the Classic Direct. It’s a Shure M97, the same one you can buy from Music Direct for \$100. Weisfeld smiles again. “It’s my daily driver,” he says. “When I mounted a JICO stylus on the M97, it changed the sound completely, and it tracks like crazy. It saves wear and tear on my Lyra Atlas.”

Fortunately, the unipivot design of the VPI tonearms, with removable arm wands, makes it easy to swap cartridges—for vinyl aficionados with multiple cartridges in their collection. An additional 12-inch 3D-arm wand can be purchased for \$3,000, while a standard one machined from aluminum is only \$1,500—a perfect match for cartridges on the less-spendy side of the equation. *(continued)*





Getting in the Driver's Seat

Once I'm acquainted with the Classic Direct, Weisfeld swaps the Shure for his favorite (and mine), the Lyra Atlas. But first we listen to Dave Brubeck's classic track "Take Five" on tape. Quickly switching back to the Analogue Productions 45-rpm version reveals precious little loss, only in the ultimate dynamics of the vinyl not being able to stretch on the quickest transients as fast as the tape, but the soul of the music on the Classic Direct is incredibly well represented. Timbre and tonality are perfectly captured, along with the airiness of the cymbals and the rock-solid character of the piano. Weisfeld has clearly met his design goals in this respect.

Then, once we move back to the beginning of the journey with the M97, the core values of the music are still intact. Timbre and drive are especially compelling, but now after hearing the tape and the Atlas, there is cloudiness to the overall presentation. Regardless, the Shure sounds far more exciting

than I've ever heard it before and light years beyond what it sounds like on my Technics SL-1200.

Auditioning a string of familiar rock recordings reveals the same things: a larger soundstage, wider dynamic range and a new sense of being able to peer deeply into the music—all of which are now available with the Classic Direct. The triangle in Joni Mitchell's "Down to You" not only has an incredibly well defined space, but the decay is breathtaking, and it just seems to hang in the air forever. The rest of *Court and Spark*, though I've heard it countless times, infatuates me as if hearing it for the first time again. That's what makes a high-dollar component special—and the Classic Direct delivers the goods in every aspect.

Led Zeppelin's "No Quarter" blazes through loud and clear. While the Classic Direct's speed stability doesn't reveal itself as much when rendering Jimmy Page's guitars, it speaks volumes with the sheer attack of John Bonham's drums. *(continued)*

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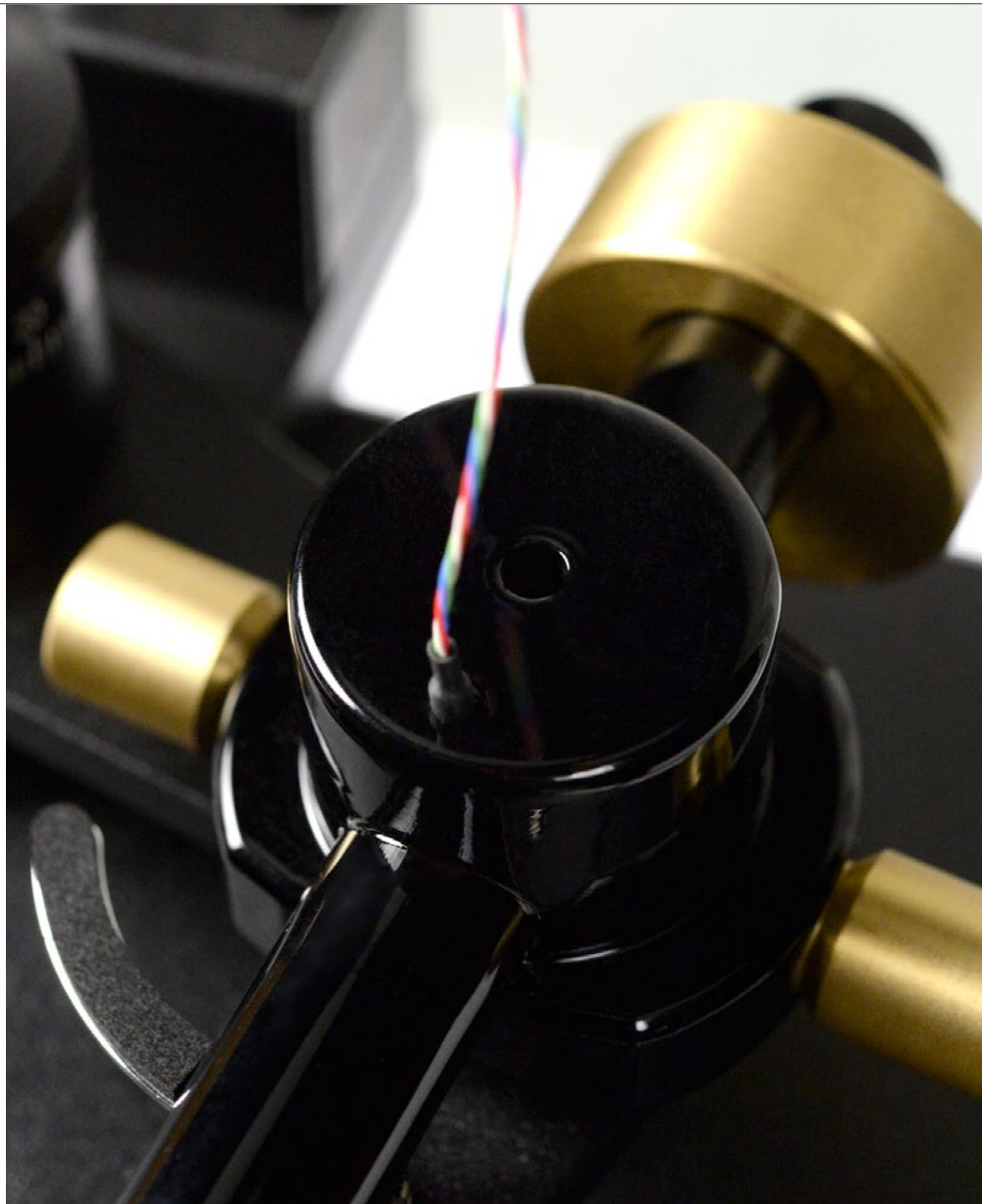
They goes from fantastic to truly explosive, and the rest of this re-cording goes well beyond speaker boundaries, forming a coherent and convincing musical image.

A quick spin of a 45-rpm maxi single of Prince's "I Could Never Take the Place of Your Man" reveals the inner detail in this multitracked tune, which I've never heard as clearly. And while the Classic Direct's major strength is tonal purity, its incredibly low noise floor uncloaks treasure in even the most highly processed records. In this case, backing vocals, synthesizer and percussion tracks are all more evident, with their own distinct placement in the soundstage, where they have always seemed somewhat vague. You don't have to limit your musical taste to acoustic music to really hear what the Classic Direct can bring to your system.

Two Years in the Making

After a year and a half, the design of the Classic Direct was final and all that remained was sorting out the ultimate form factor. While so many of today's mega tables feature an excess of bling, the Classic Direct keeps it simple and straightforward. Much like the aesthetic of the Eames Lounge Chair, this table is a classic in the ultimate sense of the word, rendered in a form factor you will not tire of.

The platter of the Classic Direct is the rotor, eliminating any errors resulting from motor-shaft coupling and taking advantage of VPI's inverted bearing as the common support for the rotor and platter. Simplicity combined with 21st-century technology wins the day—and the tolerance between the platter and the rest of the motor is only .001 inches.



This assembly is a sealed unit that weighs approximately 40 pounds and is in separate packaging from the base, requiring that the user merely connect power and gently slide it in with the supplied handle. As the saying goes, there are no user-serviceable parts inside. Weisfeld tells me that this motor is built to outlast the owner, because "we don't want to have to fix them." (The motor, that is.)

Historians of the direct-drive system may be quick to comment that this approach has been tried unsuccessfully before, but this time it succeeds brilliantly, hence the engineering time and resulting cost of this table. VPI's proprietary coil technology forgoes the standard wire-wound stator found in most motors, using slotted copper laminations instead. This allows for higher coil density, in turn giving the Classic Direct tremendous torque, even for a direct-drive design. Yet, it was designed to start rotating very slowly, another aspect of successful motor control.

VPI's familiar outer-ring clamp is the final piece to the puzzle, and if you think you can get by without it, guess again. The clamp firmly anchors the outer edge of the record to the supplied mat, making sure it contacts the platter fully, eliminating the need for one of those fancy record flatteners. It also minimizes vertical stylus excursion, thus maximizing the soundstage. The rest of the

table is straightforward, with 33- and 45-rpm speeds controlled by blue illuminated buttons on the left side of the plinth.

Worthy of the Name and the Price Tag

Record after record reveals the same thing: The VPI Classic Direct is one of the world's finest turntables. If there is a flaw in its presentation, I am not able to expose it, no matter what kind of music is played.

Crazy as it might sound to the uninitiated, \$20,000 to \$30,000 is really the sweet spot for what I consider a "destination turntable." I've spent more than my fair share of time with six-figure tables, and much like a Ferrari, they offer a level of performance unattainable by any other means, but they are just so far out of reach to all but the most affluent audio enthusiasts that it's not even a consideration. The ratio of \$150k turntable owners to \$150k system owners is tipped well in favor of the latter, so for a certain breed of audiophile, a \$30k table is not out of the question, especially if you are trading up from something else.

And I must confess that my experience with this range is healthy, having lived with tables from AVID, Clearaudio, Kronos, SME and VPI, just to name a few. As much fun as it always is to proclaim something a game-changer, running down the path of adjective excess, I'll keep my description of the VPI Classic Direct, well, direct. *(continued)*

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REVIEW



It's solid and quiet in a way I've never experienced, even compared to the mighty Continuum, the silly Onedof and the massive Clearaudio. If pitch stability is something you crave, there's just something about a direct-drive turntable, even a Technics SL-1200, that grabs you instantly. The Classic Direct just has much more of it, and it's mated to a world-class tone-arm to complete the package.

The presentation of the Classic Direct is remarkably close to that of a master tape on a great open-reel deck, which Weisfeld just happens to have next to his equipment rack for his own comparisons. He smiles. "This truly was my inspiration for the Classic Direct," he says. "Now a piano sounds like a piano."

I have purchased products from all over the world—and have been doing so for most my life—but I have to confess some American pride here. We in the United States now have a manufacturer building a turntable that not only competes with the best tables that the world has to offer but that also excels beyond many of them.

This is why we bestow our overall Product of the Year award to the VPI Classic Direct turntable. ●

www.vpiindustries.com

Audio by Van Alstine Fet Valve CF Vacuum Tube Preamplifier

BEST OF BOTH WORLDS?

By Jerold O'Brien

While Audio by Van Alstine (AVA) may be a new name for many, there's a good chance you are at least peripherally familiar with Frank Van Alstine's work. Out of his shop in Minnesota, he spent years developing modifications and upgrades for Dynaco and Hafler equipment—and those kits are still available. For customers wishing to get hands-on with their stereo, the upgrade kits are rumored to take an already-great piece of classic equipment to an entirely new level. For those with the skills and time, these kits can provide their owners some fantastic sound at very reasonable price points.

For the fine-motor-skill-challenged folks like myself, a hot soldering iron and a lot of tiny and delicate electrical parts presents a potentially disastrous combination, and so I prefer to purchase my stereo components from the hands of the true experts. Fortunately for me, Mr. Van Alstine recognizes the many audio fans in my circumstance who are seeking great-sounding equipment without requiring a second mortgage to finance it. Building on the knowledge and insight accumulated over the years, AVA came to life, bringing with it amps, preamps and DACs.



AVA offers both solid-state and tube designs. The company's website has a chart describing the differences between its preamp designs and the sonic signature of each. With four preamps in the current AVA lineup, I welcomed the opportunity to test its flagship, the Fet Valve CF hybrid preamplifier. Each circuit of our test unit features two 12AT7 tubes supplementing the gain stages and two 12AU7 tubes acting as cathode followers—from which this preamp gets its CF designate. According to AVA, this design represents "the very best we can currently do," and so it is with high expectations that we at *TONE* anticipate hearing its sonic virtues.

Customization

AVA sells directly from its website and builds each product at the time

of order. The company offers several options for the Fet Valve CF preamp, depending on the user's needs and preferences. The entry point is the black faceplate model for \$1,899. The same preamp with a silver faceplate starts at \$2,099. From there, the owner has several upgrades to choose from. For those planning integration into a home theater setup, a bypass switch for the preamp is available for \$50, allowing a surround-sound processor's volume knob to act as master volume for the system. Vinyl fans will appreciate optional RIAA phono circuits, priced at \$249. Inverter/bridge circuits and buffered tape output circuits are available for \$199 each. And finally, a high-quality remote control with a mute button adds \$299. With all the add-ons, a fully loaded Fet Valve CF runs in the neighborhood of \$3,000. *(continued)*

Where Have all the Good Stereos Gone?



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Straightforward Setup

From a usage scenario, the Fet Valve CF could not be simpler. The back panel of our test unit offers a phono input, five line inputs, a tape input and output, plus two sets of main outputs. All connections are single-ended RCA.

On the front panel, from left to right, three rotary knobs control source selection, volume and balance. Above the source knob, which selects from the six line inputs, are two toggle buttons. One offers a choice of stereo or mono playback; the other allows tape monitoring. Above the volume knob, two additional buttons control filter and low gain. According to AVA, these special settings offer the user more control over aggressive speakers and source material. As icing on the cake, the Fet Valve CF includes a 1/4-inch headphone output.

Listening

After several days of burn-in, the Fet Valve CF finally has its chance to sing. Sitting in the listening chair, I reset my mental sonic expectation to where

my past experience with \$2k preamps has placed it. There's very good gear in this price range, but much of it requires some sonic tradeoff. The play button starts the music as expected, and surprisingly, it also activates my "mouth ajar" setting. The Fet Valve CF certainly offers a great first impression.

I use the term *hybrid* for this amp, which refers to both its sonics and its design. While the marvelous, fluid tube midrange is there, some of the downsides associated with older tube designs, like limited bass punch and definition, do not follow suit. In fact, the Fet Valve CF creates bass that's quite deep and noticeable right out the gate.

While instruments and vocals retain a high degree of realism, there's also a forgiving nature to the preamp's sonic signature. Rendered digitally, some female vocal recordings, like Amy Winehouse's *Back to Black*, retain a bit of grain and edge. Through this preamp's lens, the excitement of the performance remains, while reducing these unwanted artifacts and retaining the underlying emotion of the original recording. *(continued)*

Saxophones and trumpets have an inherent potential for sonic sharpness. Recorded well, the sound captured from these instruments is one of incredible, live detail, but with some lesser-quality jazz recordings, a transparent window to untamed digital harshness can impart the listening experience with some unpleasantness. Striking an interesting balance, the Fet Valve CF places strident instruments in a slightly warmer light—which is not to say that the preamp creates an artificially sugary sound; to my ears, the sound remains generally neutral. Rather, it makes the best of what it's given. Using the pass and filter toggles described earlier, the listener retains greater sonic control than most hi-fi preamps allow.

Music portrayed through the Fet Valve CF may not have the lush and nuanced refinement I've heard with more expensive gear, but this preamp certainly has a way of making lemonade from lemons. In addition to accurately conveying the woodiness of string instruments, the Fet Valve CF also offers a compelling representation of percussive instruments. Cymbals have the expected shimmer after a strike; snares retain the requisite rattle; triangles and tambourines have the ring they should. In general, this preamp retains symphonic music's high degree of naturalness.

Compared with much more expensive reference gear, the Fet Valve CF creates a leanness to the sound. While it does a very good job reproducing both frequency extremes, it does have a somewhat reduced degree of richness and fullness by comparison. In orchestral pieces, the ambience of the performance hall is diminished. I also find that the width and depth of the stereo image through the Fet Valve CF is truncated.



Conclusions

Reviewing equipment involves critiquing the nuances of the musical presentation to determine strengths and weaknesses. But when that analysis is complete, it's equally important to take a step back and listen to the *music*, not just the equipment. Does that piece of gear allow the listener to get pulled into the sound and forget the hi-fi behind it? With the Fet Valve CF, the answer is an unequivocal yes.

This preamp is one of those pieces of budget gear that excels on many, many levels. While much more expensive preamps residing in my test system may exceed the Fet Valve CF's capability in various ways, this preamp never fails to provide musical fulfillment that exceeds expectations for its price point. It's not perfect, but it's also not saddled with any major compromises.

For those looking to build a home hi-fi system in the \$8,000-to-\$10,000 range, the AVA Fet Valve CF preamp can serve very well as an anchor component. Depending on the options chosen, \$2,000 to 3,000 delivers great sound, leaving the rest of the budget for speakers, amp and sources that complement it. Do yourself a favor and keep this preamp in mind—it might just be the solution you are looking for. *(continued)*

The music does not extend much beyond the left and right speaker limits. This preamp also struggles to project sound into the perceived space behind the speakers, although I will say that vocals never get recessed into the mix.

Despite these limitations, the sonic elements that reveal themselves between the speakers remain well separated and quite convincing. If forced to make a tradeoff, I'd prefer the Fet Valve CF's large and realistically rendered sonic image—one that's akin to stepping back several rows in a live performance—to having an artificially bloated image increasing the apparent size of vocalists or instruments. After getting used to the Fet Valve CF's portrayal, I decide that it doesn't reduce the enjoyment of the performance; it just puts a different lens on it.

Like the rest of the Fet Valve CF, the phonostage offers a fantastic price-to-performance ratio. While the sonic attributes described earlier remain generally consistent regardless of source, vinyl albums do take on a more relaxed musical presence through this preamp than their digital counterparts do. Considering the phono section is a mere \$250 upgrade option, it's an absolute steal. Even if you don't have a turntable now, you might later!



Additional Listening

By Jeff Dorgay

Not quite old enough to have purchased tubed Dynaco gear new, I did spend a fair amount of time growing up with it—and I remember when Van Alstine came on the scene, offering updates that took this modest gear to killer levels. Frank has definitely taken everything further over the years, and he's done so while keeping the costs in line.

If I had to describe Van Alstine gear in one word, it would be *honest*. This is well-made gear that delivers honest performance without frills. When I mate the Fet Valve CF to the Van Alstine Ultravalve vacuum tube amplifier, the synergy is fantastic, as you might expect. Using the two together with a handful of speakers, I don't find the smallish soundstage that Jerold experienced to be an issue; it may have been system synergy. With the Fet Valve CF, everything from AVA's own amplifier to a few examples from Pass Labs, Simaudio, Octave, and Audio Research all reveal the same big soundstage.

Van Alstine offers a 30-day trial on all of its gear, so you've got nothing to lose. I suspect precious few of these get sent back. This preamplifier is a proud addition to my list of Publisher's Choice Awards for 2013. ●

Audio by Van Alstine Fet Valve
CF Vacuum Tube Preamplifier

MSRP: Starting at \$1,899

MANUFACTURER

Van Alstine

CONTACT

www.avahifi.com

PERIPHERALS

Amplifier

McIntosh MA6600

CD/SACD player/DAC

Opportunity 105

Speakers

KEF LS50, Genesis G7c

Cables

Darwin, Transparent, DH Labs

Accessories

Sound Anchor stands, Audience
aR2p power conditioner

...are you listening in 3D yet?



"I took a listen after 20 hours of break-in, and I hereby declare the 3D wand to succeed the Rim Drive as the "Best sounding VPI upgrade of all time!" I'm absolutely mesmerized over what I'm hearing. It is so good, and so revolutionary as to defy description! A must upgrade for all VPI customers!!"

"You have erred upon the name of the new VPI wand: it should be called "the revelation" - all lps sound better than ever. There is a detail retrieval, little cues of sound that are now much clearer; there is a separation of instruments - a layering of the individual instruments in their own cushion of air (space info); individual voices, or sections of vocal pieces, have separation - instead of being one amorphous entity. Along with this there is less vinyl noise. Also, if one speakers are, let us say 5 to 6 feet from the side walls, one can hear information seemingly coming from the sides. Lastly, the timbre of instruments, from organ to piccolo, sounds more like the real thing!"

"The best way I can put it is that this arm reduces resonances to a point where playback simply sounds more like analog tape than a mechanical interface. Tonal colors fully bloom and there is more information but there is a huge reduction in distortion ... distortion that I didn't know was even there before. Or I thought it was part and parcel of LP playback. The noise floor on this thing is incredibly low. So far it seems to track like a dream and that's even with the light counterweight hanging off the back."

"Harry and Mat, IMO this arm is a serious game changer!"

"Congratulations for having the guts and innovative minds to go out and try something so new!"

“The first “3D” printer product I know of in audio, which does a remarkable job of limiting vibration thanks to its seamless rigidity...

The end result is as close to mastertapeq sound as any analog front end I've ever heard.”

-Anthony H. Cordesman



Speaker of the Year

Focal Maestro Utopia

By Jeff Dorgay

The second I queue up the Afghan Whigs' album *Gentlemen*, I know these speakers are special. The reproduced soundstage on this record is massive, with the wind in the background of the opening track, "If I Were Going," sounding much more expansive than I've ever heard it, save perhaps what I experienced at the Boulder factory last year via the Grande Utopia EM speakers and the prodigious Boulder 3050 monoblocks—the most compelling audio system I've yet experienced.

Yet slumming it back at my place, with the Pass Labs Xs 300 monoblocks and the Maestro Utopias, a bargain at \$60,000 per pair, I'm getting in the ballpark. As soon as the drumbeats hit *hard* on the title track, we are indeed getting serious slam. These speakers move major air without fatigue, distortion or coloration. They are marvelous. Sure, the Grandes are even more amazing, but you need the room to let them breathe and the rest of the system has to be equally astounding to really allow the speakers to reach their full potential.



I won't apologize for telling you to get a pair of \$60k speakers, and I don't want to hear all the tired arguments about how you can build a pair of these yourself for a lot less money. You can't. Sure you could buy a nicely appointed 5-series BMW for the price of the Maestro Utopias, but the hi-fi system inside is rubbish. The arguments about diminishing returns are also moot—you won't get this level of musical involvement for \$10k, \$20k or even \$30k. You'll have to pay if you want to play, but the good news is that the Maestros will reward you in a way that few speakers can.

What makes the Maestros so compelling is that you can build an amazing system around them for little more than the cost of a pair of Grande Utopias. And while a \$150k-to-\$250k stereo system is somewhat obsessive, the \$500k-plus that it's going to take to make the Grande's sing is a completely different realm, hence these speakers will appeal to a completely different buyer. So, if you've drooled over the sound of the Focal Grande Utopias, and either don't quite have the budget or the room to take advantage of them (or maybe you're just a bit more frugal), the Maestros do not disappoint.

Spinning AC/DC's "Rock and Roll Ain't Noise Pollution," I'm again reminded of how well the Maestros can create the sheer sound pressure of a live rock concert without compression or

fatigue. Even at brain-damage levels, the meters on the Xs 300s are barely moving from the center position, indicating that they are working in full class-A mode throughout my listening session.

And installing the Maestros is a breeze. Though just more than 250 pounds each, the Maestros are easy to remove from their shipping cartons. Thanks to the wheels on the cartons, you can move them to your listening area by yourself, though you will probably need a friend to help you to remove the speakers, which also have wheels, and get them into a rough position.

Focal's manual is thorough in describing setup and, depending on your room, you should be able to get the Maestros fairly close to fine-tuned while still on their wheels. Once satisfied that you've optimized the bass response for smoothness and weight, remove the wheels and experiment with the spikes to adjust the speaker rake angle to perfection.

The jumpers at the speaker's base provide ultra-fine-tuning, allowing a modest adjustment of bass, midrange and treble energy. Fortunately in my listening room, I do not have to deviate from the factory settings, and trying them does show their effectiveness. The additional bass boost works well with the Pass First Watt amplifier and an 845-based SET amplifier, both of which are a little shy in the low-frequency department.



Sensitivity Makes All the Difference

Thanks to a 93-dB sensitivity rating, the Maestros work well with a 60-watt-per-channel tube amplifier, and we achieve amazing synergy with the 60-watt PrimaLuna DiaLogue monoblocks in for review (you can read the review [here](#)), but this gives the Maestros a different character. They lack some of the pulverizing dynamics that they do with a big solid-state amplifier, yet even hardcore hip-hop tracks, like Wu-Tang Clan's "Protect Your Neck," still hit with plenty of clarity at all but club levels.

The Maestros, like the Stella and Diablo Utopias that we've spent plenty of time with, are equally tube friendly, so don't shy away from these speakers if you're a tube user. The Audio Research REF 250 monoblocks, Octave's Jubilee monoblocks and even the PrimaLuna ProLogue Premium monoblocks all work brilliantly with these speakers, thanks to their exceedingly tube-friendly crossover network.

As phenomenal as the Maestros are with big solid-state amps, I must confess my own personal bias and admit how smitten I am with these speakers when pairing them with vacuum-tube amplification. For those just tuning in to *TONEAudio*, I prefer my personal system to be a few molecules on the warm, romantic side of neutral, yet not lacking in cloudiness, detail or resolution—a tall order indeed. *(continued)*

Tubey Goodness

Yet this is exactly what the Maestros provide when paired with a great tube amplifier. The beryllium tweeter is as fast and transparent as any electrostatic speaker I've owned (and I've owned almost all of 'em), and a little bit of tube warmth makes them feel like a pair of giant Sound Labs ESLs but with major dynamics and punch. Put a fork in me, I'm done!

Sonny Rollins' classic album *Tenor Madness* just leaps out of the speakers, with the Maestros painting a vivid picture of this quartet in my listening room. Bass is solidly anchored, with everything lovers of pace and timing will ever need to be ecstatic. No matter how complicated the program material, the Maestros never fail to keep up with the music, regardless of listening level.

The piano is reproduced with all the necessary timbre and attack to sound great, but what pushes it over the top is the scale. In a good-sized room with plenty of amplifier power (solid state or tubes), the Maestros reproduce scale in a way few other speakers can. This is what separates great speakers from truly exceptional ones for this reviewer, and you can put the Maestros solidly in that rare latter category.

These speakers have an uncanny ability to expand and contract with the music, no matter what the material. Where the large Magnepans reproduce everything with an expansive sound field, which is somewhat unnatural but pleasing nonetheless, a solitary guitarist playing in a church is rendered thusly through the Maestros. A group of jazz musicians playing acoustic instruments in close quarters feels as if they are right in my listening room. And Nine Inch Nails sounds like a giant wall of sound slapping me down with maximum force, as it should, but it does so without fatigue—another highly important aspect of mega-loudspeaker design.

(continued)

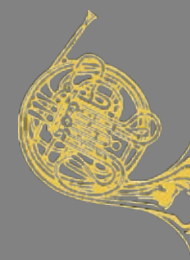


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Should you have major amplification, you will need to be watchful with the Maestros, as they can achieve such high sound-pressure levels without distortion that you could easily exceed safe levels. They pressurize the room so well and play without a hint of fatigue, that it's always tempting to turn them up beyond a level that is prudent. Honestly, this is a ton of fun, especially with my favorite rock recordings.

Playing in the Sand

Going through the gamut of high-powered solid-state amplifiers is equally rewarding and revealing. Switching back to solid state provides a fascinating but different experience. The Maestros are such efficient conduits of relaying music, never sounding harsh, forward or over detailed. All of the amplifiers in my collection turn in stunning performances with the Maestros. The speakers' high degree of resolution easily identifies the differences in tonal qualities between my references, the Burmester 911 MK3 and the Pass Xs 300s, when compared to the D'Agostino Momentum stereo amplifier and the Simaudio Moon 880Ms, which have recently passed through for review.

However, one of the more interesting performances turned in by the Maestros is not with a high-powered amplifier, but with the 10-watt-per-channel First Watt SIT-2 amplifier—a single-ended, class-A design featuring a single gain stage. This amplifier has always combined the virtues of a great 300B SET vacuum-tube amplifier with the low noise and control of the best solid-state amplifiers. But it still only produces 10 watts per channel. Lacking a bit of the ultimate bass slam that the big amplifiers possess, this amp lays bare the inner detail from only a single transistor in the gain path, which proves to be a revelation at modest volume levels.



Special Indeed

The guitar and banjo work on Neil Young's *Harvest* demonstrates the potency of these speakers. The sheer speed of the Maestros expresses acoustic instruments in a very lifelike manner, without coloration. At the same time, the decay present in a great analog recording seems to carry on forever, with a fine gradation that doesn't exist with a lesser speaker.

After countless hours with the Maestros, swapping amplifiers and other speakers for comparison, we come back to the initial question: \$60k for a pair of speakers? And the answer is still a resplendent yes, for a number of reasons. First and foremost, the level of music that the Maestros reveal is considerably beyond that of the lesser speakers we've reviewed.

In terms of construction, Focal put innumerable hours of research, design, testing and prototyping into the Maestros, which goes hand in hand with the bespoke nature of all the company's speakers. This level of passion is comparable to what goes into a Formula 1 car—every aspect, regardless of how minute, is scrutinized mercilessly by the Focal team. There is truly an integration of art and science taking place here. This is not another audio company installing drivers in a box. Nothing in the Focal Maestro is off the shelf, and none of the drivers, except the beryllium tweeter, is shared with the rest of the range.

The 3.5-way system uses two 11-inch woofers, one as a woofer and one as a subwoofer. The lower woofer vents through a downward-firing laminar port that eliminates any port noise or dynamic compression effects, and features a 2-inch voice coil, where the upper woofer has a 1.5-inch coil. *(continued)*



Passive Progressive

"I've not heard a better preamp, and I've been looking for 30 years"

- Sam Tellig, Stereophile

"I started this review with the notion that digital can spell the end of the preamplifier. The Music First Audio Baby Reference exposes this as abject nonsense"

- Alan Sircom - Hi-Fi+

"the story of the passive pre-amplifier has just been re-written"

- Andrew Harrison - Hi-Fi News

"Auditioning was a delight, fully vindicating the careful design work and the advanced manufacturing techniques required to produce it"

- Martin Colloms - Hi-Fi Critic

"This is nothing less than a landmark product"

- David Price - Hi-Fi World

"...in the right circumstance, the Music First is the best preamp I've heard"

- Srajan Ebaen - 6 Moons

Finest quality audio products, hand made in Great Britain



The 6-inch midrange driver, though looking similar to the other 6-inch drivers in the rest of the Utopia lineup, is designed and optimized specifically for the Maestro. Both the midrange and woofers utilize the third-generation of Focal's "W" composite-sandwich-cone technology, providing exceptional strength while minimizing weight. It's safe to say that this is a major factor in achieving the low coloration that the Utopia range exhibits.

Lastly, the fit and finish: The mechanical construction of these speakers is sheer perfection. The gently curved cabinets have a timeless design aesthetic, and while available in a number of standard colors (black, white and red), custom colors can be ordered at a slightly additional cost. The finish applied is on the same level as the world's finest luxury cars, and the enclosures are flawless. While these are speakers worthy of the price asked based on performance, they also exude build quality that will satisfy the most sophisticated owner, and will meld into any environment with ease.

And this is what you write the big check for—which is precisely why the Focal Maestro Utopia is our choice for Product of the Year in the speaker category. ●

Maestro Utopia
MSRP: \$60,000
per pair

MANUFACTURER
Focal

CONTACT
www.focal.com (factory)
www.audioplusservices.com
(North American distributor)

PERIPHERALS

Analog source
AVID Acutus SP
Reference turntable,
TriPlanar tonearm,
Lyra Atlas cartridge

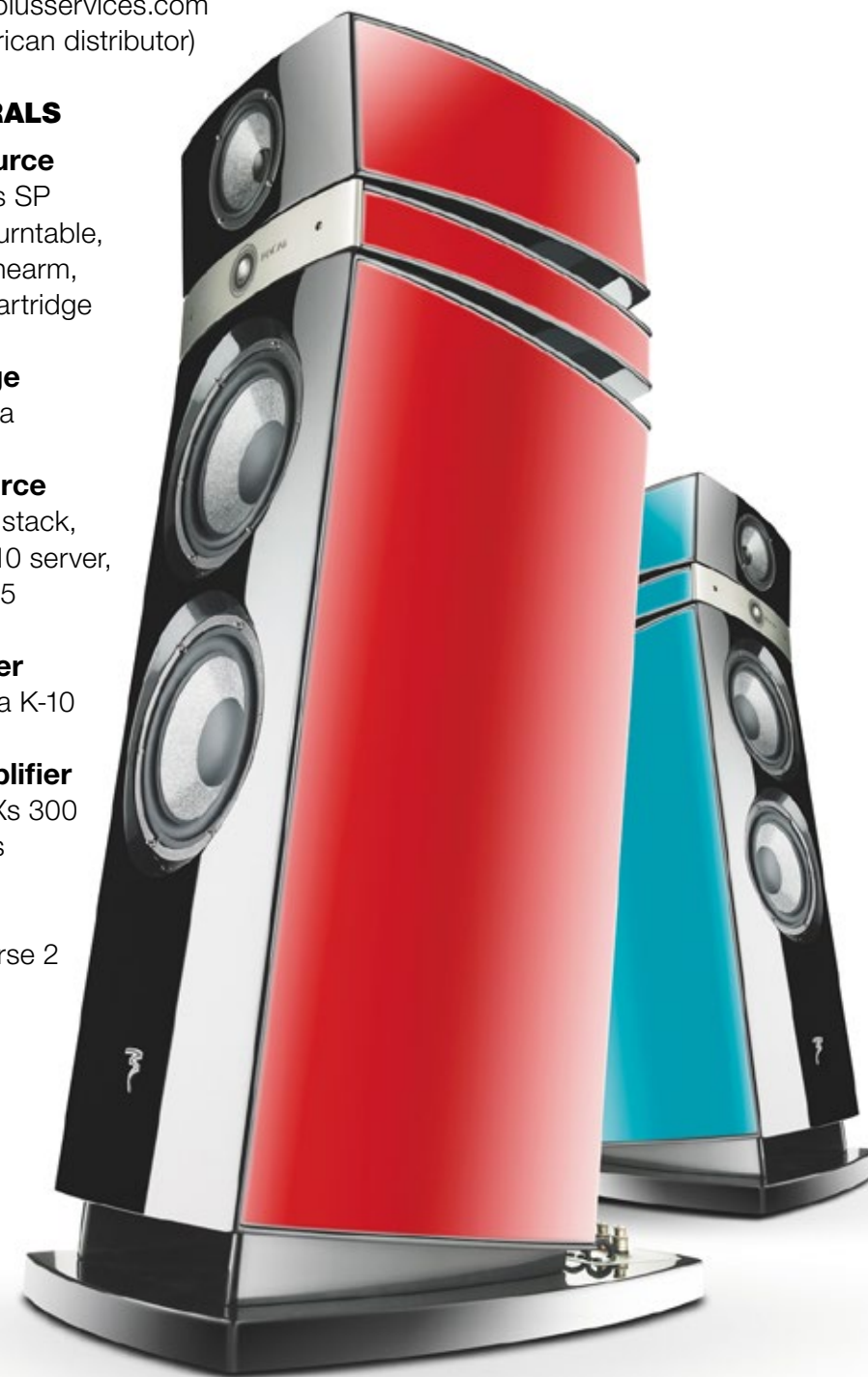
Phonostage
Indigo Qualia

Digital source
dCS Vivaldi stack,
Aurender S10 server,
Meridian C15

Preamplifier
Robert Koda K-10

Power amplifier
Pass Labs Xs 300
monoblocks

Cables
Nordost Norse 2



TONE Audio AWARDS 2013

It's amazing how fast a year passes when you're listening to such great hi-fi gear. As we only hand out a small number of awards throughout the year, it's always tough to decide what to lift up beyond the rest.

This year, we are excited to give the overall Product of the Year award to VPI Industries, whose new turntable makes a bold statement, combining the direct-drive mechanism that Japan's top brands made popular in the 1970s with 21st-century manufacturing methods and the insight that comes from 30-plus years of turntable production. The result is something truly special.

Along with our 10 Product of the Year appointees, we have nine Publisher's Choice Awards. The difference? Where the entire TONE staff decides our Product of the Year selections, the Publisher's Choice Awards are my personal favorites, those which stuck out in the last year of examining great hi-fi gear. These awards are listed [here](#), on our website.

So here are our picks for Product of the Year. Let the discussion begin!

2013 Product of the Year OVERALL

VPI Classic Direct Drive Turntable

\$30,000 (with 3D-printed tonearm)
www.vpiindustries.com

VPI's flagship turntable is a monster. Robustly built in America, it embodies founder Harry Weisfeld's vision of a turntable that is free from the problems he feels have plagued turntables in the past. When asked, he quickly responds, "It's the motor!" Problem solved. The new Classic Direct takes direct-drive performance to a level that the designers of the Technics SP-10 could have only dreamed—and then some. VPI's Classic Direct table is one of the world's finest, at any price.



AWARDS

2013 Product of the Year ANALOG

Qualia Indigo Phonostage

\$65,000

qualia-highend.com

Yeah, it's crazy expensive, but it's crazy good. The ultimate in minimalistic design, this three-box phonostage leaves nothing to chance. Every aspect is optimized for a singular purpose: to preserve the delicate signal from the world's finest phono cartridges with perfection. And while nothing is truly perfect, the Indigo certainly comes closer than anything we've ever had the pleasure of experiencing.



THE FIFTY



1961 - 2011



www.kef.com/thefifty

AWARDS

2013 Product of the Year DIGITAL



dCS Vivaldi Digital Playback System

\$108,000 (four-box system)
www.dcsLtd.co.uk

Absolute power corrupts absolutely with the Vivaldi stack, and it provides the ultimate in digital-music reproduction. And for those who think components at this level only provide incremental performance gains over those costing much less, you couldn't be more wrong. The Vivaldi is the real deal.

Fortunately, the Vivaldi is a *system*, so it can be purchased modularly, allowing you to start with just the DAC and add the upsampler, world clock and transport as you please. Those listening to digital files only can skip the transport and cut \$40,000 from the price, making the three-box Vivaldi an even better bargain.

AWARDS

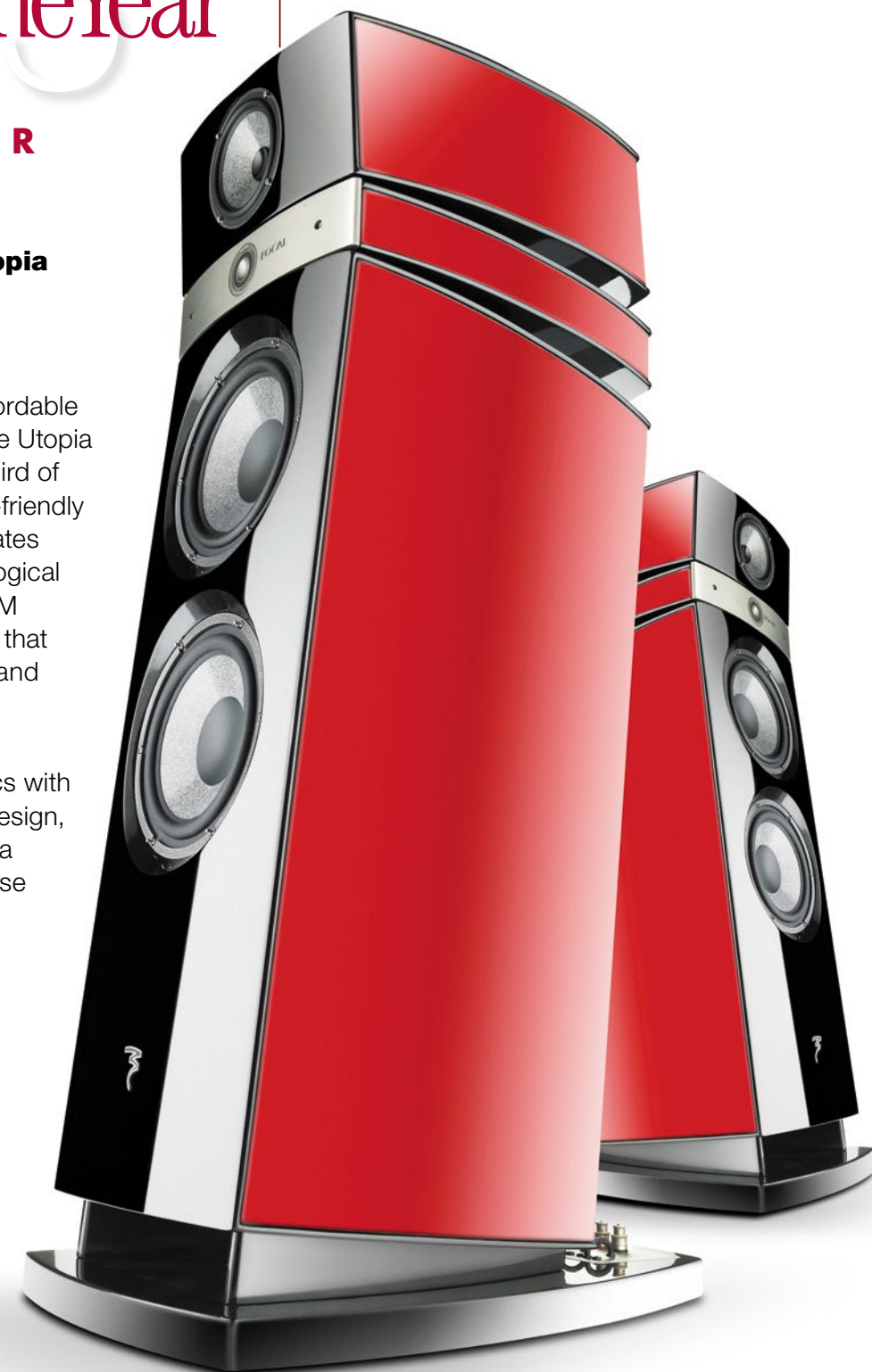
2013 Product of the Year SPEAKER

Focal Maestro Utopia

\$60,000 per pair
www.focal.com

Those wanting a more affordable version of the Focal Grande Utopia EM, look no further. At a third of the cost and a more room-friendly size, the Maestro incorporates all of the Grande's technological breakthroughs, sans the EM woofer, to make a speaker that embodies natural tonality and dynamic contrast like few speakers can muster.

Combining stellar sonics with timeless fashion-forward design, the Maestro Utopia will be a destination speaker for those who make the pilgrimage. And what a destination!



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Boulder, Colorado
— U.S.A —

www.boulderamp.com

AWARDS

2013 Product of the Year BUDGET

KEF LS-50

\$1,495 per pair www.kef.com

It's always a ton of fun listening to \$60k speakers, but it's equally fun to find a speaker that delivers tremendous performance that is within reach of every audiophile. The KEF LS-50 is that speaker, delivering the goods with a purity of concept that few speakers at any price do.

You can find speakers that deliver wider frequency response (i.e. *more bass*) for the same price, but with the LS-50 the KEF engineers went for the resolution, tonal purity and coherence that a lot of \$10k speakers lack. On one hand, this is no small feat, but on the other hand, it's no big surprise, considering the same design team that built a \$100,000 pair of speakers into the \$30,000 KEF Blades put their knowledge to bear on the LS-50—50 years of production expertise doesn't hurt either.



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AWARDS

2013 Product of the Year PREAMPLIFIER

Simaudio MOON Evolution 850P

\$30,000 www.simaudio.com

Simaudio's top preamplifier gets our top award more for what it doesn't do than for what it does. It *doesn't* do anything to alter the signal fed to it, which is something few preamplifiers manage to accomplish. While it is a solid-state design, this two-box preamplifier offers world-class tonal purity, dynamics and a quiet background.

Everything Simaudio has learned in terms of circuit design, mechanical and electrical isolation and mechanical design converge in the 850P. Sounding neither solid-state nor tube-like, the 850P is a tour de force of transparency. And thanks to a plethora of both single-ended RCA and balanced XLR inputs and outputs, this fully balanced design can integrate into any system.

And if that weren't enough, Simaudio also offers a 10-year warranty on its electronics, making the 850P a preamplifier that will truly stand the test of time.



2013 Product of the Year

SOLID-STATE AMPLIFIER



Pass Labs Xs 300 Monoblocks

\$85,000 per pair www.passlabs.com

Due to their prodigious size, weighing almost 300 pounds per channel and drawing 1,000 watts each from the AC power line, the Xs 300s are not for the faint of bicep, wallet or electric power. These amps provide big, big, big sound.

These two-chassis amplifiers deliver 300 watts of power per channel in pure class-A mode. Splitting the amplifier into two chassis allows 10 times the bias current of one-chassis designs, and that additional power on tap translates into a level of control over your speakers that has to be heard to be experienced.

What will Nelson Pass come up with next? The Xs 300 is a pretty tough act to follow.

2013 Product of the Year

TUBE AMPLIFIER



PrimaLuna DiaLogue Premium

\$3,199 www.primaluna-usa.com

Much like Porsche keeps refining its legendary 911, PrimaLuna keeps steadily refining its amplifiers. Going back to the original design, PrimaLuna amps all share the same outward appearance, with either a black or silver faceplate mounted to a dark blue, almost black chassis that is polished to a high gloss.

The goodies are on the inside, where the circuitry continues to evolve, along with further improvements to all the parts. Now the DiaLogue Premium can even be used with the newer, more powerful KT120 output tube, as well as with other popular tubes. We prefer it as an EL34 model, but you can tube roll to your heart's content with this one.

Switching from ultralinear to triode mode is as easy as flipping a switch, but best of all, the DiaLogue Premium amplifier can be switched into mono mode, producing 84 watts per channel in ultralinear mode and 50 watts per channel in triode mode. This flexibility is a great way to update your system, making the DiaLogue Premium a great investment in your audio future.

AWARDS

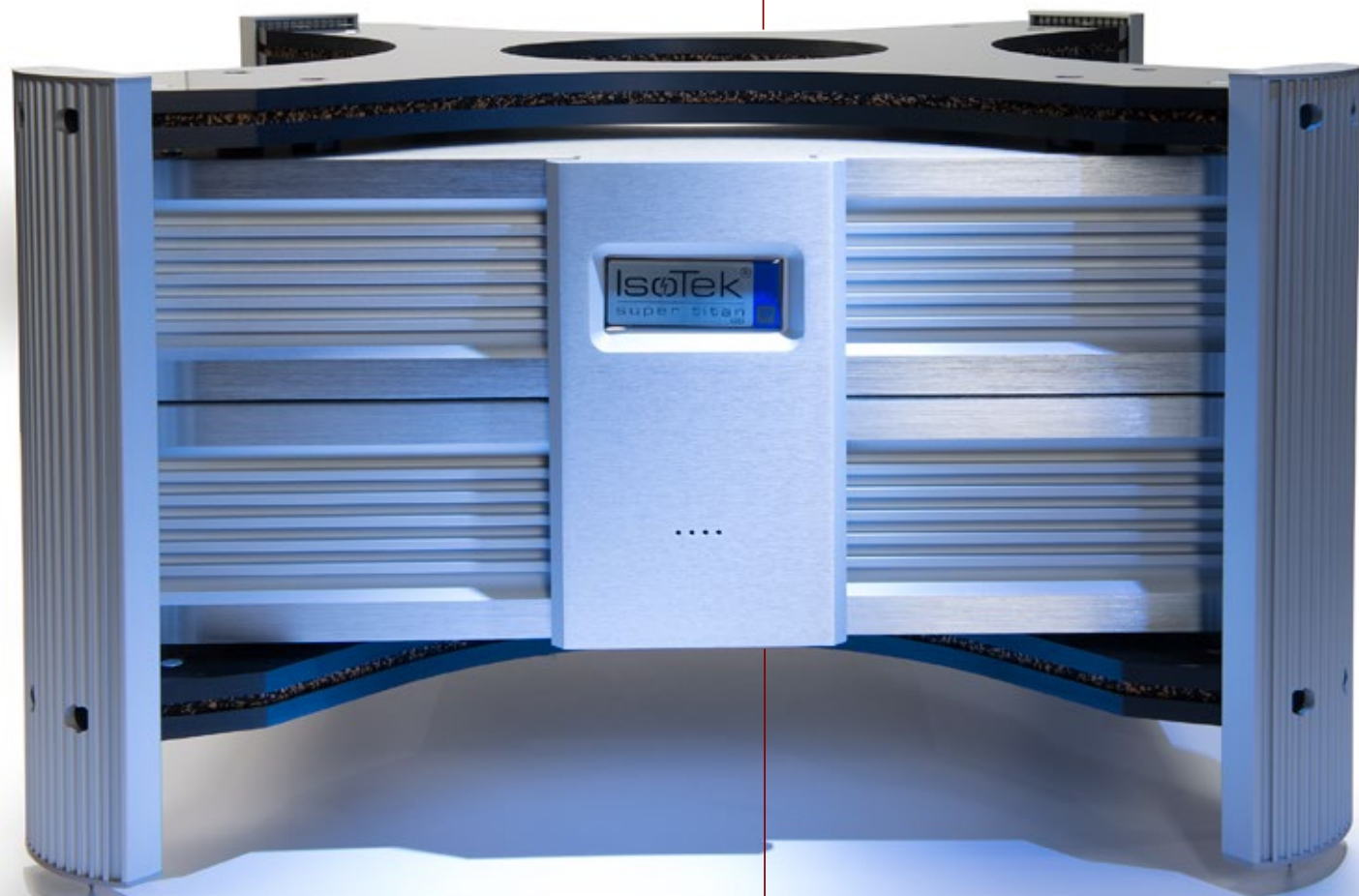
2013 Product of the Year ACCESSORY

IsoTek Super Titan Power Conditioner

\$10,000 www.isoteksystems.com

We've had excellent luck with IsoTek products over the past few years, and the Super Titan has worked flawlessly in our publisher's reference system. Combining some radical ideas to power conditioning with vault-like build quality, electronic and mechanical noise is eliminated from your system with the Super Titan.

It's Neutrik connectors for the four power cords going out to your system is just another example of how everything under the hood of the Super Titan has been taken to the extreme. With a maximum capacity of 32 amperes (from a 110-volt AC line), the Super Titan requires you to call your electrician to get the maximum capacity it can deliver, but the results are well worth it. You've never heard your system sound so free of electrical artifacts until you plug into a Super Titan.



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Debut Carbon



Rega RP1



Marantz TT-15



Music Hall USB-1



VPI Classic 1



AVID Acutus



Rega RP3



VPI Traveler



Audio By Van Alstine

American made luxury soundsm

The AVA UltraValve purist vacuum tube amplifier with 4, 8, and 16-ohm output taps and gold plated input jacks.

This is an amazingly wide band, dynamic, transparent and utterly musical amplifier. It is ready to play out of the custom padded shipping carton, no initial adjustments or set up necessary at all.

Introducing our Transcendence 9 vacuum tube preamplifier

The improved, upgraded successor to our award winning T8+ preamplifier. It is designed to produce outstanding musicality with both tube and solid-state amplifiers.

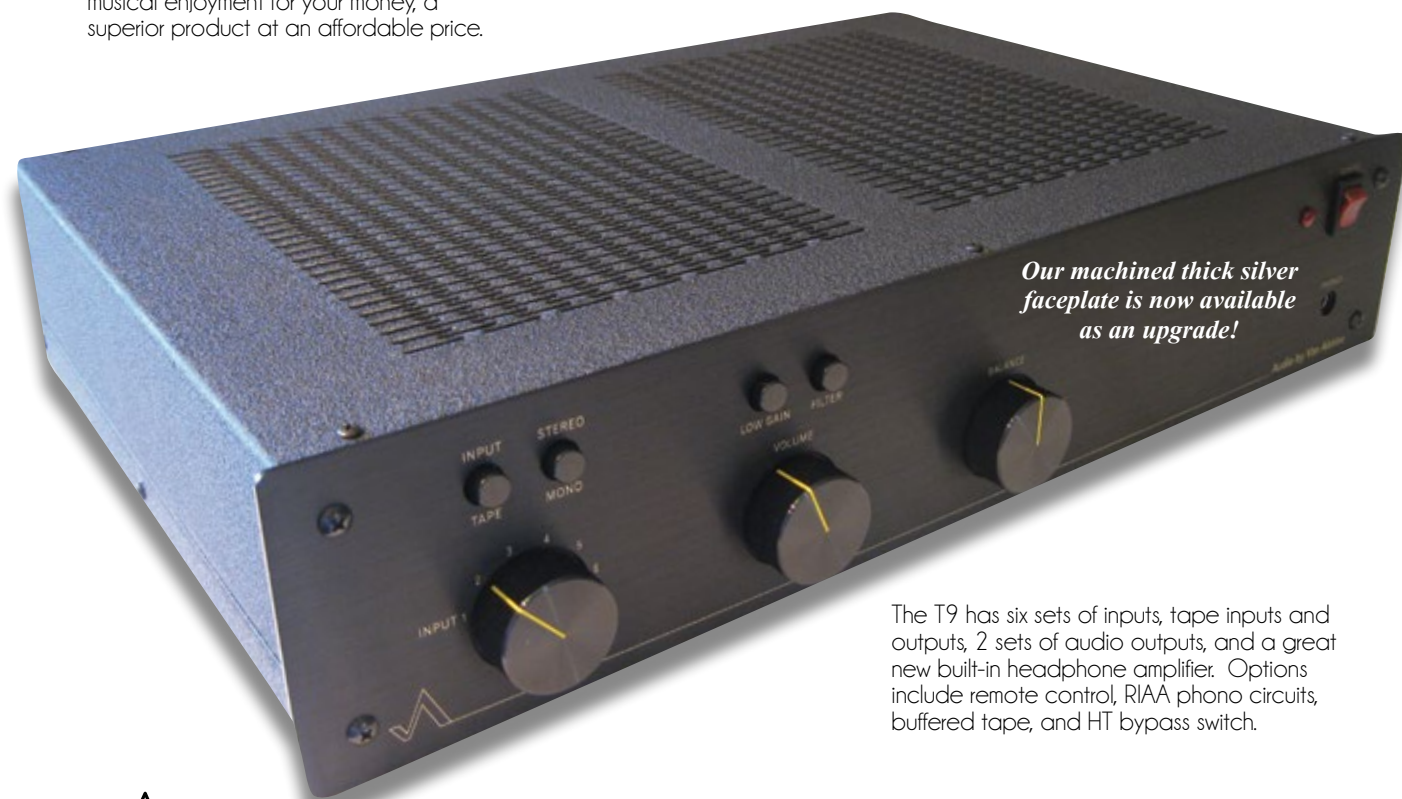
Every circuit of the T9 has been improved. We are especially proud of our unique new split passive EQ optional phono circuit.

The overall result of the T9 is more musical enjoyment for your money, a superior product at an affordable price.



Ultravalve

The level of resolution, tonality and bass control this amplifier offers for \$1,999 is unmatched at this price point. I am very proud to award the Ultravalve our Exceptional Value Award for 2013. "I'm keeping this one!"
-Jeff Dorgay -ToneAudio Issue 56



Our machined thick silver faceplate is now available as an upgrade!

The T9 has six sets of inputs, tape inputs and outputs, 2 sets of audio outputs, and a great new built-in headphone amplifier. Options include remote control, RIAA phono circuits, buffered tape, and HT bypass switch.

Transcendence 9



www.avahifi.com

Audio by Van Alstine 2665 Brittany Lane Woodbury, MN 55125 (651)-330-9871 avahifi@comcast.net

AWARDS

2013 Product of the Year PERSONAL AUDIO

Audeze LCD-X Headphones

\$1,699 www.audeze.com

Audeze raised the bar a few years ago with its original LCD-2 magnetic planar headphones, which deliver a level of sound quality previously unattainable by anything but the legendary Stax electrostatic headphones.

Now with the release of the LCD-3 and LCD-X phones, Audeze has taken performance beyond those legendary phones, and you can actually get your hands on a pair. A truly wonderful thing.

What sets the LCD-X apart from even its spectacular siblings is its new, patented driver design, which is not only more efficient but even easier to drive than past Audeze models. The LCD-X is a premium pair of headphones that you can drive with your iPhone—and that's a great place to start your high-end journey.





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WEB REVIEW



Naim DAC V-1 and NAP 100 Amplifier

\$2,400 and \$1,295, respectively www.naimaudio.com

For those needing a bit more power than the 30 watt per channel Uniti Qute, and a bit more functionality, pairing up the DAC V-1 and the NAP 100 will expand your audio horizons without needing much more space to clutter up your listening room – both boxes have the same footprint as the Uniti Qute.

50 watts per channel go a long way towards powering a wider range of speakers, and the DAC V-1 can easily interface with one of Naim's music servers or the UpNP server or NAS drive of your choice, making for a potent yet compact combo.

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



PrimaLuna DiaLogue Premium Preamplifier

\$3,199 www.primaluna-usa.net

Having just reviewed the companion power amplifier in Issue #60, PrimaLuna's flagship preamplifier is equally capable, bringing top quality tube sound to a mass audience. For those who crave state-of-the-art tube magic, robust build quality and old-school aesthetic all in one package, the DiaLogue Premium preamplifier should float your boat.

With six inputs, two variable outputs, a tape output and an HT passthrough, the DiaLogue Premium can handle just about anything you've got to interface with. But the sound is what really takes the cake. Utilizing three 12AU7 tubes per channel, the DiaLogue Premium is voiced right between perfectly neutral and old-school tube sound, and can easily be pushed one way or another by rolling tubes. As it comes equipped from the factory, it has a relatively neutral tonality, but those longing for that vintage Marantz or McIntosh sound can easily pop some Telefunken's in the tube sockets (and NOS 12AU7s are way less expensive than the NOS 12AX7s that populate so many other tube preamps) and go towards the romantic side.

No matter which route you choose, the DiaLogue Premium preamplifier will be tons of fun for the tube enthusiast.

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

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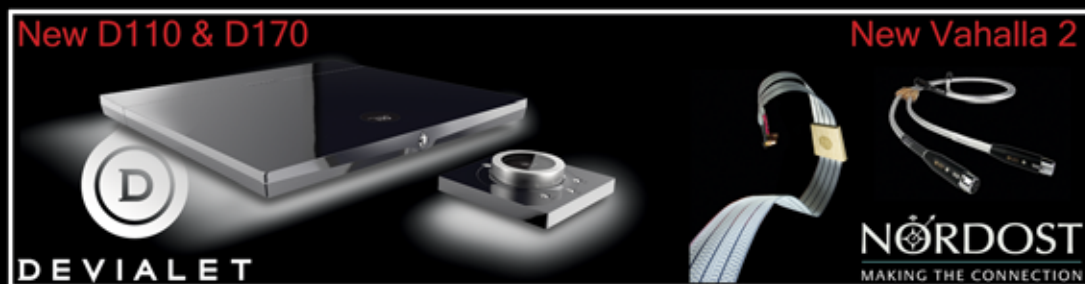




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