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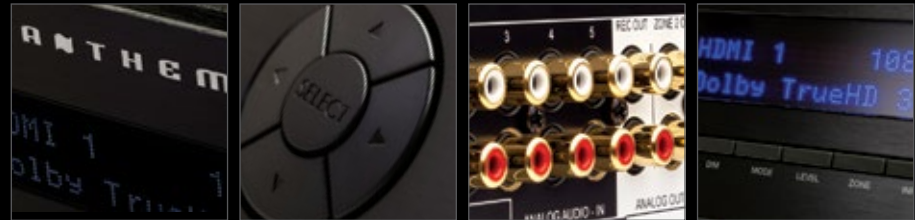
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CONTENTS



11. PUBLISHER'S LETTER

12. TONE TOON
By Liza Donnelly

features

62 Short Takes:
**The Absolute Sound's
Illustrated History of High-End
Audio Volume 1: Loudspeakers**

64. Harnessing More Power
Devialet 120

66 Getting Personal
**A Conversation with Singer-
songwriter Sharon Van Etten**
By Jaan Uhelszki

80 995: **Sounds That Won't
Break The Bank**
**Blumenstein Audio
Thrashers Speakers**
By Mark Marcantonio

122 Personal Fidelity:
**McIntosh MHA100 Integrated
Headphone Amplifier**
By Bailey S. Barnard

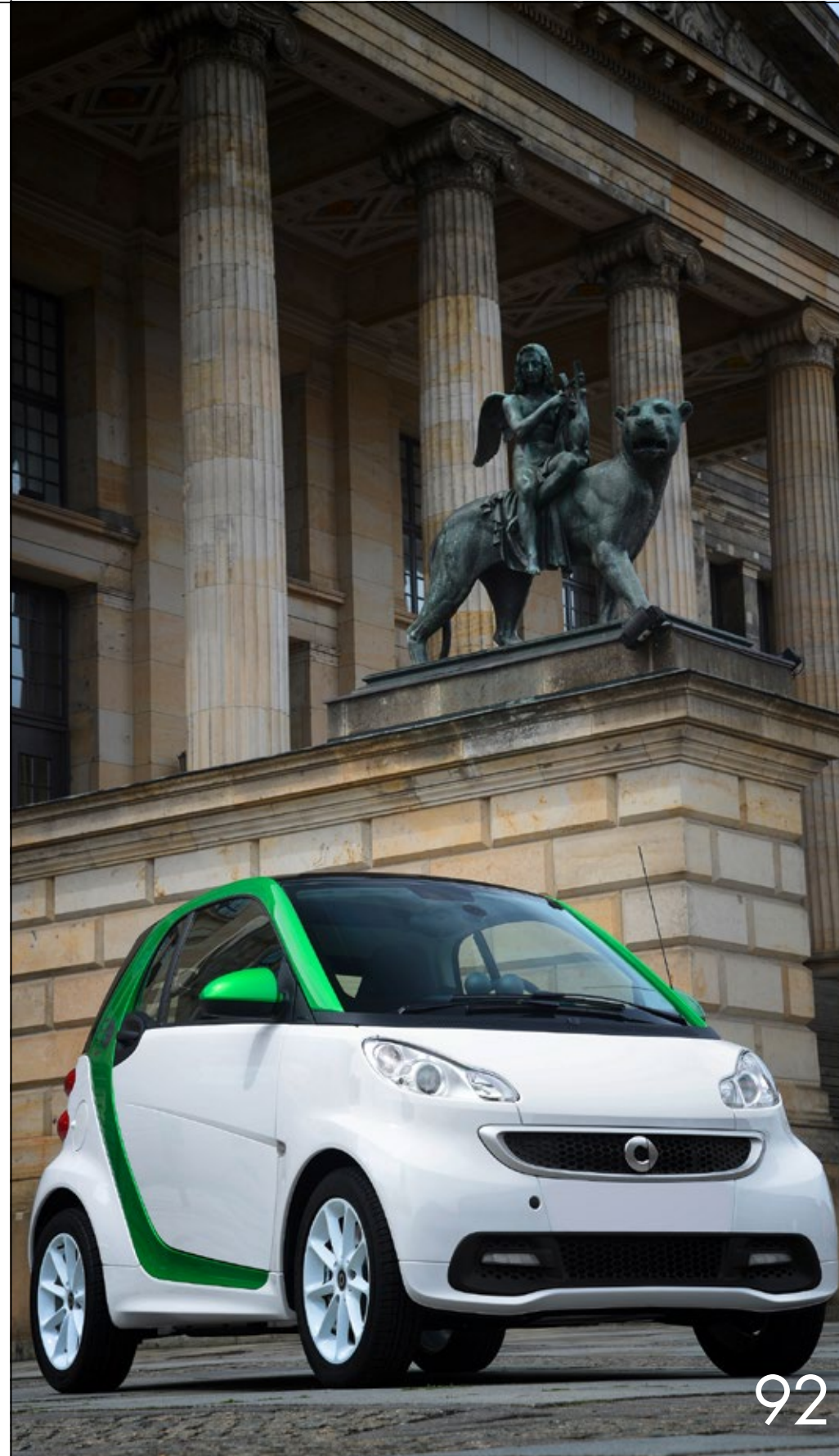


66

86

©Photo by Dusdin Condren

CONTENTS



92



122

tone style

86 The Beats Pill
Not a bitter pill at all...
By Jeff Dorgay

92 Smart Electric Drive
Staying Green
By Jeff Dorgay

98 Space Girl Bath Bomb
Awesome

100 The Screw Pen
Turn Heads With This

103 Indigo White Dot Shirt
Crowd Funding Clothes

CONTENTS



Shovels & Rope ©Photo by Molly Hayes

music

- 14. SNAPSHOT:** Rock legends Roger Glover and Ian Gillan of Deep Purple live at the Warfield theater in San Francisco
Photo by Jerome Brunet
- 16. SPIN THE BLACK CIRCLE:** Reviews of New Pop/Rock and Country Albums
By Bob Gendron, Andy Downing, Todd Martens, Chrissie Dickinson, and Aaron Cohen
- 78. AUDIOPHILE PRESSINGS:** Mobile Fidelity Metal Trilogy: Judas Priest
by Jeff Dorgay
- 104. JAZZ & BLUES:** Jason Moran, Stephen Bollani, The Bad Plus, Medeski Scofield Martin & Wood, and Louis Sclavis Quartet
By Aaron Cohen and Jim Macnie



38. Robert Plant *lullaby and...the Ceaseless Roar*

CONTENTS

gear previews

- 131. REL S2 Subwoofer**
- 132. Alta Audio FRM-2 Speaker**
- 135. Van Alstine Vision Phono Preamplifier**
- 136. Rega RP-10**

gear reviews

- 138. BAT VK-3000SE Integrated Amplifier**
By Rob Johnson
- 152. PrimaLuna DiaLogue Premium Preamplifier**
By Jeff Dorgay
- 164. Simaudio MOON 610LP Phonostage**
By Jeff Dorgay
- 174. Peachtree nova220SE Integrated Amplifier**
By Mark Marcantonio
- 184. Roksan Kandy K2 BT Integrated Amplifier**
By Antre Marc



web review

- 196. Ortofon 2M Black MM Cartridge**
- 198. Slummin'**
- 201. Manufacturer Info.**

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PUBLISHER'S LETTER



By the time you read this, summer will be almost over. It's certainly been a great one here in the Pacific Northwest. And I must say that, for me, a majority of summer is hanging out in the garage, rocking out, and doing a bit of auto detailing and maintenance. A crucial element to this, along with a few cold adult beverages and a good friend or two, is music.

And with that, I have to tip my hat to Clark and Molly Blumenstein of Blumenstein Audio for their Thrashers speakers—full-range box speakers screwed together from remnants they find around their shop, with the logo stenciled on with spray paint in the best DIY fashion. For \$249, these have to be one of the best bargains in hi-fi around—but most of all, they capture the true spirit of *TONEAudio*: fun! Sure, I could put a pair of vintage JBLs in my garage, but I'd freak out about them, just as I would if I owned a Porsche 356.

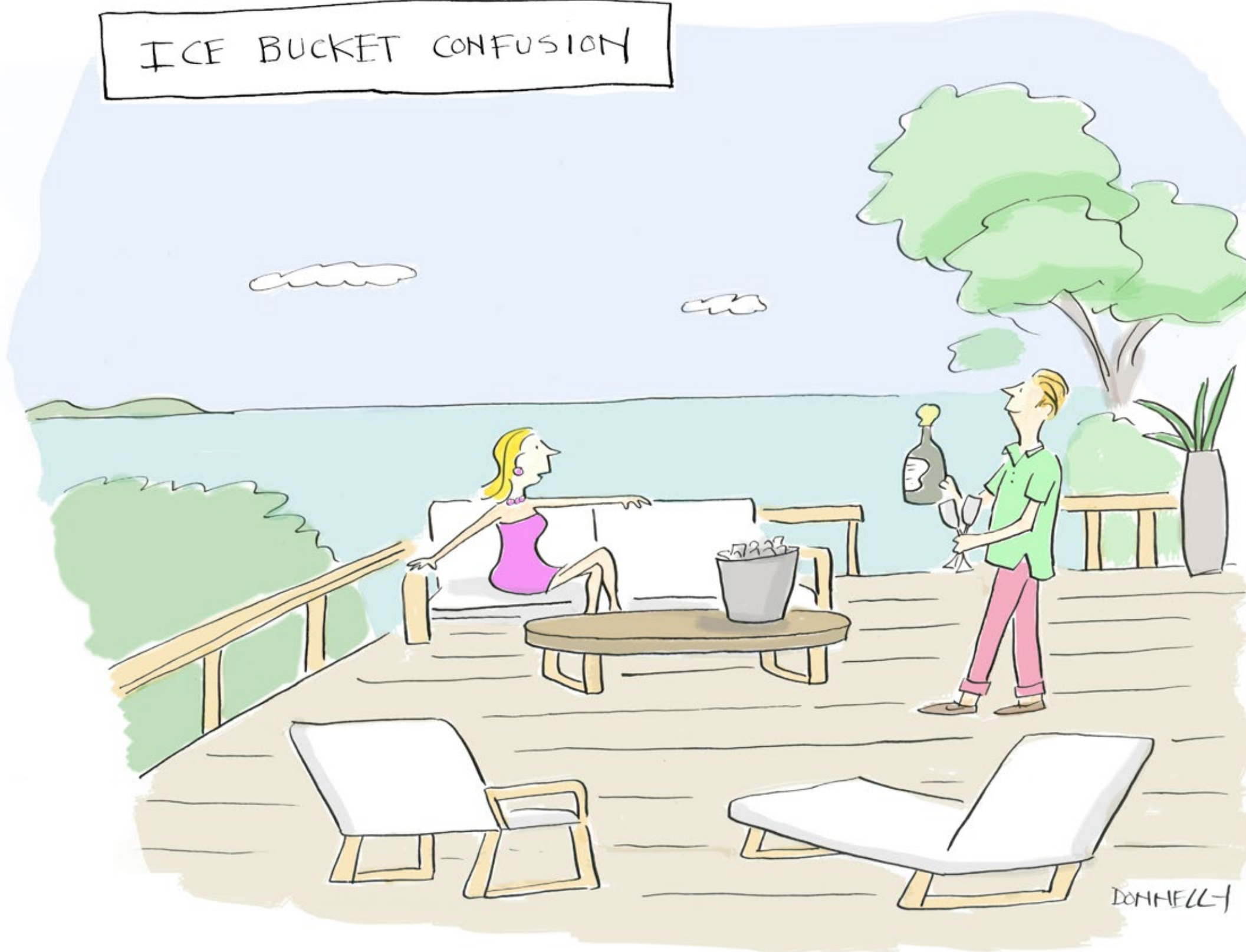
But the Thrashers are just that—great garage speakers. Every one of my buddies who has stopped by on a Saturday afternoon to share a lot of laughs and tales about cars, stereos and significant others (past and present) while we cranked those speakers into the wee hours has raved about them. Staff member Mark Marcan-tonio has written a very enthusiastic review on page 79 and I concur with his findings. These single-driver speakers sound wonderful with an 845-powered SET amplifier, but they are a ton of fun with an old Sansui, Pioneer or Marantz receiver.

The landscape of audio is changing, that's for sure. And while many of those my age and older long for the day when there was a stereo store on every corner, that's just not the way it is anymore. You don't have to engage in "deep listening" sessions to enjoy music and you don't have to have a mega system or an entire record collection of first-stamper British pressings. Though these things will continue to strike my fancy, it's fun to get back to basics. If you don't have a system like this, I highly suggest getting one, to see just how much fun music can truly be when you aren't sweating the details.

The kids *are* all right; they love music and fun just as much as we do—if not more than we did back in the good ol' days. I for one am excited to see what cool stuff they come up with in the not-so-distant future. I'm betting it will be a lot of fun.

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink.

ICE BUCKET CONFUSION



"I don't think that's what the ALS challenge is supposed to be about."

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Deep Purple

August 15th, 2007
Photo by Jerome Brunet

Rock legends Roger Glover and Ian Gillan of Deep Purple live at the Warfield theater in San Francisco.

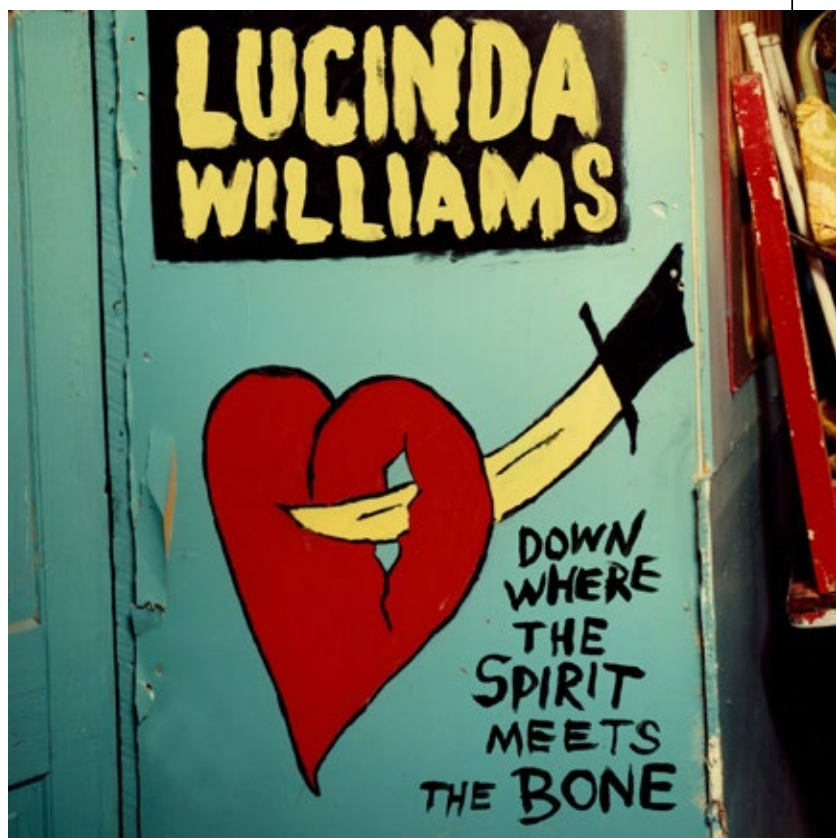
“Together with Led Zeppelin and Black Sabbath, Deep Purple has been referred to as the unholy trinity of British hard rock and heavy metal. One of the most influential and important guitar bands in history, selling over 100 million albums worldwide. If ever there was a band that was long-overdue for a spot in the Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame it would be Deep Purple!”

—Jerome Brunet

You can find more of Jerome's work at www.jeromebrunet.com

Limited edition prints are available.

NEW RELEASES

**Lucinda Williams**

Down Where the Spirit Meets the Bone
Highway Twenty, 3LP or 2CD

After more than three decades as a performer, three Grammy Awards, and a string of acclaimed studio albums for numerous

labels, Lucinda Williams can now officially call herself an indie artist again. And she's gone big. Issued on her own Highway Twenty imprint, *Down Where the Spirit Meets the Bone* trumpets the Louisiana native's resiliency, adventurousness, and enviable songwriting in thrilling fashion. Williams' uncompromising ambition is reflected across the 20 songs and via the fact she chose to release a double album in an age when many listeners increasingly shun entire records in favor of individual tracks.

The move seems Williams' way of daring music lovers to stop and pay attention, to lean in closer, to value each note, much like she and her crack ensemble do throughout the set. Never commercially minded—astoundingly, she counts only one gold record to her credit, an outrage doubtlessly owing more to vapid mainstream taste than her style—Williams has never been concerned with fitting in or repeating the past. She's constantly ventured across creative boundaries in the studio, most demonstrably on 2003's eclectic *World Without Tears* and 2007's sobering *West*, during periods when she could've taken an easier route and simply duplicated the mold for *Car Wheels on a Gravel Road*.

By extension, Williams' current bold streak arrives at an interesting junction in her life. Now 61, she's reached the age when many of her contemporaries settle for nostalgia or go through the motions. She's also happy—a condition that largely eluded her throughout much of her career and supplied grist for many of her extremely personal, veins-exposed, and profoundly sad songs. Her marriage to producer Tom Overby in 2009 changed her perspective. No, Williams hasn't forgotten what it's like to suffer deep-seated loss, but she's discovered a broader palette of emotional vistas that have in turn inspired her to push her capabilities as a vocalist. Both elements account for brilliant moments on

Down Where the Spirit Meets the Bone.

An apt metaphor for her own unvarnished writing style, the album title is borrowed from a line in the opening "Compassion," a first for Williams in that the song is based around a poem penned by her father, award-winning poet/author/editor Miller Williams. In a raw, spare, and acoustic setting, Williams moans the blues, taking time to let notes quiver. It's as if she's singing while lying on her side, too bruised and pained to get up. The performance announces functions as a harbinger of what's to come, Williams consistently dipping into Delta ink that coats her throat and invites slow-burn deliveries. With Williams, we not only get the fire, but we watch as the ashes smolder and smoke fades. Such aspects emerge amidst her warm decay on the back-porch-bound "Big Mess," deep-fried boil of the harmonica-laced shuffle "West Memphis," and honeyed molasses of the jangling "When I Look at the World."

Save for the interchangeable familiarity of "Wrong Number" and soft pop on "Burning Bridges," Williams and company—she's joined by an all-star cadre of guests that includes Bill Frisell, Tony Joe White, Ian McLagan, and Elvis Costello's rhythm section—traverse a diverse array of Southern back roads, hardscrabble trails, and dirt-caked highways in their exploration and

advancement of folk, country, soul, rock, and gospel. She delves into the swamps dotting her native state during a sticky, humid cover of JJ Cale's "Magnolia." On the devilish "Something Wicked This Way Comes," she sways to a wang-dang-doodle jukejoint groove while growling words and invoking hellfire and brimstone. For the devotional "Stand Right By Each Other," on which she demonstrates no singer makes the word "baby" count for more, Williams clicks her cowboy boots to an organ-stoked Texas desert boogie.

Yet Williams appears to spend the most time hovering around Memphis. Seldom (if ever) has her music been more soulful and, in several instances, spiritual. The Staple Singers, in particular, seem lodged in her mind—sonically and thematically. She hops on the soultrain and snarls empowering verses with barbed-wire sharpness on "Everything But the Truth," a hypnotically driving rebuke of falsehoods and call for responsibility, faith, and comeuppance. Backup gospel vocalists boost the swaying "Protection," similarly steeped in righteousness and conviction. And it's easy to imagine Mavis Staples behind the microphone pleading for forgiveness and pledging to fight on during "One More Day," a loping ballad shot through with caressing horns, glowing-ember tones, and aching sincerity. (continued)



©Photo by Michael Wilson

Indeed, when called for, Williams retains vulnerability. Yet she simultaneously displays heightened self-confidence and pronounced toughness. Even when she's facing sadness, affirmation replaces dependency. The days of Williams being rendered immobile by love and helplessly pining for obsessions are gone. Burnished with resilience and persuasion, "Walk On" bristles with courage. The slide-guitar-appointed "Foolishness" sheds demons, stares down fears, and shakes free of constraints. Conversationally warbled in a thick, easy drawl, "East Side of Town" expands on the traditional other-side-of-the-tracks narrative by serving as a challenging kiss-off tune to elitism as well as a wake-up call to often-ignored poverty, struggle, division. Organic and steady, it captures the real identity of Middle America no television commercial will dare depict and ranks as one of the finest tunes Williams ever composed.

"It's always the deepest, saddest joys that prove to be the richest ones," confesses Williams with the lived-in wisdom of someone who has experienced debilitating sorrow on "Temporary Nature (Of Any Precious Thing)." Curling syllables on the tip of her tongue, Williams sings with butterfly-kissed sweetness, recognizing that from loss and despondency spring appreciation, understanding, hope, and even opportunity. It's a testament to Williams' strength that *Down Where the Spirit Meets the Bone* makes embracing these and other hard life lessons sound simple—and vital. —**Bob Gendron**

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The New Pornographers

Brill Bruisers

Matador, LP or CD

Just minutes into *Brill Bruisers*, the New Pornographers make it clear that despite the good vibes that are, well, everywhere on the record, this one cuts deep.

"I'm not your love song," sings Kathryn Calder, one of the band's four vocalists. Then comes the clarification: She's not your "love song gone wrong." The determined, low-to-the-ground guitars and choppy, lucent synths keep the momentum of "Champions of Red Wine" moving forward, and doggedly so. She's coming over, there's going to be booze, and maybe some bad decisions. It's an early indication that *Brill Bruisers* is going to leave a mark, but as indicated by the parade-like bombast and celebratory "ba-ba-bas" during the opening song and title track, the album is more about the celebration that comes after surviving the blows.

That two such powerful moments arrive early and back-to-back on a New Pornographers LP isn't a surprise. This is a band generally guaranteed to make a dandy of an initial impression. At first listen, a New Pornographers album always feels like an instant cure for whatever it is that ails you. Consider it an intravenous rush of melody-positive tunefulness.

Now six albums deep into a career that spans a decade and a half, the power-pop architects have in *Brill Bruisers* an album that once again hydrates the soul—a collection of songs that sparkle and glimmer with dazzling electrolytes and a zip-a-dee-doo-dah zest. The production flourishes are modern, if a bit more on the dance side than usual. There's even a song dedicated to the power of shaking your tail as if no one is watching ("Dancehall Domine"), with a keyboard that blasts sonic confetti and a fake chorus that leads into a real chorus that overflows with cymbal-crashing euphoria.

Such expert craftsmanship is expected. The band is tagged as a "supergroup" in practically every article and every review, as its all-star cast of indie-pop auteurs have successful careers outside of the New Pornographers. If there's a difference today than there was, say 10 years ago, it's that the work of anchors Dan Bejar (Destroyer), Carl Newman, and Neko Case has only come into more notoriety, making it easier than it should to take the regrouping as the New Pornographers every three or four years for granted.



©Photo by Chris Buck

But that's the way it is with any rock band that's always been consistently not-awful (see Spoon, Wilco). *Brill Bruisers* connects via its overall dialing down of lyrical abstractness. On an album whose name is believed to be a nod to the famed American pop song factory, the Brill Building, the collective turns out its most upbeat and lavish set to date. It's also the ensemble's most direct. The New Pornographers have always been toe-tapping pros, but past earworms such as "The Jessica Numbers" and "Letter from an Occupant" are puzzles that demand to be decoded.

There's some smile-inducing head-scratching here too—mainly the crackpot vision of the future that is "Fantasy Fools"—but just try and deny the quadrupled-layered vocals in the sing-along chorus. The message, ultimately, is about persuading the doubters, an underlying theme that crops up again and again. For its first six songs, *Brill Bruisers* is all restless energy, only calming down for the 90-second "Another Drug Deal of the Heart," in which candy-coated keyboards plea for an end to emotional instability.

A silver lining is sought in "War on the East Coast," a Bejar-led blast where dreams of destruction are balanced with the resignation "I wanted

to come home with you." A Daft Punk-like overture opens "Backstairs," during which the group's harmonies gradually build to Abba-like grandeur all while the light-stepping Newman fights back after being shoved aside. "Born With a Sound" learns to live with hopeless romanticism by balancing skin-piercing guitars with an orchestra that sounds trapped in a vintage arcade.

Ultimately, this is an album tailored for foolish optimism. Hence, the joyous stomp of "You Tell Me Where" and quest for the "exception that proves our rule" in the hand-holding "Wide Eyes." The enthusiasm relaxes toward album's end, but there's really no room for downers. Every song has a ready-answer for the skeptics.

"They say we can't make this stuff up," sings Case with a lived-in sweetness on "Marching Orders." Maybe not, but then she has a question and she's not waiting for the answer: "What else can we make?" —**Todd Martens**



Bahamas

Bahamas Is Afie

Brushfire Records, LP or CD

On past efforts, Canadian-born singer-songwriter Afie Jurvanen, who records and performs under the name Bahamas, ensconced himself in pretty, melancholic pop songs born of heartbreak and romantic failing. Tunes like “Okay, Alright, I’m Alive,” a lush ballad nearly as polite and unassuming as its title, typically found the singer aiming to keep his head high amidst rejections and struggling to convince himself he was better on his lonesome. “I know we had it before, but it went away,” he sings. “[And] ... I’m happy here on my own.”

At the onset of Bahamas’ new album, *Bahamas Is Afie* (a statement of fact if there ever was one), the musician again appears by himself, perched on an expansive stretch of sand where he watches waves roll with the tide. But in spite of the music’s solitary feel—the tune opens with Jurvanen singing atop little more than an acoustic guitar line so casual and beach-y it’s practically wearing board shorts—the singer’s words suggest a more communal mindset. “And I saw myself as one of many waves,” he sighs.

Throughout, Jurvanen explores his connection to his fellow man—or, more aptly, woman. So where previous albums are often steeped in disconnect, much of *Afie* comes on like elaborate, unflinching marital vows set to music. Album closer “All I’ve Ever Known” could even be interpreted as a first dance of sorts, Jurvanen jettisoning past conflicts and uncertainties and embracing a more hopeful future. “They pronounced us man and wife forever more,” he sings, as piano, drums, and a delicate acoustic guitar conjure images of a spring wedding ceremony.

Of course, the set traces a typically winding path to happiness. Jurvanen holds tight to past resentments on one tune (“Bitter Memories,” a bit sweeter than its title suggests) and admits even the strongest relationships can cause a world of hurt on another (“We are the cause of each other’s pain,” he sings on the bruising “All Time Favourite”). *(continued)*

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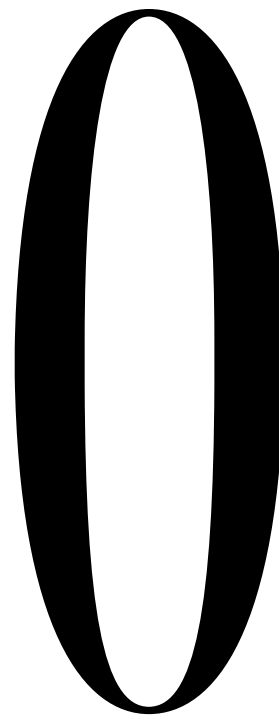


On multiple occasions, he tries to imagine setting off on his own once more—"I Can't Take You With Me" and the prayerful "I Had It All"—and each time, he finds himself circling back to the same conclusion: He can no longer survive in the wilds on his own, nor does he want to try.

The music's measured, introspective feel allows Jurvanen ample time to slow down and focus on everything from past indiscretions to his breathing. Occasionally, he sounds like a yoga instructor concentrating on every detail of the inhale/exhale cycle. He sings of holding his breath tight on one song, and on another he sighs, "[I] held the breath inside my lungs for days." On the finale, Jurvanen even takes care to note that in every breath there's life—a fitting admission on a record on which he finally sounds as though he's ready to dedicate his fully to another. —**Andy Downing**

**Lia Ices***Ices*

Jagjaguwar, LP or CD



On her first two albums, singer/songwriter Lia Kessel, who performs under the name Lia Ices, has shown a propensity for the quiet, the orchestral, and lost-in-the-clouds richness. If genre classifications were real estate, Ices would be weird-adjacent but ultimately entrenched in more domestic pleasantries. *Ices*, however, finds the artist cutting loose her tendency to experiment, letting her luminescent alto course like dandelion seeds through arrangements steeped in internationally flavored beats.

Inspired, she says, by a cross-country move from New York to California, *Ices* is an album that's more about being in constant motion than it is finding a consistent tune. Ear-catching moments flutter in and out. There's the distorted, flute-like vocals of "Electric Arc," the rubbery, hand-plucked island feel of "How We Are," and the propulsive electro-groove and tempo-shifting vocals of "Magick," to name a few. They blend into one another, attempting to transfix via their ebb and flow. It's the equivalent, perhaps, of being enchanted by the free-flowing steps of the girl with flowers in her hair at a music festival.

Perhaps that's why the strongest moments on *Ices* are those that cut through the rather sweet vibe of the proceedings, or, as Ices herself describes in the album's press materials, its "sympathetic magic." Don't groan at that description. The record's warm and relaxing tone may, in fact, mean it too often settles for background music, but it ultimately has an adventurer's heart. The Middle Eastern drums of "Tell Me" are rather striking, as is the minimalist synth-pop of "Higher," during which an electric guitar suddenly pierces what could be a harpsichord on a magic-carpet ride.

Vocals become another instrument in "Love Ices Over," where layered voices and tip-tapping skittering effects create a pillowy sensation. References to Kate Bush and the even more avant-garde Glasser abound, as the organic and electronic blend to make any chance at distinction an impossibility. When the swirls fully mix, as they do during the discontent of "Creature," the sound creates something that feels rather untamed, with voices in orbit around primal drumming and take-the-pain-away psychedelics. Heavenly, you may call it. At the least, it's of another world. —**Todd Martens**



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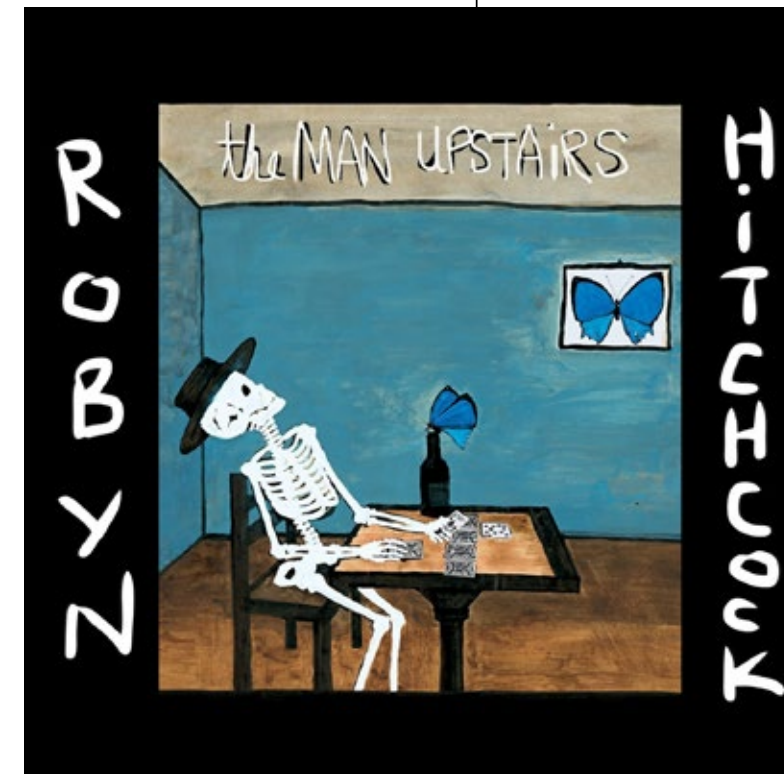


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MUSIC



Robyn Hitchcock
The Man Upstairs
Yep Roc, LP or CD

Few musicians have the ability to cover another artist's song and make it fully their own. Johnny Cash certainly could. The Man in Black so fully embodied Nine Inch Nails' "Hurt," for example, that last year an Associated Press concert reviewer erroneously wrote Trent Reznor and Co. covered Cash during a gig when they'd merely played their own tune from 1994's *The Downward Spiral*. With *The Man Upstairs*, British singer-songwriter Robyn Hitchcock seemingly follows in Cash's footsteps.

Hitchcock, 61, first came to prominence with the Soft Boys in the late 1970s and has since, over the course of 20 or so albums

(including the odd collection of demos or outtakes), carved out an esoteric and consistently wonderful career left of the musical center. As a lyricist, his songs tend to be whimsical and absurdist. He wisely sought out a similar aesthetic in his choice of covers, tackling everything from Roxy Music's digitized "To Turn You On" (transformed into a pre-technology ballad steeped in acoustic guitar, soft-stepping piano, and cautious cello) to Grant Lee-Phillips' "Don't Look Down," a lonesome, world-weary number Hitchcock retraces in lovely fashion.

Other songs, like Psychedelic Furs' "Ghost in You," appear decked out in entirely new garb. In its original state, the anthemic track playfully bounds along on chipper synthesizers. *(continued)*

MUSIC

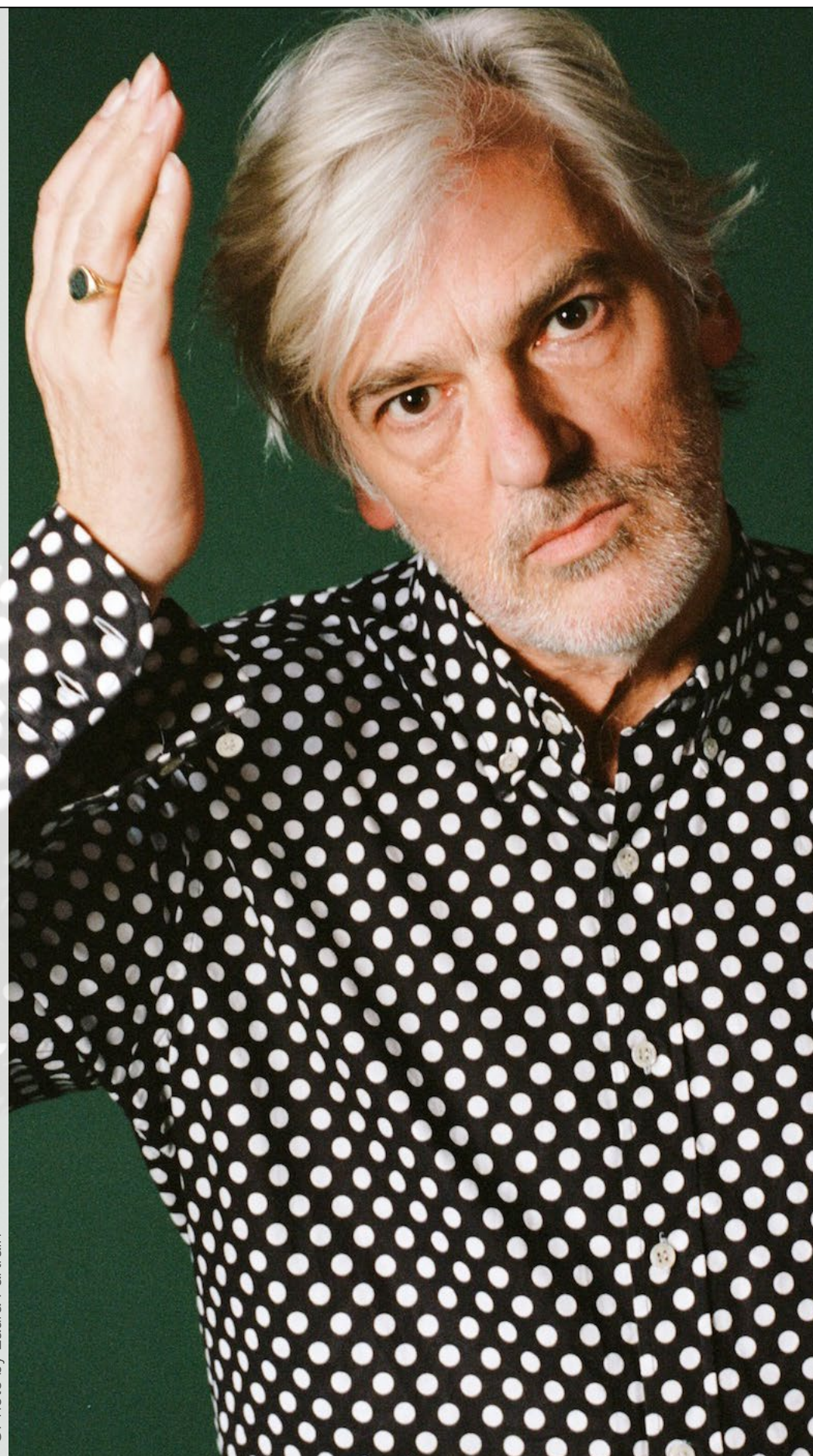
Here, the music is stripped down to the absolute studs, Hitchcock strumming an acoustic guitar and singing with a startling intimacy that suggests a living-room recording or a secret shared in confidence. A version of the Doors' "The Crystal Ship" is similarly bracing, Hitchcock swapping Jim Morrison's bloated Lizard King persona for an odder, more insular presence. I now hope he rerecords the Doors' entire catalog just for kicks.

The album is the partial brainchild of producer Joe Boyd (Nick Drake, Fairport Convention), who suggested Hitchcock record a "Judy Collins album" comprised of originals, old favorites, and new discoveries. Boyd imbues the recordings with necessary intimacy. Even when the group operates at full capacity—Hitchcock is backed by longtime collaborators Charlie Francis (piano), Jenny Adajayan (cello), and Anne Lise Frokedal (vocals)—the music maintains a solitary feel.

This trait is particularly true on a pair of new songs, "Comme Toujours" and "Trouble In Your Blood," both of which find Hitchcock abandoning a past reliance on clever wordplay in favor of bracing directness. "You got a well-constructed shell," he sings on the latter, even as the stripped-bare music exposes the tender heart concealed beneath.

—**Andy Downing**

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When the young Roy Acuff first sang the otherworldly biblical tune "The Great Speckled Bird" in the late 1930s at the Grand Ole Opry, he reportedly did so with tears streaming down his face. So singular was Acuff's interpretation that he reduced his audience to tears as well. The performance made him a star and helped change the course of country music from a string-band-heavy format to a genre where the vocalist was king.

Christopher Denny is a lot like the titanic Acuff in his emotional impact, and I write that with all sincerity and no hype. It's hard to overstate the hypnotic power of Denny's voice. He's a singer that gets under the skin and stays there. He makes it very, very easy to cry. He's frequently compared to Roy Orbison, but Denny is more a country cousin to the earthier, acquired-taste Texas tenors Jimmie Dale Gilmore and Rodney Crowell. Although these names are mentioned as a way to place Denny in a peer group of distinctive singers, he's very much his own man. An Arkansas native with a troubled past, Denny invests his lovely lyrics and melodies with deeply earned feeling. His quavering tenor is packed with intuitive phrasing.

Poetic and nakedly emotional, his songs are unusual—and unusually vulnerable. "I'm walkin' on stilts, mama/I can't reach you at all," he cries out to a woman in "God's Height," his voice cutting through a dazzling hail of electric guitars and Hammond organ. "We done beat this damn horse to death/So please ride on," he sings mournfully over dobro strains in "Ride On." On the majestic soul outing "Radio," he likens himself to a Statue of Liberty that doesn't feel very free.

CHRISTOPHER DENNY



Christopher Denny
If the Roses Don't Kill Us
Partisan Records, LP or CD

Musically, Denny has an easy touch with a number of genres. He elegantly moves through hard country, rhythm and blues, soul, and classic pop. Horns punctuate the sultry "Our Kind of Love." The sad and yearning "Wings" recalls the intimate piano-man reflections of the great southern soulman Charlie Rich.

There's not a throwaway cut here, from the bright pop of "Watch Me Shine" to the retro rootsy country-rock of the title track. Helmed by Grammy-winning producer Dave Sanger with his partners PJ Herrington and Jay Reynolds, the songs are so consistently outstanding they could have been fashioned by a genetic hybrid of Fred Rose, Chips Moman, and Smokey Robinson. Christopher Denny is a timeless singer and *If the Roses Don't Kill Us* is a contender for album of the year in any year. —**Chrissie Dickinson**


Israel Nash
Rain Plans

Loose Music, LP or CD

For 2011's *Barn Doors and Concrete Floors*, singer-songwriter Israel Nash Gripka retreated with friends to a small farm in the Catskills region of upstate New York and bashed out a rowdy set of country-rock tunes about trying to hold things together as life chips away at the foundation. "Building bridges ain't the hardest part," he sings on one stormy tune. "It's trying to swim when they fall apart."

For his latest effort, *Rain Plans*, which surfaced last year in the UK and only recently made its way to US shores, Gripka appears to have made some sort of uneasy peace with the world. On "Through the Door," a pretty, pedal-steel-kissed number, he notes the stones once aimed his way "don't come around no more." Fittingly, a lingering sense of calm bleeds into the album's nine musically comforting cuts.

At least part of the shift can be attributed to a geographical relocation. In late 2011, Gripka left behind the crazed hustle of New York City for Texas Hill Country, settling in the rolling, rock-cropped vistas of Dripping Springs. The music frequently reflects the sun-kissed terrain, Gripka and Co.—the frontman is supported by touring bandmates Joey McClellan (guitar), Aaron McClellan (bass), Josh Fleischmann (drums), and Eric Swanson (pedal steel)—painting in textured, vaguely psychedelic hues that suggest a golden desert sunset.

Even so, water remains a steady presence, bubbling to the surface in the title track—a Neil Young-esque guitar burner built around an awesomely shaggy solo—and

on songs like "Myer Canyon," where the singer compares a former lover to "water drifting away from [him]." "Just Like Water," in turn, makes musical allusion to the theme song from "M*A*S*H" and includes a line about letting problems roll off your back "just like water."

The physical and emotional distance Gripka felt since transplanting himself from NYC to the Texas wilds crop up in similarly repetitive fashion, and the lyrics include numerous

mentions of isolation and a desire to foster a deeper connection. "I could use some company," he sings with typical bluntness on "Who In Time," a shuffling number built on stubby guitar, weary pedal steel, and drums that clomp along like an aged mule.

Even if Gripka falls a bit short on the romantic front—"Bring your loving through the door/I could use a little more" he offers on one burnished tune—his bandmates make

certain he's not alone, fleshing out his solitary tales and lending the music a communal touch even in the moments the singer appears most detached from his surroundings.

—Andy Downing

©Photo by Pooneh Ghana





Robert Plant

lullaby and...the Ceaseless Roar
Nonesuch, 180g 2LP/CD or CD

Robert Plant sounds jubilant on his first new studio record in four years. And why not? Forever linked with Led Zeppelin, the singer has spurned convention over the past three decades by ignoring lucrative requests to reconvene with his former mates and choosing instead to press on with a solo career marked with diversity, risk, and exploration.

Yes, he's leaving Fort Knox-level money on the table. Countless fans and industry folk—including Plant's former right-hand man, guitarist Jimmy Page—tend to believe the 66-year-old English native bonkers for passing up an automatic eight-figure payday for simply playing old rock songs in exchange for the chance to gallivant with roots musicians such as Alison Krauss.

Of course, let's not forget Plant acquiesced to such requests, however briefly, by performing with Zeppelin for a one-off gig in 2007. At the time, Vegas put the smart money on a forthcoming reunion. Practically everything—and everyone—was in place save for the original golden-god frontman, whose decision to not partake rankled Page and ruined the get-rich-quick dreams of ticket scalpers around the world. No matter where you stand, however, it's virtually impossible to not respect Plant's integrity and desire to create rather than rehash.

Anyone still baffled about Plant's priorities should spend a few hours with *lullaby and... the Ceaseless Roar*, a charming album that both extends the singer's perpetual fascination with the blues and dives into African, Welsh, English, and American landscapes with fearless intrigue and wide-eyed wonder. While Plant immersed himself in sub-Saharan territories on 2005's mesmerizing *Mighty Rearranger*, he utilizes the eleven canvasses here as opportunities to blend old and new languages, traditional and contemporary influences, and related and disparate styles.

Accessible and inviting, the album seems more familiar than strange. Songs welcome multifaceted pop foundations. Lyrics revolve around the headliner's personal thoughts and experiences. In many ways, the set represents Plant coming full circle, a homecoming of sorts in which he threads together common strains that have always intrigued him—Appalachian bluegrass, Mississippi Delta blues, Texas blues, Chicago blues, African desert blues, Nashville country-and-western, Memphis R&B, Welch folk, ancient mythology—into loose knots that incorporate modern devices such as dub reggae and avant-garde rock/trip-hop to form distinctively Western European tapestries.

Plant navigates his way across remote sonic and geographic borders via obsessive interest in and study of his subjects—and also by way of having a crack band, the aptly named Sensational Shape Shifters, at his behest. Guitarist Justin Adams (producer, Tinariwen), keyboardist John Baggot, bassist Billy Fuller (collaborator, Portishead), jazz-learned drummer Dave Smith, guitarist Liam Tyson (Britpop veteran), and Gambian multi-instrumentalist

Juldeh Camara (a master of a one-string tribal fiddle called the ritti) reflect the same bottomless penchant for adventure and enthusiasm as their leader.

Indeed, Camara's out-of-left-field solo on the album-opening update of "Little Maggie"—a song popularized by bluegrass heroes the Stanley Brothers that receives two completely different treatments on *lullaby and... the Ceaseless Roar*—sets the mood for what follows. "I'm going away to leave you/ In some far-off distant land," utters Plant in a calm albeit breathy delivery, sounding akin to a warlock disturbed from slumbering at the top of a snow-capped mountain. As tour guide, Plant is in fine voice, trading the leather-lunged power of his Zeppelin days for added nuance, shading, phrasing, spaciousness, and soulfulness.

And yet it's completely possible to picture the highly grooved "Rainbow" gracing Side Two of *Led Zeppelin II*, with the hard-rock quotient slightly lessened and textures modestly increased.

(continued)

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MUSIC

Plant and Co. delivers sparse, chapel-recorded ballads (the gorgeous, time-freezing “A Stolen Kiss”), rhythmic, acoustic-based dance numbers (the irresistibly warm and Celtic-flavored “Poor Howard”), and gypsy-wanderer blues-rock hybrids (the mystical “Pocketful of Golden”) with equanimous verve and skill. On the slow-moving contemplation “Embrace Another Fall,” Plant gives way to waves of hand-struck percussion, rippling psychedelic guitar, and a vocal interlude by Julie Murphy while marrying the future with the past.

“I’m stuck inside the radio/Turn it on and let me out,” the vocalist implores in a high-register tone on the corrugated “Turn It Up,” a junkyard tune whose spare-part beats, funky grind, quicksilver tones, and carnival pulse simultaneously hypnotize and shake. The singer’s plea may as well be his creed. For the past two decades in particular, Plant has willingly trapped himself in global radio stations of his own imagination, eager to make the connections and pose the challenges few artists care (and dare) to construct. Vibrant and affirming, *lullaby and...the Ceaseless Roar* is his—and our—reward for keeping an ear to the ground.

—**Bob Gendron**



©Photo by Ed Miles



King Tuff
Black Moon Spell
 Sub Pop, LP or CD

It takes smarts to make dirt-cheap look good. Sub Pop garage-rock revivalist King Tuff is the type of artist that allows scuzz to feel fashionable. His third album for the label tidies things up a bit, but it's all done in the manner of throwing on a sport coat over a vintage concert t-shirt—a look so simple and plain, you're mad you didn't think of it first. "I don't care if you hate your face," sings the artist known to his friends as Kyle Thomas. He then adds in some spit before declaring, all romantic-like, "I love you ugly."

©Photo by Dan Monick



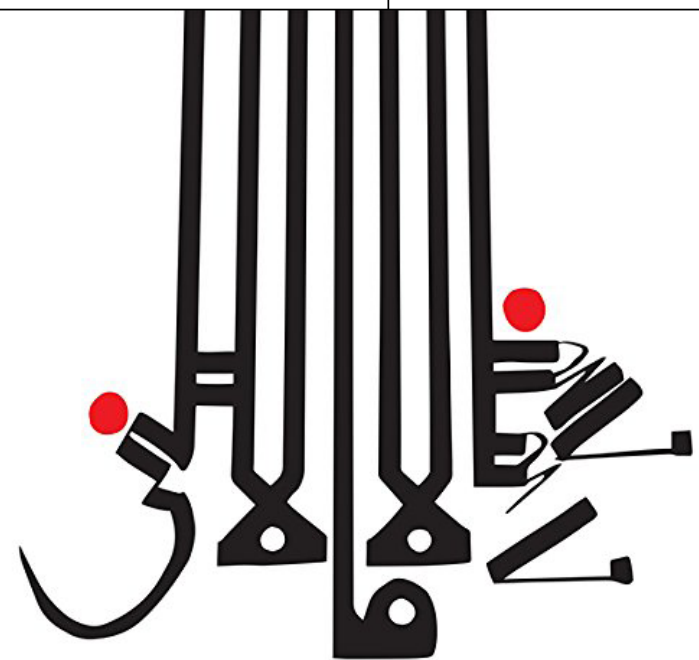
Bless the beauty of a little ol' fashioned rock n' roll done simply, and with humor. Much of *Black Moon Spell* touts the feel of a spontaneous kegger at your parents' house, complete with the type of quotes bratty kids scrawled on their folders while bored at school. "I learn more working at the record store than I ever did in high school," he declares in one song, and, in another, "Love just wasn't fun until she took off your pants." King Tuff doesn't so much as sing the latter line as let it slither out of his

mouth, bringing "Sick Mind" to a close with maniacal giggles and choppy, arms-high guitar riffs.

Admittedly, it's all vaguely recognizable. "Headbanger" recalls Kiss' "Strutter" and "Black Holes in Stereo" has shades of the streaking, choppy guitars dotting the Clash's "Capital Radio." But King Tuff is best enjoyed if one doesn't think too hard. The familiarity, after all, is part of the fun, and his live show is the stuff of legend. (*Spin* even wrote an oral history of the early days, when Thomas was kicking

around in numerous indie bands.)

If anything, the moments on *Black Moon Spell* that don't feel tossed are where the album starts to falter. For example, the Haight-Ashbury balladry of "Staircase of Diamonds" or clunky Led Zeppelin-like mysticism of "Eyes of the Muse." Thankfully, tracks like "Eddie's Song," with its "Boys Are Back in Town"-inspired riff and kazoo-sounding keyboard, outnumber the occasions when King Tuff over-thinks it. —**Todd Martens**


Shabazz Palaces

Lese Majesty
Sub Pop, 2LP or CD

Shabazz Palaces is based in Seattle, but its music barely sounds of this earth. Vocalist Ishmael Butler, who rhymes under the *nom de rap* Palaceer Lazaro, joins producer Tendai Maraïre to form the creative center of the experimental crew, which fills its latest, *Lese Majesty*, with elaborate “stories told in code,” as Butler explains on “Ishmael,” a stuttered number that comes on like a snippet culled from a futuristic radio broadcast.

Butler—Butterfly of 90s jazz-hop trio Digable Planets in another life—has rarely walked a straight line since first breaking into the public consciousness with “Rebirth of Slick (Cool Like Dat)” in 1992. Yet Palaces’ latest might be his least conformist effort yet, combining seven so-called “astral suites” that unfold over more than 45 trip-inducing minutes.

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The album's title roughly translates to an offense against the state, and on the opening track, Butler rhymes of "throwing cocktails at the Fuhrer." Rather than target any political or social figurehead, the rapper appears to direct his ire at the stilted state of modern hip-hop. So instead of following some prescribed radio blueprint, the crew favors cryptic tunes that take significant time to decode. Think of them as an updated version of the Dead Sea Scrolls. At times, the language is so dense, it feels like wading through a waist-deep swamp of syllables. Similarly, Butler repeatedly exhibits a tendency to fall back on maze-like bars that exude the feverishness of Basquiat brushstrokes scrawled on canvas. "Blackophilic peodolistic pedostrophic hymns," goes one typically tongue-twisting exaltation.

It's not all high-minded word games, however. Every now and again, Butler uncorks a bemusing literary reference ("Ish dances with the white whale on the Pequod") or a playful couplet. "I'm not messing with your mind/I don't have that kind of time," he spits with impish glee on "Harem Aria," a two-minute contact high of warped beats and blunted rhymes. A sense of seduction even bleeds into the heaving, funk-tinged "They Come In Gold," given a major lift by singer/secret weapon Catherine Harris-White. "The brontides screech every time we kiss," Butler hisses as wind chimes clatter in the gathering electric storm. "We converse in an ancient language."

At times, *Lese Majesty* slips into indulgence. "Noetic Noiromanics," for one, is barely a sketch of a sketch, building on a minimalist

beat that comes on like a barber sweeping up hair clippings with a firm-bristled broom. Meanwhile, the sci-fi "Sonic MythMap for the Trip Back" aims for the cosmos but never quite escapes earth's gravitational pull, buzzing synths and spoken-word vocals gradually pulling apart like a rocket coming undone upon reentry into the atmosphere.

Tracks like "#CAKE" and the kinetic "Forerunner Foray" take better advantage of the mutating soundscapes, Butler rhyming atop enjoyably erratic instrumentals that continuously shift, erode, and give way to cavernous sinkholes. "If you come to see us, this is what you get," the MC offers with atypical directness on one aside. It's to the crew's credit the music maintains its pull even as it drifts further into orbit. —**Andy Downing**



Interpol

El Pintor

Matador, LP or CD

Here's a truth about Interpol in 2014: Few big-ticket rock bands sound as professional. Everything on the band's fifth album, from the moody-cool vocals to the knob-twisting guitar notes, is in its right place. On *El Pintor*, Interpol's first album in four years and first studio effort without bassist Carlos Dengler, the band's sound is aces.



©Photo by Eliot Lee Hazel

But this is not the Interpol of 2002, when the band's debut *Turn on the Bright Lights* went to the front of New York's rock n' roll class with dark-as-night suaveness and tightly wound songs that were all-tension, all the time. This is the Interpol that celebrated the 10th anniversary of *Turn on the Bright Lights* with a fancy reissue and whose later work has become a consistent, if somewhat predictable, source for soul-purging, slow-churning rock anthems.

El Pintor, refreshingly, brings some much-needed tweaks to the formula. After an extended break, the band regrouped as a three-piece, with the methodically voiced singer Paul Banks taking over bass duties and guitarist Daniel Kessler using the rhythmic shakeup to find even more spacious textures. There's a sense, right from the start, that the Interpol has something to prove. Opener "All the Rage Back Home" begins with an echo and rumble before spilling into the requisite, love-torn lyrics. But it's the pattern stitched by Kessler's guitar—a cursive noodling that only gets more squirrely as the song progresses—that keeps the song on constant high-alert.

"My Desire" simmers with a beat that hisses like steam seeping out of a smoldering cauldron, and "Same Town, New Story" serves as the

centerpiece, four-plus minutes of finely sharpened high-pitched guitar notes that sound as if Kessler's instrument is tied up in knots. "Feels like the whole world is up on my shoulders," sings Banks with his baritone drone, his lyrics outlining characters that treat all emotional entanglements as a great drama. But, never mind, it's the little details that matter, be it the unexpected space-age keyboards that twinkle in "Tidal Wave" or calibrated noose-tightening (and loosening) of "Breaker 1."

Zeroing in on small moments creates the sensation that Interpol sometimes loses sight of the bigger picture. There's lots of force in these songs, but it's labored. "Anywhere" is so intent on reaching arena heights, it becomes anonymous. "My Blue Supreme" boasts tap-dancing guitar-drums interplay in search of a direction. "Everything is Wrong" stumbles as it tries to marry woe-is-me theatrics with U2-like grandeur. Even in these missteps, every downtrodden atmosphere sounds hand-crafted, lending credence to the theory that Interpol may be some of the hardest-working perfectionists around. The bad news? They sometimes sound like some of the hardest-working perfectionists around.

—**Todd Martens**


Bear in Heaven

Time Is Over One Day Old
Dead Oceans, LP or CD

When it comes to opening tracks, Bear in Heaven has a winner in “Autumn.” The first 40 seconds constitute a rush of excitement and electronic exoticism. A drum charges in for battle, synthesizers swoosh, a bass pulses with a static charge, and all sorts of digital textures flutter, twinkle, and pulsate in a rainbow-colored wilderness of digital circuitry. All this momentum never lets up during the song’s three minutes. An unexpected break and some dancefloor-ready grooves only heighten the thrill.

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MUSIC



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Naturally, *Time is Over One Day Old* can't maintain such sonic ecstasy over its next nine songs, but the bigger surprise is how quickly it changes course. The Brooklyn indie-rock trio, led by Jon Philpot and a slightly revolving cast of musicians, largely drop the all-in experimentation of "Autumn" and elements of prior albums for more of a dream-pop excursion on this set, its fourth affair.

The music is pretty, as "They Dream" is layer upon layer of Technicolor lasers and weirder-than-they-should-be hand-driven beats. Philpot's soft and detached vocals often camouflage themselves in the soundscapes. A phrase here or there jumps out when the instrumental support parts ways,

and it's often one of forlorn contemplation, such as musings on "the time between nothing to do." Then the voice gets quietly hushed into the background, masked by the propulsive handclaps and wind-blown guitar strumming of "Time Between" or cartoonish disco effects of "Demon."

There's nothing inherently wrong anywhere on *Time is Over One Day Old*. It's all rather tasteful and seemingly tailor-made for tastemakers to license. Yet when things get a little off-color—or even a tad sinister, as they do on the predatory bass-driven march "If I Were to Lie"—one can't help but wish Bear in Heaven would more often aim for a nightmare instead of a daydream. —**Todd Martens**


Shovels & Rope
Swimmin' Time

Dualtone, 180s 2LP/CD or CD

Shovels & Rope is one road-seasoned act. The husband-and-wife duo of Cary Ann Hearst and Michael Trent tours nearly non-stop, playing rambunctious Americana songs for audiences far and wide. In the process, they've built a devoted and growing fan base. Through word of mouth and glowing press, the duo has sold more than 60,000 copies of its 2012 breakthrough indie debut *O' Be Joyful* and was named Emerging Artist of the Year at the Americana Music Honors and Awards show in Nashville.

There's certainly a lot to applaud about the couple. A country-blues belter with a sandpaper edge, Hearst possesses powerhouse pipes and is no slouch on guitar and drums. Trent, by comparison, is a rustic multi-instrumentalist and grainy-voiced harmony vocalist. Produced by Trent and recorded in the couple's home studio, the duo's sophomore *Swimmin' Time* counts among its successes "Fish Assassin," an infectious chant that demonstrates the power of two voices and

raw percussion. The couple also shines on "The Devil Is All Around," an ecstatic organ-driven number with a tambourine shake unnervingly emulating a rattlesnake's tail.

Alas, Hearst and Trent make for better singers and performers than songwriters and producers. They aren't great at crafting a consistently memorable or original melody. "Coping Mechanism" gives Hearst the space to bust loose vocally, but essentially, it's a

standard rock n' roll number with tinkling piano. Ditto "Stono River Blues," which sounds like a generic homage to Frankie Laine in his "Ghost Riders in the Sky" phase.

A few songs are too busy for their own good and overshadow the couple's more direct charms. "Evil" buzzes with a dirty guitar riff that tips its hat to Neil Young and Crazy Horse, yet it's more plodding and overly long than spooky. The title track devolves into an

overcooked stew of reverb and echo effects. By contrast, the duo succeeds when it doesn't belabor the production or Southern-gothic imagery. With its crying vocals and astringent harmonica, "After the Storm" throbs with desire and hope. Here, Hearst and Trent achieve the raspy pathos of a classic Lee Hazlewood and Nancy Sinatra duet. This is Shovels and Rope at its best: Simple, and straight from the heart. —**Chrissie Dickinson**



©Photo by Molly Hayes

ELVIS

That's the Way It *Still* Is

By Aaron Cohen

Elvis Presley turned 35 in 1970 but had already led a life of constant reinvention when he staged a residency in Las Vegas that summer. His trajectory is as familiar as any American foundational legend: Rough origins in Southern rockabilly, sudden mind-boggling fame as part of the 1950s rock n' roll revolution, a misguided foray in films, and then a triumphant return to his roots via a 1968 television special. But even as Elvis continued basking in the acclaim from that television performance, he still faced a formidable challenge he helped create.

Popular music had gone through a series of evolutions since Presley first sang "That's All Right" in Memphis' Sun Studios 16 years earlier. And he had stopped trying to keep ahead of those changes or constantly create new ones, like James Brown (who he admired). But Presley's victory at the dawn of the 1970s came about because he sounded like he accepted this situation and knew how to adapt to it while keeping his integrity. His voice also conveyed deeper resonance than before, and while he was no longer a skinny heartthrob in stylish pink and black suits, Presley still had more than enough charisma to burn. *(continued)*

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MUSIC



©Photo courtesy Elvis Presley Enterprises Inc.

The collection *Elvis: That's the Way It Is (Deluxe Edition)* reaffirms how hard he worked in August 1970 to ignite that star power. Like Presley himself, this box does not shy away from extravagance and is clearly geared toward the fans: eight CDs present six concerts recorded across four nights, rehearsals, the original album, singles, and outtakes. Two DVDs include the concert documentary film originally released that November along with outtakes (Presley's manager Col. Tom Parker can no longer demand final cut). It's exhaustive, to be sure, but only in brief moments does Presley himself sound winded. This set's comprehensive approach also digs far deeper into the process of a Presley performance than the four-disc 1956-1975 overview *Elvis Live In Las Vegas* issued on RCA in 2001.

Peter Guralnick wrote in *Careless Love*, volume two of his definitive Presley biography, that the singer was enjoying himself during this summer. So was his band, which recalls that time as being part of a rambunctious family. *(continued)*



Elvis Presley

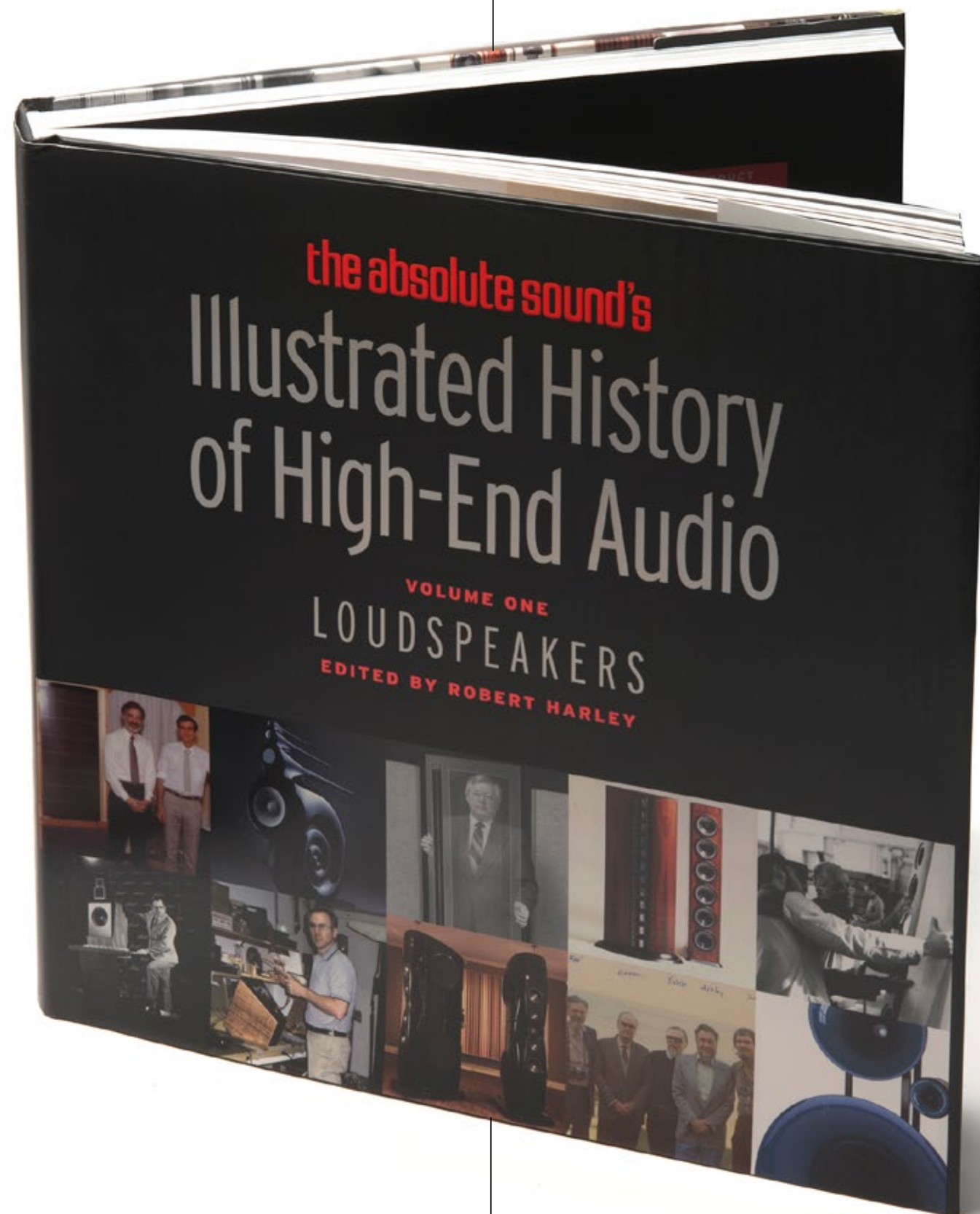
Elvis: That's the Way It Is (Deluxe Edition)
RCA/Legacy, 8CD/2DVD box set or 2CD

Such lighthearted spirit comes through on the set's disc of rehearsals, but this CD reveals other strengths of the ensemble and its leader. His musical appetite remained omnivorous, as he knowingly ran through an array of gospel, rock, modern blues, and lesser-known gems from his own back catalog. As the group runs through these covers, guitarist James Burton provides some flashes of why he was such a favorite of future Voidoid/Lou Reed sideman Robert Quine. His bent notes complement Presley's voice, and his sudden dissonant shards must have kept him on his toes.

Once the ensemble took the stage, the musicians still sounded like they were having fun. Yet this box set also documents how much heavy lifting went into these gigs. After opening night, they had a series of dinner and midnight shows. Presley significantly pared down the repertoire. Most of the sets feature the same songs—a few of Presley's 50s hits and his more recent interpretations. But the way he performs them show he absorbed phrasings and techniques from all the idioms he ran through during the rehearsal. Inhabiting his own

range somewhere between tenor and baritone, Presley had also devised a singular delivery that blended late-60s soul and country, especially in his versions of Joe South's "Walk a Mile In My Shoes" and Tony Joe White's "Polk Salad Annie." Alongside the mostly tasteful orchestral arrangements, with Burton by his side, Presley still rocked—even through multiple renditions of "Hound Dog."

As strong as Presley sounds throughout *That's the Way It Is*, this set also conveys a bittersweet undercurrent given he tumbled from this peak shortly afterward. His infamous meeting with President Richard Nixon happened a few months later. There, the singer warned the Commander In Chief about the dangers of a cultural revolution that he sparked—especially concerning the Beatles. And the less said of Presley's indulgences and recordings later on, the better. But for these few nights, he justified his regal title. ●



SHORT TAKE

STAGGERING SPEAKER READ:

THE ABSOLUTE SOUND'S
ILLUSTRATED HISTORY
OF HIGH-END AUDIO
VOLUME 1: LOUDSPEAKERS

www.theabsolutesound.com

\$129.95

Crammed into 312 large pages, this coffee table book will get you up to speed on damn near everything you ever wanted to know about most of the major high end companies. The amount of work produced by *The Absolute Sound* is truly staggering.

Playing to their strength, the *TAS* staff covers the period of 1980 to the present, with incredible depth, digging up some great historic photos and key interviews with many of the top company figureheads, making for very interesting reading if speakers are your thing.

Each section of the book contains a timeline with major accomplishments of the companies profiled. Long time readers of *TAS* will recognize many of the pictures and the interviews, but there is enough new copy to keep all engaged. Also included is a page or two at the end of each section entitled "Oddities and Wonders," though it's not really clear which were considered the oddities and which relegated to wonder status.

It's an interesting slant that *TAS*'s current darlings (i.e. YG Acoustics, Magico and Raidho) are given way more space than true legends of speaker design like Altec, JBL, KEF and Quad. But hey, you can read Ken Kessler's books on the latter two if you really want to know more about them.

Graphically, the book is well presented, with a clean overall layout, though almost all of the photographs consist of manufacturer-supplied images. It would have been nice to see them go the extra mile and create some truly unique imagery for 130 bucks.

This is a tremendous effort from the *TAS* staff, and a plethora of information all in one tidy spot for those of us that no longer have stacks of audio magazines lying about. If you love loudspeakers, you will enjoy this book. They are promising a few more volumes on the rest of the components in the hifi industry, so it will be interesting to see which products make the cut.



SHORT TAKE

HARNESSING MORE POWER:

DEVIALET 120

www.devialet.com

\$6,500

Everything we loved about the Devialet 110 (www.tonepublications.com/review/devialet-110-amplifier/) is here in spades with the new 120, but the addition of a crucial feature makes the 120 more than a simple upgrade. Devialet's new SAM (Speaker Active Matching) technology, in a nutshell, provides a more synergistic coupling between amplifier and loudspeaker, thanks to their engineers harnessing more power of the on board DSPs. Visually, the 120 looks identical to the 110, with the same compliment of inputs and outputs.

SAM is an optimized program for your individual speaker (Devialet is constantly adding new SAM profiles to their website) that claims full phase alignment over the entire frequency spectrum and extended low frequency response down to 25Hz.

While we have no way of measuring this, the results with the Penaudio Cenya speakers, the KEF LS-50s and the KEF Blades was nothing short of stunning. We are currently working on a full review of the Devialet Ensemble system, utilizing a pair of Devialet designed Ahtom GT1 speakers.

This is not a subtle upgrade. While the KEF Blades are no slouch in the bass department, it was easy to hear more extreme bass extension on bass heavy tracks from Pink Floyd and Daft Punk. Not only was there more detail in the low bass as you would get with a top notch subwoofer, there was more punch, more weight. The heartbeat in the classic Floyd track "Speak to Me: Breathe" now feels heavier, more ominous than without SAM. For the Thomas's doubting SAM, the Devialet remote allows you to dial up how much SAM processing you'd like in the system, making it easier to see the results first hand.

In my smaller listening room, this proved very useful with the LS-50 and the Cenyas, as there was just a bit *too much* bass with SAM set at 100. Both work best with SAM set in the 60-70 range. With SAM engaged I was able to shut the subwoofer off with both of these speakers, it was no longer needed.

The new functionality that SAM brings to the picture, along with the additional 10 watts per channel that the 120 offers is only a firmware upgrade away for existing Devialet 110 owners. Fantastic sound and drop dead gorgeous casework aside, this is the best thing about owning a Devialet product is that they are future proof. It was awesome to view the 120 at the Munich hifi show and be told, "You only need to download the new firmware and you have a 120." That's music to my ears.

GETTING PERSONAL

**SINGER-SONGWRITER SHARON VAN ETTEN CONVERSES
WITH JAAN UHELSZKI**



Everything you need to know about Sharon Van Etten is contained in a bookshelf in her tiny jewel box of an apartment in New York's West Village. *Meditation for Beginners* shares space with *If Only the Sea Could Sleep*, a book of sacred love poems by Ali Ahmad Said, one of the great poets of Arab literature. There are the complete diaries of Anais Nin, and all of Sylvia Plath, and the *Tao Te Ching*. To lighten the mood, there's Pat Benatar's autobiography, *Between a Heart and a Rock Place: A Memoir* ("My mom bought it for me," Van Etten confesses), and *Love is a Mixtape: Life, Loss, and What I Listened To*.

Van Etten sees me looking at the latter 2007 tome by *Rolling Stone* contributor Rob Sheffield. "Embarrassing, I know. But haven't we all done that?" she asks, rather rhetorically.

Well, Van Etten has, certainly. But to be completely accurate, isn't that what she has been doing with every single album she makes—detailing the emotional geography of her heart, hovering somewhere between uncertainty and regret, without truly landing on either? Making the mystery of love even more inscrutable? "You'll never understand it," the 33-year-old singer tells me. "It's infinite."

Love is a subject she seemingly knows a little too much about. Her recording career was almost a non-starter after an abusive boyfriend tried to convince her she didn't have what it takes to make it, and more importantly, tried to tell her that her songs were too intimate. "It's funny because all the reasons that my ex disparaged me are the things that people like about my music now," Van Etten recently told the UK's *Daily Telegraph*.

"He used to say, 'You need to be a better writer because your songs are too personal.' But it's because they were all about him and how badly he was treating me. So of course he didn't like it."

Those songs ultimately became 2009's *Because I Was In Love*. Since then, Van Etten's career has been picking up steam. (continued)

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INTERVIEW

Her 2012 album, *Tramp*, sold double that of 2010's *Epic*. Her recent *Are We There* looks to continue the upward trend. While not yet a household name, Van Etten has expanded her universe with high-profile duets.

She's the only guest vocalist on the Antlers' breakout *Hospice* and sings with Rufus Wainwright on "Baby, It's Cold Outside" on the 2012 Starbucks Christmas-themed collection *Holidays Rule*. She also pairs up with J Mascis on John Denver's "Prisoners" on the Denver tribute album *This Music Is You*. And she perked up ears with her close, chilling performance with Justin Vernon on "Trials, Troubles, Tribulations" at a MusicNow event where artists re-imagined songs recorded by ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax.

Accomplishments aside, there's something very accessible about Van Etten. She's the good girl that lives next door, the smart girl that always did her homework but who flashed a wicked sense of humor and devilish glint in her amber-colored eyes. An old boyfriend used to say she looked like Suzi Quatro. Everybody seems to say she reminds them of someone, she tells me. "I have friends that say when their eyes are closed, I sound like Lisa Bonet." Despite all the comparisons, there really is no one like Van Etten. And that's a good thing.

.....

JU: Have you always been this forthcoming in your songs and in your life?

SVE: I'm an open book. I think I've always worn my heart on my sleeve. My mom always said, "You're very vulnerable." I always told her, "Why hold back?" I want people to know who I am.

JU: That makes you a rare artist. That and the fact that you sell umbrellas at your merch table.

SVE: I just wanted to do something utilitarian. I don't want to sell anything that I wouldn't buy or use. You go to festivals in Europe and it rains, and they have wellies or whatever, but I think an umbrella is much easier to carry around than a pair of boots. Also, I decided it was funny, too, with the name of the record printed on it.

JU: Your new song "Everytime the Sun Comes Up" seems atypical for you. Are you moving into a new phase of songwriting where songs won't just be therapy for you?

SVE: Yeah, maybe. That one was really fun to write. I just thought we needed to end on a high note, because I was ending the shows with a piano ballad and I felt I was letting people down by ending the whole night with a real heavy song.

JU: But a lot of people go to you for the heaviness.

SVE: It blows my mind that that many people want to, especially coming out on Friday night in the rain to listen to this kind of music.

JU: Last year you were on tour with Nick Cave. What was the most profound thing you learned?

SVE: A lot of things. I remember I was in the airport on my way to Europe when I got the call to open up for him. He wanted me to support him for March and April. I called my boyfriend, whom I promised that I'd be off around that time, thinking he'd be excited. Because he's a huge fan of Nick Cave, too. But he wasn't okay with it. We had had problems before, but that was one of the last straws in us being okay [as a couple]. During that tour he would call me every day before the show just to make me feel bad for taking the tour. It's a lot more complicated than that, but I remember Nick saw me after one of those calls. (continued)

I'M AN OPEN BOOK.

I THINK I'VE ALWAYS WORN MY HEART ON MY SLEEVE.

I WANT PEOPLE TO KNOW WHO I AM.

INTERVIEW

He took me and my drummer Zeke out to dinner on the last day of the tour to say thank you for touring. So I said to him, “You fight with your wife, right? You tour, you write, you work constantly, and you must fight all the time, right?” “We fight, but never about work,” he said. That whole month or two that we were with Nick Cave, it was like a journey of reminding myself that what I was doing wasn’t completely selfish. It’s also when I started asking myself questions about why I’m doing it and why I feel bad with my boyfriend. My friends and my family, they miss me, but they’ve never given me a hard time about what I do. They’re proud. And it was something I just couldn’t get past with him.

JU: I’m not sure if you’ve chosen your career over love, but what would be the perfect scenario for you?

SVE: I don’t want stardom. I’m not a pop star. I don’t write radio hits. That’s not who I am, and I feel I’ve been pretty good about being grounded and surrounding myself with friends and family. If things grow at a rate that they’ve been growing, I don’t think I’ll be able to be true to myself. I like where they are if they could stay, and then I can just figure out my time off better. But I also think about going back to school and becoming a therapist, because I feel I’ve learned how much music has meant to me and how it saved me, and I want to help other people learn how to do that.

JU: Onstage, even if you’re nervous, you’re so funny, and then you let your darker personality out in your songs. Is it hard to integrate those two sides?



9 THINGS YOU DON'T KNOW ABOUT SHARON VAN ETTEN

- She is a child of rock. Her parents’ first date was at a Manassas concert in 1973.
- Her favorite chord on the guitar is C9. Why? “Because the chord itself is happy, but also kind of sad. It’s not quite minor and not quite major.”
- She is a hobby person, and very crafty. When she gave up smoking, she started knitting. “I can only knit scarves and I can crochet hats.”
- Her cure for writer’s block? Switch channels. “I go through old writing I haven’t looked at for years and work on that. If I feel like I’m forcing that, I try other mediums. I read, I go to galleries or movies. I like to cook. And yes, I do love wine.”
- She worked in two wine stores, and considered becoming a sommelier. Her favorite wine makers are Tony Coturri from Coturri Winery in Sonoma and Olivier Cousin from Anjou in the Loire Valley.
- Her merch is a cut above average. She’s added a packet of tissues with her face printed on them, and an umbrella with Are We There stenciled on it, just in time for the festival season.
- The video for “Taking Chances” is inspired by Greek-French film director Agnes Varda. Van Etten is not really getting her tarot cards read. The cards were selected by the director because of their visual appeal, not metaphysical significance.
- She attended Middle Tennessee University to become a recording engineer. She left after a year.
- She has glow-in-the-dark toilet paper in her bathroom.

**I DON'T WANT
STARDOM.
I'M NOT A
POP STAR.
I DON'T WRITE
RADIO HITS.
THAT'S NOT
WHO I AM.**

Because I don't know who I am anymore." He never called me back, but his girlfriend called me back. She was so sweet and she said, "I listened to your message. It kind of freaked him out, but he gave me permission to call you, and if you just want to talk, I'm here to talk." My boyfriend in Tennessee found out that I did that and he was so furious. He said, "That's fucked up that you would do that." I had to hide the fact that we had these phone dates. I would go on walks and we would talk, and she would recommend me books that she thought would help me through something, and she was the one that encouraged me to call my sister, who ended up getting me out of there. I took my guitar and a bag of clothes and I left everything.

JU: You produced your latest album, *Are We There*, yourself. I read that you said after Aaron Dessner produced *Tramp*, you were worried that people just listened to it because the guy from the National produced it. Did that last?

SVE: That's oversimplifying it, but I am a middle child, I have a lot of siblings, and in my life most of my friends take me under their wing. Everybody looks out for me. I am their little sister all the time. And I wouldn't take back working with Aaron for the world. I love what we did together, I'm really proud of what we did, but still I felt there were some sonic compromises, choices I wouldn't have made, things that I just ended up letting go. I was in his world. It was his studio. Then, later in interviews, everyone was asking about who played on the record, and asking me about how we all know each other instead of talking about the songs. Of course it's a publicist's dream: You got the guy from the National producing it and all these other bands are involved. It's great because this is our real circle of friends. But to a fan, it's a star-studded cast.

JU: You were afraid people paid more attention to that than the songs? So you decided to avoid that this time?

SVE: Everyone I work with has been amazing, so it's not like I ever felt that wasn't me or my song. I wrote all those songs and I'm really proud of it. I was challenged on every record, and I feel I've progressed on every record, and I hope I always do that. I don't want to put out the same record twice; it's boring. And I know that a lot of me wanting to do it myself is a mix of insecurity and also being proud because I know I can do this. Like that middle child: I can do this by myself.

JU: I see how fans walk up to you, like you're a soap star or something. It's like they already know you because of your songs.

SVE: My lyrics are so personal. When I go out to talk to people after a show—if my voice is okay and it's not too much of a crazy show—they come up to me and tell me what's going on with them, some really heavy stories to be telling somebody at a merch table. I love that, and at the same time, I don't feel qualified to hear those stories. But they feel they know me, they want to hug me right away.

JU: What's changed the most for you over your five albums?

SVE: I think it's important to get to a place to like who you are and like what you're doing and like letting yourself be. That to me is growing up. It's not about changing. It's about accepting yourself. You'll always be affected by the people around you. Someone shouted out something when I was playing at the Music Hall in Williamsburg. I said, "I wrote this about a love," and someone said something like, "He wasn't worth it." You know, it's *always* worth it. *(continued)*



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INTERVIEW

Every love is worth it. Even if it doesn't work out how you want it to.

JU: Do you write all the time?

SVE: I'll sit down at the piano and hit "record," or pick up my guitar, or I'll put on headphones and do electronic stuff, just depending on my mood. If I'm not feeling inspired I'll go back to older ideas and work on them. But you can't force it. I'm just like, "this sucks." I'm banging my head against the wall, but you don't have to come up with something genius every day. I write a lot of garbage, but you know what, just try. But as soon as I feel like I'm forcing it, that's when I stop.

JU: You said you're always writing for therapeutic reasons. Do you think that will change?

SVE: I don't know...I don't plan it. I think I'll always write for me, but I think what I choose to share will change. I'm still experimenting with what I'm comfortable with, with how it affects other people, friends and family that know me and what's going on. I think for as much as I write from a really personal place, I wouldn't share it unless I thought other people could relate to it, and hopefully learn from it as well, and ask themselves the same questions, and also not feel alone. That sounds silly, but I mean it.

JU: Why is there no question mark on the title *Are We There?*

SVE: I wanted to leave it open-ended. I wanted people to ask themselves why I didn't use it. Because it's not really proper, and I just let it be improper. ●



AUDIOPHILE PRESSINGS

Judas Priest

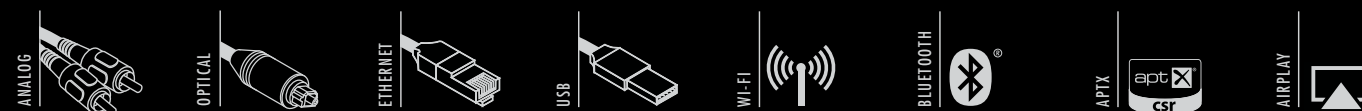
A Mobile Fidelity Metal Trilogy

By Jeff Dorgay



With so much dreck posing as metal these days, it's refreshing to go back to one of the main sources to get needed perspective. Drinking in three of Judas Priest's finest metal albums afforded audiophile care by Mobile Fidelity is a headbanger's delight. So put away those Jacintha records, break out some Priest, and crank it up. MoFi couldn't have chosen three better Priest albums to showcase. *Metal Hammer* magazine bequeathed the honor of "heaviest metal album of all time" on *Stained Class*, and *Screaming For Vengeance* remains Priest's best-selling record, earning double-platinum status. Many of the tunes on these platters became the core of the band's live set for a decade. (continued)

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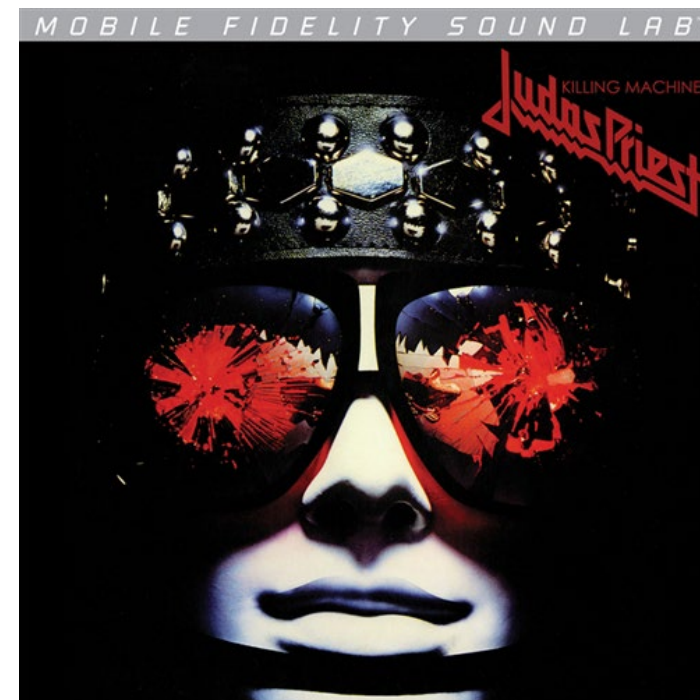
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Judas Priest

Stained Class, Killing Machine, and Screaming For Vengeance
Mobile Fidelity Silver Label, LP

The biggest dilemma is where to start. Priming the pump, "Before the Dawn," the only slow track on any of these three records, clearly illustrates the low noise floor in the remastering process. Rob Halford's lead vocal shines through and is clearly separated from the acoustic guitar work, sounding much more dimensional than the original pressing.

Alas, the original pressings in my collection do not do this band justice, as they lack in depth and dynamics—essential to heavy rock music. Restoring the dynamic range to these recordings unlocks their power and offers better insight into the synergistic playing of lead guitarists Glenn Tipton and KK Downing. The title track on *Screaming For Vengeance* is now beyond awesome. *Stained Class* may be the heaviest album of all time, but this has to be one of the best metal anthems, with each of the master guitarists taking up residence on each side of the stereo system, just as they do in concert. Amidst the bite of the guitars, Halford's blood-curdling scream toward the end of the song truly delivers the goods.

But Priest is not all shrieks and blistering guitars. The bass line on "Devil's Child" is no longer buried in the mix as it is on the original, and it is equally liberated on all three records, giving them added weight and punch. Isn't that what metal is all about?

If you are a metal aficionado, consider these three releases from Mobile Fidelity a must. The louder your system will play, the more you will appreciate them. ●

FEATURE

Blumenstein Audio Thrashers Speakers

By Mark Marcantonio

One of the signs of a mature audiophile is whether they have a true garage system—not the wife’s old Lloyd’s faux-wood tuner/record player/cassette, but an actual receiver, disc player and speakers. Chances are the electronics are at least 20 years old, but the true pride is often in the speakers. Placement usually either involves a couple of L-brackets or, for the more adventurous, eyhooks and some length of chain. It can be problematic when the speakers are needed for an outdoor event away from the garage/workspace. I would not recommend taking your home speakers to the park gazebo.

Out of this madness comes Blumenstein Audio with what may be the most useful, multi-purpose and durable solution, the aptly named Thrashers. Blumenstein generously calls the finished look “industrial design.” In truth, the speakers look like something straight out of a Jeff Foxworthy special.



FEATURE

The review pair comes with an oriented-strandboard (aka chipboard) cabinet. Two cabinet upgrades are available: a fir plywood front or a complete fir plywood cabinet. Each cabinet measures 17 by 13 by 12 inches. The port and speaker jacks are mounted in the front panel below the 1-inch super tweeter, which is crossed over at about 10 kHz; an 8-inch Pioneer Bofu driver is also mounted in the front panel. With everything on just one side, there is less to worry about when inebriated friends decide to help move them about.

To make the review as real world as possible, I power the Thrashers with my 1980 Harman/Kardon 680i receiver, Magnavox DVD/CD player and 16-gauge speaker wire. I place the speakers on a shelf in my garage 6 feet apart and 5 feet off the floor. Much of the listening time transpires while I work on a home project, with plenty of contemplation and hopped adult beverages, and with the TV on mute during the World Cup. With their 92 dB rating, the Thrashers take precious little effort to play loud and clear, and they are designed to be manhandled, both physically and sonically.

The Thrashers sound like a quality budget set of nearly full-size speakers. Vocalists, whether Tom Petty, Melissa Etheridge, Roger Daltrey, or Rihanna, sound far more lifelike than if they were reproduced by the well-cared-for rack systems of yore. The



FEATURE

crunchiness of vocals comes from the limitations of the recordings, not the Thrashers. Robert Plant's eviscerating vocals during "Stairway to Heaven" are scary realistic. The front port helps deliver ample bass down to 45 Hz, even when placed against a wall.

One afternoon out of boredom, the teen neighbors bring over a mixed disc of hip-hop, rap and popular music. They listen to the first song and turn up the volume a couple of times. During the second track, they begin texting. Next thing I know, a car pulls up with three of their friends. The girls begin dancing to Rihanna, while the boys punch one another and act like bloodhounds. The spontaneous listening ends only when the neighbors are called to go to a ball game. The Thrashers are like the ultra nerds in high school who everybody ignores until test time and then everyone needs to sit near them in order to pass the class.

Upping the game with a Vista Audio i34 integrated tube amplifier makes the overall sound more sultry and sweet, and an SET amplifier would probably take it further, but why bother? Whatever the combination of factors, the Thrashers sound better than any \$229 dollar speakers have a right to, hands down. For those few rare audio souls who have come across and rescued a tube amp awaiting the garbage truck, the Thrashers are the mates. *(continued)*



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As luck would have it toward the end of the review period, I’m invited to a large picnic at a nearby park. Seizing the opportunity, I toss (well, not quite) the Thrashers and receiver in the back of my pickup and head for the park. Discovering the area doesn’t have any electrical outlets, I plug the Thrashers into my pickup with the speakers sitting on the tailgate, and soon the park is filled with music. Cranking up *Frampton Comes Alive!* brings out the air-guitar enthusiasts, and several people compliment me on the great sound system.

Sure, you could go to Goodwill and maybe find a pair of speakers that don’t suck for \$50—but the odds of that happening are somewhat slim. Or you could get out the power tools, make a few trips to Home Depot and build your own pair. Hats off to you if you’ve got the fortitude for that exercise. I say send the folks at Blumenstein Audio a couple hundred bucks and break out the beer. Carry the Thrashers, slide them, dent them—it’s all about the sound and carefree portability, which these speakers offer in spades. Just a hint: Keep a pair of work gloves handy, as the Thrashers do shed splinters on occasion. ●

www.blumensteinaudio.com

PUBLISHER’S NOTE: After auditioning the Thrashers with everything from an \$88,000 pair of Pass Xs300s to my Sansui 771, I decided that I need them. Per Mr. Marcantonio’s suggestion, they are my new garage speakers. Rock on.
—Jeff Dorgay



The Beats Pill

Not a bitter pill at all...

By Jeff Dorgay

On one level, Beats has become the new Bose, in that everyone loves to slag Beats. But like the legendary Bose 901 speaker, which we reviewed a few years ago, most of the Beats stuff is pretty damn good and not worthy of the aggression thrown its way.

I've got a Beats audio system in my Fiat Abarth and it sounds better than any other \$900 car-stereo upgrade I've heard. Plus, it plays loud enough to overpower the growl of the Abarth's turbo motor—no small feat.

...which leads us to the little red guy you see here, the Beats Pill, complete with a matching Beats Character. My only real complaint is that it doesn't bend like a Gumby—now that would be super awesome. But it does sound awesome. Yes, you heard right: The Beats Pill sounds awesome.

It feature aux, USB and Bluetooth inputs—and, as you might expect, it sounds best hardwired via the aux jack, but this compromises mobility and coolness. All things considered, Bluetooth playback is not all bad, especially playing Apple lossless files via my iPhone 5.



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Specs Aren't Everything

Actually, there are no specs for the Beats Pill on the company's website, but the device does have an internal DAC and amp of *some* kind. The website does mention that the Pill has three volume settings: loud, turned up, and (my favorite) call the cops. Well, it doesn't really play that loud, but the four little speakers that seem about 2 inches in diameter do move some serious air for their size. As cute as the Beats Character is, it elevates the Pill off of the table enough to diminish the surface bass response, and for many, that's what Beats is all about.

Listening to the latest Daft Punk release demonstrates the table-gain phenomenon quite clearly. If you want a bit more boom in your low end, take the Pill out of the Character and place it midway back on the table. This

will give the maximum bass reinforcement. However, if you'd like a bit more of a balanced response, putting the Pill back in the Character helps achieve this. The vocals on Chrissie Hynde's "Dark Sunglasses" have a throatier quality when directly on the table sans Character; yet, Johnny Cash's voice in "Delia" has too much. Male vocal tracks seem to be more natural with the Pill up off the table.

A Joy to Live With

Much like my Smart Electric Drive, the Beats Pill has to be one of the most fun, user-friendly pieces of gear I've ever played with. Everyone wants to touch it, experience it and interact with it. Almost unanimously, the first comment is always, "Wow, it's so cute," followed by, "This thing sounds great." No one bats an eyelash when I mention the \$249 price tag

(with character; \$199 without). Most guys seem to like the black one and, of course, most women liked the pink one with the cute eyebrows. I find myself wishing Beats would make a lime green one...

In addition to no specs, there are almost no instructions either. In keeping with the Apple ethos, precious little instructions are required—just push the Bluetooth button on the back, pair it with your computer or smartphone and you're rocking. The miniscule LED on the back blinks until you pair the Pill and then goes to solid white once the connection is made. Should you run the Pill out of power (a full charge is claimed to last 7 hours, but we routinely got 8) or shut it off, it will look for the last device it was paired to upon power-up. You can charge it with a wall adaptor or via USB from your laptop. (continued)



A Double Dose

As cool as the Pill is, it's even better in stereo. You can link two of them via the output cable on the rear, and then stream to the duo with one as the left channel and the other as the right channel. I can't think of a more fun way to boost your laptop or desktop sound—well, maybe if they offered a wireless Beats subwoofer.

Spreading them about a foot from each side of my MacBook Pro makes for the best stereo image without collapse. Listening to the Flaming Lips version of *Dark Side of the Moon* with this configuration proves incredibly trippy. The width of the Pills flanking my laptop makes it feel like I have a miniature pair of Quad 57s on my desk—these babies create an image like crazy. Somehow, this pair of Beats speakers has me thinking about electronica, so I go old school, listening to a lot of Kraftwerk, Eno and Art of Noise tracks with great results.

Fun, Fun, Fun

At the end of the day, the Beats Pill, whether you order it alone or with a character, is the most fun desk accessory you'll ever buy. I suggest you get a pair of them.

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Staying Green

The Smart Electric Drive

By Jeff Dorgay

Here at *TONEAudio*, we've been green from day one, eschewing chopping down trees for a consumer magazine, which has just never felt right to us—even when we lived in Scottsdale, Ariz., instead of tree-loving Portland, Ore. So, other than our massive pair of Pass Labs Xs300 amplifiers, we try to keep our carbon footprint small.

Most of the autos with premium sound systems that we review in these pages are anything but miserly on fuel (though the current Porsche 911 will hit 30 mpg at about 70 mph on the motorway, if you're gingerly with the gas pedal.) And considering all the great luck we've had with battery-powered audio from Red Wine Audio, ASR and a few others, we figured why not try a battery-powered car?

Of course, the Tesla comes to mind, but with a "business lease" on the current Model S breaking the bank at around \$1,000 per month and with Tesla's long-term future remaining potentially murky, we chose a much simpler solution: the Electric Drive from Smart. For those of you who don't know, Smart is a Mercedes-Benz product and its cars are distributed by Mercedes dealerships.



This is actually a full-blown car review, as the stereo system in the Smart either sucks (the “multimedia system” upgrade basically just adds a pair of door-mounted tweeters and a wimpy subwoofer) or really sucks (the standard system has only a pair of 5.75-inch speakers in the lower part of the door panels). However, considering that the car is battery powered, range is *everything*, so forgoing a high-powered audio system is actually a good thing—which is too bad, because the Electric Drive is really quiet inside. It would be the perfect place for a killer system. Maybe we can get Vinnie Rossi from Red Wine to do a signature Smart system with a couple of his really low-powered class-D amps. Stay tuned for that.

Charge Now

Having lived with the Electric Drive for a few months now, I’d like to reiterate that range really is everything. A “charge now” indicator comes up on the dashboard every time you shut off the Electric Drive, reminding you that the car can cover a very finite distance on a single charge. Smart claims that it has a range of 59 miles for strictly freeway driving, 76 miles of all city driving, or 68 combined. We seem to reach just about 70 miles in the car no matter what, with a few caveats.

Driving the car spiritedly but not maniacally still keeps the range close to 70 miles, but strong headwinds, constantly mashing the accelerator pedal to the floor (which is totally fun, due to the car’s instant torque) or using the air conditioning heavily will drop the range to about

58 miles. And this leads us to the only complaint with the Electric Drive: This little car that could would really be the little car that can if it could go 100 miles on a charge. Maybe the next generation will.

The Electric Drive comes with a 120-volt charger installed in the rear tailgate. This is great to get you started using the car, but it will take 16 hours to charge it from a 20 percent charge, which severely limits the car’s usefulness. What you want is a 240-volt charger to replace the sexy Smart charger, which will set you back \$2,500. Amazon has a Bosch charger (which we featured in last month’s Style section) for \$479; it will have you rocking in about four hours. Combine that with visiting your favorite stores—like IKEA, which feature EV chargers on site, some even at no cost—and you can really extend the range of your excursions.

Reality Doesn’t Bite

In the Electric Drive, day-to-day, moderate-distance hops couldn’t be more enjoyable. The car is comfortable and way roomier than its diminutive size suggests. The passenger cabin feels very similar spatially to that of the Fiat Abarth but without the rear seat. The Electric Drive’s cargo space will hold about eight bags of groceries or a few large bags of dog food and, with the front passenger seat folded flat, it can easily accommodate a substantial pair of speakers or a large piece of furniture from IKEA. *(continued)*

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TONE STYLE

The car's most underrated specs are its 0-to-60 mph time and its top speed: 11.5 seconds and 74 mph, respectively, according to Smart. Our test vehicle easily sprints to 60 mph in just under 10 seconds and can hit 85 mph on level ground. And unlike your average econobox that wheezes heavily at 70 mph on the open road, the Electric Drive shoots from 70 to maximum speed with ease. Driving it like a rally car in downtown Portland is amazing; this four-wheeled midget will show its rear bumper to just about anything off the stop light to about 35 mph. It's a ton of fun to hole-shot punks in Subaru WRXs

with a car that doesn't even use gas.

Thanks to a short wheel-base and rear-wheel drive, the Electric Drive handles crisply. It is an absolute blast to drive and everyone who has had a chance to take it for a spin comes back with a huge grin on his or her face. Best of all, you can lease one from your Mercedes dealer for about \$150 a month. (The car starts at \$12,490 after U.S. federal tax credit.) Considering that all my cars average about 22 mpg on premium gas, driving the Electric Drive about 1,300 miles a month means I save about \$250 a month on gas.

It's like having a free car!

I don't know how long Mercedes will keep offering the Smart Electric Drive for this low of a price, but if you do a lot of short-trip driving and can get over the American point of view that you *have* to have a massive car to feel safe, the Smart Electric Drive just might be one of the most enjoyable automobiles you've ever driven. ●

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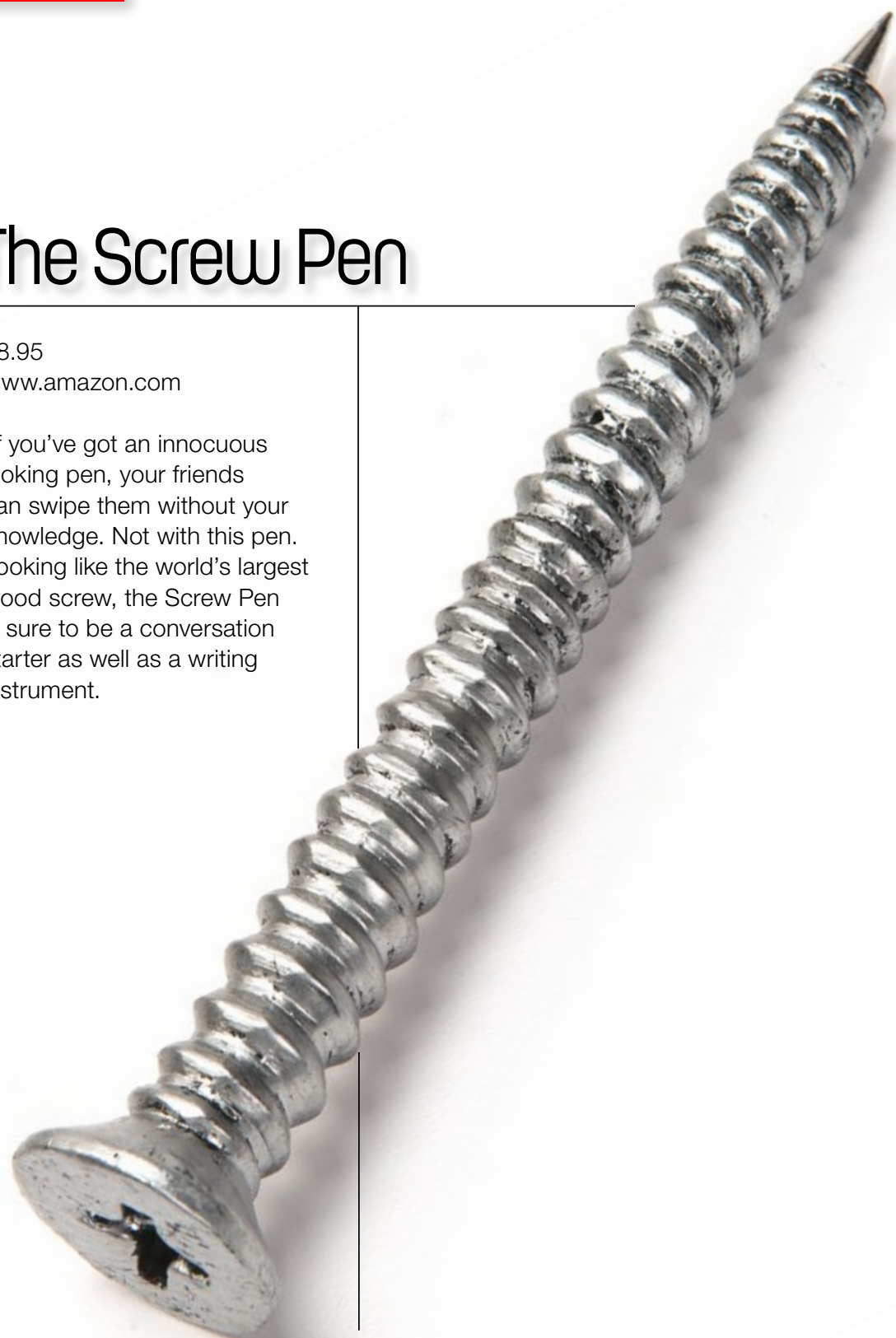
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Like every other crowd funded product, the lead time is a little longer than promised, (this shirt took 8 weeks to receive) but the quality of the workmanship is well worth the wait, especially if it's not a must have today item. ●

JAZZ & BLUES

For the past few years, pianist Jason Moran has been touring with a multimedia presentation of the work of early jazz composer Fats Waller. It's easy to see why Waller's music has endured well into this century: Few could swing as hard, and even fewer were as hilarious. Moran's celebration of Waller has retained the integrity and, often, the humor in his work while also drawing on more contemporary influences. Onstage—such as at his concert at the 2013 Chicago Jazz Festival—much of the appeal is visual, as it was with Waller's own film appearances. A few dancers add modern steps and Moran performs with his head underneath an oversized *papier mâché* Waller mask. His new *All Rise: A Joyful Elegy For Fats Waller* proves the project is just as compelling on disc.



Jason Moran

All Rise: A Joyful Elegy For Fats Waller
Blue Note, LP or CD

The core group includes Moran's longstanding trio of bassist Tarus Mateen and drummer Nasheet Waits with an additional assemblage of horn players and vocalists, including Meshell Ndegeocello. This expansive ensemble lends Moran a wider amount of textures. He makes the most out of the expanded palette, especially when he draws on contemporary R&B tones and hip-hop rhythms to highlight how Waller's compositions adapt to new musical contexts.

Such modern, and personal, transformation starts with "Ain't Misbehavin'." In this version, the horn intro sounds closer to Outkast than Count Basie, and then the brass turns around to support singer Lisa E. Harris' slow vamps. Moran's group also sets up a contrast with Waits' rapid delivery underneath Leon Thomas' muted trumpet on "Yacht Club Swing." Mateen's electric funk keeps the effervescent harmonies grounded on "This Joint Is Jumpin'." As a singer, Thomas turns "Two Sleepy People" into a soul ballad as he lays his lines on top of Moran's Rhodes (the background electronic string effects are a slight distraction). *(continued)*

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But the most striking overhaul is Ndegeocello's arrangement of "Ain't Nobody's Business," which converts the song into a dark lament with a hint of Sade's phrasing.

Moran's solos throughout *All Rise* show how much fun he has reworking his own learned knowledge of jazz history. Just listen to his use of hesitation and intervals that echo Thelonious Monk on "Lulu's Back In Town." And the combination of acoustic stride piano and electronics on "Handful Of Keys" could have come from Sun Ra (who admired Waller). Saxophonist Stephen Lehman's performance on "Jitterbug Waltz" could also surprise some listeners. While his records (such as the recent *Mise En Abime*) feature his own experimental language, he has not abandoned his commitment to digging deeply into traditional chord changes.

When Moran performed the Waller tribute in Chicago last year, he occasionally overemphasized the repetition. But on *All Rise*, there are hardly any wasteful notes. Maybe he knows too much excess will result in more than just a raised eyebrow from the spirit of the comic swing master. —**Aaron Cohen**


Stefano Bollani

Joy In Spite Of Everything
ECM, CD

Stefano Bollani has truly wooed me in the last few years. The Italian pianist's work with Enrico Rava boasts a muted radiance that brings a gleam of joy to the trumpeter's dark-hued work. Listen to how he energizes even the most ghostly passages of Rava's remarkable *New York Days*. And last year's encounter with Brazilian mandolin virtuoso Hamilton de Holanda is filled with the kind of quick-witted interplay that impresses anyone who demands music both animated and accessible. I caught the pair at the Newport Jazz Festival in early August, and they had a crowd—one I'm betting hadn't previously heard their music—utterly enthralled.

This new quintet album, one of the year's most seductive jazz records, seals the deal in regards to Bollani's charm. The pianist pinballs off his rhythm section on the flurry of lines that comprise the title track. Genial agitation is something he's expert at, but the fluid touch at his command often brings a Bud Powell elegance to the fore when he shifts into high gear. The quintet he assembled here is remarkably pliable. Guitarist Bill Frisell and saxophonist Mark Turner share the front line and bassist Jesper Bodilsen and drummer Morten Lund charge everything they touch. The boss is the pivot man, granting himself a fair amount of solos while feeding the fire when others are having their say. His comping work remains as inspired as his feature excursions. I reference Powell on purpose: Bollani brings a jaunty drive to the table on "No Pope No Party," a post-bop romp that could be a one-shot convincer for the group's awesome esprit.

Whimsy bubbles up in various spots. "Alobar e Kundra" sounds stitched together with moonlight, the pianist and his rhythm section following impulse after impulse while chasing gossamer. In Italy, Bollani is a recognized

© Photo by Paolo Soriani/ECM Records



Morten Lund, Bill Frisell, Stefano Bollani, Jesper Bodilsen, and Mark Turner

author of children's books and lacks not when it comes to wit. There's a gamesman slant to his playing, too. The duo exchange with Frisell on "Teddy," a two-man reverie that parallels last year's Fred Hersch/Julian Lage meeting for poise and playfulness, makes counterpoint seem to be the most essential element of improvisation. You can almost see the grins on their faces.

All this talk about elation somewhat belies the command this unit has over autumn moods. "Vale" sits in the middle of this fetching program, providing an eerie stroll that gives Turner ample time to plot a luminous course while the quintet, especially the leader, sets a pensive mood. "Ismene" is somewhat similar—call it a tone poem of deep evanescence—but here, Frisell's

dewy lines help the aura unfold. Like the opening calypso "Easy Healing," the song resounds of character, distinct even as it uses a cloak of amorphousness to help establish its lighthearted essence. That's not easy to do, and as the music drives the group (especially Turner) to sound unusually inviting, the heart of Bollani's art emerges. He's all about drawing you in.
—Jim Macnie

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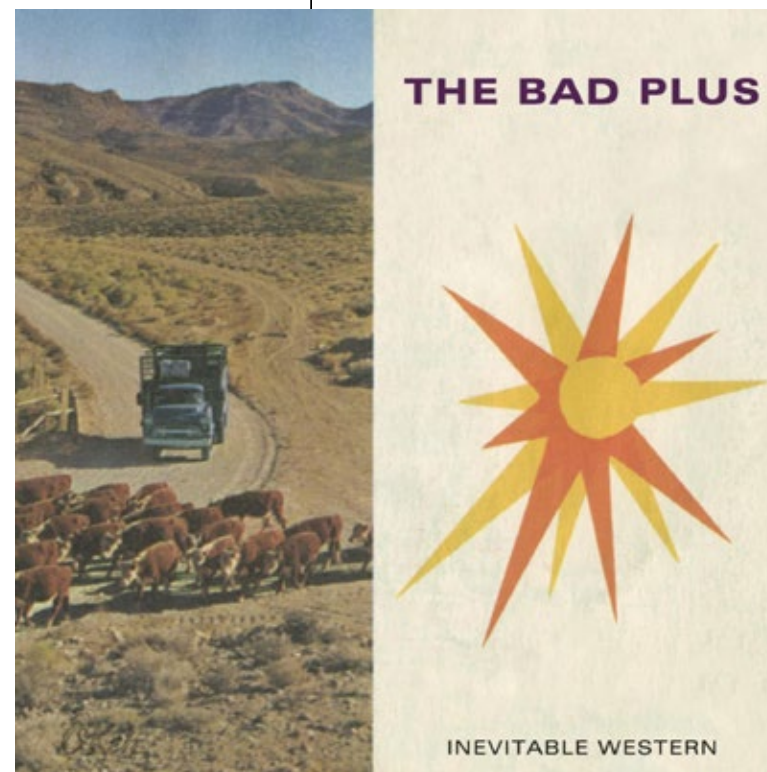
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MUSIC



The Bad Plus
Inevitable Western
Okeh, CD

The Bad Plus has never lacked ambition. A few months ago, the trio released its take on Igor Stravinsky's polarizing *The Rite Of Spring*. Now the group has gone back to refocus on rock-inspired modern jazz improvisation with *Inevitable Western*. But even if the nine original, and relatively compact, compositions (with writing duties divided equally among the band members) may not initially seem as monumental as reinterpreting a key modern classical work, the seemingly more inward-looking performance here sounds no less determined.

While the Bad Plus has stepped away from the rock covers that brought it widespread attention more than a decade ago, some elements from that time are prevalent throughout *Inevitable Western*. Heavily dramatic chord changes fuel drummer David King's "Gold Prisms Incorporated" as well as bassist Reid Anderson's "You Will Lose All Fear." Queen could be one source here—and the trio has interpreted "We Are The Champions" (on *Live In Tokyo* from 2005).
(continued)



© Photo by Jay Fram

But such grandiosity is never an ending point in and of itself. The group possesses the resourcefulness and quick-thinking intuitive dialogue to usually turn such statements inside-out.

On “Gold Prisms Incorporated,” pianist Ethan Iverson’s emphasis on higher-register notes and key changes make the latter come across like they’re subverting the dominant motifs. He also creates a vivid contrast between his simultaneous low-register rumblings and higher-note lines on pieces such as King’s “Adopted Highway.” Then he weaves in a few arpeggios. Just as crucially, Iverson’s playing cajoles while leaving enough space for King and Anderson to constantly turn pieces around, as they do on the slow intro to Anderson’s “I Hear You.” Iverson’s surface minimalism also highlights King’s rapid, deceptively light attack.

Throughout, the rhythm section’s role becomes anything but predetermined. On Iverson’s “Self Serve,” King sounds more pronounced not because of his own volume, but how he guides the pianist and bassist while remaining in the background. At the beginning of “Epistolary Echoes,” the rhythmic foundation is established with an adroit handclaps-and-bass duo rather than on his own instrument. When the drummer unleashes polyrhythms on Iverson’s “Mr. Now,” he knows enough not to overheat the piece. After Anderson’s opening solo, Iverson’s slow gait closes the album via the title track. Perhaps the pianist’s playing, and his tune, are supposed to convey a sense of the cinematic desert. Either way, the Bad Plus has fun with any kind of narrative. —**Aaron Cohen**

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Medeski Scofield Martin & Wood
Juice

Indirecto, CD



Jazz loves to push the boundaries and make big creative statements, but there's always been plenty of room for moves that conform to formula and recalibrate existing tropes. Medeski, Martin & Wood, the keyboards/bass/drums trio that wooed a sizable audience by blending extreme improv with enjoyable grooves, struck a rich vein of the latter when they connected in 1998 with John Scofield for the guitarist's *A-Go-Go*. Four albums and several live dates later, this foursome not only comes off like a true band but a well-heeled group of road dogs that couldn't sound any more comfy together.

With each new disc by the quartet, the collective ease becomes more pronounced. Familiarity is the name of the game on *Juice*, the ensemble's third studio affair. As pithy riff tunes spill into more luxuriant extrapolations, the give-and-take becomes seamless.

The rhythm section knows where to zig, the soloists know where to zag, and somewhere down the line—certainly on the percolating sizzle and flowing grooves of “Stovetop”—the elbow room they provide one other evolves into a symbol of the confluence needed to make elaborate interplay sound utterly natural.

There's a bit of Boomer sentimentalism at play here. But fear not, these four dodge all things mawkish. “Juicy Lucy” corrupts “Louie Louie” with just enough gnarly glee to give it props for being one of the most pliable nuggets ever. By the end, it's bent out of shape. The reading of “Light My Fire” is more literal.

Rather than use it as a diving board for extensive solos, the quartet keeps the song as compact as the Doors did (even though the album version on the band's 1967 debut is an “extended” version). Adding a few more jukebox kicks, things get a tad wilder as the 60s are peeled further back. Repertory demands imagination, but it would have been hard to guess that a dub romp through Cream's “Sunshine Of Your Love” was in anyone's future. The guys give it a dose of easy skanking, and milk it for mood as much as they do melody.

I'm down with John Medeski's rainbow-colored

organ antics, but there's something striking about “Louis The Shoplifter,” which features him on piano instead. The caffeinated samba propels itself with steady chug. Scofield's pinched runs are deeply lyrical, like he's singing the song himself. Ultimately that's what marks *Juice*: The flow of action is so supple that everything arrives with a lilt attached. Even the hyper stuff. As the group watches the sun set on “The Times They Are A-Changin’,” its expertise at poetic understatement resounds. The musicians' spin on Dylan's anthem is the most warm-hearted benediction of the jazz year.

—**Jim Macnie**

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MUSIC

Louis Sclavis Quartet
Silk And Salt Melodies

ECM



Louis Sclavis Quartet
Silk And Salt Melodies
ECM, CD

French clarinetist Louis Sclavis sounds comfortable taking an extensive journey. About 25 years ago, he explored different reed instruments' outer edges along with such European free improvisers as Evan Parker and Wolfgang Fuchs on *Duets*, *Dithyrambisch*. But he's been traveling in a different direction these past few years with his Atlas Trio of guitarist Gilles Coronado and pianist/keyboardist Benjamin Moussay. On 2012's *Sources*, the group explores North African music. His new *Silk And Salt Melodies* reflects his take on the sounds of storied Central Asian trade routes.

Several international modes flow in and out of the disc's nine compositions, all of which Sclavis wrote. These include phrases that sound like they derive from the impressionism of Claude Debussy. Iranian percussionist Keyvan Chemirani, who represents a different classical tradition, even joined the ensemble for this disc. He plays the zarb, a kind of frame drum. *(continued)*



© Photo by Luc Jennepin EMC Records

But *Silk And Salt Melodies* remains firmly rooted in jazz, especially as it sounds like the source for the group's intuitive dialogue. That includes opening track, "Le Parfum De L'exil," where Sclavis introduces the piece for the solo, but then swings behind the beat that Coronado and Moussay shape. On "Des Feux Lointains," Sclavis also plays from underneath Moussay's piano lines, but controls the motion with some surprising pauses. He also has a tone that occasionally echoes Eric Dolphy and John Carter. Sclavis soars during his solo on "Dance For Horses," which follows a skittish duo between Coronado and Chemirani. Other times, Sclavis emphasizes groove, like when his single notes tug along with Moussay's electric keyboard, with Chemirani adding the funk.

Silk And Salt Melodies sounds especially lively when these different elements crash against each other. Moments include the trio's shift in dynamics from loping to aggressive on "Sel Et Soie," and how the gentle opening to "L'autre Rive" spins into a fragmented solo from Coronado that sounds a bit like Marc Ribot. There is also no shortage of humor in "Cor-tege," which sounds as if it's mocking the martial tone of the introduction. But Coronado's open-ended solo is what defines the piece. The disc concludes with a brief, and somewhat strange, electronic collage called "Prato Plage," perhaps the signal of a different trip Sclavis plans for the future.

While Sclavis and his crew depict such faraway places, producer Manfred Eicher recorded the disc at one of ECM's main studios near Avignon, France. The pristine sound, which highlights the air as much as the notes, is remarkable. —**Aaron Cohen**

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FEATURE

Full Throttle

McIntosh MHA100 Integrated Headphone Amplifier

By Bailey S. Barnard

I can't believe what I'm hearing from my little pair of Energy satellite speakers, which I think I paid \$150 for about a decade ago. Dr. Dre's *2001* should not be thumping like this through these speakers. The cause of this magic trick? McIntosh Lab's new MHA100, which delivers 50 potent watts into 8 ohms for speakers.

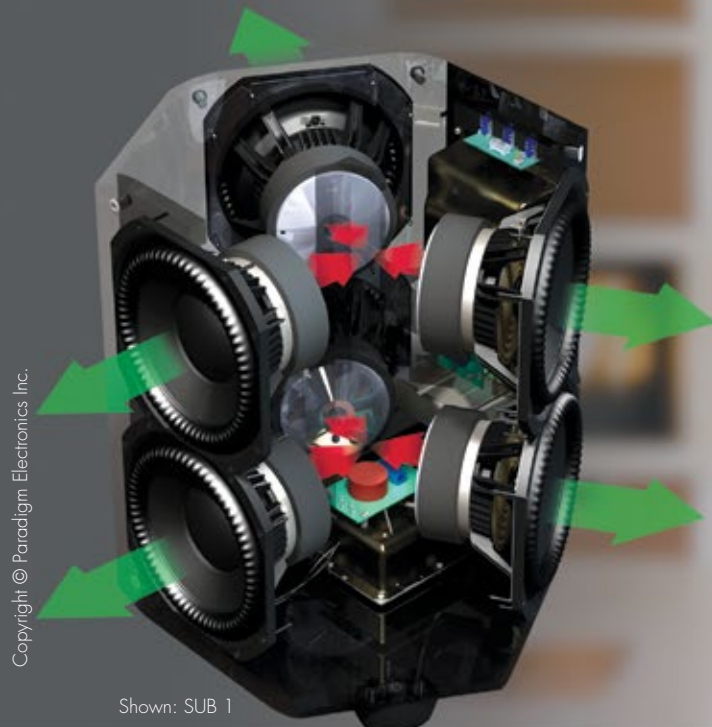
The bass on "Forgot About Dre" is surprisingly deep and crisp through the Energy speakers' tiny drivers. I didn't think they were capable of such low-frequency response—but, of course, I can only turn the volume knob on the amp so far, to where the iconic blue decibel meters just barely start swinging, before I have to stop for fear that the Energys will explode.



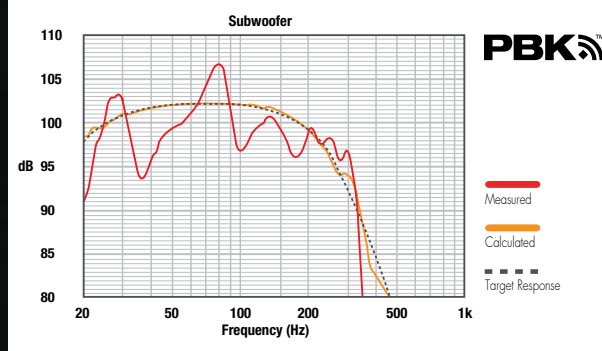
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FEATURE



The big, clean power that this little solid-state amp delivers to speakers is truly astounding—especially considering that it was designed as a headphone amplifier. As most *TONE* readers know, McIntosh doesn't really do anything small or halfway. As such, the MHA100 is no mere desktop audio accessory. With a set of sturdy speaker terminals on the back panel, along with a wealth of inputs, this is a pretty serious integrated amplifier. Inputs include USB, coax, and AES/EBU on the digital side—the onboard DAC can facilitate digital files up to 24 bit/192 kHz—and balanced XLR and unbalanced RCA for analog (plus an

RCA preamp output), so this amp can take pretty much any source you throw at it.

This also isn't exactly something you'd want on your desktop: It's about a foot wide, a foot and a half deep, and 6 inches tall, and it weighs more than 26 pounds. The cost for this not-so-little wonder is also in line with what our readers likely expect from McIntosh: \$4,500, which is probably more than most people are willing to spend for a headphone amp—but considering that this really is an integrated amp (and a very capable one at that), the price tag isn't entirely unreasonable. *(continued)*

FEATURE



The MHA100 also does a solid job with the floorstanding ELAC FS249s—which, at \$8,000 a pair and with a recommended power input of 30 to 400 watts per channel, are in another world than my little Energy speakers. Through the ELACs, the MHA100 delivers Jason Isbell's outstanding album *Southeastern* will all the finesses and soul that it requires, but on hard-hitting rock and pop from the likes of Vampire Weekend, Jack White, and Led Zeppelin, the McIntosh amp has no problem throwing down.

Of course, I would be remiss not to discuss the MHA100's greatest capability, its headphone section, which is among the best I've heard. Perhaps its most noteworthy feature is the ability to select from three headphone impedance ranges—8 to 40 ohms, 40 to 150 ohms, and 150 to 600 ohms—all powered by a version of McIntosh's famous output Autoformer, adapted for headphone use. (continued)

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FEATURE



FEATURE

These selections cater to a variety of headphones—everything from ear buds to ear cans. (Headphone impedance, input/output, volume, and limited bass adjustments can all be controlled using the two dual-level knobs on the front panel or with the small supplied remote.)

A 24/192 version of *Dark Side of the Moon* sounds downright eerie through the MHA100 and a pair of 600-ohm Beyerdynamic T1 headphones. The auxiliary sounds at the beginning of “Money” are so real and detailed that they almost induce hallucinations. Similarly, *Songs of Leonard Cohen* on vinyl through these headphones gives one the creepy impression that Cohen’s lips are right next to your ear and he’s whispering to you. The MHA100 reveals details on that record—such as distant backup vocals and various instrumental nuances—that are not present though most systems. The Mac amp illuminates them in the mix, bringing the listener deeper into the music.

The soundstage this amp presents through headphones is big and lifelike, and its accuracy and clarity across the frequency spectrum are reference-level good. McIntosh has done a phenomenal job adapting its trademark amplifier sound for the headphone user.

I can’t stress enough how wonderful the headphone section is—but at \$4,500, the MHA100 isn’t for everybody. Those who take the plunge will have a component that they can base a reasonably sized system around. Unless you’re looking to drive gigantic or overly power-hungry speakers and run multiple analog and digital sources, the MHA100 will give you everything you need with all the power, finesse, and quality for which McIntosh is known. Oh yeah, and it’s a kick-ass headphone amp. ●

McIntosh MHA100 Integrated Headphone Amplifier

MSRP: \$4,500

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PREVIEW



REL S2 Subwoofer

\$1,499 www.rel.net

REL has always delivered amazing bass reinforcement from relatively compact cabinets, and thanks to their speaker connection, can integrate into virtually any amplifier system, making them the most versatile subs going.

The new S2 utilizes a 10-inch, front firing driver, coupled to a 10-inch downward firing passive radiator, an approach that they claim extends the frequency response a few more hertz. The results are in the listening—and they are superb. And at this price it's easier to belly up to the bar for a pair of them, though you can easily start with one and go from there. Watch for our full review in issue #66

Alta Audio FRM-2 Speaker



\$15,000/pr. (with stands)
www.alta-audio.com

Speaker designer Michael Levy has created a winning combination with his stout two way monitor, featuring a 6" woofer and ribbon tweeter. Thanks to a 3.1" voice coil and massive motor, this modest sized driver produces prodigious bass, along with a speed that mates to the ribbon perfectly—making for the most seamless marriage we've yet heard between a ribbon and dynamic driver.

While our test pair is finished in a luxurious piano black, Levy says they can match virtually any color, and the curvy shape should look good in any number of outrageous colors, depending on your decor. But, a pretty cabinet means nothing without stellar sonics and the FRM-2s provide amazing reproduction. So far, everyone on the staff that has experienced them has been shocked at the realism they provide. Watch for our review in issue #67.

NEW



M O O N

Nēo 430HA

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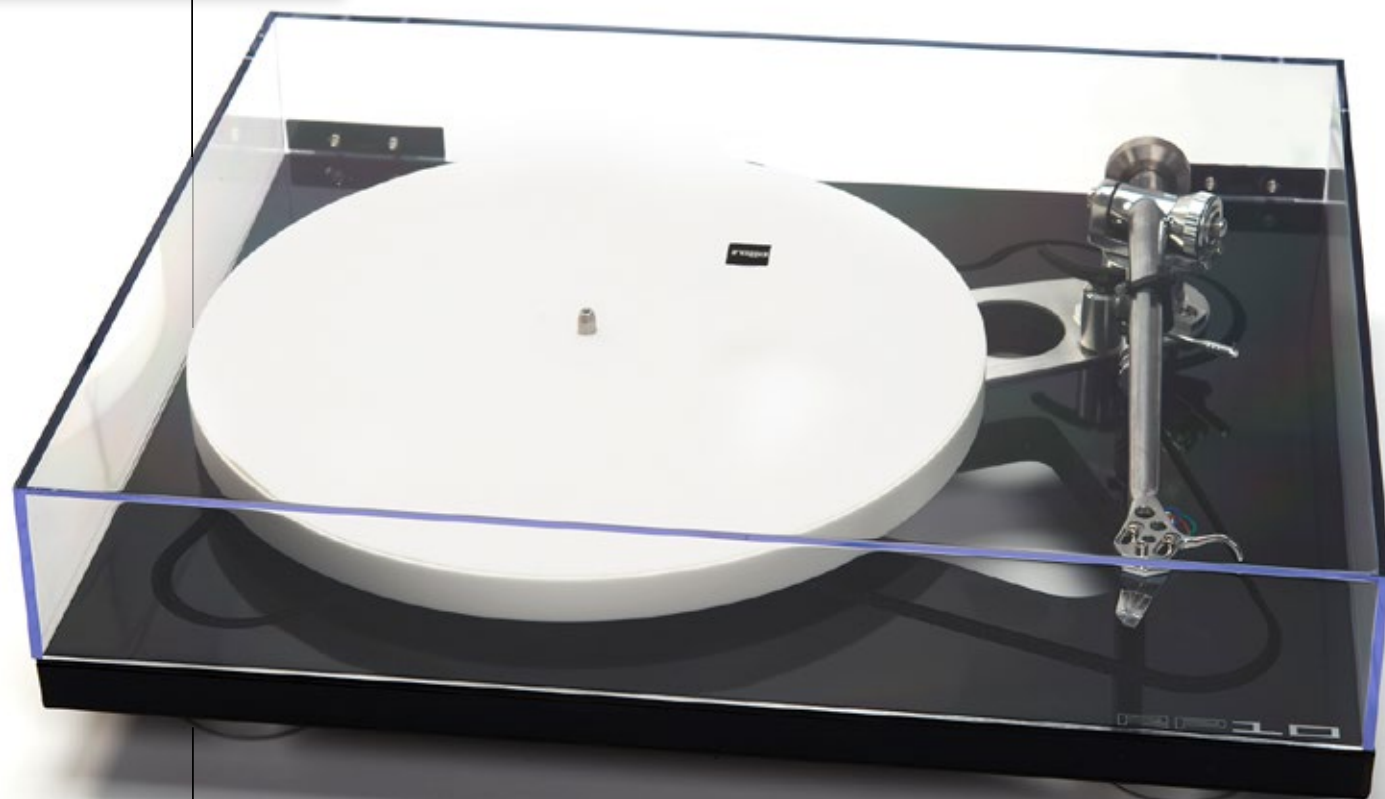
PREVIEW



Van Alstine Vision Phono Preamplifier

\$599 www.avahifi.com

Though famous for his tube designs, Frank Van Alstine is no slouch with solid state either. With passive EQ and no coupling capacitors, this American made phonostage offers no frills high performance. And MC owners take note, AVA can customize the Vision to the loading requirements for your cartridge. We are currently using this with the legendary Denon 103 and it offers mega performance. Review in progress.



Rega RP-10

\$5,495 (table only), \$6,495 (with Apheta MC cartridge)

www.rega.co.uk

www.soundorg.com

It's been a long time since we listened to the RP-10 prototype at Roy Gandy's house in the UK, but much like the Porsche Boxster, the final effort has not deviated that far from the prototype.

As with all Rega tables, the word is evolution, not revolution; the RP-10 builds on everything Rega has learned in 40 years of turntable design and manufacturing. The new RB-2000 arm is completely handmade and adjusted, and this table features a second generation ceramic platter, first seen on the legendary P9 (a long term reference here at TONE) later on the P7.

The Apheta cartridge offers clean,

quick reproduction and should be a hit with music lovers subscribing to the PRAT (pace, rythem and timing) school. We've had a lot of experience with this cartridge and if properly loaded between 25 and 50 ohms is startlingly revealing without stridency. But, if your analog front end does not offer this option, higher settings will leave the Apheta delivering a harsh performance, so match your phonostage for the best results.

The combination delivers a lively, tuneful rendition, with plenty of grunt in the lower registers, much like the P9, but with a clearer window into the music. Watch for our web review shortly.

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Balanced Audio Technology

VK-3000SE Integrated Amplifier

By Rob Johnson

The VK-3000SE from Delaware's Balanced Audio Technology (BAT) is a vacuum-tube lineage and a solid-state amplifier rolled into one. The latter offers 150 watts per channel into 8 ohms and twice that into 4 ohms. For the preamp section, BAT utilizes a pair of Russian 6H30 valves, which are concealed inside the unit. Some refer to these military-grade tubes as "super tubes" for their longevity and durability; they're also alleged to have a whopping 10,000-hour lifespan. In the unlikely event of a bad tube, BAT stands behind them with a one-year warranty. (The VK-3000SE itself comes with five-year warranty.) The unit weighs in at 50 pounds and the chassis measures 19 by 5.75 by 15.5 inches. It's priced at \$7,995, which is pretty reasonable considering the amp's broad capabilities.

B a l a n c e d A u d i o T e c h n o l o g y



As you might guess by the company's name, the VK-3000SE's internal circuit topology accommodates a fully balanced signal. The back panel offers a combination of three single-ended RCA inputs, two balanced inputs and an RCA tape out. Metal speaker binding posts accommodate many connection options. Keep in mind that the posts are quite close together, so large speaker cables with spade connections like mine require some finagling.

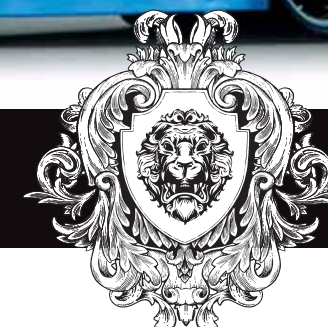
In addition to the standard linestage capability of the preamp section, BAT offers a pre-installed MM/MC phono stage with the associated outboard inputs as a \$1,000 upgrade option. Users have an option of a 48 or 55 dB gain, the latter being the default. Load-wise, the phono card is factory set at 47,000 ohms, but it can be adapted for other cartridges as needed. Users can make these changes themselves by removing the unit's cover and following BAT's instructions. The standard load works quite well with my cartridge, a Dynavector 17D3, so I didn't make further adjustments. *(continued)*

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—Geoff Poore

Clean Design

The VK-3000SE offers a clean, elegant external design. Our sample unit sports an anodized black finish, but silver is also an option. The hefty, metal remote control has a similar finish. The chassis' subtle curves give the amp a sleek, modern appearance. To help keep the unit cool, which is especially important given the hot tubes within, BAT utilizes a top panel with small ventilation slits at the outer edges and holes down the center in an hourglass shape.

Once powered up, the amp's front-panel vacuum fluorescent display (VFD) shows the input choice and volume level. The font is large, blue, and very visible—it's easy to read from my listening seat 9 feet away. For those who prefer darkness, the remote's display button will variably dim or turn off the VFD.

A minimal number of small controls on the front panel disguise the versatility within. The visible buttons include power, mute, input, phase, mono and function, the latter of which allows access to an

on-screen menu. And of course, there's a beefy volume knob that goes from 0 to 140. According to Geoff Poore, BAT's sales manager, the numbering scale represents a 70 db range, in half db increments. He goes on to mention "There are two other volume 'scales' that can be used in the 3000SE: 'DBM' and 'DBU'. The unit comes with a more understandable (for consumers) 'CNTS' (counts) scale. Broadcast and recording facilities are more likely to use 'DBM' (-70 to 0) or 'DBU' (-50 to +20). One may

preset any of these different scales in the set-up with the "function" button while cycling through. We are very proud of the sophistication and accuracy of the volume control in the 3000."

When toggling through the input options, you'll see that the VFD has them listed as CD, tape, aux and so on, though the owner can modify the labels. Relabeling the third input as "iPod" proves very easy. Once programmed in, the amp stores these labels in its memory and remembers them

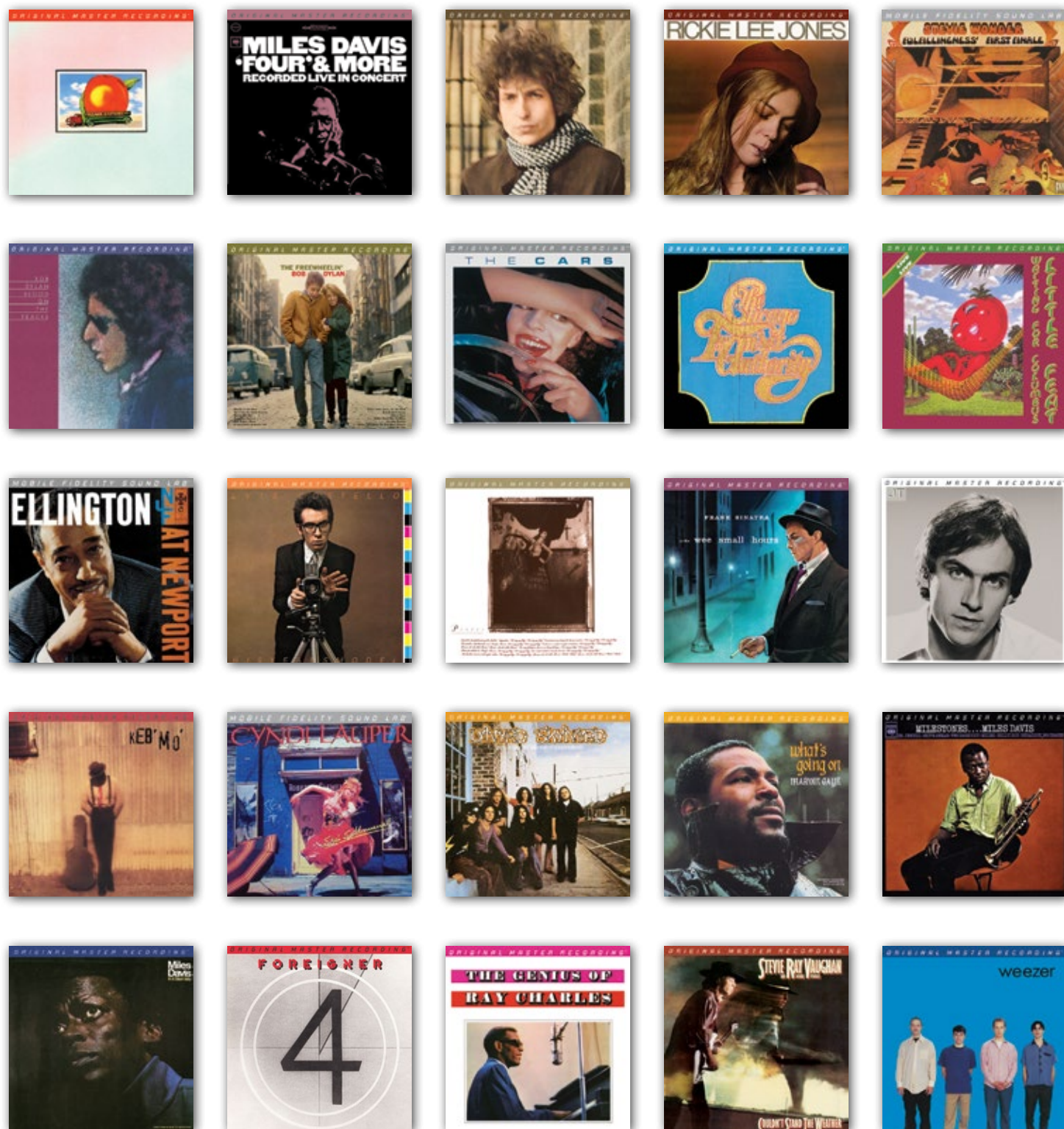
even if it's powered down and unplugged.

The function button is similarly flexible; pressing it reveals several user-selectable options for the selected input. Users can adjust balance, phase, mono/stereo and display mode, and select fixed, relative and maximum volume to equalize input sources and to avoid an inadvertent sound blast. To exit the menu, just hold the function button for two seconds. Most of this functionality is also accessible via the remote. *(continued)*

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REVIEW

Up and Running

Setup for the single-box unit is very straightforward—just connect sources and speakers and you are ready to rock. Pressing the power button puts the VK-3000SE into a muted tube-warm-up mode; after a minute or so, a quiet click indicates the amp is ready. Pressing the button again puts the unit into a low-power standby mode, with the tubes remaining engaged. Holding down the power button for a couple seconds shuts down the unit completely.

Testing both the single-ended and balanced connections with my DAC, I find that they sound similar but have some subtle differences. The XLR connections do offer a bit quieter background, providing a little more sonic detail and nuance, and the presentation is a little more up-front. If you have the option of balanced connections, they are the way to go.

Across the frequency spectrum, VK-3000SE leans a bit to the warmer side of neutral in my system. Pitch Black's album *Rude Mechanicals* provides a helpful test. The bass presentation is more relaxed than punchy and the amp has no trouble making very low frequencies known, but they never overwhelm the mix.

Extremely revealing components have a tendency to make the listener wince when playing some female vocal recordings; pleasantly, the VK-3000SE does not. Throughout Sia's cover of "I Go to Sleep," vocal crescendos project little stridency, despite their power. Also, as I notice in the cymbal shimmers on other tracks, the amp has a slight tradeoff of sonic realism for a touch of veil, but a degree of euphony in some circumstances is welcome. Balanced connections prove more revealing, so users should experiment with interconnects to find the sonic balance that works best in their system.

The amp's ability to portray both a vertical and horizontal soundstage is fantastic, regardless of source material. Music extends beyond the speakers to the extreme left and right and from floor to ceiling, though front-to-back layering is not a strong point. The VK-3000SE does make it easy to pick out individual elements of a song, but it's not a fully convincing reproduction of a live performance when band members are scattered across the front and back of the stage.

(continued)



Putting the phonostage through its paces, I soon find that there's a lot to enjoy. Analog and digital sources have similar sonic signatures through this amp, but the phonostage offers a greater sense of ease and naturalness. Vocals, like those on Daft Punk's "Instant Crush," move forward in the soundstage, enhancing the VK-3000SE's front-to-back presentation. Some of that benefit, of course, is due to the analog source, but the quality of the analog reproduction is strong evidence of the effort and quality that BAT put into the unit's phono card. It would be a challenge to find a single-box phonostage of this quality for the amp's \$1,500 phono add-on. The VK-3000SE demonstrates the synergistic value of an integrated audio solution.

Final Score

While \$8,000 is a substantial investment for any piece of audio gear, it's important to frame this product in the context of what you get for that price. You could spend a lot more money

for individual components that deliver greater sonic nuance, layering, and air around each musical element, as well as a more realistic-sounding reproduction of a live concert. Of course, with added components, an owner also needs to consider the cost of extra interconnects and power cords.

The VK-3000SE is both a great preamp and a great power amp, and with the optional (and fantastic) phonostage, it's a versatile, compact, and great-sounding piece of gear. If each of its elements were sold as individual components, the combined price would certainly be higher than the cost of the single unit, and it would be tricky to find separates that complement each other this well.

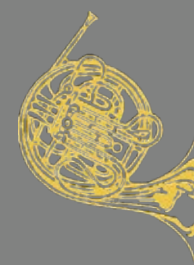
Having plenty of power and multiple input options, the VK-3000SE offers a turnkey solution that will mate well with many sources and speaker types. With a five-year warranty backing it, this is a component you're likely to enjoy for a long time, even as the other gear in your audio arsenal evolves around it.

Airloom.



REFERENCE 75

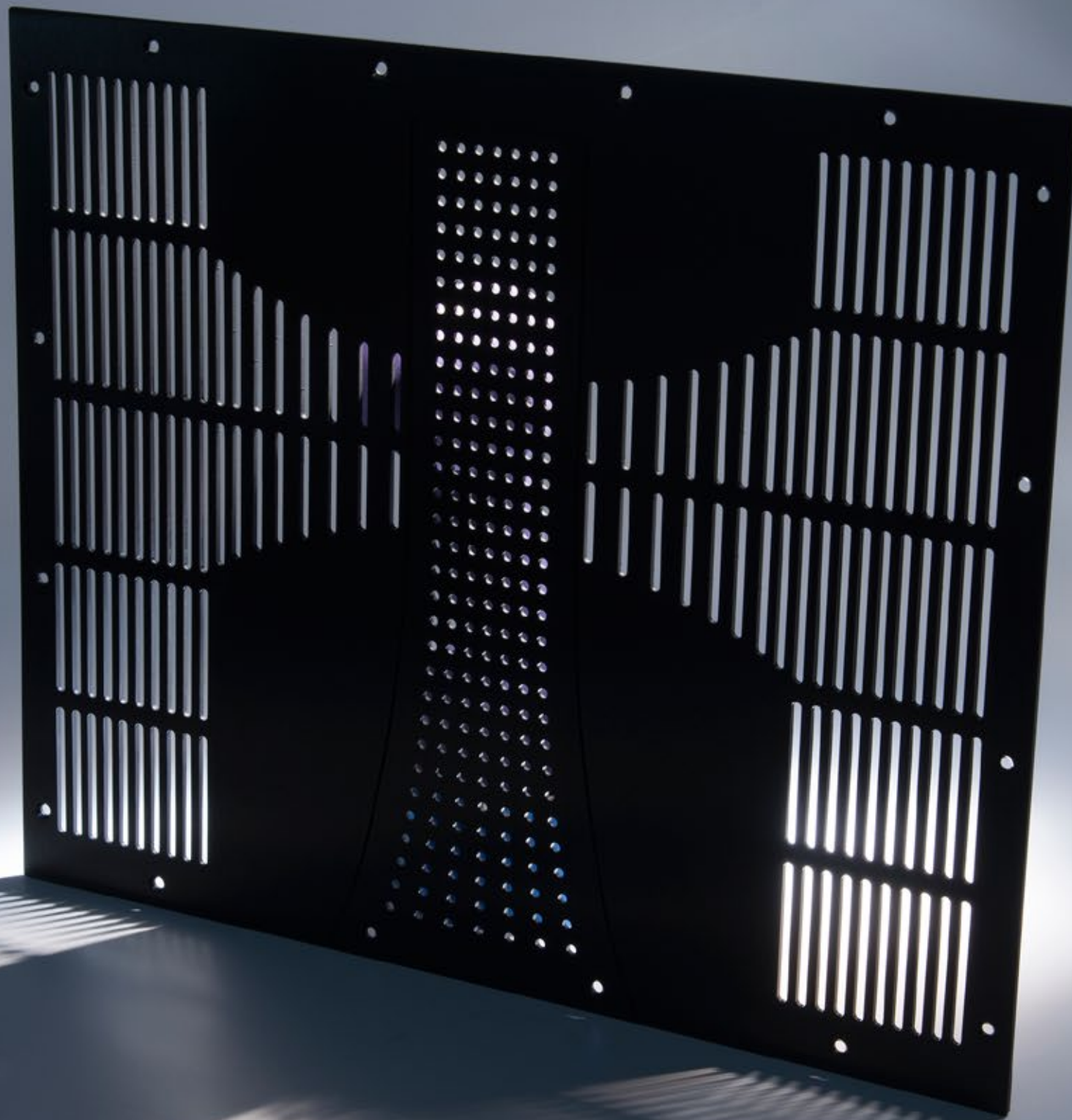
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Additional Listening

By Jeff Dorgay

Having been such a big fan of BAT gear over the years, I had to hand the main review over to Rob—partly to share the excitement of the brand (with which he's had no experience) and to deliver a more impartial review. Firing up the VK-3000SE to perform break-in duties is like putting the keys in a Porsche 911, in the sense that everything is where I remember it and, regardless of vintage, the overall ride is similar—just as the dynamic sound of BAT is like taking an old friend for a test drive.

While BAT has made a name for itself based mostly on the reputation of its fine vacuum-tube gear, the company has always made great solid-state power amplifiers, which have not always received their fair share of (well-deserved) praise. I have always loved the combination of a solid-state power amplifier and a valve preamplifier, so the VK-3000SE is right up my alley.

As much fun as modestly powered tube amplifiers are, 35 watts per channel limits your speaker choices too much, in my opinion. But 150 wpc is just right for all but the most inefficient speakers. Everything at my disposal—from the 90-dB-per-watt KEF Blades to the 84-dB-per-watt Harbeth Compact 7s—proves a good match for this amplifier, with nothing running out of steam until I crank the volume to beyond brain-damage levels.

A side-by-side comparison to another favorite, the Simaudio MOON 600i, is enlightening. Both amplifiers are similarly priced (though the MOON does not include an onboard phonostage option), yet the MOON is all solid state. Those preferring a slightly more neutral, even a

touch punchier sound and who don't care about the phono might prefer the MOON. Personally, the VK-3000SE has that combination of solid-state grunt and a touch of tubey warmth in an ever-so-slight way that is not veiled, colored or slow.

The 6H30 is a very dynamic and powerful tube, sounding nothing like, say, a 12AX7. And BAT built its reputation around this tube, and the company implements it like no other. Whether you're blasting AC/DC, Coltrane or Coldplay, this amplifier offers a lot of inner detail and timbral purity in spades.

As good as the onboard phonostage is, choosing it will ultimately be the limiting factor for the hardcore vinyl enthusiast. But again, it's *damn* good for a thousand bucks. If you are primarily digital and just dabbling with LPs, it's fine; grab your favorite \$2,500 table/arm/cartridge combo and call it a day. However, if you're more of an analog lover or plan on serious analog upgrades in the future, order your VK-3000SE without the phonostage and go for BAT's awesome VK-P6 instead. (We will have that review shortly). You'll be glad you spent the extra dough. The VK-P5 was a class leader and the P6 promises even more performance for around \$3,500.

High-performance integrated amps continue to be popular for the audio and music lover who wants world-class performance without buying a rack full of components. The VK-3000SE is an excellent choice, should that be your cup of tea. This is certainly one I could retire with happily ever after. ●



VK-3000SE Integrated Amplifier
MSRP: \$7,995 (plus \$1,000 for the optional phono section)

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SME 10 turntable with Dynavector 17D3 cartridge

Preamplifier

Coffman Labs G1-A

Amplifier

Mark Levinson No. 335

Speakers

Piega P-10, Sonus faber Olympica III

Cables

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Power

Running Springs Audio Haley, RSA/ Cardas Mongoose and Golden power cords, Shunyata Python Alpha power cord

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Top Shelf

PrimaLuna's DiaLogue Premium Preamplifier

By Jeff Dorgay

PrimaLuna and I go way back; back before *TONEAudio* was even a twinkle in my eye back. The first audio review I wrote for *The Absolute Sound* happened to be the original EL-34 based ProLogue 1, and was way more exciting than the boring NAD integrated amplifier that Robert Harley was going to have me cover for my first assignment. I bought that review sample not only because it sounded great, but it was so much fun; reminding me of all the great EL-34 amps I'd owned over the years. 11 years later it's still in my family, going strong, with merely one set of replacement tubes – a testament to PrimaLuna quality.

It's been fun watching *TONE* and PrimaLuna grow over the years, diversifying our products, but keeping the same ethos of offering high performance at a reasonable price, never giving quality a back seat. PrimaLuna now has a range of four vacuum tube preamplifiers; with the DiaLogue being the top of the range at \$3,199.

PrimaLuna®



Where a number of past PrimaLuna preamplifiers relied on the 12AX7 tube, the DiaLogue Premium takes advantage of the 12AU7, six of them – and this has two big benefits. For those not familiar with the brand, PrimaLuna gear has always been super easy on tubes, so investing in a good set of premium NOS (New Old Stock) tubes has always been solid thinking. Fortunately, where the best 12AX7s are now pushing \$200 – \$350 each, equally good 12AU7s will only set you back about \$75 each. And PrimaLuna's US importer Kevin Deal can hook you up.

You don't *need* to invest in NOS tubes if you don't feel inclined. The DiaLogue Premium sounds great out of the box. Tube rolling is only for those who are part curious, part OCD, and can yield different results for those wanting to chase the rabbit. Most of you will just unbox your DiaLogue Premium and enjoy. There's nothing wrong with that.

The biggest advantage of the 12AU7 though, is its lower gain. With so many of today's sources having a four volt output, the 22 -28db of gain that most contemporary line stages provide is just not needed. You end up with the volume control always being used in the 7:00 to 9:00 position and not only having precious little range of control, but noise can be an issue because the preamp is not running in its sweet (and lowest noise) spot.

Less gain, less pain

The DiaLogue Premium, having 10db of gain, gives you plenty of volume control range and is dead quiet throughout. Using it with my Zu speakers (101db sensitivity) and a pair of 845 SET amplifiers, I had the silky smooth silent treatment, even with my ear right up against the ribbon tweeter. *(continued)*

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Sincerely, *WEL*



What makes each Element different



Water

- Solid Perfect-Surface Copper+ (PSC+) Conductors
- Polyethylene Air-Tubes
- Carbon-Based 6-Layer Noise-Dissipation System



Earth

- Solid PSC+ Conductors
- **FEP Air-Tubes**
- Carbon-Based 6-Layer Noise-Dissipation System



Wind

- **Solid Perfect-Surface Silver (PSS) Conductors**
- FEP Air-Tubes
- Carbon-Based 6-Layer Noise-Dissipation System



Fire

- Large Solid PSS Silver Conductors
- **Larger FEP Air-Tubes** with More Air Inside
- **Carbon-Based 8-Layer** Noise-Dissipation System
- **WEL-Type Double-Contact Machined RCAs and XLRs**

What makes all the Elements great

- 72V Dielectric-Bias System polarizes the conductor insulation, greatly reducing signal/dielectric interaction.
- Air-Tube Dielectric ensures that essentially electrically and magnetically "invisible" air is the primary insulation.
- Triple-Balanced Geometry prevents the shield from being used as an inferior reference-ground conductor.
- Pure Red Copper plugs employ thick Hanging-Silver plating directly over extreme-purity base metal.
- Used with RCAs or XLRs, the ground reference always has lower impedance than signal conductors.
- Noise-Dissipation System (NDS) shields-the-shield, keeping most EMI from ever reaching the ground plane.
- Direction of all conductors and shield drains optimized for ideal noise-filter effect.



audioquest®



When substituting the DiaLogue Premium, for the Nagra Jazz preamplifier in an all Nagra system, thanks to the low gain, the PrimaLuna was quieter than the mighty Nagra, costing three times more.

A dual mono design with five inputs and two variable outputs, the DiaLogue Premium should be able to handle anything you can throw at it, except balanced sources. (You can use an adapter if need be). As a tape enthusiast, I really appreciated the additional, fixed level, buffered tape output to make mix tapes on my trusty Revox. A home theater pass through is also incorporated, for those needing to make the DiaLogue part of a home theater system.

Running the DiaLogue Premium in our main reference system, displacing the

\$13,000 ARC REF 5SE preamplifier and the \$32,000 Robert Koda K-10 was highly insightful. While the big bucks preamplifiers revealed more music and more dynamic slam at the extremes, the mighty PrimaLuna was never embarrassed. Kind of like comparing a Porsche Cayman S to a GT3.

Trying the DiaLogue Premium with about ten different power amplifiers from Simaudio to Burmester again underscored it's versatility. Only the Burmester 911 Mk. 3 really needed the volume control cranked all the way to get full output. (no doubt because we were using balanced adaptors here, all of the other balanced power amplifiers tried had separate, single ended RCA inputs. *(continued)*



That lower gain was a real blessing when using vintage power amplifiers like the Conrad Johnson MV-50, which only need about .6 volts to be driven to full output. FYI, combining this preamplifier with my MV-50 that has had all of the caps upgraded to CJD Teflon was absolutely heavenly, mated with my Quad 57s.

I've always found PrimaLuna gear to be a wonderful combination of old and new school design and sonics, yet as you go up the line, the top components in the PrimaLuna line sound more like current vacuum tube electronics, i.e. more linear and neutral, where the entry level pieces sound slightly more vintage. Much of this is due to the beefy power transformers used, combined with premium Takman resistors, SCR foil capacitors and Swiss sourced, silver plated oxygen free copper wiring throughout.

It's also worth mentioning that the DiaLogue Premium has no problem driving long runs of interconnect cables. Comparing the sound between a 20 foot run of AudioQuest (find cable here) and a one meter pair revealed no difference, and no rolling off of the high frequencies, so those that like having their power amplifier down on the floor close to the speakers, with the rest of their components further away on a rack will be pleased. I had similar luck with cable from Cardas and ALO Audio.

Love that tube

Personally, there is always something special to me about the sound of a preamplifier built around the 12AX7 or 12AU7 tube, they just always seem to paint the sonic picture with a little bit more air and gradation than the 6DJ8/6922 designs do, and feature more sonic gradation between heavy and soft tones than a preamplifier utilizing the 6H30 tube. Neither is better or worse, just different. A Lotus Elise gets

around the curves with a little less effort than a Corvette or a Viper.

I noticed this the most when listening to acoustic music of any kind. Spinning the XRCD of Lee Morgan's *Tom Cat*, it was easy to discern the differences in rendition between my vintage ARC SP-11 (6922 design), current REF 5SE (6H30 design) and the Koda K-10. (best solid state I've ever encountered) Morgan's trumpet has more "blat" and slightly more contrast with the REF 5SE, but the cymbals are dreamier, more palpable, and smoother through the DiaLogue Premium.

Going back to some of George Winston's solo piano records on the Windham Hill label, the pianos decay is equally enticing through the DiaLogue Premium. This is a totally musical preamplifier, always getting out of the way of the presentation, so that you don't focus on the gear. Not all preamplifiers can do this regardless of price, so this is a home run for the PrimaLuna – and amazing for \$3,199.

Each preamplifier brought its own palette to the reproduction, yet the DiaLogue offers an excellent balance, and cohesion to the musical presentation, almost like listening to a full range ESL, rather than a speaker made of woofer, tweeter and midrange. The DiaLogue provides fatigue free listening at its finest, and made for many 12-hour listening sessions without wanting to ever turn the music down.

While the DiaLogue Premium turns in good performance at the frequency extremes, offering solid, defined and tuneful bass response, combined with extended highs that are never screechy, it's this coherence and ability to nail instrumental tone and texture that makes it so compelling. *(continued)*

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The DiaLogue Premium does what tubes do best, providing a dreamy, three dimensional sense of ambiance, giving the listener a healthy dose of “you are there” realism. Eschewing female vocals, I spent a lot of time listening to Johnny Cash, Elvis and Tom Waits through the DiaLogue Premium and I always came back impressed. The soundstage painted is *huge*, in all three dimensions, making my Dynaudio Eminence Platinum speakers disappear in the room, no small feat.

Rounding the bases

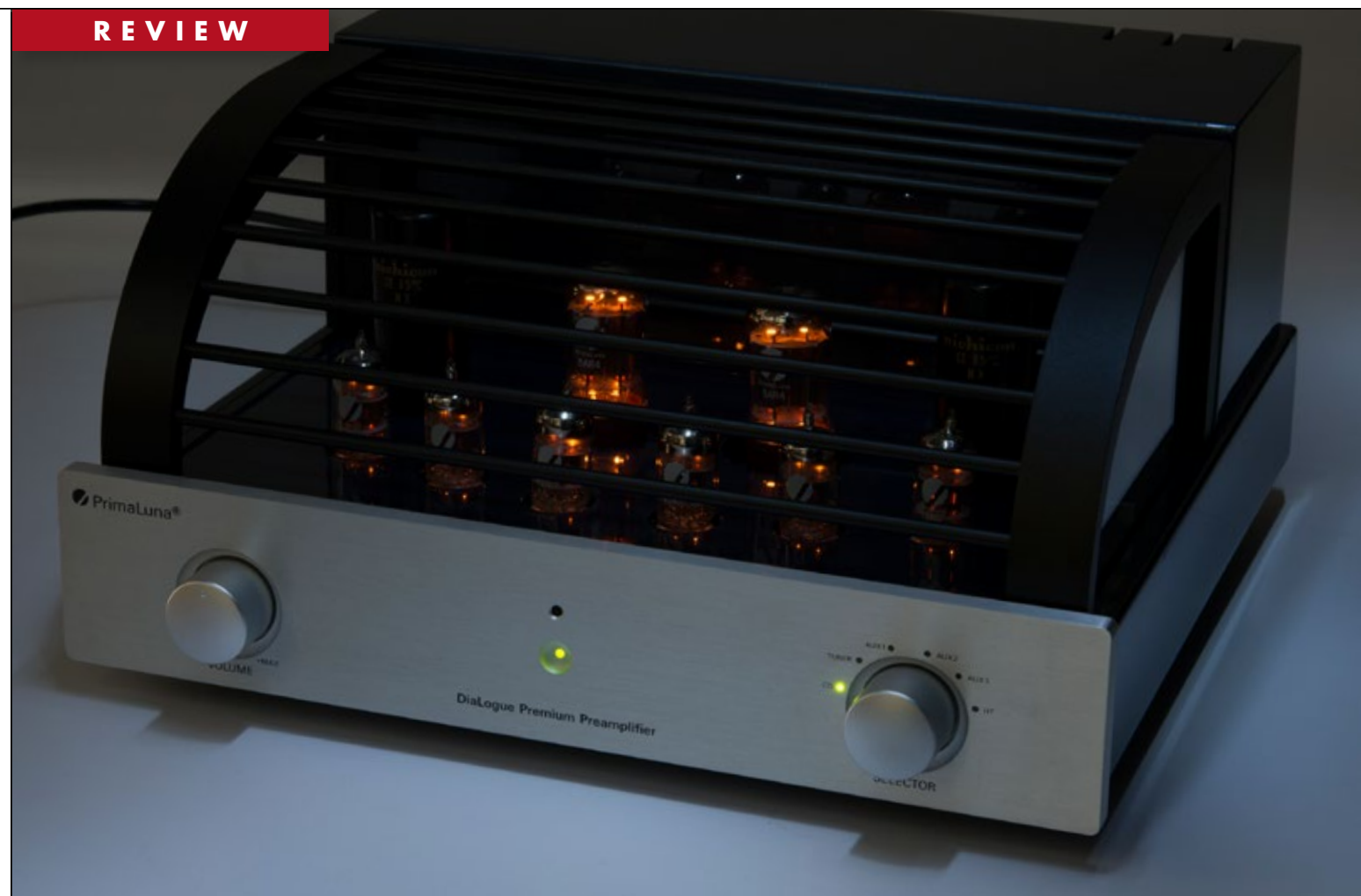
The DiaLogue Premium preamplifier offers incredible sound and value for \$3,199. If I were building a system in the \$20 – \$50k range, I can’t imagine needing to spend more than this for a linestage, provided you didn’t absolutely have to have balanced outputs. The ability to tube roll with ease and modest cost is another big bonus with this preamplifier, allowing the ability to either fine tune the sound, or just play with a different feel.

Best of all in over a decade now, PrimaLuna has not compromised a molecule on build quality. They are still making gear that feels bank vault solid, encased in a dark blue, high gloss metallic finish that would do an Aston Martin proud. (and a set of cotton gloves to keep fingerprints off of said finish) Even the shipping cartons are the best in the business, with three layers of heavy cardboard to make sure your purchase arrives without blemish. *(continued)*

REVIEW



REVIEW



Combining all of these small touches and world class sonics, makes for gear that owners don't want to part with. Perusing Audiogon or EBay rarely reveals used PrimaLuna gear, and when it does go for sale, it fetches top dollar. Another home run from PrimaLuna! ●

The PrimaLuna DiaLogue Premium Preamplifier

MSRP: \$3,199

MANUFACTURER

PrimaLuna

CONTACT

www.primalunausa.com
www.upscaleaudio.com

PERIPHERALS

Digital Source dCS Vivaldi Stack

Analog Source AVID Acutus Reference SP/ TriPlanar/Lyra Atlas

Phonostage ARC REF Phono 2SE

Power Amplifiers PrimaLuna DiaLogue Premium Power Amplifiers, Burmester 911 mk. 3, Conrad Johnson MV-50C1, Nagra 300B, Pass Xs300, Pass Aleph 5

Cable Cardas Clear

Speakers Dynaudio Eminence Platinum, Acoustat 2+2, KEF Blade



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Hardly Second Best

The Simaudio MOON 610LP Phonostage

By Jeff Dorgay

Bouncing between St. Vincent's current and last album, I can't help but be in awe of the staying power of the vinyl record.

Thanks to the many manufacturers, like Simaudio, who have not only kept the faith, but continue to innovate and refine their designs, spinning records is better than ever in the year 2014 than it ever was. Who knew? Even better, much of the technology in flagship designs is making its way down the food chain to more affordable designs like the MOON 610LP here.

We've been using the Simaudio MOON 810LP phonostage as a reference component for some time now, but at \$13,000 is out of reach for a certain group of analog enthusiasts. The \$7,500 MOON 610LP, though not inexpensive, opens another door. Comparing the 810LP and 610LP side by side reveals subtle yet profound differences and while the 810LP ultimately reveals more music than the 610LP; some may actually prefer the presentation of the 610LP.

A unified voice

First and foremost the 610LP has a similar, yet slightly softer voicing than the 810LP. The more expensive MOON offers up more resolution on leading and trailing transients in a take no prisoners system, but some of your preference may come down to overall system tuning and associated components. Going back and forth with the Lyra Titan i, I actually preferred the 610LP in my reference system, which is a few clicks to the warm side of neutral. Those wanting every last molecule of resolution will prefer the 810LP, but the 610LP is no slouch. Dare I say it, but the 610LP almost sounds a touch more “tube-like” in the same vein of my favorite solid-state preamps from Pass, Burmester, Robert Koda and Luxman. Never slow or veiled, just a bit lusher than the 810LP, which struck us as one of the most neutral phonostages we’ve had the pleasure to audition.

Tracking through the recent Blue Note remasters and the recent Miles Davis discs from Mobile Fidelity are a perfect example of the 610LP at its finest. This phonostage creates a soundfield that is both extremely deep and wide, going well beyond the boundaries of my Dynaudio Eminence Platinum speakers, but the magic doesn’t stop here. Where the 610LP mirrors the performance of its more expensive sibling is in its ability to render acoustic instruments naturally.

Switching from the Titan i to the more tonally neutral Atlas, it’s tough to tell these two phonostages apart through the critical midrange, especially with modest dynamic swings.
(continued)



REVIEW

The cymbals at the beginning of Bachman Turner Overdrive's "Blue Collar" float in the air in front of my listening chair, feeling right spatially as well as feeling as if the drum kit is of a realistic size. The 610LP does not exaggerate perspective, which can be fun for a short period of time wears on you after long listening sessions.

Quiet, quiet, quiet

Though the 610LP has a claimed signal to noise ratio of 93db, while the spec on the 810LP is 95db, you'd be tough to tell them apart. This phonostage is dead quiet. Even the most delicate pieces of classical music, the noise floor is always in the recording, with tape hiss from the master coming through, not the electronics. Personally, this is one of the true benefits of a great solid-state phonostage—the absence of noise. While a number of tubed units can add a touch of palpability (wanted or unwanted) that the solid state units can't match, they always seem to impart a bit of sporadic tube noise.

Depending on your system, this can go from barely audible to somewhat annoying. Even more annoying is trying to rustle up a matching set of tubes for your phonostage that you love, only to find the tonality changed when it's time to re-tube. Another awesome reason to go solid-state; turn the 610LP on, leave it on and forget about it forever, unless you change cartridges and need to adjust gain and loading. Personally, as much fun as tube rolling is, I enjoy the consistency of transistors—your mileage may vary.

If you haven't sampled a top solid-state amplification component in a while, you will be surprised at how lifelike and natural the 610LP renders music without needing vacuum tubes. The gap has been closing for years and Simaudio is one of the rare few that produces solid-state electronics that have no "sound" of their own. If you desire the tonal flavor that comes with a vintage vacuum tube sound, that's another story. (continued)

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



HIGH PERFORMANCE ANALOG

With over a century of combined experience working with analog, we decided to embark on building a new collection of high performance analog products for distribution in North America. In addition to outstanding sonic and build qualities, we also require each product to possess high value. This does not mean that we shy away from the exceptional and more expensive. Instead, this means that every product we work with is available for a fair and consistent price relative to performance.

At the foundation of our analog offerings is Dr. Feickert Analogue from Germany. We have worked with Chris Feickert to create new high performance and unique packages that are specific to our North American market. Each of our new models are available in standard high gloss piano black lacquer or in an upgraded rosewood finish. Performance is at the heart of each of these new turntables.

No high performance analog system would be complete without a selection of high quality accessories. For these essential items we work with several manufacturers including Acoustical Systems from Germany, Blue Horizon from the United Kingdom and Okki Nokki also from Germany.

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.

VANA Ltd. is the new home for high performance analog. High resolution without bits and sampling rates.

Mega adjustable

With 64 steps for resistive loading from 12.1 ohms to 47k, 16 steps for capacitive loading from 0pf to 470pf and 16 steps of gain adjustment from 40db to 70db, I can't imagine a cartridge that the 610LP *can't* handle. I certainly had no issues with the cartridges at my disposal and appreciated the wide range of adjustability down at the lower end of the scale—critical with some of the Koetsus and especially the Rega Apheta, which mates incredibly well with the 610LP. Ultra OCD analog lovers will appreciate the fine adjustments available, and again, the more resolving your system, the easier it will be to hear those fine adjustments.

As with the 810LP, all of the adjustments are via DIP switches on the underside of the unit, so this is not a phonostage for casual adjustment. After living with both of these units for some time, I suggest putting your 610LP on a shelf with plenty of height, so you can prop it up and not have to disconnect it or remove it from the rack when making loading settings.

It's worth mentioning that the 610LP makes an incredible moving magnet phonostage. Though I'm guessing that most analog enthusiasts at this level will have probably graduated beyond the top MM carts (all in the \$800—\$1,200 range), if you start your assault on top notch analog, you can start with the 610LP as an anchor and go up the scale on cartridges as your budget allows. The 47k setting is a wonderful match for the Grado moving iron cartridges, which have a low output of .6mv, yet still require 47k loading. For those in the audience with the Grado Statement and Statement 1, the 610LP is a perfect match for these cartridges.

The 610LP also offers balanced inputs as well as outputs. If you have a balanced tonearm cable for your turntable, take advantage of the fully balanced, differential circuit design of the 610LP. Using identical Cardas clear tonearm cables, my impromptu listening panel always picked the balanced option as more open and dynamic.



We're not talking a major delta here, but noticeable enough that even untrained listeners could pick it out, and again, the more resolving your system, the bigger difference it will make, especially if you have a fully balanced system.

Rounding out the package

For those not familiar with Simaudio, all engineering, design and assembly is done at their factory in Montreal, and like Boulder, they do all their chassis metalwork in house as well. The MOON 610LP is a member of their Evolution series, robustly built—both mechanically and electronically, as you would expect from a flagship component.

Lifting the lid reveals a massive power supply that Simaudio claims has more reserve power, is faster and quieter than an equivalent battery supply. Going topless also reveals first-rate components throughout, and having been to the Sim factory (see issue 32) the care taken in machining chassis parts and physical assembly is some of the best our industry has to offer. This is why Simaudio offers a ten year warranty on their products—very few of them ever go back home to the mother ship.

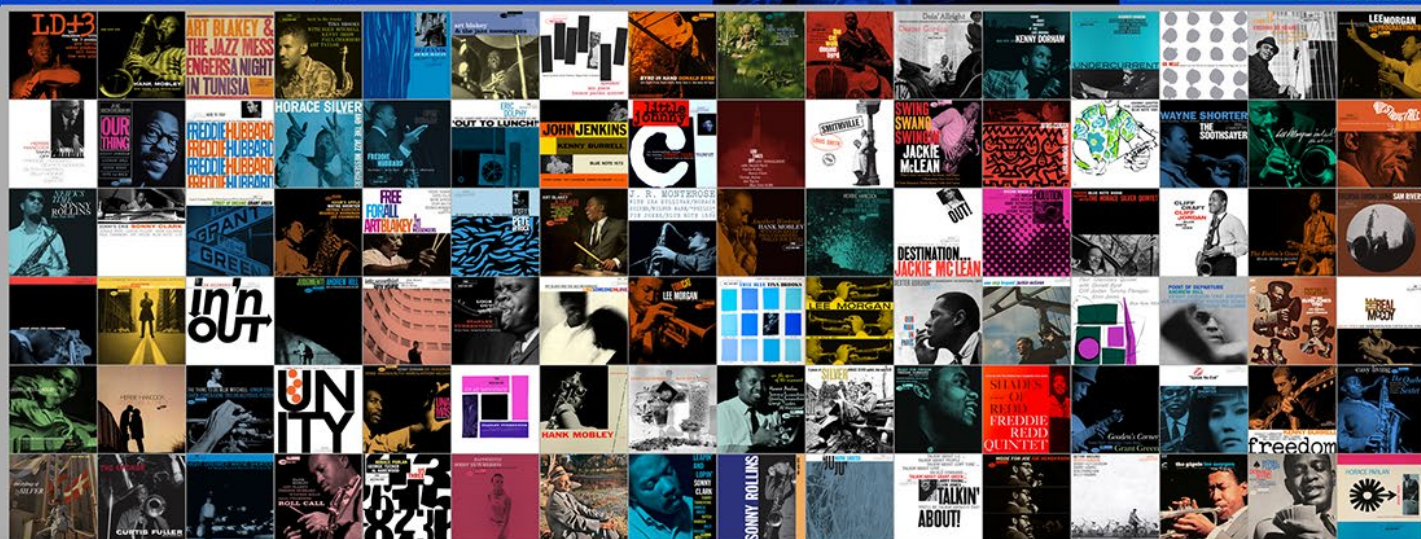
More power

You'll notice a socket on the rear panel of the 610LP marked "power supply," allowing you the option to take advantage of Simaudio's 820S external power supply. We have a review of the 820S in the works and while this massive power supply does extend the range of the 610LP in a mega system, most of you either don't need it or would be better off stepping up to the 810. *(continued)*

grive thyself



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REVIEW

However, because the (\$8,000) 820S has outputs marked “analog power” and “digital power,” those having either the 740P preamplifier, the 650D or 750D DAC/transport would be well served to split the duty of the 820S between phonostage and one of these other components.

Simaudio’s MOON Evolution 610LP phonostage is a fantastic addition to an analog system, offering an incredibly high price to performance ratio for the analog enthusiast that wants a cost no object phonostage in a single turntable system without refinancing their home.

For all but the most obsessed, this will be the last phonostage you need to buy. Very enthusiastically recommended. ●

**The Simaudio MOON
Evolution 610LP phonostage**
MSRP: \$7,500

MANUFACTURER

Simaudio Ltd.

CONTACT

www.simaudio.com

PERIPHERALS

Preamplifier Robert Koda K-10, ARC REF5SE, Burmester 011

Turntable AVID Acutus Reference SP/Tri-Planar/Lyra Atlas, Rega RP10/ Apheta

Cartridges Lyra Titan i, Lyra Kleos, Ortofon Cadenza Bronze, Ortofon SPU, Ortofon 2M Black, Grado Statement 1, Dynavector XV-1S

Power Amplifier Pass Xs300 monoblocks

Cable Cardas Clear

Power IsoTek Super Titan



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

Music Matters, Ltd.

Peachtree nova220SE Integrated Amplifier

By Mark Marcantonio

The idea of an integrated amplifier has always appealed to me. Combining the amplifier and preamplifier sections in a properly isolated design makes economic sense—just sit back and enjoy the music without the bleed-through of a tuner.

Last year, I had the pleasure of reviewing Peachtree's nova125 integrated and, while I enjoyed both its form and function, I wondered what impact nearly doubling its power would have on the notoriously power-hungry Magnepan 1.6 speakers. Well, I now know—and it's been worth the wait. The nova220SE possesses tremendous grip, never letting the Magnepans beat it into submission.

Turn your living room into a concert hall



Editor's Choice Award - 2014

"The RS3's innate clarity through the frequency range revealed the natural timbre of the piano most vividly. The speaker proved so wonderfully descriptive of the textures and timbres of acoustic and electronic sounds that it was never anything other than wholly captivating."

John Bamford, HiFi news, 2014

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Dynamic - energetic - alive



REVIEW



Delving into orchestral music with Beethoven's 9th by the North German Radio Symphony conducted by Günter Wand, I experience the symphony's beautiful, complex inner movements and quick pace changes, which prove a great test for the nova. Where lesser-quality amplifiers struggle to keep instrument separation, the nova performs exceedingly well. Even under the intensity of the Magnepan's 2-ohm load drops and volume levels crossing 100 dB, the amp stays in control. It revels in being driven hard; this isn't an integrated for those who enjoy listening to music at whisper levels.

Nuts and Bolts

The nova continues Peachtree's distinctive and curvaceous design. The various stained-wood cases have been replaced by black lacquer, and the front panel is brushed aluminum, with a similar gray color to that of Kyocera equipment from the 1980s.

The nova's front panel is clean, though I do wish the selector buttons were identified with a slightly larger font, as the contrast on the panel is minimal. The power button is located in the lower left, with the five source buttons—USB, coax, opt 1, opt 2, and analog—encircled by blue LEDs. Following the Peachtree tradition, a blue LED-lit oval window displays the nova's Russian-made 6N1P tube. A large, smoothly rotating volume knob completes the front panel. *(continued)*



The back panel is nearly as clean: wired remote and source inputs, jacks for pre-out and RCA, right and left speaker binding posts, power cord receptacle, and master power switch. The amp is 14.8 inches wide, 5.2 inches tall, and 11.5 inches deep, and it weighs just over 19 pounds.

The matching anodized-aluminum front remote is also straightforward, with two groupings of buttons; the upper for controlling volume and tube buffer and selecting the USB input, and the lower for selecting the other four inputs.

As I go through my various test tracks, the toms on the drum kit really stand out. The nova makes the various hits pop with intensity. Whether reproducing the attacks of the Who's wild man Keith Moon or the magic of Buddy Rich, the exact placement of the drumsticks on the toms is distinct and easily discernable.

Chalk that up to the class-A preamp section and the 220/350 watts per channel (into 8 and 4 ohms, respectively) of the class-D power section. The clarity between the left and right hits on Dan Fogelberg's "Higher Ground" has me replaying the track several times over.

Until recently, praising class-D power amplifiers came with a warning that proper speaker matching is crucial. Just like Peachtree's nova125, the nova220SE needs no such disclaimer. With speakers from Harbeth, Totem, ACI, Golden Ear, and Magnepan, this integrated amplifier shows no weaknesses—though the combination with the Golden Ear Triton Sevens is a particularly good match, both sonically and financially. Just one listen to "Still... You Turn Me On" by Emerson, Lake and Palmer convinces me to keep the amp-speaker combo together for a week. *(continued)*

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A Lot to Love

To the team at Peachtree, the word *integrated* means including a built-in DAC that utilizes the asynchronous ESS Sabre Hyperstream 9022 chip, USB and coax inputs that can handle resolutions ranging from 16 bits/44 kHz all the way to 24/192, and two optical inputs (which are limited to 24/92). Using my MacBook running iTunes/Pure Music and a Wadia i170 iPod dock, I'm able to test all the configurations. The DAC section is a fine performer—definitely not a gimmick. I find it bettering the Audioengine D2 DAC by pulling out greater inner detail, which is especially noticeable in the guitar and piano of William Ackerman's "Climbing in Geometry." On the same song through my reference Simaudio 300D DAC, the edges of the highest frequencies come out a hair shriller than through the nova, and the acoustic guitar is a bit drier—but overall the nova puts forth an impressive effort.

Since my wife works from home, I spend a great deal of time using the nova's headphone output, which offers 1,170 mW into 32 ohms and really brings a pair of Sennheiser HD800s to life. Bonnie Raitt's mellow masterpiece "Nick of Time" holds the same acoustic properties as when running through speakers, signaling that the headphone section wasn't an afterthought but a well-thought-out part of the nova220SE. For those readers who wonder if the headphone output gets the tube buffer treatment, the answer is yes and it offers the same tubey goodness as the amplifier does.



When listening to the nova through speakers, I keep the tube buffer engaged for the most part, as I'm a fan of the harmonic pleasure that vacuum tubes provide. But at times it's hard to tell when the 6N1P tube is in the auditory loop, which I attribute to the superb class-A preamplifier section. Consider the tube buffer as a tone control for the 21st century.

When nothing but heavy metal will suffice, the nova, like a Detroit muscle car, is ready to go balls to the walls at anytime. "I Can't Quit You Baby" from Led Zeppelin's *BBC Sessions* alternates between stop-light blues and accelerating guitar riffs. The sheer grunt to put the listener back in his or her seat is the nova220SE's specialty. Get comfortable and enjoy the sonic ride.

Obvious differences between the \$1,999 nova220SE and my reference \$8,000 Simaudio Moon i-7 integrated are subtle but prevalent. The little things are missing from the nova's resolution. For example, the xylophone notes at the beginning of Steely Dan's classic "Aja" don't take on the three-dimensionality that I'm used to hearing. Steve Martin's exceptional banjo picking through the nova occasionally sounds a bit flat when measured against the i-7. But beyond that, the nova is a very worthy competitor.

For the digital junkie, the nova's myriad inputs enable CD playback, mass storage, and streaming from multiple sources without swapping wires—just push a button and jump from a hard drive to AirPlay or Sonos. Vinyl lovers only need to plug their favorite phono preamp into the nova's auxiliary input to enjoy their favorite records. For those with budgetary concerns, the low energy usage of the nova's class-D power section and its versatile preamp section, along with Peachtree's two-year warranty, make it a wallet-friendly investment. *(continued)*

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REVIEW

nova220SE
Integrated Amplifier
MSRP: \$1,999

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PERIPHERALS

Amplifiers

SimAudio Moon i7 integrated amplifier, Vista Audio i35 integrated tube amplifier, Virtue Audio Sensation M451 Tripath/hybrid integrated amplifier

Phonostage

Simaudio Moon LP5.3

Sources

Rega RP1 turntable with Ortofon Super OM40 cartridge; MacBook iTunes/ PureMusic, Wadia i170 w/ iPod 160 Classic

Digital Processor

SimAudio Moon 300D

Speakers

ACI Emerald XL, Harbeth Compact 7ES3, Golden Ear Triton Seven, Magnepan 1.6 with Skiing Ninja crossovers, Totem Acoustic Rainmakers

Cables

Shunyata Venom 3 power cord, AudioArt IC-3 interconnects, AudioArt SC-5 speaker cables



Final Tally

As smitten as I was with the nova125 last year, I'm totally impressed with the nova220SE. With nearly twice the power and an improved preamp design trickled down from Peachtree's top-of-the-line X-1 integrated, it makes terrific music with every speaker combo I have on hand. Right now, if I were forced to change integrated amplifiers, the nova220SE would be my choice. The sheer value of its capabilities as an integrated amp, DAC, and headphone amplifier makes the nova220SE a no-brainer. The only thing keeping it from being perfect is its lack of a built-in phono preamp. Perhaps Peachtree will incorporate one into the next iteration. ●

Roksan Kandy K2 BT Integrated Amplifier

By Andre Marc

British hi-fi buffs know Roksan Audio as a company that offers extraordinary value and sonics that challenge far pricier competitors. The company, located just northwest of London, takes a complete-system approach, with analog and digital sources, amplification, speakers, cables, and power supplies among its product lineup—and it is currently making a push into the North American market.

Roksan has several lines that cater to different needs: The Oxygene line strips away everything to the basics, with modern design and functionality; the Kandy line offers higher performance; and the Caspian line is the top of the hill. All Roksan products have a simple but appealing aesthetic and are known for high reliability.

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REVIEW



The subject of this review—and the first Roksan component that has been in my system—is the Kandy K2 BT integrated amplifier, which retails for \$1,900. The K2 BT is one of the more feature-rich integrated amplifiers that we have reviewed, equipped with a phonostage, five line-level inputs, a tape loop, remote control, and Bluetooth connectivity—the latter of which is what the *BT* designation represents. (The standard, non-Bluetooth K2 retails for \$1,700.) The unit's power output is 120 watts per channel into 8 ohms.

Roksan says it uses the highest-grade parts available and that the K2's output stage is based on that employed in the Caspian series. The company pays special attention to circuit layout and especially power supply, with the sonics coming first. The result is a product that makes for a sound investment, which has helped build Roksan's reputation since its founding in 1985.

The Basics

The casework on the K2 BT, while not extravagant, is solid, nicely put together, and commensurate with the price point. In terms of appearance, the unit is available with either a black case and silver faceplate or the reverse.

Installing the K2 is straightforward, with connections made and sound emanating from speakers within minutes of unpacking. The amp easily drives a pair of Gallo A'Diva Se satellite speakers with a Gallo TR-3D subwoofer, and it makes light work of the Harbeth Compact 7ES-3s sans sub. (See end of article for additional full list of peripherals.)

The review sample has decent mileage on it, so only a few days are needed to get it up to optimal performance—and it does not take long for the K2's personality to shine. It flows music to the speakers in a velvety smooth, seductive, and effortless manner, even with the relatively inefficient Harbeths. *(continued)*

The amplifier never breaks a sweat, delivering gorgeous, dare I say, tube-like tone and imaging that is wide, deep, and always involving.

Down to Business

Nick Cave's 2013 recording *Push the Sky Away* is transportative through the K2. The open, spacious mix and Cave's superbly recorded voice are perfect for the amp to show off its way with nuance, instrumental timbres, and timing. Cave always imparts some sort of drama and tension in his songs, and on this collection he does so with more subtlety than usual. Here, the K2 lets the tension build and ebb so as to spotlight the performance, with all things "hi-fi" taking a back seat. This is truly a music lover's amplifier.

On a lighter note, streaming a variety of recordings by lounge-pop revivalists Pink Martini is great fun, with the K2 keeping pace with the free spirit of the band's whimsical, intoxicating sound. Such albums as *Sympathique*, *Hang On Little Tomato*, *Splendor in the Grass*, and *Get Happy* are a gas—and the Kandy is up to the task. Whether cycling through jazzy standards, French lullabies, tangos, Chinese folk songs, or Turkish pop, this amp keeps the party going, never missing a beat.

With higher-resolution digital files, the K2 pays big dividends. The 96-kHz download of Chicago's album *II* is excellent, and the Kandy brings back the summer of 1972, showcasing the quality of the legendary band's interplay and songwriting. It makes tracks like "Poem for the People" and "In the Country" sound vibrant and fresh. (continued)



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The K2 not only unravels complex music but also lays out simple pleasures, like Chuck Berry's monumental 1950s *Chess* recordings, with ease. Trying to resist tracks like "Little Queenie" or "Back In The U.S.A." proves futile, as the Roksan takes these mono recordings and renders them with natural authority; and the pacing is sublime. I am continually reminded that this amplifier effortlessly gets out of the way, always drawing attention to the music and not to itself.

The K2 clearly has a wonderful way with digital sources, regardless of

program material or sampling rate. I put it through its paces further with a little analog via some pre-recorded, commercially released 7.5-ips reel tapes played back on my vintage Sony deck. The results are stunning, with the Kandy providing a clean, quiet background and excellent detail retrieval. It ups the ante on the musical involvement that tape lovers find so intoxicating.

Final Score

Ergonomically, the K2 is a dream. It offers plenty of volume steps, even

with the remote, which can be a sticking point on amplifiers in the \$2,000 price range. The front panel is easy to navigate and the amp is dead quiet, running cool as a cucumber. All this adds up to maximum enjoyment and flexibility.

After spending an extended period of time with the K2, listening to it with a wide variety of music and gear, I become curious about a complete Roksan system. Perhaps we'll see a full-system review in the future.

The only area where I find that

the K2 comes up short is its Bluetooth capability. The sound quality is excellent, but the connection in my system proves a bit unreliable with both an iPad Air and iPhone 5. When the Bluetooth works, it is fun as heck, but it's annoying when the connection is marginal. (Our publisher doesn't experience issues with the Bluetooth. See *Further Listening*.)

Roksan has rightly earned a reputation across the pond as a music-lover's manufacturer. The K2 BT is a special component.

Paired with multiple sets of speakers, sources, and cables, it never disappoints sonically. Aside from the shaky Bluetooth connection I experienced, there is nothing to quibble about. You get the complete package here, including good looks. At just under \$2,000, this is an easy recommendation for those who want a full-function integrated amp that works equally well with both analog and digital sources. The Roksan Kandy K2 BT is clearly a benchmark for its price point.

Further Listening

By Jeff Dorgay

Andre sums up the essence of the Kandy K2 BT perfectly—though, lacking a turntable, he wasn't able to comment on the phono section, which I find to be excellent, especially for a \$1,900 integrated. As vinyl continues to enthrall new users, and with so many people dipping their toes in the water, a high-performance phonostage is a wonderful addition to an integrated amp, allowing maximum system flexibility.

Most people purchasing an amplifier and speakers at this level will probably be using a turntable in the \$100-to-\$1,000 range, and they will not be disappointed. The Kandy's phonostage is easily on par with any outboard phonostage we've auditioned costing \$300 to \$500, so for price matching most of my listening is with the \$95 Shure M97 cartridge and the \$295 Rega Elys 2—both MM designs. Just to push the envelope, I use the \$700 Ortofon 2M Black and have good results. This is definitely an integrated amp that an analog owner can grow with.

Where most budget solid-state phonostages are flat, two-dimensional, and relatively sterile, the Kandy's phono section performs admirably, giving up more height and depth than is usually associated with a relatively inexpensive onboard unit. Playing the MoFi remaster of Los Lobos' *Kiko*, the Roksan renders this rock classic with an extra-large sonic image, especially with the Ortofon 2M Black. Brian Eno's *Small Craft on a Milk Sea* proves highly involving, with the subtle environmental textures not fading too far into black.

Interestingly, I had zero issues with the Bluetooth receiver in the Kandy, so those who may be using it in an area with a lot of wireless connectivity in the vicinity should consider a test drive to see if this part of the gear is right for you. I can see where this would be a deal-breaker if it doesn't work properly in your environment.

I can easily proclaim that the Kandy is an incredible bargain for under \$2,000, but it's even a better deal when you take the phonostage into account. Anyone looking for a great system anchor should give this baby a test drive. We are happy to award the Roksan Kandy K2 BT one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2014. ●



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