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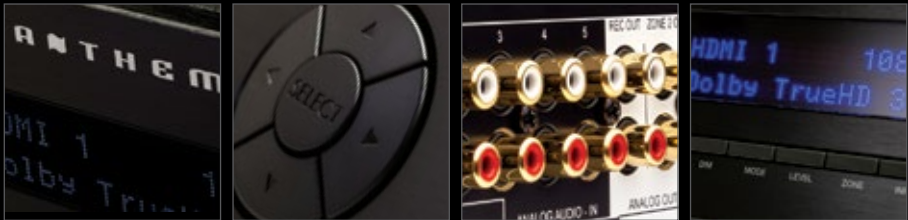
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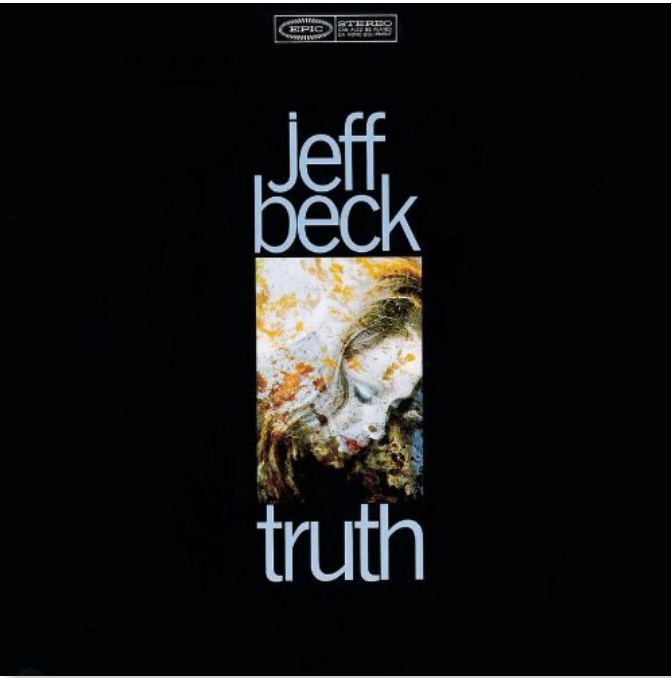


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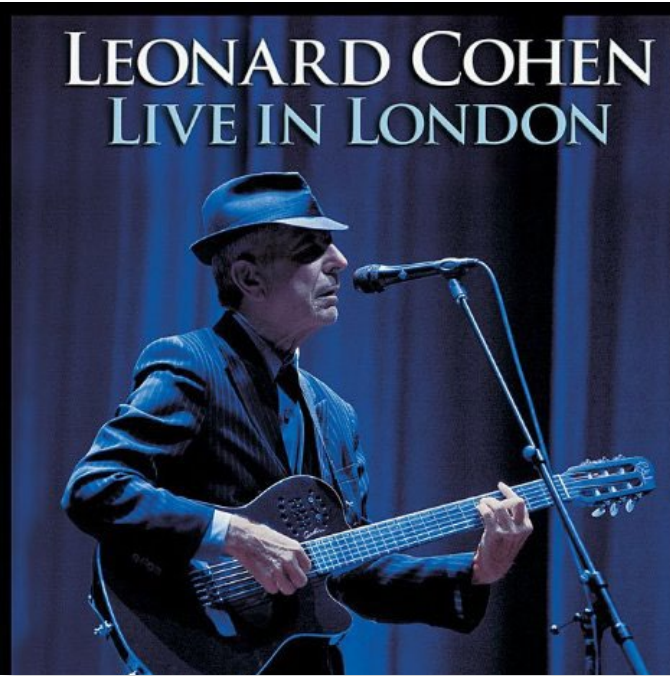
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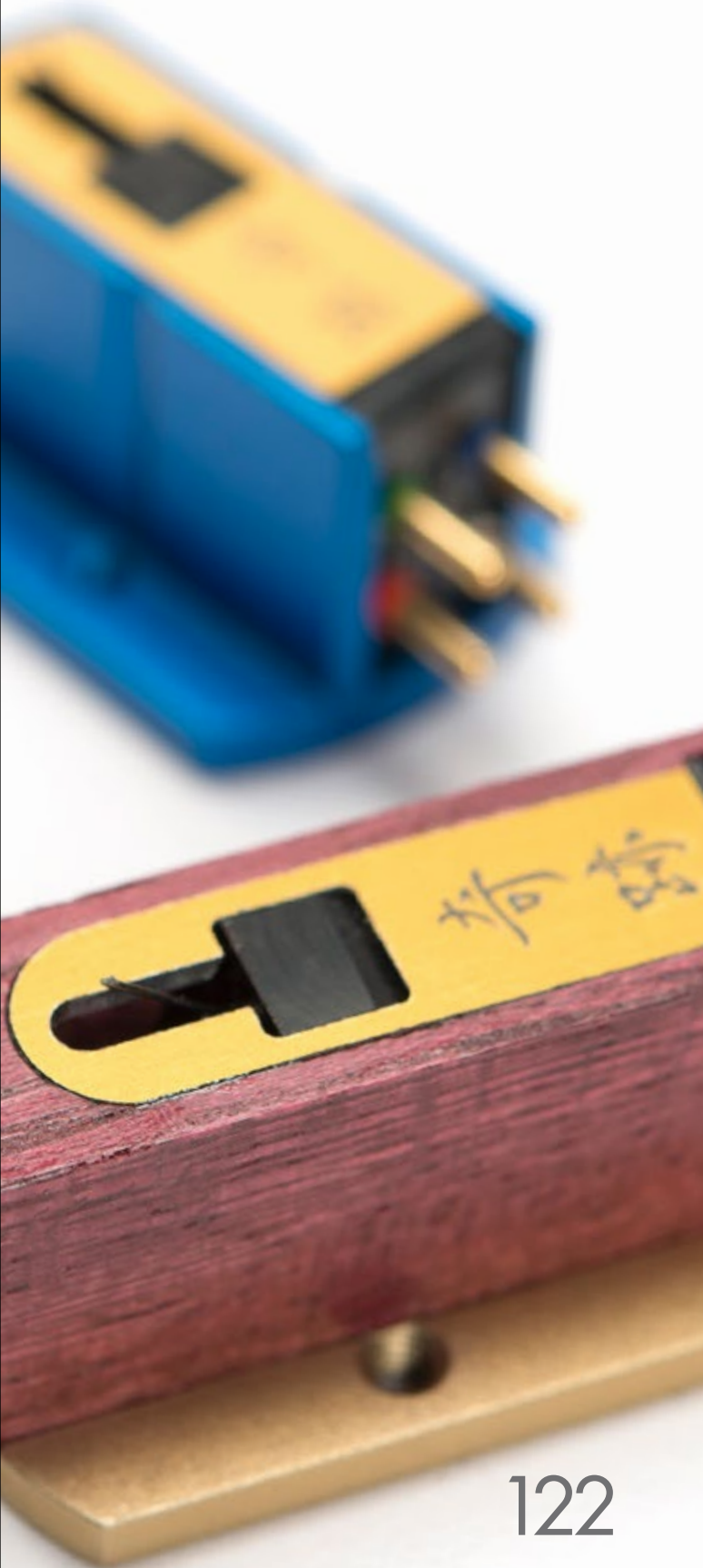
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PUBLISHER'S LETTER

A

fter nine years, the temptation to produce a “Best of” issue is high, but the B word tends to box you in a corner. It’s always highly charged and highly opinionated to say the least, but on one level, it does our audience a major disservice. If my favorite color is green and yours is red, what’s the best color? Green will still be my favorite and red will still be yours. Like the north and south going Zax, we will never see eye to eye on this one, yet red and green both remain excellent colors to their respective fans. As much fun as it is to act important and proclaim what the best truly is, I’m not ready to dedicate a whole issue to whatever we might think “the best” is. You’ll only find that out if you feed me a *lot* of expensive whisky. (Macallans 60 will do nicely.)

As usual, we like to take a different approach here at *TONEAudio*, so what we’ve put together is a number of lists of our favorites. Most of the staff has chimed in on their favorites in various areas, at a wide range of price points. Are these the best audio components? Who knows. For some of you they may be, but when you spend a lot of time with a wide range of gear, as we’ve had the privilege, it’s tough to not have a few favorites.

So let us know what you think. Send us a note on our Facebook page, we’ll have our fireproof undies on!

On a sadder note, the man that told me to “never use the B word” has passed away. Harry Pearson, the founder of *The Absolute Sound*, was an intriguing and controversial man. Loved by many and hated by some, few had a middle of the road perspective on a person who was



highly influential in shaping the world of high-end audio. Though he sold his interest in TAS around the turn of the century, he remained on as a contributor until 2012, but his passionate editors letters, where he remarked in years earlier that “he had the best job in the world,” were long gone. While I think Hugh Hefner and Michael Schumacher had better jobs, I truly share Pearson’s thought that this gig is truly an enjoyable one.

Though many (Pearson himself, included) felt that the high end would not have existed without him, he did play a major role in getting us to listen to our systems in a more subjective way, and in the process coined much of the vocabulary we all use to define these aspects of audio performance.

Other than a few sorted phone calls with HP when *TONE* was in it’s infancy, and the occasional brush with him at CES and RMAF, I don’t have any major Harry stories to share, other than that he was always kind to me and encouraging about *TONE*.

Bugs Bunny once said that “monsters lead interesting lives,” and regardless of your take on Pearson, he was an interesting monster. He will be missed.



A few of Liza Donnelly's favorite things.

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TONE FAVORITES

BOB GENDRON'S FAVORITE LIVE ROCK ALBUMS OF THE LAST 25 YEARS

Everybody loves lists of favorite albums. But lists with context—selections justified by explanations—hold considerable more weight than simply those that index the names of a few records and assign them random numbers according to personal preference. However commonplace, picking ten favorite albums presents a daunting task to avid music lovers, not only because there are literally thousands of records from which to choose, but also because the scope and timeline are impossibly broad.

How, then, to limit choices and make the endeavor more meaningful? Assign strict parameters that restrict the era and type of album and/or genre, and, for good measure, operate outside of convention. For instance: Classic rock is always extremely well represented (actually, over-represented) in list-making exercises. Not that anybody needs to read more about masterworks from the Beatles, Rolling Stones, Jimi Hendrix, or Led Zeppelin.

By contrast, despite yielding hundreds of worthy titles, the past 25 years primarily remain underserved or wholly ignored.

Still, when one is limited to just ten albums, a quarter-century seems like an eon. That's why other restrictions must enter to the equation, including criteria that add fresh perspective to long-debated topics such as "Best/Favorite Live Rock Albums of All Time." Sure, almost everyone knows about The Who's *Live at Leeds*, Kiss' *Alive!*, Thin Lizzy's *Live and Dangerous*, and other usual suspects. But what about concert records released from 1990 to the present? It's not that artists haven't released any great live albums during this period, but rather matters of lazy critics refusing to insert them into the discussion and flawed traditional thinking suggesting evergreens such as *Get Yer Ya-Ya's Out* can never be usurped because, well, they are classic, and therefore untouchable.

The following live rock albums issued during the past 25 years may lack the familiarity and cache of many of their predecessors, yet every one contains memorable performances, rewarding surprises, and historic merit that increase in stature the more they are played. Turn 'em up.



Ministry *In Case You Didn't Feel Like Showing Up (Live)*

No record—not even Nine Inch Nails' slow-growing breakthrough debut, *Pretty Hate Machine*, issued the same year—did more to put industrial music on the commercial map at the time than Ministry's 1989 studio grenade *A Mind Is a Terrible Thing to Taste*, which beat all odds by entering the *Billboard* Top 200 despite receiving virtually no airplay. While a cultural sea change would rapidly occur two years after its release, and Ministry itself would later secure a prominent spot on Lollapalooza, the rock/pop environment in which Ministry toured the record was one dominated by plastic pop, hair metal, and conservative politics. In other words, conditions ideal for sonic brutality and lyrical savagery, the likes of which few outside the underground and college scenes had ever witnessed.

In Case You Didn't Feel Like Showing Up (Live) progresses at such a breathless clip, it doesn't feel like it should last more than its 39:47 running time. Fewer albums' content is truer to the record cover art. Recorded in February 1990 at the Holiday Star Theatre in Merrillville, Indiana, just outside the group's home base of Chicago, and released in September, the explosive record oozes hostility, tension, and intensity. A collision of goth, dance, metal, and electronic disciplines filtered through a cracked lens coated in concussive distortion and amphetamine highs, the set culminates with one of the most antagonistic and profane performances caught on record, as bandleader Al Jourgensen launches a tirade against everything under the sun and, in typical Ministry fashion, smiles at the lunacy of it all.



Keith Richards

Live at the Hollywood Palladium

Recorded in 1988 during the *Talk Is Cheap* tour, and released in December 1991, this 13-track set stands as one of the most convincing arguments that Keith Richards should've left the Rolling Stones after *Dirty Work* to log at least a decade as a solo act with his ornery backing band, the X-pensive Winos. The case for Richards' uninterrupted independence becomes even stronger when this dynamite record is measured against the Stones' subsequent offerings during the period, namely 1989's *Steel Wheels* and 1994's *Voodoo Lounge*. While we'll never know what might've happened had Keef stepped out, *Live at the Hollywood Palladium* at least allows fans to imagine. (Richards explains his bond with the X-pensive Winos in great detail in his excellent biography, *Life*.)

Swaggering with fun, spontaneity, and first-rate playing, it's spiked with roll-up-the-sleeves looseness and shot-and-a-beer rawness. Richards is clearly in fine spirits, as are his colleagues, particularly drummer Steve Jordan, whose snare hits sound like a whip snapping against wet pavement. The songs largely draw from Richards' solo work—the one-two punch of “Take It So Hard” and “How I Wish” rival anything the guitarist's main group has done in the last three decades—and include a few Stones covers, not the least of which is Richards' signature “Happy,” here given extended treatment by a man that knows a thing or three about knotty riffs.

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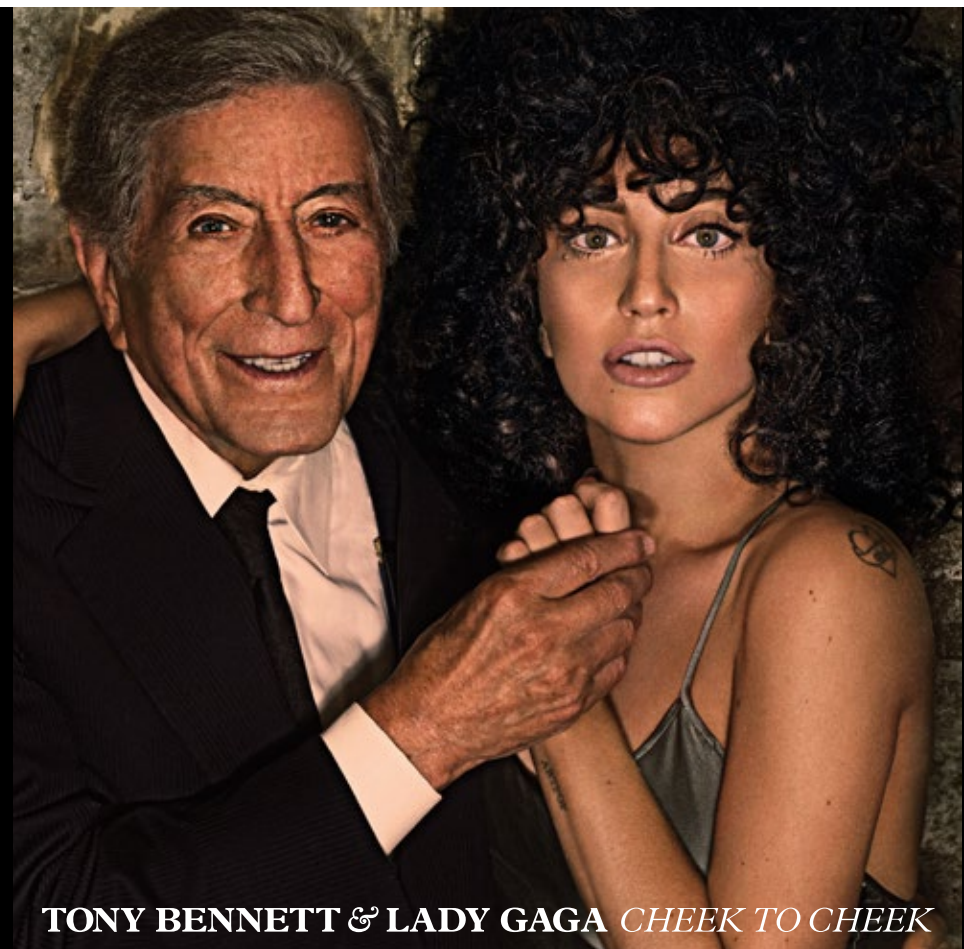
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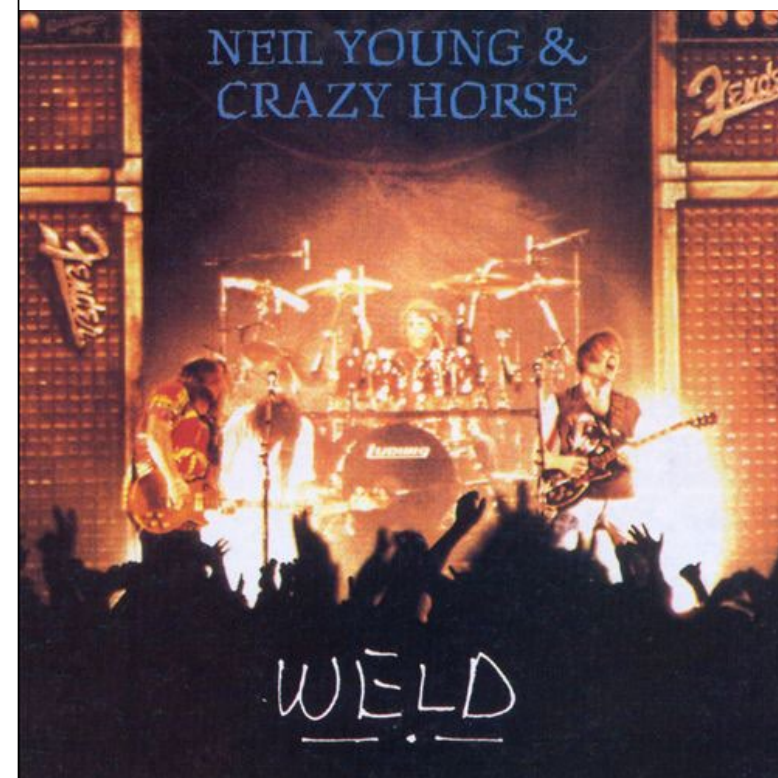
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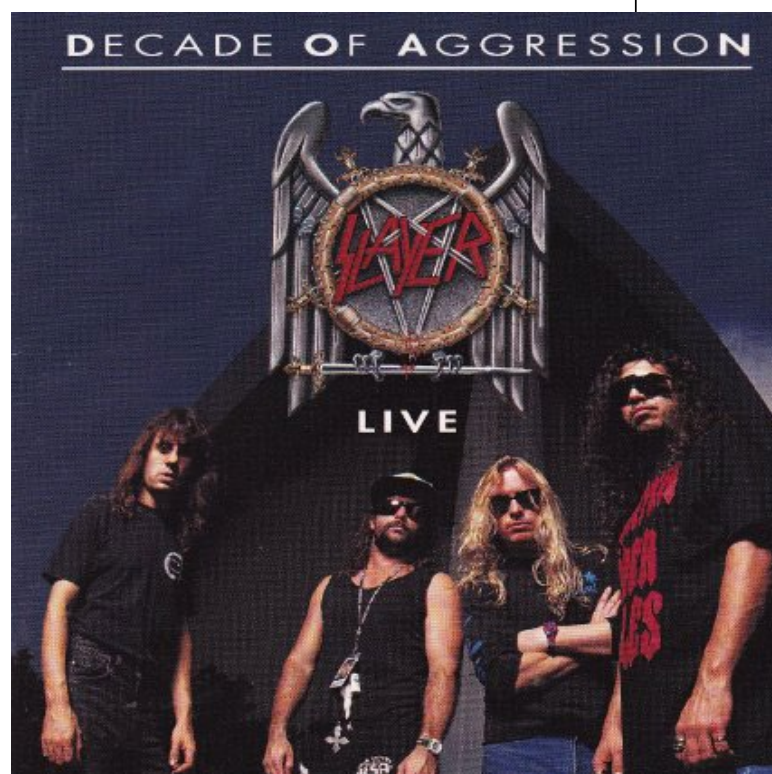
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Neil Young *Weld*

Staples of the 1970s, and indicative of why the then-relevant *Rolling Stone* crowned him Artist of the Decade, Neil Young's *Live Rust* and *Rust Never Sleeps* regularly materialize on most greatest live albums lists. Young has since considerably added to his live catalog, unearthing such ear-bending archival releases as *Live at the Fillmore East* (1970), *Live at the Cellar Door* (1970), and *Live at Massey Hall* (1971). The cantankerous Canadian native also hasn't been shy about documenting later tours on disc, be it *Year of the Horse* (1997) or scattered *Road Rock Vol. 1* (2000). None, however, tower above the scorching *Weld*, an all-electric double album released in conjunction with the instrumental and experimental *Arc*.

Recorded on Young and Crazy Horse's *Ragged Glory* tour from February through April 1991, and mainly during the Gulf War, an event that doubtlessly fueled the headliner's anger and purpose, the feedback-crackling *Weld* serves as a blistering snapshot of the long-running, on-again-off-again band at its peak. At once serious and humorous, rehearsed and improvised, the 16-song effort finds Young and fellow guitarist Frank "Poncho" Sampedro stretching out on tweeter-blowing solos and pushing then-recent fare such as "Love to Burn" and "Love and Only Love" to their in-the-red-distortion limits. Eleven tracks eclipse the six-minute mark, and while "Welfare Mothers," "Cinnamon Girl," and "Like a Hurricane" also appear on Young's better-known live records, they sound wilder, hungrier, and far more ferocious here. Add in Young's searing protest rendition of Bob Dylan's "Blowin' In the Wind," complete with air-raid sirens and gunshots, and *Weld* looms as his pinnacle live statement.





Slayer *Live: Decade of Aggression*

Common sense holds that 1991 will always be better recognized as the Year Punk Broke. (The designation refers to a smart documentary from filmmaker Dave Markey, who followed the likes of Sonic Youth, Dinosaur Jr., and Nirvana around on the road just as “alternative” music entered the popular parlance.) Yet the year also yielded one of the most memorable metal package tours ever assembled in the United States. Joined by Megadeth, Anthrax, and Alice In Chains, and picking up where it left off the previous fall in Europe with a similar bill, Slayer reached its widest audience to date while simultaneously supporting its commanding *Seasons In the Abyss* album and celebrating its tenth anniversary together.

Live: Decade of Aggression doesn't completely capture what exactly what it was like to be present at one of the quartet's exhilarating shows that spring—really, no album could—yet it comes close enough, placing listeners in harm's way of a merciless, violent, cohesive, and melodic attack that no thrash band has ever equaled. The colossal feats singer/bassist Tom Araya, guitarist Kerry King, now-deceased guitarist Jeff Hanneman, and drummer Dave Lombardo—who departed the group after the tour's completion, only to return in 2006 before leaving again in 2013—achieved onstage in terms of uncompromising power, frenetic velocity, lockstep virtuosity, jazz-like precision, limits-pushing extremity, and rhythmic architecture come across sans overdubs or mixing-board tricks. The first disc focuses on songs Slayer played on a nightly basis (largely from the unholy trinity of records released between 1986 and 1990) while the second spans selections rotated in and out of setlists. Listen, and understand why Slayer once truly was the most dangerous band in the world.

Big Black *Pigpile*

Steve Albini's perceptive, savvy, and unflinchingly frank liner notes personify the harsh attitude, polarizing milieu, and sly humor abundant on *Pigpile*. A sampling of the then-Big Black guitarist/vocalist and now-famous recording engineer's observations on his group's inexorable lyrics: “Anybody who thinks we overstepped the playground perimeter of lyrical decency (or that the public has any right to demand ‘social responsibility’ from a goddamn punk rock band) is a pure natural dolt, and should step forward and put his tongue up my ass. What we sing about is none of your business anyway.” Albini's prose on the band's history, approach, and demise is equally witty and relevant. Similarly, his commentary on each of the record's dozen tracks doubles as a lesson in wry satire.

The sensory-overloading experience that is 1992's *Pigpile*—recorded in London on Big Black's final tour in the summer of 1987, before which the trio had already announced its break up—deserves nothing less. While descriptions such as “ahead of its time” and “innovative” have largely been sapped of meaning due to ubiquitous and undeserved usage, they apply to every note here. Albini's guitar isn't so much a guitar in the traditional sense as it is a shock-wave-inducing bone saw or shrapnel-dicing razor blade, designed to shred and slice the coarsest and densest alloy. Pulverizing Roland drum-machine beats complement the drill-press grind, skull-smashing harshness, decibel-heavy blare, and industrial menace. Big Black's abrasive, unsettling music would alone be enough to satiate even the most aggressive appetites. Yet when Albini's acerbic barks, bloodcurdling yelps, and detached musings enter the fray and report on all manner of taboo themes (rape, molestation, arson, racism, murder) with sinister casualness, *Pigpile* morphs into a disturbing, provocative, intelligent assault with few peers in the art world.



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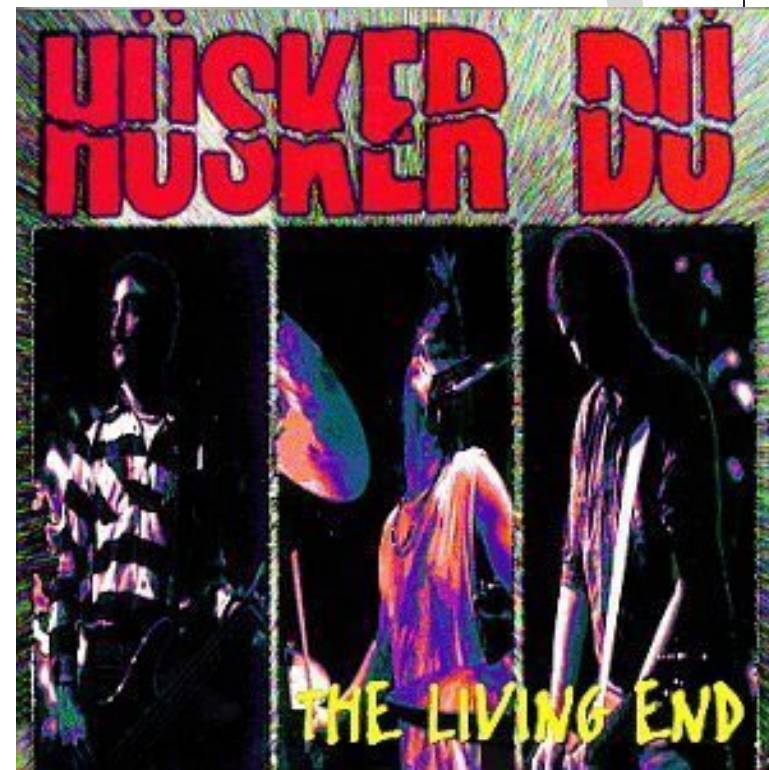


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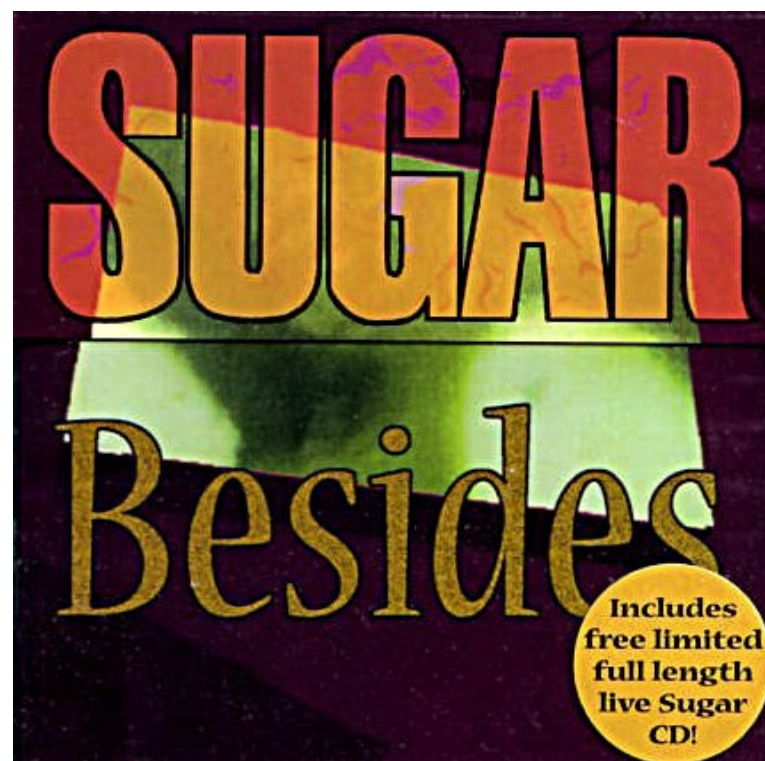


Husker Du *The Living End*

In the liner notes to this live release, Husker Du guitarist/vocalist Bob Mould sums up his band's performances by saying, "The music was so strong, everybody got caught up in it. It was easy to say, 'Fuck all this other shit' for an hour." Humorously, Mould later told another outlet he's never even heard *The Living End*, which Warner Bros. issued out of the blue in October 1994, nearly 17 years after the inimitable trio broke up. Longtime fans won't be surprised by Mould's admission. Like Morrissey, he's nearly alone in standing on the sidelines as virtually every act big, medium, and small has elected to mend old wounds and reunite. Husker Du fans know that no such reconciliation among the members is in the offing. Which makes the existence of *The Living End*, despite a few small quibbles about production, all the more valuable.

Assembled from a variety of dates on the collective's final tour in fall 1987, this 24-track set comes on like a fleet of 747s roaring down a runway and barely avoiding collision with everything in their path. Mould's log-splitting sheets-of-sound guitars cut, saw, and trample, while drummer/vocalist Grant Hart matches him pound for pound, the two nemeses competing with each other as they rip hardcore songs such as "Divide and Conquer" and "Data Control" apart limb by limb, and in land-speed-record times. Bursting with passion, sweat, and bitterness, *The Living End* isn't just noisy. Husker Du's visionary punk wraps its proverbial arms around catchy pop throughout the disc, whether on the rushing "Ain't No Water in the Well," giddy "Books About UFOs," or romantically tinged "Girl Who Lives on Heaven Hill." These invigorating readings, along with the relentlessly hammering "New Day Rising" and bare-naked introspection of "Hardly Getting Over It," make it almost impossible to believe this band would call it quits less than a month after most of these recordings were made.





Sugar *The Joke Is Always On Us, Sometimes—Live at First Avenue*

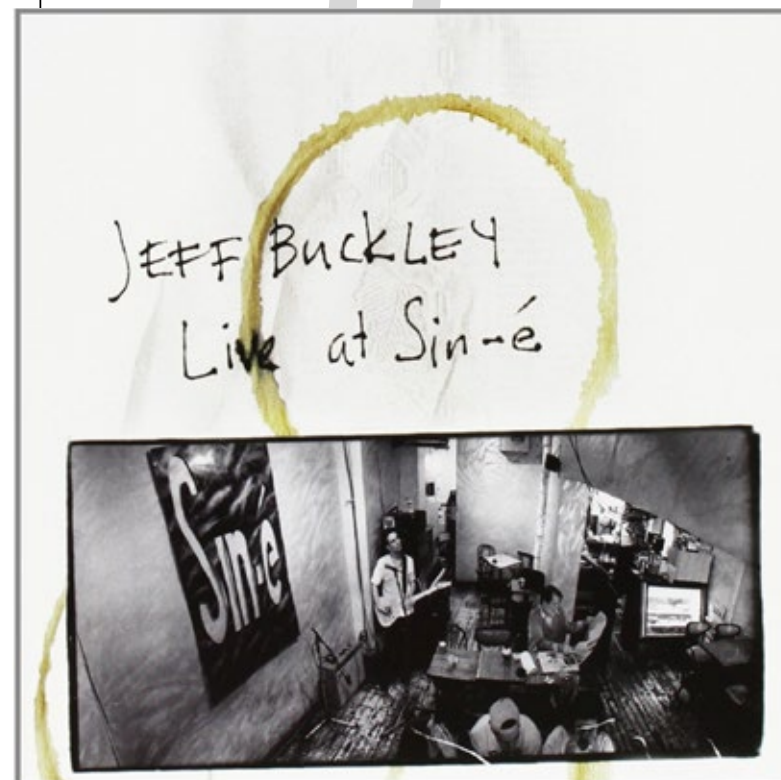
Technically, *The Joke Is Always On Us, Sometimes* was never conventionally released as an album. Included as a bonus disc in the initial run of 1995's odds-and-sods compilation *Besides*, the torrid set far outshined the main attraction and became a collector's item among Sugar devotees, particularly after it went out of print nearly a decade ago. Fortunately, Merge Records reissued the short-lived power trio's entire catalog in deluxe fashion and paired the concert set with Sugar's swan song, *File Under: Easy Listening*.

Recorded in Minneapolis in early November 1994—shortly before leader Bob Mould dissolved the ensemble that re-introduced the former Husker Du member to loud, buzzing rock n' roll in a group setting—*The Joke Is Always On Us, Sometimes* qualifies as the most desirable “secret” albeit officially sanctioned live record of the modern era. This is the sound of a band straining at its leash, constantly threatening to break free of any tether, and seething with primal emotion. Mould's vocals erupt with uncontainable energy. Guitars sting, ring, rattle, jangle, and chime. Swirling melodies soar almost to the point of exhaustion. Assertive harmonies work in tandem with crunchy feedback and thunderous beats. While Sugar's studio fare remains a nearly infallible blueprint for fusing sweet bubblegum pop, aggressive power pop, and controlled chaos, such possibilities are further heightened on this night in Mould's adopted hometown. The music is supercharged, tightened, and afforded a visceral edge that cuts especially deep on songs about frustrations, cycles, and traumas associated with distressing relationships and their outcomes. No wonder why Mould's wrenching, painful, from-the-gut screams on a combustible reading of “The Slim” still leave emotional bruises two decades later.

Jeff Buckley *Live at Sin-é* (Legacy Edition)

Music-industry veteran and early Jeff Buckley admirer Mitchell Cohen aptly describes the departed singer's solo performances at New York's tiny Sin-é café in the early 1990s as “daredevil cabaret.” Buckley played the East Village spot on a weekly basis, and continued to do so even after he scored his deal with Columbia Records, testing out new material, turning cover songs inside-out, and chatting up crowds utterly transformed by what they witnessed. Indeed, Columbia actually introduced Buckley to the greater public by releasing the four-song *Live at Sin-é* EP in November 1993—preceding his now-legendary *Grace* debut by nearly a year.

Revamped and sizably expanded in 2003, *Live at Sin-é* (Legacy Edition) seems a gift dropped from the heavens by Buckley himself. Chronicling two afternoon shows recorded on July 19 and August 17, 1993, the set comprises 34 tracks and, most importantly, documents a remarkable singer-songwriter operating without a net. Channeling the spirits of the likes of Led Zeppelin, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, and Nina Simon, and delving into early versions of originals such as “Lover, You Should've Come Over” and “Last Goodbye,” an unencumbered and uninhibited Buckley seduces, transfixes, haunts, and charms all the while effortlessly toying with his vocal range and clean-reverb Fender Telecaster as if they were putty in a child's hands. Due to the intimate sonics, Buckley sounds as if he's standing before you, an angelic figure whose soulful timbre and astonishing falsetto teem with naturalism, purity, and uniqueness, and a human being doing it all simply for the love of music.



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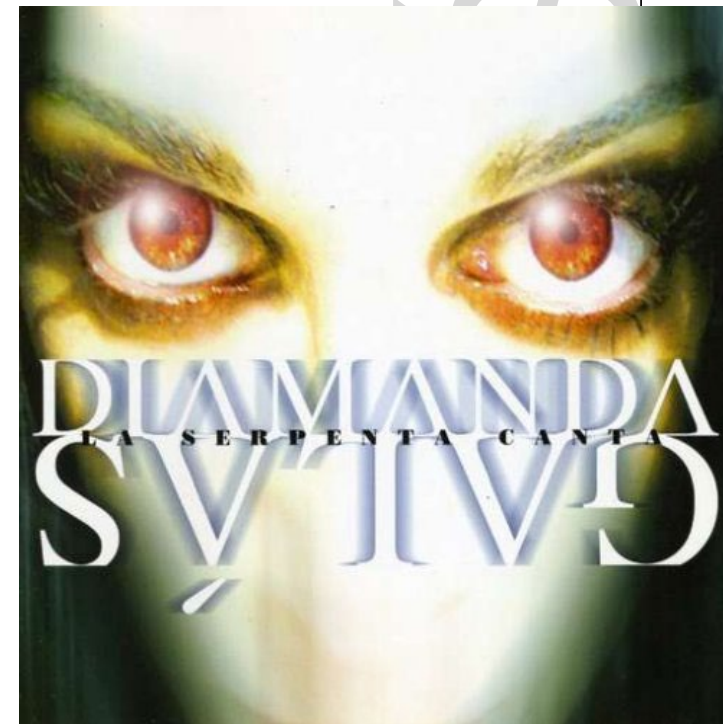
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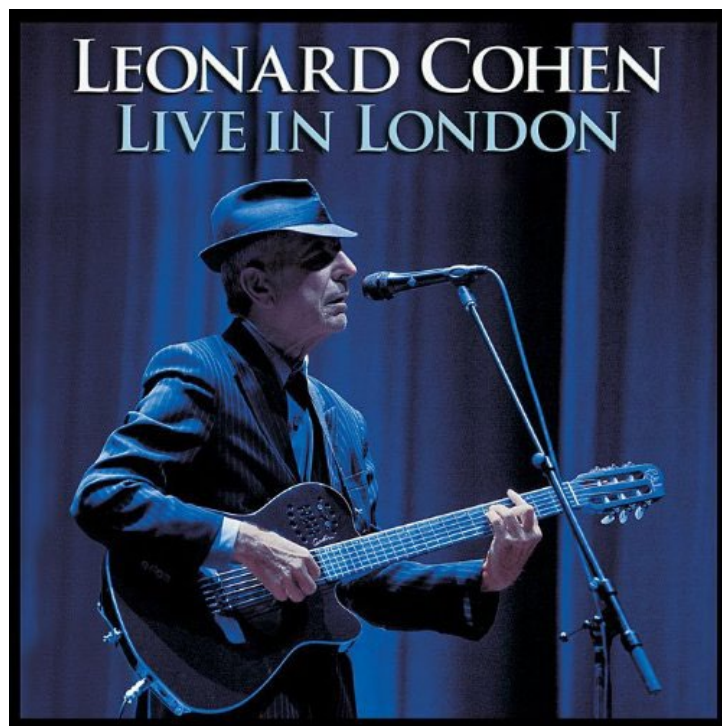


Diamanda Galás *La Serpenta Canta*

An inimitable performer whose confrontational methods and avant-garde approaches are nearly as famous as her disarming four-octave vocal range, Diamanda Galás was trained as a classical pianist and ultimately rebelled against a conservative upbringing. She drew notice after recording a trio of opera-inspired records in the mid-80s, chronicling her brother's battle with and eventual death from AIDS. Ever since, she ventured into uncharted realms of pop, gospel, opera, jazz, and blues that, until 2003's double album *La Serpenta Canta* (and its simultaneously released operatic companion, *Defixiones: Will and Testament, Orders From the Dead*) hadn't fully harnessed the spellbinding character of her arresting concerts.

A solo record of voice and piano, *La Serpenta Canta* arrives as a harrowing set of blues, spiritual, soul, and country covers that Galás' fiery voice makes shiver, shriek, and bedevil. Fiendish, mighty, terrifying, and delicate, her radical reinterpretations of traditional American song—Hank Williams' "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry," John Lee Hooker's "Burning Hell," and Dan Penn's "At the Dark End of the Street" are among the standards overhauled—probe the psychological depths of loss, death, and horror with stark, sacrificial vision. To wit: Galás' shattering rendition of the traditional "See That My Grave Is Kept Clean" witnesses her extreme cadence ricocheting as if the song's two white horses are being tied together and pulled in opposite directions until all that remains are shallow pools of blood. Not for the faint of heart.





Leonard Cohen *Live In London*

By now, the story of why Leonard Cohen returned to the road in 2008 after a 15-year absence is relatively familiar. Having spent the first part of the turn of the century living as a monk in a Buddhist monastery, Cohen learned that his former business manager pilfered nearly every dime of his savings. Then 73 years old, Cohen was basically forced back into touring in order to secure his future. From a ticket-buyer's perspective, an artist's need for cash isn't an appealing motivating factor. Cohen, too, already possessed a reputation for dourness, further stacking the odds against a singer that, at his age, couldn't possibly match the vigor of his youth, right? Wrong. Acclaimed by both fans and critics alike, Cohen's concerts became must-see events around the world, impacting not only onlookers, but the vocalist himself, who was obviously moved by the enthusiastic reactions and grateful receptions.

Recorded July 17, 2008, *Live In London* survives as a souvenir of the spectacular yearlong trek, a 26-song set infused with top-notch playing (Cohen's band is magnificent); droll humor (who know until then that Cohen was so funny); compassionate, poignant, somber, and eloquent singing (the headliner's voice is deep, and occasionally gnarled, but it's never sounded better); unmistakable warmth (what transpires doubles as a model of an ideal artist-crowd relationship); and one outstanding song after another (from the nuanced "Who By Fire" and graceful "Take This Waltz" to the menacing "Everybody Knows" and insistent "Dance Me to the End of Love," Cohen's songbook remains grossly underrated). Any conversations about the best live albums of all time that ignore *Live In London* are best ignored. ●



NIGHTHAWK
AROUND-THE-EAR SEMI-OPEN HEADPHONES



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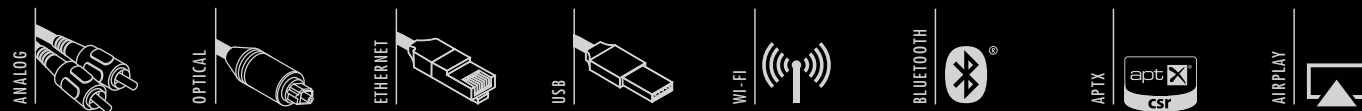


HiFiGuy 528's Faves

Though Mike Liang is no longer part of our staff, now that he's gone on to be media manager for Woo Audio, he's still the biggest headphone enthusiast we've ever met. Between his YouTube channel, where he's always unboxing new phones, and his own personal headphone collection of over 250 pairs, he's a maniac. And he's definitely heard enough cans to have a solid opinion on what he loves. Here's his list.



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FEATURE



AKG K3003

\$1,499

<http://us.akg.com/akg-k3003-overview-us.html>

The AKG K3003 comes in two flavors, with and without Apple iOS 3-button in-line remote. It is a reference-class 3-way design featuring one dynamic and two balanced-armature drivers in a tiny stainless steel housing. The interchangeable sound-tuning filters (bass boost, reference sound, high boost) make these IEMs incredibly flexible. The build quality is top notch and the sound is absolutely stunning. The K3003 reveals more musical detail than I've ever heard in a universal fit IEM. Pairing it with the Astell&Kern AK120II, I constantly ponder why I really home Hi-Fi system.



FEATURE

Sony MDR-CD900st

About \$200
www.sony.com

Sony is not a newcomer to the world of high-end headphones, yet often their coolest stuff never makes it here to the States. The MDR-CD900st is a perfect example. On the outside it looks a lot like the consumer-grade MDR-v6, but don't be fooled. The CD900st is a completely different animal in the sound department and more comfortable than its doppelgänger. Its sonic signature is relatively neutral. As the saying goes, "garbage in, garbage out" – so the better your source, the more

you will be impressed. In fact, this model is a studio monitor "officially" only offered in Japan through Sony Professional Division. But our Japanese friends on Amazon can get you a pair for around \$200 USD. The MDR-CD900st is a gold nugget in the sand – a gem that is worth digging up.

**B&O H6**

\$399
www.beoplay.com/products/beoplayh6

Bang & Olufsen practically invented the concept of audio gear featuring high style, so it's no surprise they've contributed heavily to a segment of personal audio often referred to as "fashion headphones." The BeoPlay H6 is no stranger to this world, bringing aluminum ear cups, a genuine leather headband and lambskin-covered memory foam earcups together in a sexy and luxurious design. But the most amazing part of the equation is that the magicians at B&O pulled it off for such a low price.

All would be lost if these were just a pretty pair of phones, but they've got the sound quality to make them much more than "just a pretty face." The H6 may have you rethink the fashion headphones segment.



FEATURE

FEATURE

Sennheiser HD700

\$799

www.sennheiser.com

Big soundstage, crystal-clear highs, tight bass, fast response, easy to drive, and extremely comfortable are all traits of the Sennheiser HD700. Many of the design cues and materials used in this second-to-the-top model are derived from the company's most technologically advanced headphone – HD800 (which will set you back almost twice as much). For better or worse, the HD700 is more forgiving than HD800, meaning the low-resolution music in your collection will be a lot more enjoyable than listening through the flagship HD800. If you are on the fence about getting into personal audio, give the HD700 a listen on a good quality DAC/amplifier and you'll see why the hobby is so strong.



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FEATURE

TONE FAVORITES

Beyerdynamic T51i

\$299

<http://europe.beyerdynamic.com/shop/t-51-p.html>

The new T51i is a closed-back headphone featuring memory foam pads for extended comfort, blocking out environmental noise while on the go. First and foremost, it's high quality; audiophile sound comes from the Tesla drivers that are derived from its much-pricier sibling – T5p. The "i" signifies Apple "made for iPod/iPhone/iPad," while MFI certification means you can control your iDevice and take phone calls right from the 3-button in-line remote. At \$299, the Beyerdynamic T51i has Hi-Fi sound without the Hi-Fi price.



MrSpeakers Alpha Dog

\$599

<https://mrspeakers.com/product/alpha-dog-headphone/>

Dan Clark, AKA MrSpeakers, modifies the modest \$129 Fostex T50RP to a headphone rivaling some of the best headphones on the market – at only \$599. One of Dan's modifications is replacing the ear cups with a 3-D printed housing. MrSpeakers Alpha Dog is the world's first 3-D printed headphone. Dan also swaps the stock ear pads for custom lambskin pads that are extra thick and pillow-like comfy. In fact, the only thing left from the original Fostex are the heavily modified planar magnetic drivers and the headband that holds the headphone together. Before you spend \$1K or more on a headphone, you need to give the Alpha Dog a listen first. Thank me later by taking me out to dinner with the money you saved.

RHA T10i

\$199

www.rha-audio.com

Reid Heath Acoustics is a relatively new headphone company based in Glasgow, Scotland. My first experience with their products was the MA750i; it was love at first listen, and I felt it should cost more – a lot more. The new T10i is even more impressive for only \$199 – only a slightly higher price than the MA750i. The T10i is made from injection-moulded stainless steel which is impressive at this price point. Another impressive feature is the tuning filters that are similar in effect to the ones that the \$1499 AKG K3003 uses. Yes, you can change the sound by changing between reference, bass boost, and treble boost filters. This functionality makes the RHA T10i an incredible value.



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Audio Technica ATH-M50x

\$239

www.audio-technica.com

The M50 has been around for a long time and shares equal popularity with the Sony MDR-7506 among audio professionals. Audio Technica took a trusted old friend and gave it the modern features users have been demanding with the new M50x. The ear pads are upgraded for extended comfort; the cable is now detachable and comes with coiled, straight, and a short one for mobile use. The M50x sounds much like the M50, which is a good thing for those loving the sound of the old, now upgraded with more functionality.



FEATURE



FEATURE



Focal Spirit Professional

\$349

www.focal.com

Focal is known for their incredible Utopia loudspeakers for the home listening room as well as a full line of studio monitors used by sound engineers around the world. The Spirit Professional is part of Focal's family of headphones – Spirit One and Spirit Classic. Don't let the low \$349 price tag fool you, as the Spirit Pro shares a lot of DNA with Focal's multi-thousand dollar studio monitors.

Beats Solo2

\$199

www.beatsbydre.com

The new Beats Solo2 is a completely new design from the ground up. The stereotype that Beats headphones are kids' overpriced neck candy – with below-average sound quality – no longer applies. The new Solo2 sounds much more natural and is greatly improved over the model it replaced: the Solo HD. Gone is the sonic signature that dogged early Beats designs; muffled midrange and boomy bass that overwhelms the rest of the music is a thing of the past. The Solo2 sounds clean, clear, natural, and has tight punchy bass that sounds great with a wide variety of music genres. Give the new Beats Solo2 a try before you dismiss it. Honestly, you may not find a better portable headphone for \$199.



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FEATURE

A few of my favorites: Jeff Dorgay

While I'll be the first to admit I'm not a headphone guy, Mike's enthusiasm is overwhelming, and I can't help but admit I've caught some of his fever. I don't have anywhere near the collection he has, but I do have a few of my own favorites as well.



Oppo PM-1

\$999

www.oppo.com

HiFiMan and Audeze are major players in the planar magnetic headphones, but even though Oppo is a bit late to the dance, their contribution is stunning. Like all other Oppo products, the PM-1 offers world-class performance at a reasonable price, yet no corners are cut. This is the Oppo magic. While the PM-1s are obviously tailored to be a perfect match with their own headphone amplifier, the PM-1s sound fab with every amp I've plugged them into, and they are also incredibly efficient and easy to drive from an iPhone or iPad, making an external amp an option only for the most maniacal. A definite plus for someone who is on a plane 40 times a year.

Koss Pro 4aaa

About \$50 on the secondary market
www.koss.com

Though no longer made, the original Pro 4aaa from the late '70s is just as cool as hooking up an old pair of Advent or JBL speakers to a vintage receiver. If you were there the first time around, grab a pair of these on Ebay, put on *Dark Side of the Moon*, and head back there for half an hour. You'll see what I mean.

FEATURE

Beats Solo 2 Special Edition

\$249

store.apple.com

I agree with Mike's take on the Solo 2s and share his respect for this brand. Beats *always* gets a bum rap by snooty audiophiles, but after listening to more than a few pairs, I've become a staunch supporter. And these feature a Hello Kitty motif. What could be better, I ask you?



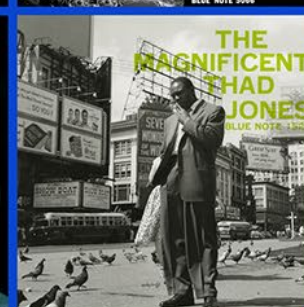
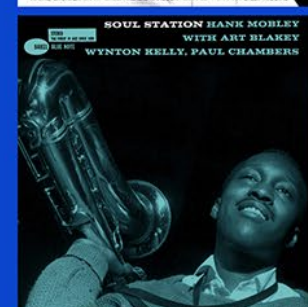
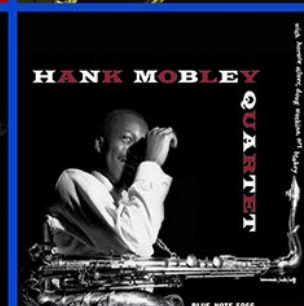
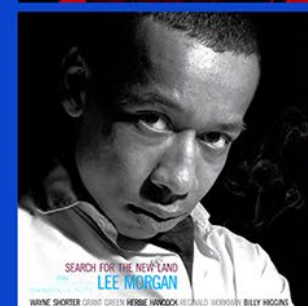
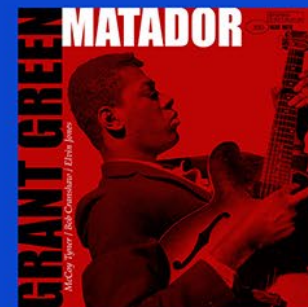
Sennheiser HD650

\$499

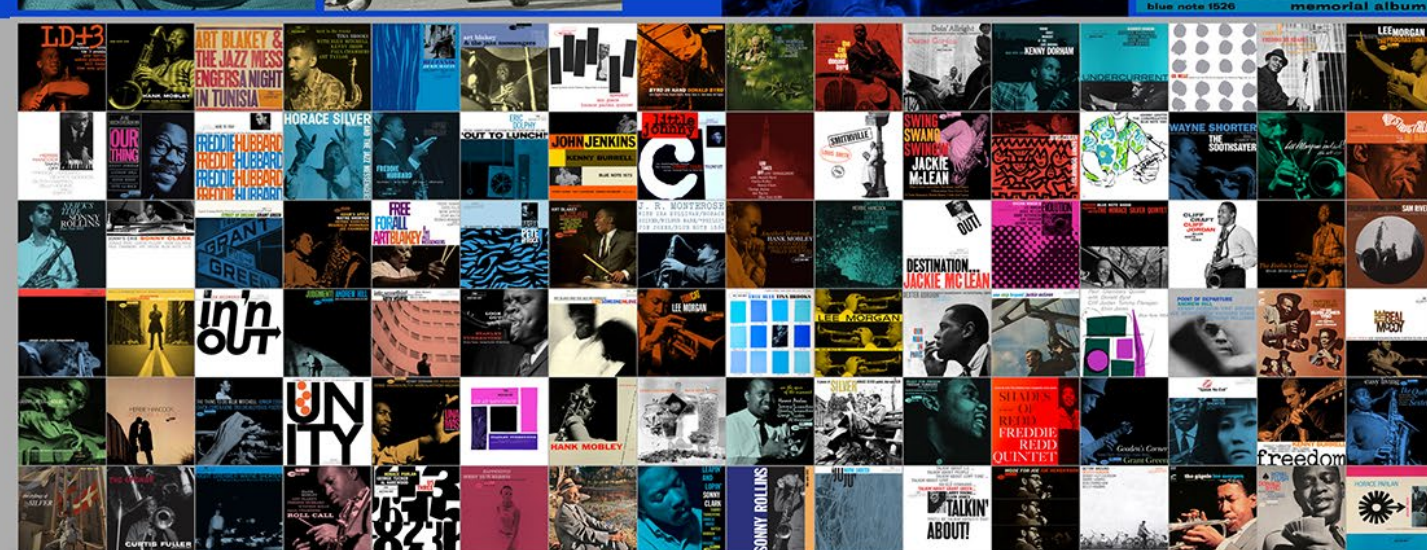
www.sennheiser.com

Sennheiser's latest HD700 and HD800 phones are definitely more resolving than my workhorse HD650s, but especially when upgraded with a better cable from your favorite headphone aftermarket vendor (I suggest the cable from ALO Audio) about half of the darkness that surrounds this model is gone, and that makes them a hell of a lot more listenable. They lack the ultimate resolution of the HD700 and HD800, but for long listening sessions are still one of my favorites, being entirely fatigue-free.●

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The Allman Brothers

Eat A Peach
(1972) Capricorn Records

When band founder and spiritual leader and guitar savant Duane Allman died in a motorcycle accident during the recording of their fourth album *Eat A Peach*, the remaining members mourned by pouring their wounded souls into finishing what became their artistic apogee. By rights the band could have perished on that chilly November day in 1972, but they decided to preserve and what emerged was a slightly different Allman Brothers, with some of the sharp, dangerous edges rubbed off by their grief. The chemistry and locus of the band was altered as Dickie Bettes emerges as a songwriting force with “Blue Sky” and “Les Frères in A Minor,” but it’s the majesty and experimentation of the 33-minute “Mountain Jam” and the build and romantic release of Gregg Allman’s “Melissa” makes this album live on.



Love

Love (1966) Elektra

Only together for two short years, Love was at the forefront of the West Coast psychedelic movement, providing the link between the jangly rock of the Byrds and the tougher, apocalyptic bite of the Doors. While musically more sophisticated than either of those outfits with their imposing orchestral arrangements and their use of flamingo guitar, sleigh bells, and flute, not to mention the beauty and threat of their idiosyncratic frontman Arthur Lee. “Little Red Book” presaged both Question Mark and the Mysterians and Prince.



Led Zeppelin

Physical Graffiti
(1975) Swan Song

On their sixth album, and their first double disc, Zeppelin have taken a few steps off of rock Valhalla and exposed their more human side. For instance during the recording of “In My Time of Dying” you can hear drummer John Bonham coughing and then saying, “that’s going to be the one, isn’t it.” Also left in the mix are the sounds of a supersonic jet in “Black Country Woman,” and then the phrase “We gotta leave the airplane in.” A perfect blend of light and shadow with the intensity of “Kashmir,” offset by the ethereal mystique of “In The Light,” and then something entirely prosaic like “Boogie with Stu.”

Within two weeks of its release *Graffiti* was perched at the top of the U.S. charts, pulling all of the band’s previous five album’s in its draft, and depositing them back on the Billboard album charts becoming the first band ever to have six albums on the Top 200 simultaneously. At the time of its release (which was preceded in over 1 million advance orders) the record was reportedly selling over 500 copies an hour. At the time the band penned Kashmir (Originally titled Driving Into Kashmir) none of the band members had set foot in the country.



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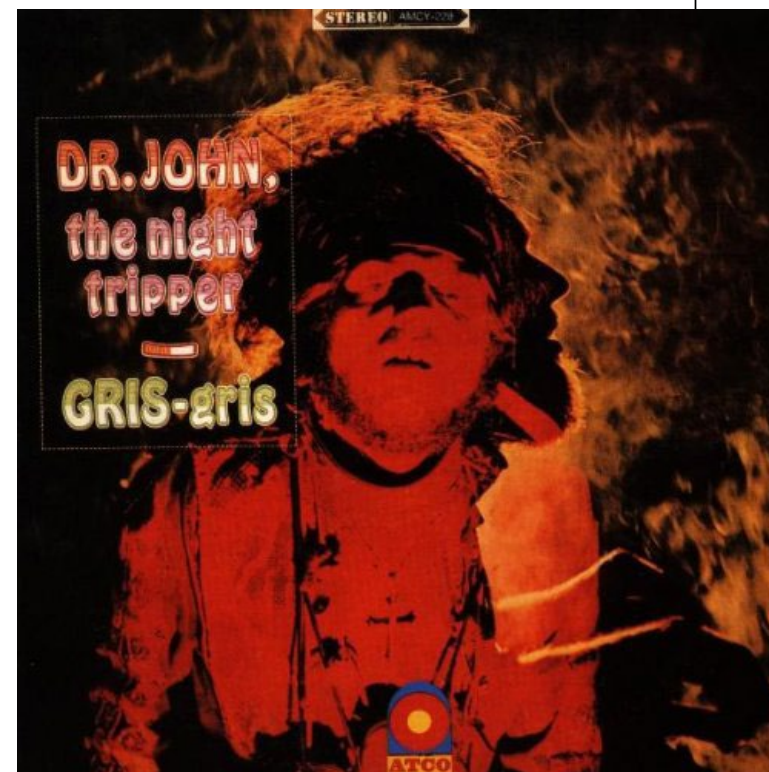


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MUSIC



Dr. John
Gris Gris (1968) Atco

In 1967, Max Rebennack and his posse of Crescent City expatriates captured the dark heart of Voodoo culture with its occult mysteries and arcane rituals and grafted it into a hypnotic groove, adding some funky blues, sparse and disturbingly repetitive minor chord melodies and funereal keyboards to create an atmosphere so thick and tangible that you need a machete to cut through it. Add to the witchy brew, the fevered chants, the Afro-Cuban syncopation, the dangerous gibberish, feral jungle noises, and Dr. John's metaphysical threats and boast of his powers and cures in the title track and the unease of "Walk on Gilded Splinters" and you have an unwholesome brew of sorcery and chicanery that fascinates as much as it disturbs almost forty five years later.

**MC5**

Kick Out the Jams
(1969) Elektra

The Motor City Five crawled out Detroit a time when rock was still dangerous; and commerce and art were often at rude and combustible loggerheads. An anomaly in the peace-and-love hippie climate of the late sixties, there was no band alive that was more daunting than this band who fueled their vision of a revolution with what was high energy garage rock and blurring the line between entertainment and politics, the Five's blasts of serrated rock rage and Sun Ra riffs melded together into a futuristic caldron, earning a seminal place in the canons of hard rock.

**The Who**

The Who Sing My Generation
(1966) Decca

This very first album from the Who finds these proto-Mods worshipping slow, seductive American R&B and firing off some of the earliest shots of the second wave of the British Invasion with ripping anthems like "My Generation," "Can't Explain" and "Kids Are Alright," along with prickly snapshots of British life in the mid-1960s like "Legal Matter," without the preciousness of the Kinks. Instead, there is an undercurrent of brutality and recklessness behind their knowing smirks and high ambitions.

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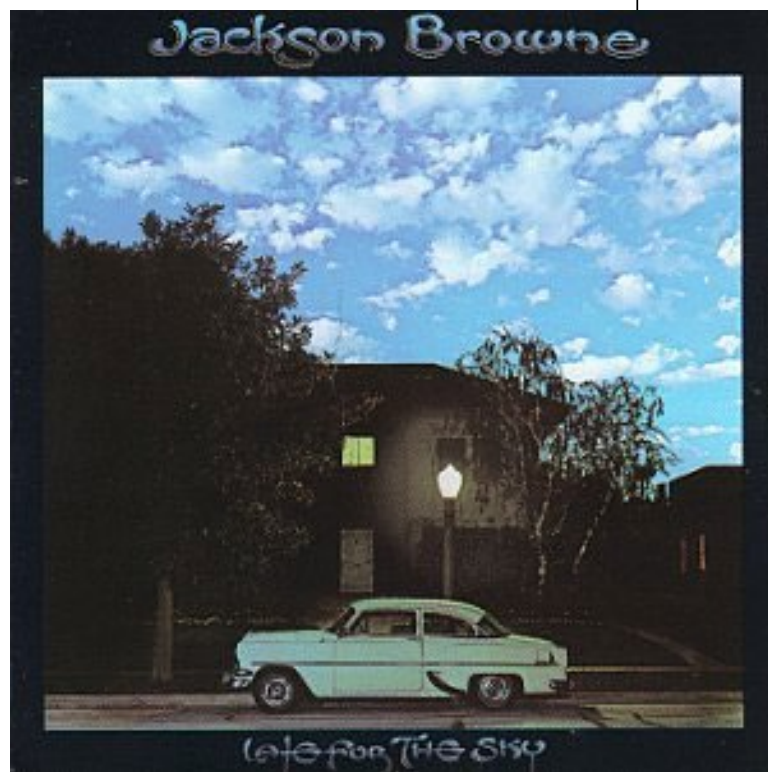
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Lynyrd Skynyrd

Second Helping (1974) MCA

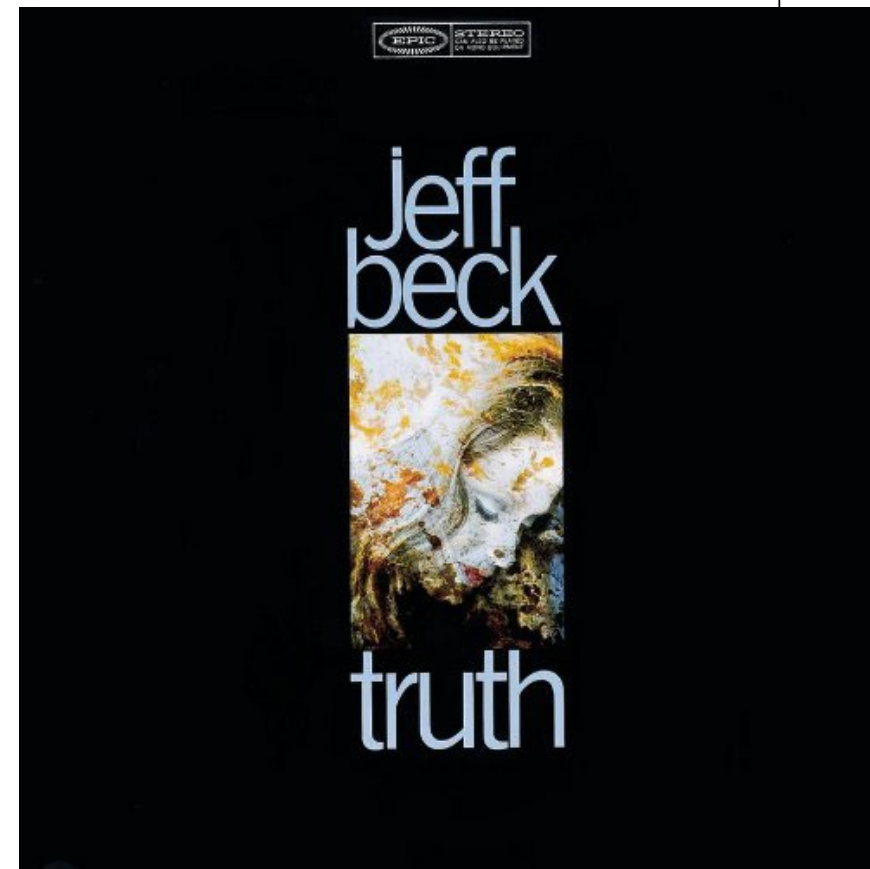
This is perhaps the second most important record in the southern rock canon (behind the Allman's *Eat a Peach*) from the tragically doomed Florida rockers. This disc finds Ronnie Van Zant penning songs of uncommon depth and perception showing the trajectory from ruin to redemption and exposing the complicated soul of life beneath the Mason-Dixon line.



Jackson Browne

Late for the Sky (1974) Elektra

Browne found his voice on his third album as he explores the thin line between fantasy and reality following the sad trajectory of a love affair in its final days. Almost a song suite about romantic illusion and delusion, his sheer, perfect poetry doesn't soften the blow, but sometimes you just have to purge the pain with tears. The quintessential break-up album.



Jeff Beck Group

Truth (1968) Epic

This was Jeff Beck's first full-blown group after leaving the Yardbirds during the middle of a Dick Clark "Caravan of Stars" tour in 1966, when he became ill ("I had this throat thing come on—and what with inflamed tonsils, an inflamed brain, and an inflamed cock..." he said at the time) and never returned to the fray to no one's surprise since he was continually butting heads with Jimmy Page for ascendancy in the band. This is the Jeff Beck Group's debut album, (released in the U.S. as Jeff Beck, not the Jeff Beck Group, foreshadowing problems that would plague the line-up less than a year after its release—when Ron Wood and Rod Stewart would leave for the Faces.)

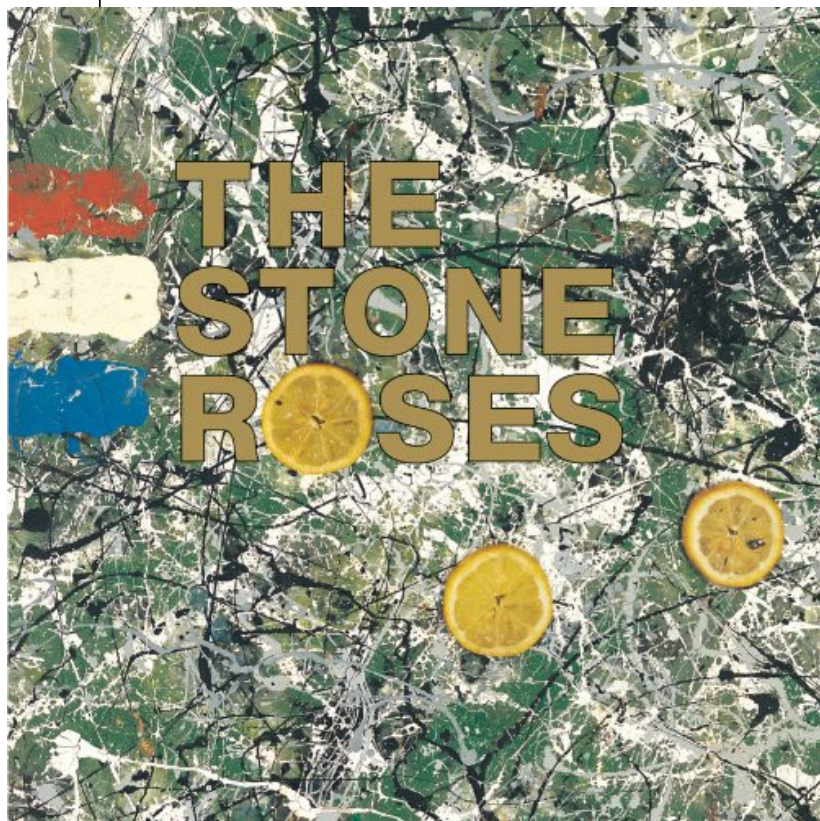
Truth became one of the seminal albums of the 60s; an advance guard of what would be called English hard rock, and in turn laying the foundation for what become heavy metal. What set this band apart from other British blues outfits was that the JBG sounded lighter and more fluid than any of the other contenders, and there was a dramatic element that other bands didn't possess—the coiled tension of the Beck's guitar's interplay with Rod Stewart's gritty and resolute singing, trading guitar and vocal lines—which would become de rigeur for any self respecting hard rock band.



M

entioned in
the same breath
as the Beatle's

Sergeant Pepper and the Sex Pistols *Nevermind the Bullocks*, the Stone Roses 1989 eponymous debut managed to demolish the last whispers of the whiny reign of the New Romantics while signaling a global and sonic revolution. The Berlin Wall was falling, and China devoured their young on Tienanmen Square while this brash glamorous quartet from Manchester took it all in, translating that roiling change into an epic work of great prophesy and danger. In "Elephant Stone" singer Ian Brown lamented that there's "a hole in my dream," but these Baggy Princes were dreaming for an entire generation, ushering in a spiritual awakening of British music while demanding "I Wanna Be Adored," while simultaneously insisting "I Am the Resurrection." It turned out that they were right and 25 years later their ambition, attitude and brooding good looks still sets the standard for the rock aesthetic.



Stone Roses

Stone Roses (1989) Silvertone

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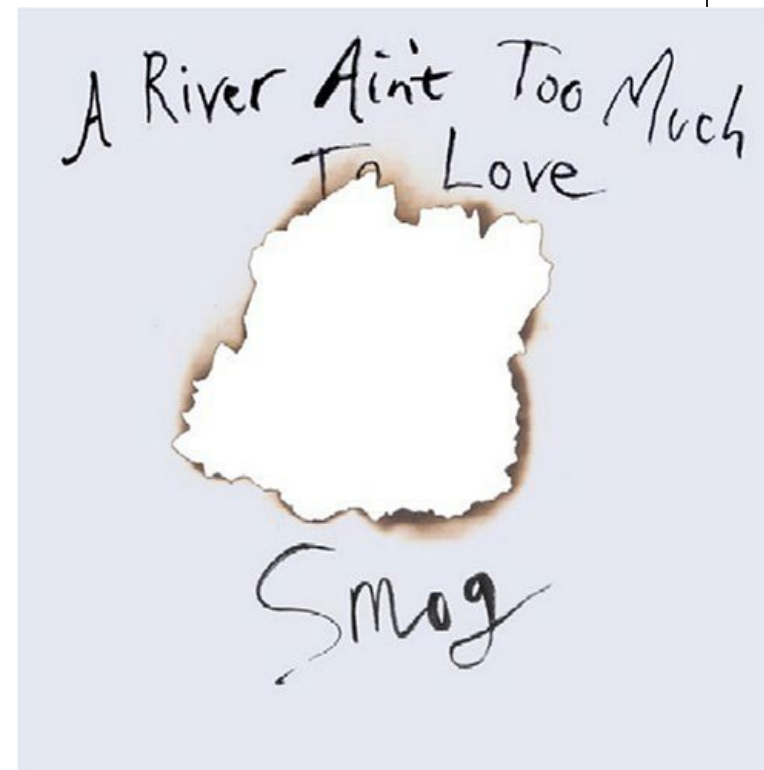
MUSIC



Smog

*A River Ain't Too Much
To Love*
(2005) Drag City

This marks Callahan's move from Chicago to Austin, Texas, not coincidentally dubbed River City by locals, a sure draw given his identification with the bodies of water. Recorded at Willie Nelson's Perdnales studio, it takes on some of that rough-hewn outlaw mystique. Desolate and spacious, it channels what is frightening about Texas at night, and what is equally frightening about relationships. Then-inamorata Joanna Newsome plays spectral piano on the mystery play of a song, "Rock Bottom Riser."



Bill Callahan

Woke Up On A Whaleheart
(2007) Drag City

This is the first recording released under Bill Callahan's own name. The centerpieces are the deeply intoned "Diamond Dancer," and the "Sycamore," which leads one to believe that he has indeed planted roots in this loamy Texas earth. As for the enlarged heart? It's how one feels when they've found a big love. It's an album that addresses what it means to be a man, and self-reliant. But oddly, Callahan handed over the production to Neil Hagerty, ex of Royal Trux.





The Flaming Lips

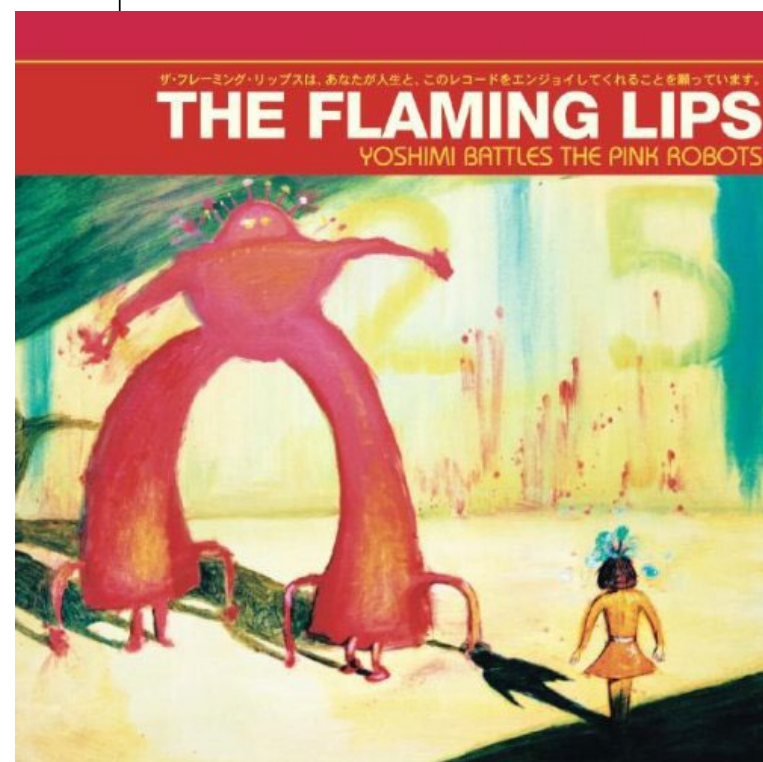
Soft Bulletin (1999) Warner Bros.

This epic work changed the entire direction of Oklahoma City's art provocateurs aesthetic with gorgeous harmonies, lush orchestration and nakedly emotional themes about love, loss and the future of the human race. Eschewing some of the weirder things and noise wanks that used to make up their set lists, but here they've learned how to create real songs and how to shape more emotional things, like Steven Drost's heroin addiction, which appears as "Spiderbite," on the disc. Other stand outs were the mournful "A Spoonful Weights A Ton," and "Fight Test." But in fact, there are no bad tracks on this album. Many believed that this change up was due to frontman/spiritual leader Wayne Coyne's father's death, but he claimed not. "That was really Zaireeka or maybe even Yoshimi." The title? It was their own quiet revolution.

The Flaming Lips

Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots
(2002) Warner Bros.

A concept album on par with anything that Pink Floyd or the Moody Blues ever fashioned inspired by a Japanese fan's death. This is the Lips tour de force: Emotional, coherent, tragic, but in the end honest yet hopeful. Refining their sense of melody and epic-ness, they were nonetheless bent on not making another *Soft Bulletin* with music that wasn't so heavy handed. In the end, the frothy images and comic book plot lines couldn't disguise how weighty the subject matter is, especially key track "Do You Realize?" As utterly happy as the song sounds, lyrically it's vintage Coyne as he tempers the happiness with his final answer to the song title's question: "Someday everyone you know will die." ●



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TONE FAVORITES

VINTAGE FAVORITES

By Sean Brady

In this issue, Sean Brady from Audio Video Choices in Phoenix, Arizona is our guest columnist. Though Brady has been in the hifi world for quite some time, he's always understood the value of accepting the customers' old gear on trade. As many an audio enthusiast will tell you, "you have to get rid of the old before you can bring in the new."

For many of us, cherished preowned gear is a great way to enter the hobby – not only from a financial standpoint, but from an ecological standpoint as well. It's definitely green thinking to recycle rather than just unbox something new.

Through the years, Brady, like the rest of us, has a few pieces that have become favorites to own, sell and share with the rest of us. Here's what an audio vet has to say:



M

y first choices are two amplifiers that bookend the the production of vintage tube amplifiers. The Radio Craftsmen C500/500A Williamson Triode is a subtly refined Williamson triode amplifier. Using a pair of Mullard KT66 output tubes, 15 watts are available with an ultra-wideband response of +/- 1dB from 10Hz to 50kHz. Tube rectification, octal-based 6SN7 tubes for front end/driver, and high quality transformers are utilized in this classic implementation of the Williamson amplifier circuit.

Radio Craftsmen was founded in Chicago in 1947, around the same the time as McIntosh, Fisher, Scott, and Harman Kardon. The C500A was designed in 1953 by Sid Smith, the same Sid Smith that went to work for Marantz in 1954 to design their famous tube amps, preamps, tuners, and crossovers. Even by today's standards, the C500 is clear and sweet with superb musical performance. And the description of its performance in the original brochure reads like something you would find for a modern amplifier.



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FEATURE



Next, the king of amplifiers (for me anyway), is a majestic pair of ultra-rare McIntosh MC-3500 designed by Mile Nestorovic. The MC-3500 is the limited home version of the McIntosh MI-350 industrial amplifier – a true piece of industrial art. Rated at 350 watts per channel, Stereo Review magazine revealed an astonishing 500-watt output at 0.08% distortion on the test bench.

These big Macs are the only vintage tube amplifiers that I have ever heard give a great ride to the demanding Wilson MAXX loudspeakers. (We usually pair the MAXX with solid-state amplifiers possessing major current reserve.)

The MC-3500s have tremendous low-frequency extension and control with seemingly unlimited headroom. The effortless dynamics and smooth extended high end are so musically involving, it's tough to believe these are vintage amplifiers.

For a little perspective, in 1968 a pair of 70-watt Marantz Model 9 amplifiers cost \$780 when the McIntosh MC-3500 pair was \$2200! To this day, this is the most powerful tube amp McIntosh has built. At one time the Grateful Dead used fourteen MC-3500 amps in their famous "wall of sound" system, and they were loaned to the Woodstock festival as well.



FEATURE



The exquisite Marantz Model Twenty FM Stereo Tuner, the first solid-state Marantz tuner after the legendary tube 10B, with arguably superior reception and sonics to its predecessor, features an oscilloscope for monitoring center of channel tuning, multipath, and audio output. The scope even has an external audio input. A world class tuner (still) it is preferred by many to the 10B, as it requires less frequent adjustment. This was made by Saul Marantz and company in Woodside, New York.

The Electro-Voice Patrician loudspeaker is one of the largest home systems at 325 pounds! Here is how E-V described it: "Let's start at the bottom (as much as an octave below most other woofers). Our thirty-inch diameter Model 30W woofer reproduces 15 Hz fundamental at full volume without doubling. Nothing less than a live performance can compete with the sound you hear and feel from this giant speaker."

Over a decade of engineering refinement has made this E-V Model SP12 woofer unexcelled in mid-bass performance (and it's also an uncommon value as a full range speaker from 30 to 15,000 Hz.

It takes this sophisticated team of compression driver and patented diffraction horn to fully satisfy the rigorous demands of the treble range. There's no smoother combination than the E-V T25A compression driver and 8HD horn.

Ruler flat from 3,500 to 23,000 Hz! But extended range is just one of the

benefits of the T350 VHF driver. Its exclusive throat and horn design spreads undistorted highs to every corner of your listening area. Delightful!

These unusual components have been combined in the Patrician 800 – often acclaimed as the world's finest loudspeaker system. \$1,095.00 in traditional cherry cabinetry. It's waiting to be challenged by the most powerful, widest range amplifier you can buy. Listen. The difference you hear is what high fidelity is all about!

Many regard the Revox A700 as a thinly disguised Studer professional analog reel recorder, as this machine is well built with the performance to match. It was very advanced for its time and remains so today. This \$3000 machine has three speeds – 3.75/7.5/15ips – and records two tracks on ¼-inch tape. At 15 ips the frequency response is 30Hz to 22kHz +2/-3 dB with signal to noise at 65 dB or better. High end reel-to-reel has a very natural sound, with no stress or congestion.



FEATURE



Yes, we need a bright, shiny object with lights and switches. Let's not forget the McIntosh MPI-4 is a laboratory-grade instrument. It provides the facility to continuously monitor the quality of the performance of a stereo system. The MPI-4 can sample and display signals from the tuner, preamplifier, and power amplifier without reconnecting cables. Signals are displayed on an oscilloscope screen calibrated with scales for tuning, measurement, and testing.

As a tuning aid, the instrument is a guide to exact FM station selection and precise tuning. The screen displays FM signal strength, modulation percentage, and multipath interference. Audio signals may be viewed for stereo balance, strength, phase, and channel separation. Output power of the power amplifier can be seen at any instant during program performance, or stored to develop a trend over several minutes.

With the addition of test discs, the MPI-4 can show compliance and trackability of a phono cartridge, frequency response of the preamplifier

and power amplifier, audio distortion, and stereo speaker balance.

In one of its operational modes, the MPI-4 becomes a dual trace oscilloscope, and when operated thusly, the left and right stereo channels appear simultaneously, yet separately, on the screen for direct comparison. Featuring a "triggered sweep," the MPI-4 permits the viewer to choose a single tone and lock it on the screen for careful inspection and measurements. In the '60s no righteous system was without an MPI-4, but this is still a very valuable tool today. ●



TONE FAVORITES

SIX GREAT NON-AUDIOPHILE DISCS

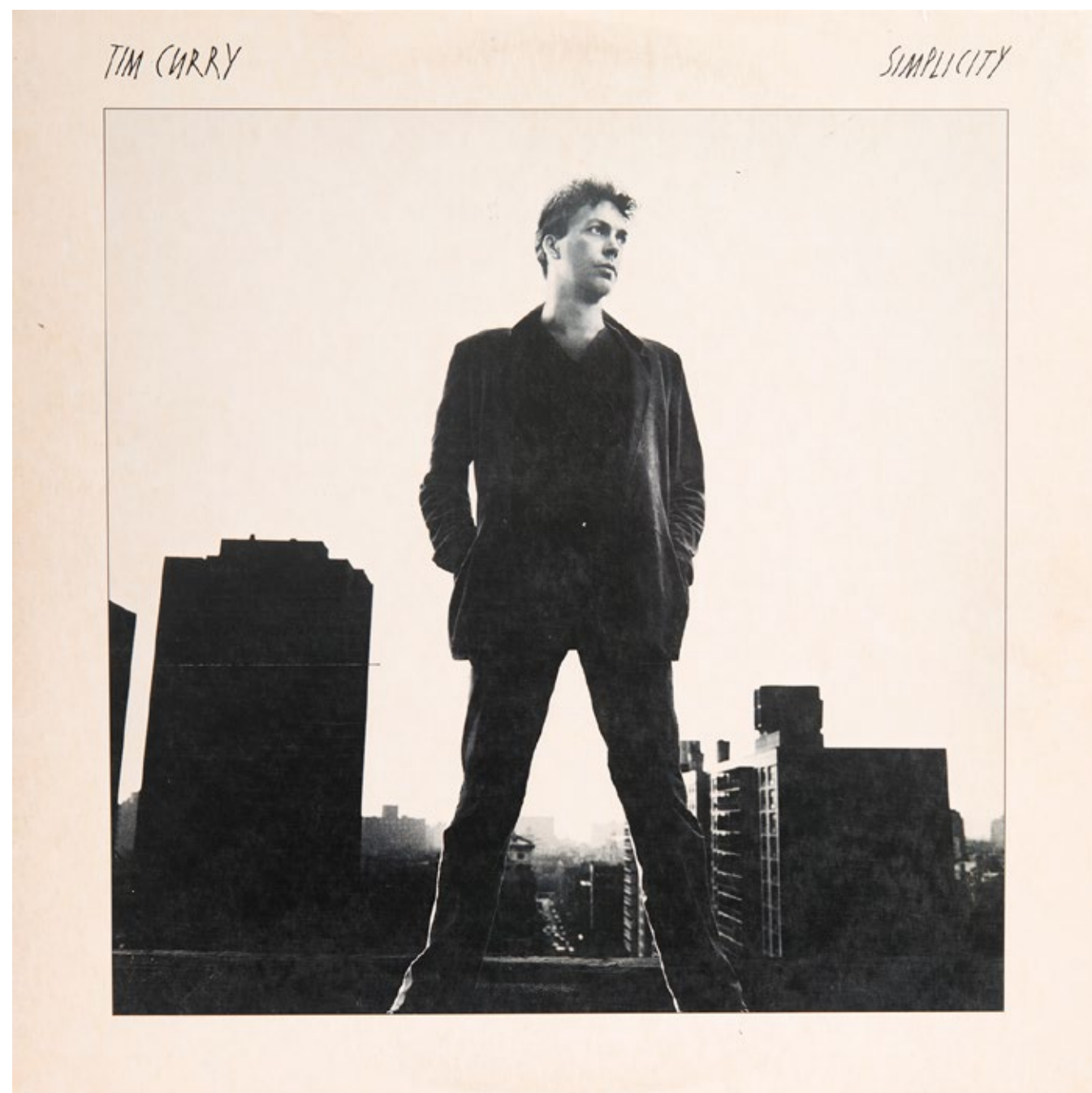
By Jeff Dorgay

With no disrespect to our friends in the industry producing fantastic remastered records, giving us a chance to revisit recordings we may have missed out on the first time around that often sound as good as (or even better than the originals), I'm focusing my list on a few records that I love that are not from these imprints. Like our Music Editor Bob Gendron confesses with his list, there are no Beatles, Led Zeppelin, or even Steely Dan here. And there will definitely not be any Jennifer Warnes, Jacintha, or the like. We've either heard such records too often, or are fully aware of them. I'm instead talking straight-ahead rock records I've always enjoyed, and which are well-recorded, well-mastered, fun, don't cost more than a set of tires to acquire.

Never released on CD, Tim Curry's final record for A&M is spectacular, with a great mix of originals and some very creative covers, ranging from the Zombies' "She's Not There" to the Squeeze track "Take Me I'm Yours." Curry's tunes are no stinkers either, from the playful "Working on My Tan" (an 80s mixtape favorite) to the introspective title track.

Recorded at the Hit Factory and mastered by Bob Ludwig, there's no shortage of talent on either side of the console, with Curry's backing band including Earl Slick on guitar, Michael Kamen (who also produces) on keyboards, and David Sanborn on saxophone. And there isn't a hint of digital anything anywhere. Between the choruses of "Working on My Tan" when Curry croons, "take a boat, take a bus," the city bus panned wide right sounds so real, you're ready to jump on board and follow him.

The breathy voice that Curry launched in the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* is honed to perfection four years later with 1981's *Simplicity*. His treatment of the John Sebastian classic "Summer in the City" makes you wonder what made Curry go Disney in the end.



Tim Curry
Simplicity
A&M, LP only

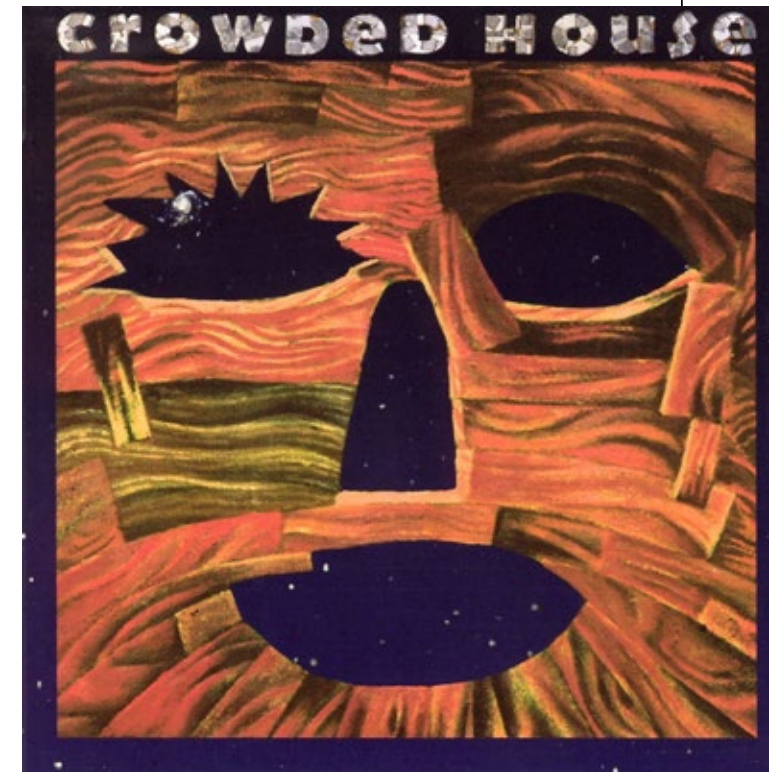
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Crowded House
Woodface
Capitol, LP and CD

Crowded House's third album, while not receiving the major acclaim of its first two records, is arguably the band's finest. The songs are bright, perky, quirky, and clever, opening with the silly "Chocolate Cake" on which the Finn Brothers take a poke at the Big Apple as they sing, "Not everyone in New York would pay to see Andrew Lloyd Weber." Finn brothers Neil and Tim are joined by core Crowded House members Paul Hester and Nick Seymour on drums, the last record produced with this lineup. The group's sound would significantly change on its next release, *Together Alone*.

Woodface fills the bill for those wanting something more than a standard pop record and the recording is brilliant. Produced by Mitchell Froom and Neil Finn, and mixed by Bob Clearmountain, the LP is the copy to get if you can find one. Forget the version done a few years ago by Pure Music: It's garbage, sounding like an early MP3 from the iTunes store.

Credits don't say whether Bob Ludwig at Masterdisk mastered the CD as well as the LP, but the CD is smooth and dynamic. However, the EMI imported vinyl is wonderful, with a soundstage in which you can swim, a lush midrange, and excellent dynamics. A clean copy will set you back about \$35, but if you love this record, it is worth seeking out.




Meshell Ndegeocello

Plantation Lullabies
CD and LP

I was hooked on Meshell Ndegeocello the first time I spotted her on “Conan” going crazy with a fretless bass with a Grace Jones kind of anger and intensity, singing, “If that’s your boyfriend, he wasn’t last night.” (The tune was nominated for a Best R&B Grammy in 1995, before her famous duet with John Mellencamp.) *Plantation Lullabies* put a spin on R&B that, quite frankly, she’s never been able to equal.

The CD is magnificent, and usually languishes in the bargain bins for about three dollars, while the double LP is tough to find and usually fetches about \$50.


Brand X

Livestock
CD and LP

Ok, ok, I’m a sucker for fusion music. So shoot me. If you share my affliction and you haven’t heard of Brand X, which incidentally includes, of all people, Phil Collins on drums, this is an incredibly well-recorded live album, half of which is recorded at Ronnie Scott’s jazz club in London.

So many live albums sound lifeless, either in recording quality or performance, but *Livestock* thrills on both counts. The tracks are well-chosen, rearranged somewhat, and played with enough enthusiasm to not only convey a great feel for what the band was like live but also show this wasn’t just an excuse to totally recreate the studio album onstage—something many prog bands do.

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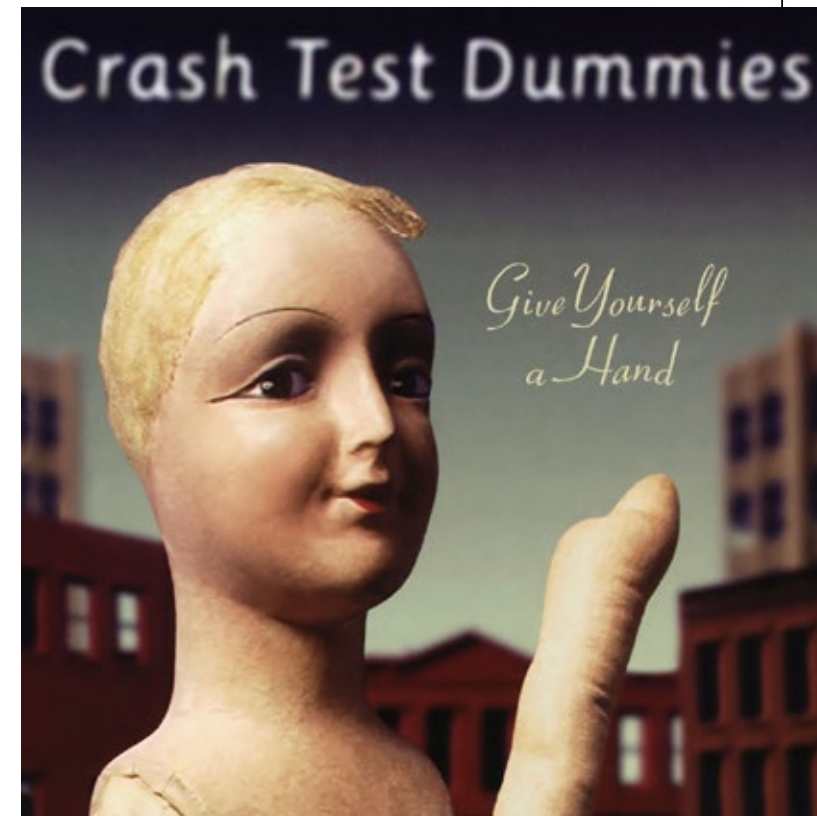
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Crash Test Dummies

Give Yourself a Hand
CD only

This quirky Canadian band received heavy airplay on MTV in 1993 with the big hit "MMM MMM MMM" from the triple-platinum album *God Shuffled His Feet* album. A big part of that unique sound comes from lead singer Brad Roberts' deep voice. Riding the success the band subsequently produced *A Worm's Life*, which tanked its popularity.

The collective's fourth and final album for BMG/Arista took a major stylistic detour with Roberts singing falsetto, something he said he did "in the shower a lot" in an interview with NPR shortly after the record was released. *Give Yourself a Hand* also features backup vocalist Ellen Reid taking the lead on a couple of tracks, mixing up the usual repertoire even more. "Just Chillin'" features an obtuse arrangement, with lightly placed keyboard riffs that sound as if they've come straight out of *Twin Peaks*. And it just gets better, as the Dummies deal with anger, jealousy, and mixed-age relationships with aplomb.





Prince
One Nite Alone (Bonus Disc)
 CD only

Sold as a bonus disc in the first 1000 sets of Prince's 2002 three-disc live box set of the same name through his NPG online store, this is the only record on my list that isn't reasonably priced or easy to find. When available on the used market, an unsealed copy can reach \$500.

The album features Prince on piano, with a little bit of accompaniment by his "doves," Divinity and Majesty. Prince's usual high-powered combination of jazz, funk, rock, and whatever else he cares to add to the mix at the time is gone here: *One Nite Alone* is miles away from the little red corvette you remember. Arrangements are sparse, moody, and dramatic, yet very delicate. Prince even pays homage to Joni Mitchell with an incredibly sexy rendition of "A Case of You," subtly retitled in Prince fashion to "A Case of U."

The recording itself is exquisite, sounding like Prince has moved his piano into your listening room to give you a private concert, with the first two tracks featuring deep bass lines that will give even the best subwoofers a major workout. ●

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A New Standard in Portable Players

SONY'S NWZ-A17

By Jeff Dorgay

As a loyal Apple listener grooving on Joni Mitchell's "Jungle Line" in 24bit/192kHz resolution via Sony's new NWZ-A17 high-resolution Walkman via a pair of OPPO HA-1 headphones, I'm wondering why anyone would ever want to drop the same 300 bucks on an iPod after hearing this. With the price of portable high-resolution audio players heading up faster than our stock market, it's getting a little ridiculous out there. And the world of high-end audio has often been about the ridiculous, says the guy that owns a \$60,000 CD player. However, enough is enough, and when the price of portable audio players (that still have a crappy user interface) cost more than half the used cars on Craigslist, it's time for a revolution.





Who better to spearhead this revolution than Sony, the company that started the portable player craze with the Walkman back in 1980? And remember, these guys invented high-resolution playback with the SACD, so there are some serious engineering chops here.

\$299 gets you a high-resolution portable digital player that is truly portable, capable of playing files up to 24bit/192kHz resolution. I'm sure some will squawk that it's a travesty to ignore DSD playback, but while so many music lovers are still being sold on the idea of *CD-quality* files, this should take care of most listeners' needs. Throw in an FM tuner, the ability to stream and a high-quality headphone amplifier – all in an extremely compact case with 50-hour battery life – and we have a winning combination.

Sony vs the fruit

Precious few people are neutral on the subject of iTunes. Most love it or hate it. If you love it and are firmly embedded in an iTunes ecosystem, it's easy to drag and drop files from iTunes into the Sony player via a USB connection. However, that will only get you 16/44.1 playback, and while the Sony does a fab job at CD resolution, that might not be enough for you to leave Apple. *(continued)*

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- ANTHONY KERSHAW, AUDIOPHILIA



REVIEW



A quick comparison of lossless files at 16/44.1 using the line/headphone output gives a clear nod to the Sony, especially through a pair of headphones. The Sony has a much more robust output section than the iPod, and on their website, Sony claims that they've taken advantage of their ES technologies here. Some vinyl rips of various LPs, via the Nagra LB digital recorder in native 16/44.1 make it even easier to hear the increased HF clarity and extension that the Sony brings to the table.

Cymbals are much smoother, with less digital grain; the midrange is more lush and, dare I say it, tubelike, with a larger three-dimensional soundfield floating around my head. Where the Apple player takes the lead on 16/44.1 playback is with the handful of DACs that are Apple certified, letting you use the iPod as a transport and take the digital bitstream through the USB connection. So, for this 1% of the portable users, the iPod will come out on top for redbook files. For everyone else, the Sony is the hands-down winner.
(continued)

REVIEW

And, remember, the iPod has a fixed memory capacity, so if you like to use your iPod on the road, you will always be deciding what music stays and what music goes. Thanks to a miniSD slot that accommodates 128gb chips, the Walkman is infinitely expandable – a feature that behooves the major music lover to give it some serious consideration.

Sony vs the high-priced portable

Audiophiles who have been building high-resolution libraries, but have been hesitant to write the check for a \$2,500 portable, take heed. While the Sony can't be used as an external DAC, and it won't play DSD files, it's so close in sonic performance when playing 24/96 or 24/192 files, you'd be crazy to spend the extra \$2,200 on something else if you don't require those two things.

Wrestling that very player out of one of my crazed audiophile friends, and performing a lot of A-B comparisons in different systems, the Sony continued to impress. Granted, the big boy had a slight edge in the highest of frequencies, which could only be noticed with classical music and solo acoustic guitar recordings – and even then, just barely on my main reference system featuring the \$88,000 Dynaudio Evidence Platinum speakers. In both of my home systems, featuring excellent but reasonably priced components, the delta was negligible. (continued)



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Pros and cons

In addition to its ability to play digital files, the NWZ-A17 includes an FM tuner, which proves both handy and enjoyable. Tuner strength is good enough to pull in the major stations here in Portland with more than adequate clarity, adding to the options available when you get bored with your own music.

The NWZ-A17's Bluetooth capability proved a mixed bag, interfacing well with our Devialet 120 and 200 home systems, but intermittently with both of my current model BMWs featuring Bluetooth audio. To Sony's credit, the iPhone 6 did not fare much better, and both the Sony and Apple devices had mediocre sound quality via Bluetooth in the automobiles in which I sampled them.

Going back to the good old-fashioned line-level cable proved best, and in this environment, the playback quality of the Sony player was instantly discernible.

High-resolution playback, even with the somewhat average audio system in the BMW Z4, was miles above what was coming out of my iPod, iPhone, or the internal music storage.

In a home environment, the Sony player is a kick because it's so small, which makes it easy to transport your favorite music from room to room, plug in a pair of phones, or share your latest high-res files with a friend over a drink. Until high-resolution streaming becomes ubiquitous, a music server of some kind is still the way to go, and a portable version all that much better, especially for those of you with a high-performance audio system in your car. At \$299, the Sony NWZ-A17 is a must-have. I've used them all, and this one ticks all the boxes. They've certainly come a long way from that first Walkman I bought in 1980, and the most worthy of one of our Exceptional Value Awards this year. ●

The Sony NWZ-A17
\$299

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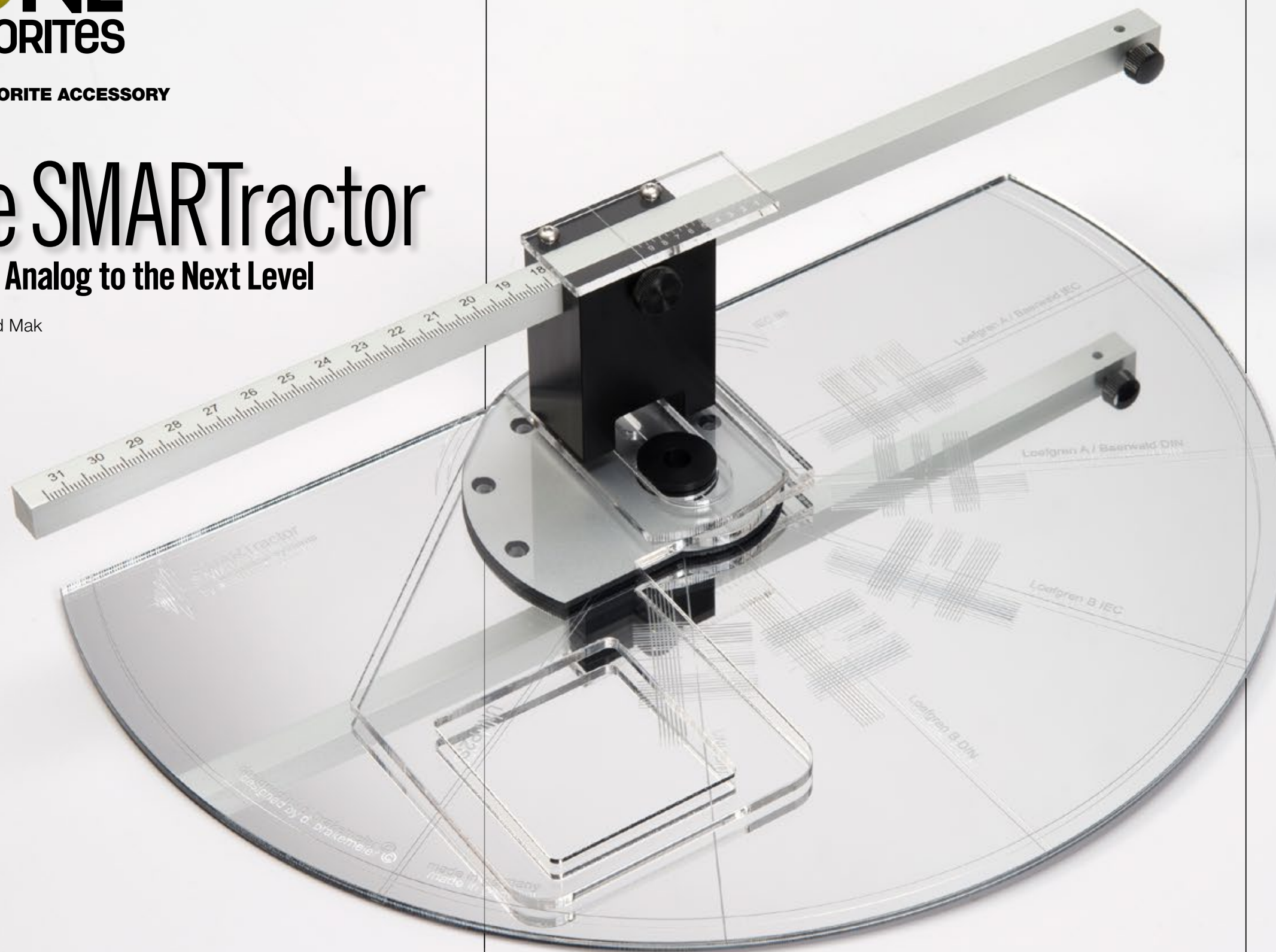
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TONE FAVORITES

OUR FAVORITE ACCESSORY

The SMARTractor Taking Analog to the Next Level

By Richard Mak



While tremendous advances have been made in turntable and phono-cartridge design since the introduction of the LP 66 years ago, there remains more music to be found in those vinyl grooves. We now have cartridges with dynamic range and stylus profiles unheard of back then, yet we continue to optimize our turntables with tools from the 1950s. In 2013, Dietrich Brakemeier of Acoustical Systems from Germany found a way to bring us into the 21st century, with a cartridge-alignment tool called the SMARTractor.

The development of the SMARTractor began with an earlier, more expensive alignment tool called the Uni-Protractor (\$795), which Brakemeier created in 2010 as a result of research and development on his proprietary UNI-DIN alignment geometry. His aim was to improve upon the traditional Baerwald and Lofgren alignment geometry used for non-tangential tonearms, along with a separate tool to accurately handle pivot-to-spindle distance. In 2013, VANA Ltd., Acoustic Systems' North American distributor, managed to convince Brakemeier to combine the two tools into one. That product is the SMARTractor, priced at \$650.

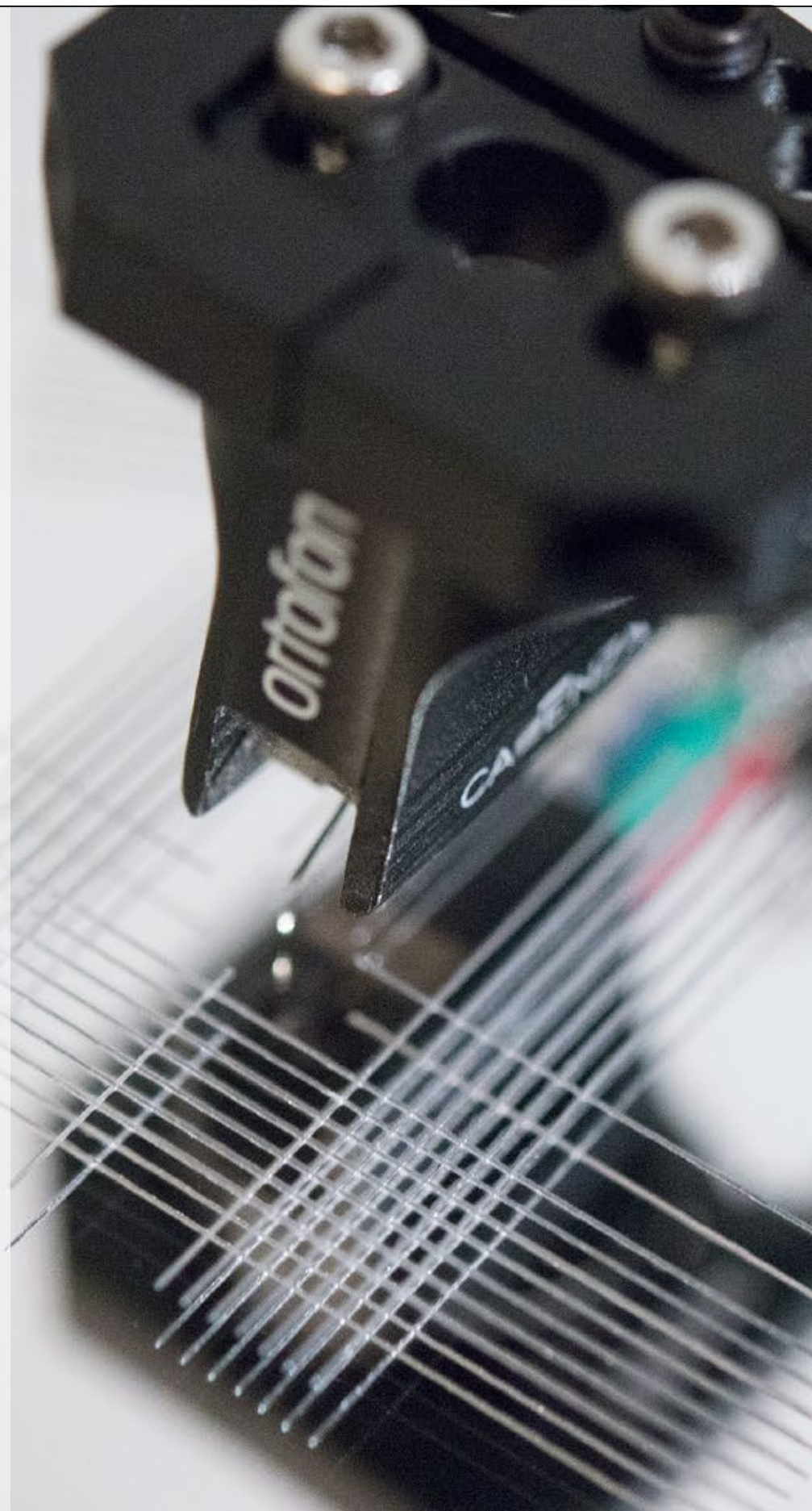
In my opinion, the SMARTractor is the most precise and user-friendly universal cartridge-alignment tool on the market today. As one of the first beta testers of the SMARTractor, I have used this tool to successfully set up hundreds of turntables for friends, family and other analog enthusiasts. In doing so, I have identified four compelling features that take precise cartridge alignment to a level previously unattainable—and taking analog enjoyment to an equally enthralling level.

Pivot-to-Spindle Accuracy

The first step in any analog setup involves setting the pivot center of the tonearm at a specific position relative to the spindle as specified by the factory. This is called the pivot-to-spindle distance. Some tonearm manufacturers provide a rudimentary tool to perform this alignment, while others do not. The SMARTractor leaves nothing to chance.

Using the provided alignment jig or a simple ruler, you measure the mounting distance of the tonearm pivot. But you will only be able to get within 1 to 2 mm of accuracy and, taking slight variations of spindle size into account, this measurement could actually be off quite a bit. In the microscopic world of record grooves, where the distance between groove walls is no more than 2 to 3 micrometers, a 1 mm deviation is practically the size of a football field.

The SMARTractor improves pivot-to-spindle accuracy in two ways: It takes into account variation in spindle sizes by providing three spindle adapters to ensure the tool is mounted onto your spindle with a precise fit, eliminating playback errors; and distance accuracy is further improved by incorporating a vernier scale on the extendable distance-measuring arm, which is accurate to within 5/100 of a millimeter. (Detailed instructions are provided on page 8 of the concise owner's manual, for those not familiar with this method of measurement.)



With the measuring arm extended at the precise distance specified the manufacturer, you insert the metal pin into the SMARTractor's measuring beam, aiming it directly at the tonearm pivot to find the proper mounting position. Some manufacturers are smart enough to provide an indentation on top of the pivot to identify this location, but for those that don't, the SMARTractor comes with a transparent circular disc with printed gridlines to identify the proper location of the tonearm pivot. The tightened tolerance of each of these steps translates into a much higher level of measuring precision for proper positioning of the tonearm pivot than was previously available with other tools.

Null-Point Accuracy

The next step is to move the position of the cartridge into the spot on the headshell where the cantilever stylus will land on the null point of the chosen mounting geometry. These null points are usually a printed dot on the templates, ranging in size from 0.5 mm to 1 mm. The SMARTractors null point is a cone-shaped indentation cut onto the template with a laser; the size of the indentation is smaller than the actual stylus so that only the very tip of a stylus can fit into the spot, which is barely visible to the naked eye. The stylus either fits into the SMARTractor's indentation or it won't, with unprecedented single-point accuracy.

Two words of caution: Users should always set the vertical-tracking force (VTF) to the factory

recommendation before making any attempts at landing the stylus; if VTF is set too high, by the end of your session, you will have damaged the suspension of the cantilever. Secondly, be sure the turntable platter is secure to avoid any movement before you begin measurements, as the stylus will be ripped from the cantilever should unexpected rotation occur!

Parallax Distortion Eliminated

When the relative location of the stylus in relation to the null point has been determined, the next step is to rotate the cartridge body so that the cantilever, not the cartridge body, is perfectly parallel to the gridlines printed on the template. Herein lies the problem of parallax distortions associated with nearly all the tools found on the market. The SMARTractor improves upon this method by providing gridlines that are much longer and narrower, greatly improving visibility and accuracy.

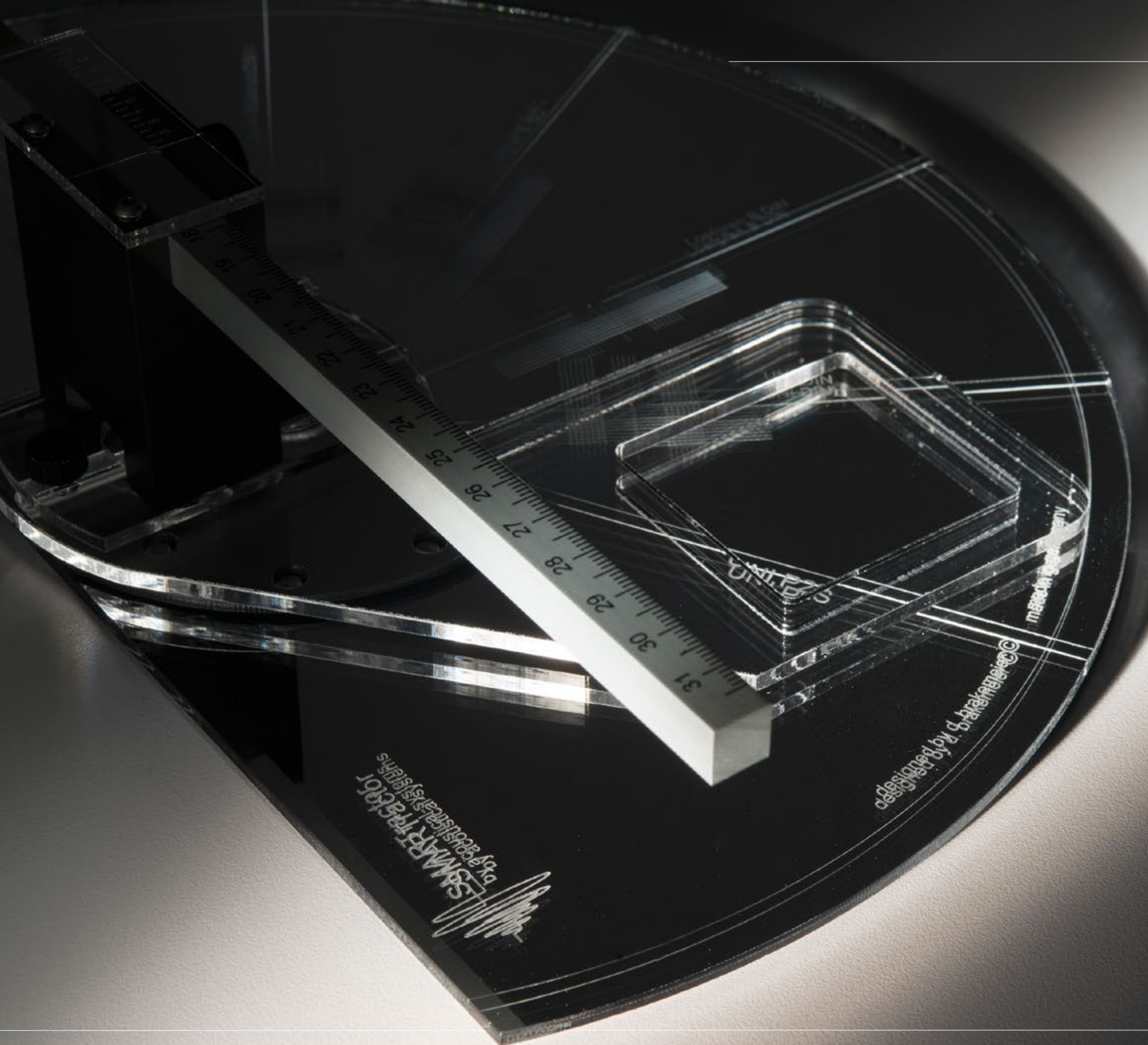
For cartridge cantilevers hidden well into their body, such as the Kondo IO-M, a small magnifying glass is provided with SMARTractor. For the optically challenged, Acoustical Systems does offer the UNI-Scope (\$349), an electronic microscope designed to fit onto your UNI-Tractor or SMARTractor. It magnifies the stylus image to approximately 220 times the original size and displays the enlarged image on your computer screen via USB. Your kids can also enjoy the Uni-Scope, magnifying insects and such to 200 times their size.

Five Alignment Geometries

The SMARTractor offers five different curves to align any cartridge and tonearm combination: Loefgren; Baerwald IEC, Loefgren A; Baerwald DIN, Loefgren B IEC; Loefgren B DIN; and last but not least, Brakemeier's own UNI-DIN geometry. You can engage the geometry you prefer by positioning the corresponding choice into place, securing it with the locking screw on the tool. (Again, everything is well explained in the owner's manual.)

While it is beyond the scope of this review to discuss the merits of each sets of geometry, my interview with Brakemeier offered some insights to his UNI-DIN geometry. He feels that the two popular geometries (Loefgren and Baerwald), which most users are familiar with, were developed before World War II for the 78s record format, which has less complex grooves than today's records and are tracked at 20 to 30 grams with styli that are 20 to 50 times the size of a modern stereo stylus. Both Baerwald and Loefgren are calculating tangential curves based on the lowest possible average distortion as well as lowest maximum deviation from the zero tangential point, with the goal of achieving a mixture of the lowest possible distortion and trackability over an assumed linear groove.

However, modern-day records have much tighter grooves. The beginning of a record has an approximately 100 cm groove length per revolution, versus only 36.1 cm at the inner groove (according to the DIN standard). *(continued)*



FEATURE

While speed has remained constant, the working condition of the stylus is non-linear, making today's styli work much harder; nearly 3 times harder as it approaches the inner label, an important factor that only the UNI-DIN geometry takes into account. UNI-DIN trades higher distortions in the tangential curve at the beginning of the record/groove for lower distortions in the last 70 percent.

In comparison, UNI-DIN offers lower overall distortion than Baerwald, Loefgren or Stevenson, and explains why the result feels so much more open and transparent. The human ear is highly sensitive to quick changes in distortion levels, and once the cartridge is aligned to UNI-DIN, you will immediately notice the difference.

Brakemeier does not go so far as to claim that his UNI-DIN geometry is the best, but he does encourage serious audiophiles to investigate. His geometry offers a more relaxed sound with less sibilance, while offering more headroom for dynamics.

Uni-Protractor or SMARTractor?

At nearly double the price, the combined UNI-Protractor and pivot-to-spindle tool is the big brother to the SMARTractor. Brakemeier calls it the heavy-duty professional version. It features more metal parts and interchangeable templates with tonearm-specific geometries, and it is only available on special order. While the mirror-like surface of the SMARTractor

alignment template may look like glass, it is actually polycarbonate, which can be scratched by the diamond of the stylus tip. Over time, such scratches will render the template unusable, so the interchangeability is an added advantage of the more expensive unit. With the high number of alignments I've clocked on the UNI-Protractor, I've managed to wear down three templates, so for someone like a dealer who will be setting up a lot of turntables, the UNI-Protractor may be the best choice. For everyone else, the SMARTractor will be sufficient, as most people will likely perform less than 50 alignments in their lifetime.

In the audio world, where Goldfinger cartridges can cost more than cars yet full ghetto-blasters can cost less than a SMARTractor, I'll leave economic analysis out of the equation. But as a music lover and an analogaholic who performs more than 200 to 300 setups per year, I will say that the SMARTractor has proven itself to be an indispensable tool. If you are like me and gunning for analog perfection, the SMARTractor is a must buy. ●

The SMARTractor
\$650

www.arche-headshell.de
(manufacturer)

www.vanald.com
(North American distributor)



TONE FAVORITES

FOUR FAVORITE UPSTARTS

By Jeff Dorgay

In the ten years of TONE's history, we've seen a lot of new products come and go, but a few great ones have stuck. It's been fun to watch these four companies grow and mature, but it's equally fun to wind the clock backwards and take a look at their humble beginnings.



Audeze LCD-2 Headphones

\$995

www.audeze.com

About seven years ago, when the headphone renaissance was just beginning, Audeze burst on the scene with a planar magnetic headphone that took everyone by surprise. They not only cracked the ceiling with a \$1,000 headphone, they produced a pair of phones with a sound that was, up until now, limited to the likes of electrostats like Stax, which are still nearly impossible to purchase.

They've done an update to the basic design, making them even better than ever. Though the product line has expanded and they've gone through some growing pains, Audeze has held the line on the LCD-2s price, making them a best buy and a head to head competitor with OPPOs \$995 PM-1, another titan.

ModWright SWL 9.0

Approx. \$1,200

Back when the high performance audio segment of CES was held at the Alexis Park hotel in Las Vegas, I met a nice guy from Portland that had made a name for himself modding CD players named Dan Wright. He had just started building his own preamplifiers, and had converted the entire basement of his house into a very tidy, organized workshop. His first product that came into my world was the SWL 9.0 linestage. It was a tidy box with great sound. So much so, that I got rid of the Conrad Johnson PV-12 that I had been

using in favor of this newcomer.

Shortly after our encounter, Wright moved into his own facility, started hiring employees and expanded his product line considerably. Now a force at the major hifi shows, ModWright has become a well-established company, but that original 9.0 still stands out as an incredibly good bargain. Wright still services them, and when you can find an owner willing to part with one, the SWL 9.0 makes for an incredibly good anchor to your hifi system.



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FEATURE



Coffman Labs G1-A
\$4,995

Another Portland local, Damon Coffman hails from the medical equipment industry, yet his passion for music and design led him to build his own preamplifier after a life long quest for better sound.

The G1-A combines the best of retro and contemporary design, both inside and out. Coffman auditions and hand picks what he feels are the best sounding NOS (new old stock) components, combined with contemporary parts, depending on application to create the G1-A. With an onboard MM/MC phono stage and headphone amplifier, the G1-A is an incredibly versatile performer, like some of the great, full function preamplifiers of audio's past, from McIntosh, Audio Research and C-J.

A new G2 is in the works, and Coffman has also put his stamp on the Prautes headphone amplifier from Cypher Labs, but this is where it all began.



PrimaLuna ProLogue 1

\$1,095 (when new)

I began my hifi writing career at *The Absolute Sound*, and instead of the boring NAD integrated amplifier I was supposed to review for my first article, Robert Harley called one day (about two weeks after the ProLogue 1 appeared on the cover of *Stereophile*) and asked if I wouldn't mind reviewing the ProLogue 1 instead. Oh boy, would I, I thought.

This little tube integrated amplifier was

built like nothing I'd ever seen for just over a grand, and it sounded pretty damn good too. I got my first byline in the audio world and editor Harley left in, what would be a ubiquitous quote in PrimaLuna's marketing campaign heard round the world. "How does it sound? It sounds bitchin!" 11 years later, PrimaLuna amplifiers still sound bitchin, and their product line has grown tremendously. ●

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Jeff Dorgay, *Tone Audio Magazine*, January 2013



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Paul Rigby, *Hi Fi World*, March 2013



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TONE FAVORITES

MY NINE FAVORITE AMPLIFIERS

By Jeff Dorgay

While many people argue that speakers are the anchors of an audio system, I will always contest that the power amplifier is just as critical (if not more so) to a system's overall sound. A great amplifier can make a mediocre pair of speakers come alive, but a great pair of speakers powered by a mediocre amplifier still sound mediocre. In celebration of the power amplifier, I decided to list a few of my favorites from over the years, in no particular order. Hit us up on Facebook with your favorite power amp. We always love to hear from readers.



Nagra 300p

\$16,900

Okay, so I have expensive taste. But if we're talking about favorites, I've never listened to a Nagra product that I *didn't* like. The 300p is especially dear to me, as I had the privilege of seeing the prototypes coming right off the drawing board a few years ago when I visited the factory.

The 300p uses a pair of 300B output tubes per channel in a push-pull configuration, producing about 20 watts of power per channel—much better than the average 9 watts per channel that an SET design with a single output tube can muster. This topology is implemented to great effect, as the 300p is as mellifluous as any SET I've experienced and far less affected by speaker load. Topping it off, the 300p is dead quiet and produces way more low-end heft than you would expect from a 20-wpc tube amplifier. It's kind of costly going in, but this is an amplifier that you will pass on to your grandchildren.

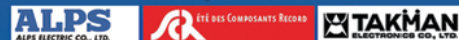
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—Sam Tellig, *Stereophile*, June 2013

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

—Dick Olsher, *The Absolute Sound*, Issue 233 • May/June 2013

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FEATURE

Audio Research D-79

From \$3,250 to \$6,000
(for the D-79C mk. II)

Many audiophiles have said that the D-79 is the best amplifier that ARC ever built. With a massive power supply for its modest 75 watts per channel, the D-79 drew 750 watts from the AC line at full output. All four versions of the amp utilize a matched pair of 6550 output tubes with an

additional 6550 as a voltage regulator, though each iteration of the amp uses a different input, driver and phase splitter complement of tubes. Personally (after all, this is a *favorites* issue), I prefer the additional warmth of the original D-79 with 12AX7 tubes.

These still run about \$3,500 for a super-clean version, and unless ARC itself updated the power supply in

the last 10 years, it's going to need an overhaul—and it's going to be expensive. This remains a wonderful amplifier, with big dynamics, a massive soundstage and tons of sheer grip. Ralph Lauren once said every man should own a 12-cylinder car. I submit that every true audiophile should experience a D-79.

www.audioresearch.com





Rega Brio-R
\$995

Rega's little amplifier that can be an integrated that pumps out 50 watts per channel into 8 ohms and has an outstanding MM phono stage built in. For those of you who loved the original Naim Nait, here is an amp in a similar vein, but with enough power to drive quite a few more speakers.

The Brio-R, like my favorite Pass amplifiers, features a tonality leaning towards the warm side and while not quite

tubey in nature, it will never be mistaken for a harsh, etched solid-state amplifier. The mid-range is yummy, but there is still enough extension and slam to get the dynamic contrasts right. If I were on a tight budget and didn't want to sacrifice sound quality, this is the one I'd choose and would match it up with a pair of MartinLogan Aeries speakers from my favorite used hi-fi store.

www.rega.co.uk

Mark Levinson ML-2 Monoblocks

From \$3,000 to \$6,000 per pair

Much like the ARC D-79, the ML-2 monoblocks from Mark Levinson were big and beefy. Designed by John Curl and Tom Colangelo, these Class-A monoblocks ran *hot*. While they were only rated at 25 watts per channel into 8 ohms, they did double that into 4- and 2-ohm loads, making them a perfect match for the Magnepan Tympani 1Ds that graced

my listening room in the early 1980s.

Since no replacement sheet metal is available, go for the cosmetically cleanest pair you can find. There are still a few people who can work on these, so get yours checked and rebuilt, stat!

www.marklevinson.com





**Pass Labs
Aleph 3 and Aleph 5**
About \$1,000 and \$2,000

Nelson Pass likes to say that he creates amplifiers with “the sound of tubes minus the hassle.” When referring to the early Aleph amplifiers with heat sinks as the entire case, local hi-fi dealer Kurt Doslu likes to say, “Don’t play catch with it.”

All kidding aside, this single-ended, full Class-A design provides 30 watts of tube power with all the midrange magic of my beloved MV-50 but with major bass control and a dead-quiet background. It’s a combination you’ll either love or hate, but it will definitely become an addiction if you are on the love side of the equation. Pass builds everything like a tank, so these babies run forever. And the company can still fix the Aleph 3, so you can send yours back to Pass for a tune up anytime. Should you want a little more juice, the Aleph 5 produces 60 watts per channel, but slightly less sweet than the lower powered model.

passlabs.com



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The ease of operation via its exacting yet simple fixed bias control and comprehensive electronic safeguards, along with its state-of-the-art performance affords absolute refinement, enduring value and unmatched reliability. Further audible improvement and an upgrade path are offered via the optional OCTAVE Black Box power supply capacitance module.

Exhibited in a range of models that redefine the expectations of tube amplifier performance, OCTAVE's timeless contemporary design and harmonious sound quality epitomizes the understated elegance of a true modern classic.

FEATURE



Conrad-Johnson MV-50
About \$1,000

Not CJ's first tube power amplifier, the MV-50 was introduced right at the beginning of the '80s and quickly became a staple of hi-fi stores carrying the brand. It offers 45 watts per channel of tube power and a magical midrange that would define the company for years to come. Using a pair of 6CA7 output tubes per channel, this understated, champagne-colored beauty made music like precious few other amplifiers could.

Those wanting a bit more modern CJ sound can have their MV-50 sent back to the factory to have the power supply rebuilt and premium CJD Teflon capacitors installed in the circuit to bridge the gap between old- and new-school sound. It's a brilliant piece of gear either way.

www.conradjohnson.com



NEW



M O O N

Nēo 430HA

The **Nēo 430HA** is the ultimate expression of headphone amplification. Loaded with numerous state-of-the-art features, the **Nēo 430HA** was created for those who crave perfection. Capable of jaw-dropping dynamics and transparency, the **Nēo 430HA** is destined to become the ultimate solution for the headphone experience. Completing this package is an optional internal DAC that can process both DSD256 and 32-bit PCM.

You owe it to yourself to test-drive the **Nēo 430HA**.



M O O N

simaudio.com



MUSICAL ECSTASY

FEATURE



Burmester 911 MK3

\$32,000

In issue 32, I called the 911 MK3 “the best solid-state amplifier ever made.” And though a few things have come down the road that exceed the performance of the 911 (you can bridge them together for even more power, which changes the game somewhat), it is still one of the finest solid-state amplifiers I’ve ever had the pleasure to use. While not quite as liquid as the mighty Pass Xs monos, the 911 is probably the most Class-A-sounding Class AB

amplifier I’ve experienced; it is only one chassis and draws considerably less AC power.

Much like the Porsche automobile sporting the same name, the Burmester 911 offers a large dose of what the money-is-no-object amplifiers do, but for a lot less—just as the Porsche 911 has similar performance to the much more expensive options from Ferrari and Aston Martin.

www.burmester.de



FEATURE

Decware Zen Mystery Amp

\$5,695

I was going to include the Decware Torii amplifier that I've been using for some time now as my last favorite on this list, but then a new package arrived from Steve Deckert. Though it's not nearly broken in yet, the Zen Mystery amp takes the basic design of the Zen monoblock amplifiers, puts them on one chassis with a slightly lower output (40 watts per channel vs. 60 for the monos) and offers a healthy drop in price to boot.

For those who need a bit more push over the cliff than the 25 watts per channel that the Torii delivers, but can't afford the \$11k pricetag of the monoblocks, the ZMA will be your pot of gold. Much like the Torii, this is one of the most incredible amplifiers I've ever experienced. With more power, the ZMA has a much wider range of speakers it can work well with. If you want an amplifier to last the rest of your life, call Decware and get in the queue for one of these.



FEATURE

Pass Labs Xs 300 Monoblocks

\$88,000 per pair

Moving from past to present, my current reference amplifiers are also from the mind of Nelson Pass. I make no apologies for being a Pass fan, and the last few generations of big Pass Class-A amplifiers have been wonderful; however, there was always that slight bit of delicacy that the Aleph 3 possessed, with its single output device, which was tough to find in the big amplifiers.

Those familiar with the design philosophy of Mr. Pass know that he is a fan of the less-is-more school of thought, but you just can't achieve high power without a little bit of complication. But the Xs 300s bridge the gap, making big power with no sonic compromises. Drawing 1,000 watts of power for each channel, they will alter your carbon footprint somewhat, but for sound this glorious, isn't it worth installing some LED lightbulbs as an offset?

passlabs.com





The Boulder 3050 Monoblocks

\$210,000/pair

I saved the best for last. There are two things in this life I'll probably never be able to afford; an Aston Martin DBS and a pair of Boulder 3050 amplifiers. But, that doesn't make them any less awesome because I can't have a pair. I've had the good fortune to listen to a lot of amplifiers over the years, but the 3050s reproduce and reveal music in a way that I've never experienced with anything else.

These amplifiers require a pair of 240 volt outlets to do their thing, and produce 1500 watts of pure class-A power in return for the hit they put on your carbon footprint. The only problem is that if you experience a pair, you'll never forget the experience. Forget all the audiophile clichés, the 3050s transmit music in a totally uncolored and unfettered way. If you are one of the lucky few that can afford a pair, you will not be disappointed. ●

www.boulderamp.com



AN OLD FAVORITE RETURNS

The Kiseki Blue and PurpleHeart Cartridges

By Jeff Dorgay

People are fond of the saying “history repeats itself.” The second I drop the stylus on the recent MoFi remaster of Tears for Fears’ *Sowing the Seeds of Love*, I know that the Kiseki cartridges have beaten Koetsu at their own game once again, and analog history is repeating itself. If you’ve been around the block with analog, chances are you know the name Kiseki, which translated from Japanese means “miracle.” Over thirty years ago Herman van den Dungen (the man behind PrimaLuna, for those of you a bit newer to the hifi scene) was the Koetsu distributor in Holland.

After a few years of struggling (and Koetsu is *still* a pain in the you-know-what to deal with today) to get orders on time and in proper working order, this young man decided to do it himself. Long story short, he approached some of his Japanese connections and started building his own cartridges that, by his admission, had to be better and less expensive than the famed Koetsu Black of the day.



REVIEW

He succeeded brilliantly and was soon building and shipping ten times what he was able to with Koetsu – and you thought Americans were the only ones to dig in their heels, kick ass and start their own venture. Unfortunately, the CD was soon upon us and the interest in vinyl waned enough that the demand for high-quality phono cartridges diminished, and what was left of Kiseki was mothballed. Van den Dungen stuck with the hifi world as a successful distributor, and then did the same thing with his PrimaLuna amplifiers, which have grown into a major brand of vacuum tube electronics. A couple of years ago, van den Dungen had that smile on his face, much like a kid who's stolen the keys to his father's sports car, when he made it known that he had uncovered a cache of old Kiseki parts and a very limited run of N.O.S. cartridges would be built. Ken Kessler wrote a very enthusiastic review for us, but alas, the remaining samples were snapped up immediately.

Fast-forward to this year's Newport Beach hifi show, and his friend and partner Kevin Deal is sporting the same grin. "Dude, I just got a batch of *new* Kisekis; want to give them a listen?" And thus, the N.S. or "New Style" cartridges are born. Based on the original models, these new models use updated technology and parts, yet stick to a short body cartridge design as in the past, making them compatible with a very wide range of tonearms.

(continued)



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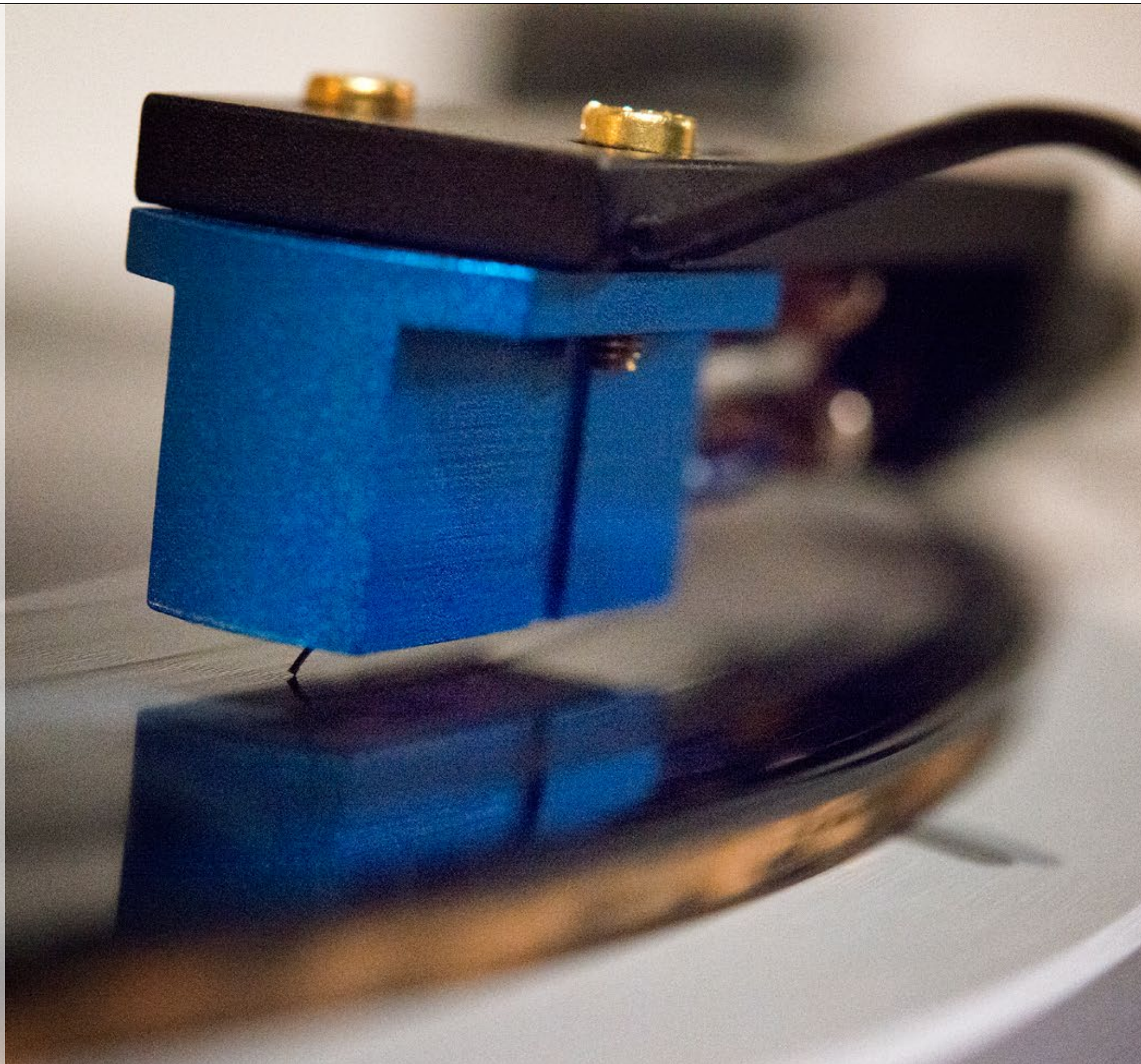
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A wonderful mix of old and new

Having heard the NOS version of the Kiseki Blue only briefly, I distinctly remembered it having a very Koetsu-like sound, basing that on the sound of my then-references, the Koetsu Urushi Sky Blue and the Koetsu Rosewood Signature Platinum, the latter being slightly more laid-back and the former more extended in the HF range. The Kiseki Blue is very close to the Urushi in both tonal quality and dynamic range – I would definitely call it “forgiving,” but wonderfully lush.

Queuing up a clean copy of Fleetwood Mac’s *Rumours*, it’s instantly evident that the Kiseki Blue NS is a very special cartridge indeed. And, that’s the less expensive model, at \$2,299. The PurpleHeart NS for a thousand dollars more is a revelation. The tonal balance of both Kiseki cartridges are more saturated than colored, if you will. Think of it as turning up the saturation control on your TV or computer monitor, where the primary colors are just a bit brighter than they are in reality, but the end result is highly pleasing. This is what the Kisekis bring to the table (pun intended).

Getting back to the Mac, all four members’ vocals take on a distinctive, specific placement across the soundstage, going well beyond the speaker boundaries. Both cartridges set up to the UniDen alignment specification are breathtakingly quiet – providing all the wonder of analog with the ultra low noise floor of digital, with clean records, of course!



Great as the Blue NS is, if you can stretch the extra thousand bucks for the PurpleHeart NS, I would highly suggest it. It’s like getting an M3 instead of a standard 3-series BMW – everything is more visceral. Particularly in the soundstage size – if you don’t get a chance to hear them back-to-back, you’ll love the Blue NS, but if you do, you won’t be happy without the extra 100 horsepower that the PurpleHeart NS provides. The gap can be narrowed somewhat by using a bit more lush phonostage. Though it didn’t have quite the resolution of the PurpleHeart NS, using the Blue NS with the slightly warm Rogers phonostage approached the palpability of the PurpleHeart NS with the Simaudio and ARC Phonostages. Ah, the wonder of analog!

Face off

Keeping things as identical as possible, a brand new VPI Classic Two turntable (which we are also currently reviewing) was commandeered from VPI’s Mat Weisfeld with a pair of identical tonearm wands to facilitate swapping cartridges quickly and easily, minimizing listener memory loss. Later, once the initial comparisons were made, an AVID Volvere SP with an Ortofon TA-110 tonearm and identical headshells to start and then with the

Both cartridges have a claimed separation of 34dB, but thanks to the Feickert software and the SMART-ractor (reviewed by Richard Mak in this issue) I was able to get a whopping 36.2 dB from the PurpleHeart NS and 35.1dB from the Blue NS – indeed impressive! (*continued*)

REVIEW

A comparison with Ortofon's excellent Cadenza Black, priced at about \$2,800, proves interesting indeed. The Feickert Blackbird turntable in for review, also with removable headshells, again shows a major difference between these two class leaders. The Grado Statement 1, which I also use as a reference cartridge, does a little more of this, and the Koetsu Urushi Blue slightly more. The Simaudio 810LP and 610LP phonostages with the 820S power supply used in all of the comparisons are rock solid, dead quiet, deliver major dynamic swing and are spot-on tonally, making this comparison even easier to quantify. So, you can either see your cartridge as a tone control or something else downstream. I could live happily with either.

With a slightly different stylus profile, the PurpleHeart NS sports a 4 x 120µm line contact stylus, where the Blue NS is slightly wider at 5 x 120µm. Both feature nearly identical internal resistance (42 ohms for the former, 40 for the latter) and both have identical compliance specs. (16µm/mN), yet the PurpleHeart NS has a claimed frequency response of 20-30,000hz, where the Blue is only claimed to go up to 25,000hz, both within +/- 1dB.

Concentrating on the Classic Records remaster of Alan Parsons's *I Robot*, and the trippy, '70s electronic effects, the extended response of the PurpleHeart NS is clearly revealed. A similar effect is achieved with the recent MoFi pressing of Dead Can Dance's *Into the Labyrinth*.



REVIEW

A complete evaluation and judgment cannot be made on the basis of electronic music; there is a certain airiness and spatial ability that the PurpleHeart NS adds to the presentation, involving the listener that much further, regardless of turntable and phonostage used. The wooden body also adds a bit more palpability – again that tonal saturation that I've mentioned before.

Rounding out the evaluation, the Blue NS and the PurpleHeart will pull you in with the wonderful midrange, but the longer you listen and the wider range of program material you audition, their fatigue-free presentation make either one a cartridge you can listen to for days on end.

Neither cartridge had trouble tracking whatever tortures I threw at them (even *better* when aligned with the SMARTractor), and both proved to be the most similar in bass response, with solid, tuneful bass. Though not quite as powerful as some of the world's finest, they are definitely above par for their price class. Again, I would describe the LF character of the Kisekis as more organic than electronic. Perhaps this would be the best description of these cartridges' overall character.

That being said, there is no particular style of music that the Kisekis can't play with aplomb, and being slightly saturated in their rendition of music, those worshiping solo vocalists and acoustic instruments will be thrilled. Spinning k.d. lang's *All You Can Eat* portrayed the Portland chanteuse in full glory.

Rounding out the rest of the picture

Each cartridge delivers excellent dynamics when tracking force is optimized to the suggested 2.4 grams, and both work well loaded at 400 ohms. While I am sold on the SMARTractor, using the supplied Ortofon and VPI alignment tools still give excellent performances, so neither of these two beauties prove tough to live with, nor require a \$650 protractor. *(continued)*

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bowers-wilkins.com



Decoupled Double Dome tweeter



On one level, very little has changed. Koetsus are still hard to come by and even tougher to get serviced. Herman van den Dungen is still kicking ass and taking names. While it is great news that he's brought this great cartridge back to market, it's even better that they will be widely available.

There are mega cartridges like the Lyra Atlas, the Clearaudio Goldfinger and a couple others that occupy the stratosphere of analog reproduction. For those, you need a mega turntable and system to match, and they do surpass what the Kisekis can do. But in the extremely competitive world of \$3,000–\$5,000 cartridges, if you've always wanted that special kind of sound that a Koetsu offers, the Kiseki is still a better choice for a more reasonable price. Considering what these cartridges offer, we are very happy to award them one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2014. Now that's a miracle we can all be excited about. I know I want one. ●



REVIEW

The Kiseki Blue NS and PurpleHeart NS Phono Cartridges

\$2,299 and \$3,299 respectively

MANUFACTURER

KISEKI-Durob Audio BV

CONTACT

www.kiseki-eu.com
www.upscaleaudio.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source

VPI Classic 2, AVID Volvere SP w/Ortofon TA-110 arm, Feickert Blackbird w/12" Jelco arm

Phonostage

Simaudio 610LP, Simaudio 810LP (both with Simaudio 820S external power supply) ARC REF Phono 2 SE, Rogers PA-1A

Preamplifier

Robert Koda K-10, Pass Labs Xs Preamplifier

Power Amplifier

Pass Labs Xs 300 monoblocks

Cable

Cardas Clear

Power

Iso Tek Super Titan

Accessories

GIK Acoustic Panels, SRA Scuttle rack



T[😊]ONE FAVORITES

7 From Rob Johnson's System

I have been meaning to update my 20-year old car, but the love of music, and buying the audio gear that reproduces it, keeps getting precedence. Fueled by a life-long passion for audio, my reference system has evolved over the course of many years starting with a Sony boom box at age 12. During all those years many pieces came and went. As with many kindred audiophiles, the very slow process of sonic improvement involves selling the weak link component and buying a better one, whenever saving, horse-trading, or sweat equity makes purchases possible.

With so much great gear out there, it's exceedingly difficult to skinny-down my own "favorites list" to a scant seven components. However, a few have stopped me in my tracks, arrested my desire to flip them, and elevated the performance of my reference system with a synergistic contribution aligning with my personal sonic preferences. Each of my favorites have taken long-term residence in my home due to their fantastic sound, marvelous build, and exceptional reliability – all equally important. In each case, I've purchased those pieces of gear as my budget permitted. *Putting my money where my ears are* is the greatest compliment I can give to any audio component, and I want to thank the manufacturer of each piece for their dedication, passion, and hard work producing something that brings so much musical joy to my life.





FEATURE

SONUS FABER OLYMPICA III SPEAKERS

\$12,500

www.sonusfaber.com

The Sonus faber Olympica III floorstanding speakers are beguiling for their astonishing sound as well as their dashing good looks. While they have limited capability for producing the lowest bass frequencies, they won me over with their organic sound, incredible ability to produce a three-dimensional sonic image of any well-recorded performance, and the almost tangible way the drivers re-create instruments and vocals. Sonus faber creates their own drivers in-house, and therefore can wrap them in an ideally mated cabinet design. Listening to Johnny Cash's *American IV* album through these speakers still proves revelatory.

Closing my eyes, Olympicas can provide me the momentary illusion that Cash himself is sitting in the living room. In a world of cost-no-object speaker designs, \$12,500 is a very fair price for speakers of this quality. While Sonus faber produces even higher-end speakers, the Olympica IIIs demonstrate very little compromise and reveal all the nuance of components upstream – even when those components might be more expensive than the speakers themselves.

WA7 FIREFLIES

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32-Bit, 192K USB Digital-to-Analog Converter



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"THIS IS POSSIBLY THE MOST LINEAR
DAC AND HEADPHONE AMP I'VE HEARD " - POSITIVE FEEDBACK

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SOUND QUALITY AND PHYSICAL PRESENTATION. " - HP SOUNDINGS

"THE WA7 IS A THING OF MUSEUM-GRADE BEAUTY AND SIMPLICITY." - KEN ROCKWELL

"THE FIREFLIES IS VERY HIGHLY RECOMMENDED FOR ANYONE BUYING THEIR FIRST,
OR EVEN POSSIBLY THEIR LAST, REFERENCE AMPLIFIER." - DAGOGO

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www.avahifi.com

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



BURMESTER 911 MK3 AMPLIFIER

\$29,995

www.burmester.de

Of the amps I've enjoyed over the years, the Burmester 911 Mk3 stands strong as a current favorite. First, the Burmester's outward appearance demonstrates not only gorgeous aesthetics, but incredible attention to every detail. Beautifully crafted heat sinks and an equally elegant ventilated top panel hint at the musical beauty locked within. However, the 911's voice confirms it immediately. Sound reaches ever so slightly to the warm side, but with detailed reproduction that captures every nuance of a recording. With 350 watts of solid-state power into 4 ohms there's plenty of juice

for virtually any speakers mated with it. Crystalline highs, beguiling mids, and a tight, controlled, musical bass leave no frequencies un-pampered. Along with the delicate sound reproduction comes a soundstage that extends away from the speakers in all directions. Vocalists stand out front, ambient details stretch to the sides of the speakers and though the rear wall behind them. This Burmester is a marvelous amp and certainly one that has proven itself worthy of standing the test of time, in both my system and our publisher's.



Oppo BDP-103 Blu-Ray Player

\$499

www.oppodigital.com

Price-performance wise, Oppo's players are a pinnacle of achievement. At \$499, the BDP-103's produces stellar video and audio reproduction. On the video side, rendering of Blu-Ray discs and streamed video content offer a wonderfully crisp and colorful picture. On the audio side, 7.1 surround sound proves equally remarkable. As another plus, the BDP-103 is a very good Redbook CD/SACD player or transport when used solely in an audio capacity. With a wireless or Ethernet internet connection, BDP-103 enables streaming directly from Netflix, Pandora, and other sites as well as music streaming from a NAS. There are more resolving (and more expensive) players including the 103's brother the Oppo BDP-105. However, for a one-box unit that serves so many purposes in a home audio-visual system, I find myself hard-pressed to suggest another player that does so much, so well, at its price point.



SME Model 10 Turntable and Model 10 tonearm

\$8,100

www.sme.ltd.uk

While SME's 20 and 30, exceed its capability, the model 10 proves itself a workhorse with sonic reproduction, and a show pony in aesthetics. Yes, it was love at first sight. The SME model 10 turntable looks like a modern sculpture. Though it's an entry-level turntable in the SME family, the model 10's build quality does not reveal any shortcuts. With a unique vibration dampening system beneath the heavy platter, records spin uninhibited. A screw-down record clamp holds vinyl to the platter with a tight grip allowing the tonearm and cartridge to pull each nuance from the record grooves. Mated with a matching SME 10 tonearm and a great cartridge, the 'table offers a wonderfully organic analog experience. The model 10 also offers an upgrade path for those who seek it. The SME V tonearm takes it to an even higher level of musical reproduction.



**Jena Labs
StreamDancer USB cable**

\$500/5 feet

www.jenalabs.com

As with power conditioners and vibration control, speaker and interconnect cables can have a sonic impact on system sound. The more revealing my reference system has become, the more the subtle differences between cables become evident. After experimenting with many to find the best synergy for my own system, my quest led me to a USB cable from Jena Labs. Made of braided, liquid nitrogen immersed, high-quality copper, all the Jena Labs cables are hand-made in Oregon. The cable enables wonderfully natural, rich sound, plus great extension of lows and highs without any harsh etch that can accompany higher frequencies with some cables. I keep several other high quality USB cables on hand for testing, but none get as much dedicated listening time as the Jena Labs USB.

Benchmark



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Ultimate Ears UE18 Custom In-Ear Monitors

\$1,350

www.ultimateears.com

When traveling on planes, custom in-ear monitors are a best friend. Not only can they seal out the sounds I *don't* want to hear, but they allow me to pipe into my head exactly what I *do* want to hear. With a tight ear seal keeping unwanted sound out, they can enable great sonics at a lower volume, reducing ear strain. I purchased my pair UE18s three years ago, and still use them many times a week at the gym, on walks, riding mass transit, and during all my travels. The fit is perfect, and the sound they produce offers a very detailed, but non-fatiguing quality. With a snug-fitting IEM hugging the ear canal bass is robust and tuneful, with great mids and highs elevating the sense of musical enjoyment. I also enjoy JH Audio JH16 IEMs, but the UEs were my first custom IEM purchase and they have proven durable well beyond my expectations. I love their sound as much today as I did when they first arrived in the mail.



Ultimate Ears Custom Ear Plugs

\$179

www.ultimateears.com

At the same time I sent my earmolds to Ultimate Ears to make UE18 IEMs, I also had them make for me a matching set of custom ear plugs. I love recorded music, but of course, have a passion for live music too. These provide the perfect way to protect one's valuable hearing, but not completely muffle the sound of the performance. UE's ear plugs are made of a firm but flexible translucent material that seals the ear canal perfectly, just like their IEMs do. Because the 'plugs are designed to maintain a neutral sound, it's rather like having a volume knob for your head. No Frankenstein-esque bolts are needed though. To accomplish this feat UE offers each owner a choice of small filter inserts that slide into the earplugs and reduce external volume by 9, 15 or 25dB. Those who need varying levels of hearing protection for different environments can buy all the filters and change them easily on-the-go. I use the -15dB inserts every time I go to a show. ●



FEATURE

TONE
FAVORITES

Seven Cheap and Cheerful Favorites

By Mark Marcantonio

As the guy on the *TONE* staff who covers some of the more “reasonably” priced gear, I am a big fan of trickle-down technology. Amazing things are happening at the high end of the audio food chain, which means that what was once reference-grade technology is now available in much more affordable and even entry-level components. And so the pool for high-quality but inexpensive gear is growing. I’ve had the opportunity over the last few years to audition and review a lot of amazing examples. What follows are seven of my standout favorites.

**Magnepan MMG**

\$599

With so much mystique surrounding panel loudspeakers, there’s no better place to start than with Magnepan’s entry level speaker. The MMG can only be purchased directly from Magnepan, and thanks to their eliminating the dealer markup, you get a remarkable speaker for a very reasonable price. While the MMG lacks the treble extension of the ribbon tweeter in the higher priced models, they are much easier to drive, making them a fit with a much wider (and less expensive) range of amplifiers.

The most interesting aspect of these speakers is that they will provide pleasant, room filling sound with a mass market receiver, yet they really come alive with a big, high current solid state amplifier, so they can be the last component you replace as you move down the upgrade path.

Magnepan has recently introduced a “Super MMG,” featuring a center bass panel for \$1,200, and while it reveals more music than the original (which is still offered), it takes away from the mega budget ethos of the MMG. The original MMG is perhaps one of the best buys in all of high end audio, and still the one I suggest to all my friends.



IN ADMIRATION OF MUSIC

DALI BY DESIGN



Dali loudspeakers feature a performance consistency unmatched by any other speaker. From the entry-level Zensor, to the stylish Fazon and elegant Rubicon to the flagship Epicon, all share the same engineering goals: combining low-loss cabinet materials, emphasis on maintaining time coherence and gentle easy-to-drive crossover networks in a range of loudspeakers delivering what the musicians intend you to hear.

Get to Know Dali.



The Sound Organisation

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info@soundorg.com soundorg.com

FEATURE



Audioengine D2 24-Bit Wireless DAC System

\$599

For those in search of a quality but budget-friendly solution for wirelessly transporting music from their computer/server in one room to their audio system in another, Audioengine offers the two-piece D2 wireless DAC system. It consists of a sender and a receiver unit, with a range of 100 feet. I found clean, quality sound at 70-plus feet and through several walls.

The 24-bit, 192-kHz asynchronous DAC of the receiver unit is controlled via the PCM1792A chip. The D2 does a very good

job for a budget DAC at extracting the inner details from various recordings. The system does a particularly good job of resolving female vocals like Kathleen Edwards and mallet-played percussion instruments. And the DAC section is definitely not an afterthought. Users with multiple systems can add as many as three receivers. The D2 system continues Audioengine's streak of impressive but affordable gear.

audioengineusa.com



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FEATURE

Shunyata Venom 3 Power Cord \$125

So, it's time to replace those stock power cords sticking out the back of your recently upgraded system, but the thought of saving up some serious cash for just one replacement cord at a time makes you ill. Try a different approach. The Venom series power cords from Shunyata Research are designed for budget-conscious yet discriminating listeners, and it was developed as a way for users to affordably upgrade their entire system. For just \$125, each the Venom 3 power cord has been widely praised for providing great value.

The company's president, Caelin Gabriel, has put together all the critical elements: Shunyata-specified CDA 101 12-gauge oxygen-free copper, slow and steady cryogenic treatment, 100-percent aluminum shielding and brass connectors—the same base features found in the company's excellent Helix series power cords. Don't believe your ears? Hook one up to you high-definition television and see the improvement in color saturation and black level. My entire system receives its juice via the plum-colored Venom 3.

shunyata.us



"Moderation is a fatal thing... Nothing succeeds like excess."

Oscar Wilde



Xs 300: Dual chassis monoblock
Xs 150: Dual chassis monoblock
Xs Preamp: Dual chassis preamp
Xs Phono: Dual chassis phonopreamp

Rega RP1 Turntable with Ortofon OM5 Cartridge

\$450

Looking for a turntable to start your vinyl journey? Head straight to the Rega RP1. Take it from someone who was in this mode a few years ago, when I wanted to reacquaint myself with analog but needed to stay on a slim budget (though the stunning Rega P9 at the *TONE* studio had me thinking of taking a second job). The RP1 has more than satisfied my thirst.

Ridiculously easy to setup and ground-wire free, the RP1 does all the basics right. Later on, one can move up the cartridge ladder from the solidly performing Ortofon OM5. (I'm currently running the Super OM40 with excellent results.) With the RP1, Roy Gandy of Rega has created a turntable that both the vinyl-curious youth and the reminiscing rest of us budget audiophiles can enjoy for years to come.

www.rega.co.uk



FEATURE

**Peachtree Audio nova220SE
Integrated Amplifier**

\$1,999

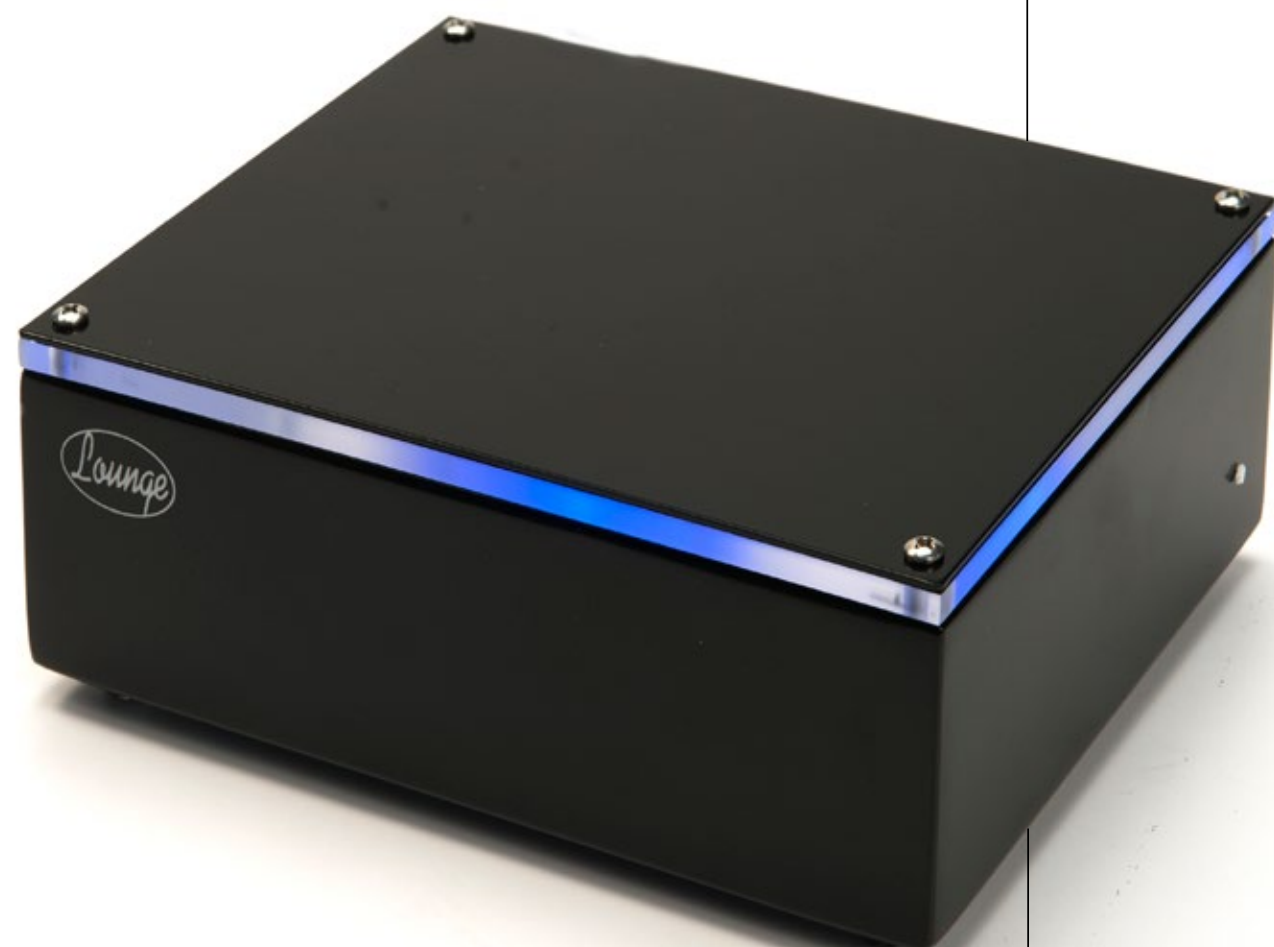
Musical, powerful, solid and sexy are all words that accurately describe the Class-D nova220SE integrated amplifier. Sporting 21st-century input choices (USB, two optical and a coaxial), along with a very respectable built-in ESS Sabre 24/192 asynchronous DAC, the nova220SE is a digital-music-lover's dream. Making the amplifier section sound even sweeter is a tube buffer in the preamp section.

At 220 wpc into 8 ohms, the nova220SE has no problems holding a solid grip on the notoriously power-hungry Magnepan 1.6s, even when the loads drop into 2-ohm territory. Skip the worries about careful speaker matching with this chip-based amplifier section; it plays nicely with at least five very different speakers types. And with a built-in DAC, the nova220SE a financial and sonic bargain.

www.peachtreeaudio.com



FEATURE



Lounge Audio Phonostage
\$300

Though I've only heard it at the *TONE* studio, the Lounge Audio LCR MKIII phonostage deserves every bit of the praise that publisher Jeff Dorgay wrote in his review. It's warm, grain-free sound belies its miniscule \$300 price tag. Designer Robert Morin nailed the RIAA curve reproduction, which the phonostage does with a wide variety of cartridges. Whether part of Jeff's budget system or six-figure reference system, the Lounge makes a fine impression with a wide soundstage, excellent pace, and a surprising low-end frequency response.

With this phono pre, you can take the extra \$800-plus you would have spent on another option and put it towards a finer cartridge or speakers. This little wood box perfectly illustrates how satisfying budget audio can be.

www.loungeaudio.com

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.

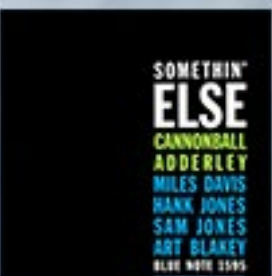
No high performance analog system would be complete without a selection of high quality accessories. For these essential items we work with several manufacturers including Acoustical Systems from Germany, Blue Horizon from the United Kingdom and Okki Nokki also from Germany.

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.

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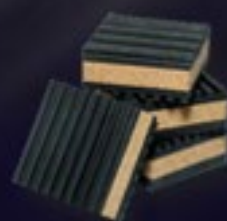
RP6 by Rega



Clearaudio Concept



Audeze LCD XC



Isol-Pad



Ortofon 2M



Audio Desk System's
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FEATURE

Golden Ear Technology Triton Seven Speakers

\$1,400 per pair

On rare occasions, I can't stop thinking about a product long after the review is over. The Triton Seven is one such example. No matter what room I placed them in during my review, the speakers managed to make the space their own. With surprisingly full bass response (down to 29 Hz) and terrific imaging, these speakers caught my attention and didn't let go.

If the whole family is to share one system, the Triton Sevens could very well be the nirvana speakers. Whether hip-hop, metal, acoustic, jazz or symphonic music, these slim towers play each with enthralling gusto. Need them to be a part of a home-theater setup? No problem—they'll give you enough dynamics, clear vocals, and bass response to have you skipping the purchase of a subwoofer. If I could turn back the clock, I would have bought the review pair and dealt with the wife's scorn. ●

www.goldenear.com





VPI Classic 3

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"The Classic 3 wasn't as quiet as the Continuum Caliburn at more than 20 times the price, but it came closer than any table I can recall that costs under \$10,000-without a tonearm."

- Michael Fremer



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Scout 2

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REVIEW

TONE FAVORITES

OUR FAVORITE SYSTEM

By Jeff Dorgay

REVIEW

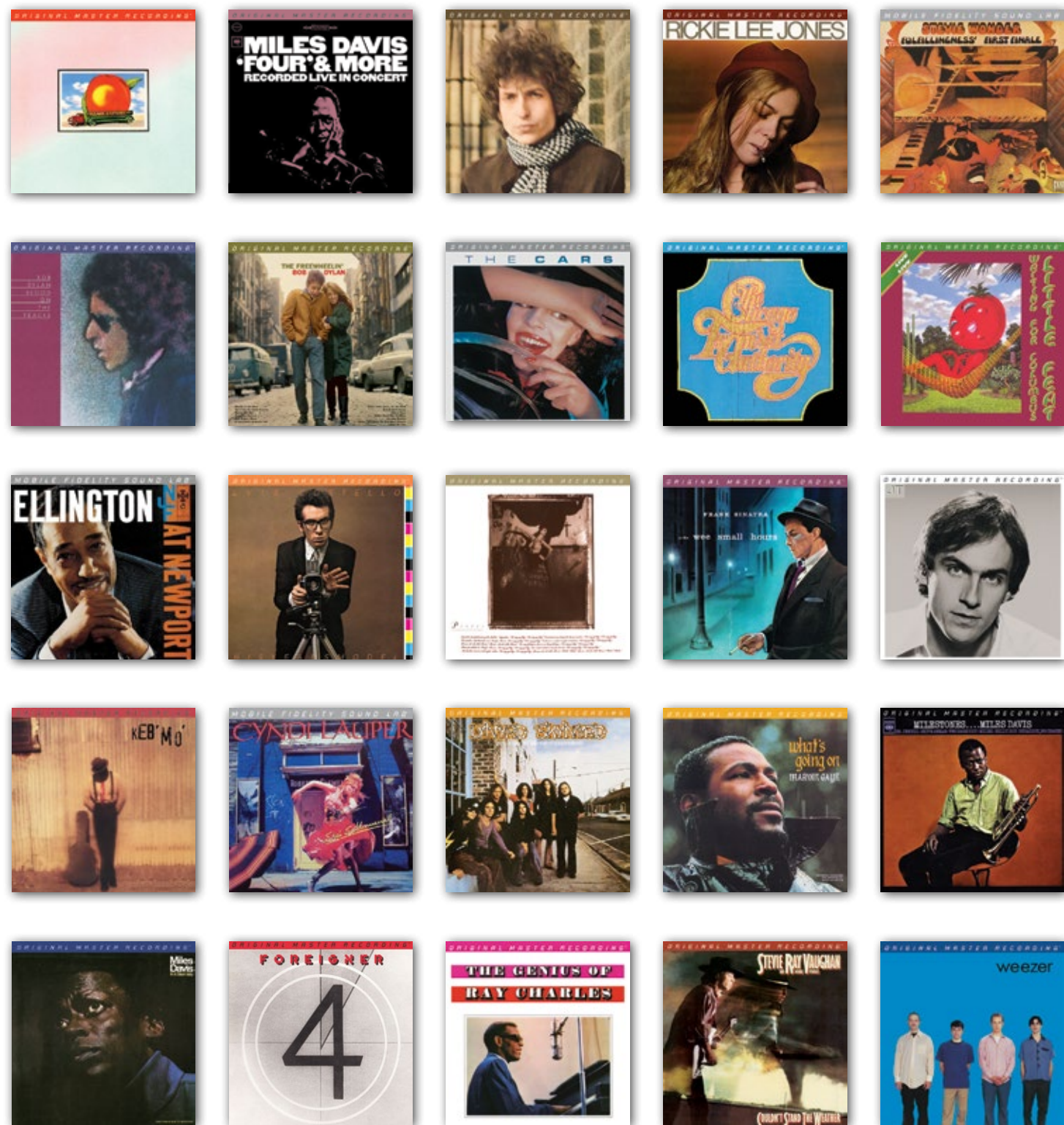
The Devialet Ensemble





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www.mofi.com



REVIEW

We've had an interesting journey with Devialet since the company came onto the scene three years ago. After we produced North America's first review of the original Devialet D-Premier (in issue 35) our entire staff was smitten with the Devialet amp, which combines function and capability with one of the most stylish designs on the market. The only thing keeping it out of the hands of some buyers was the \$16,000 price—and the fact that not everyone needs 250 watts per channel.

Today, Devialet offers a range of models, from the entry-level 120 to the 200 and all the way up to a pair of Devialet 400s, for those with an unquenchable lust for power. Fortunately, they all sound nearly identical, so choosing the model that is right for you is really a matter power and features. They all offer a high-resolution 24-bit/192-kHz DAC, preamplifier, power amplifier, phonostage (the 120 has an MM input only, while the others offer MM and MC), and an onboard streaming module at no extra cost, which ranges from \$6,495 up to about \$29,995. *(continued)*



Each Devialet is roughly the same physical size; they each look something like a small chrome-plated and curvaceous pizza box that one might sooner expect to find in a modern art collection than in a hi-fi store. We suggest purchasing the optional wall-mount bracket and displaying yours on the wall like a piece of art. And with a Devialet as your system anchor, all you will need is a pair of speaker cables, a power cord and something to go between it and your source components. Wife/partner acceptance factor is a thing of the past with Devialet; a recent visit from a friend and his wife underlined this point. After remarking on the stunning good looks of the Devialet, she turned to him and said, “You mean we can eliminate that big rack of stuff from our living room? Buy one—*tomorrow!*”

Making It Even Easier

Mating the Devialet 110 (now upgraded to 120 spec) with a variety of speakers over the last year has been incredibly easy. From the full-range Acoustat ESLs to the Vandersteen 1Ci, nothing proved problematic for this little French marvel. Even in the context of a mega system, using the Devialet with the \$150,000-per-pair GamuT S9s, the \$90,000 Dynaudio Evidence Platinums and the \$60,000 Focal Maestro Utopias, the Devialet was never a weak link, providing stellar audio performance with all speakers tested.

This May, the company announced its Devialet Ensemble.

It includes the Devialet 120 amp equipped with the new Speaker Active Matching (SAM) functionality, optimized for the Atohm GT1 speakers, which are included in the Ensemble—priced together at about \$9,995 – with speaker cables. The result, as heard by all those at the Munich High End Show, was very impressive. In short, the SAM system uses Devialet’s DSP engine to optimize the speaker output for the speaker being used, taking into account its load and crossover characteristics. The electrical result is a phase-optimized system, with low-frequency equalization that extends bass response in a major way. During the demo, as Devialet representatives switched SAM in and out, it felt as if a subwoofer had been added, but without any ill effects clouding the delicate midbass region.

In the months to follow, Devialet has developed more SAM profiles, now including two other speakers we have on hand here at *TONE*, the KEF LS-50 and the Penaudio Cenya. Both speakers exhibit an equally impressive improvement with SAM, and should the LF boost be too much, SAM can be accessed through the display and adjusted from 100 percent down to 0. This proved highly effective in my 11-by-13-foot listening room, where the boost provided by SAM was just a bit too much at 100 percent, but it was perfect at 73 percent. To give your Devialet even more control over your environment, it also has custom-configurable bass and treble controls. (*continued*)

REVIEW

The Ensemble combination with the Atohms is tough to ignore, and for the customer who wants high performance, high style and high functionality with no fuss, look no further than Devialet. The Ensemble system offers perfection for all but the most crazed audiophiles, which means that 99.99 percent of you will never need another music system.

As good as the Devialet 110 was without SAM, the 120 and all current models take things to another level. No matter what the program material, the extra LF grunt is instantly noticed. The bass line in Meshell Ndegeocello's "Call Me" locks into place firmly with considerably more weight, picking up some speed in the process and with more texture and realism. The Devialet achieves a similar effect with Daft Punk's recent record, with the diminutive Atohm speakers begging you to play *Where's Waldo* with the subwoofer. But it goes beyond bass; optimizing the speakers in the phase domain makes for a more natural presentation overall.

The Atohm speakers have always been impressive, but the SAM/Devialet connection makes them even more so, especially with the extended bass response. Even in the context of my larger 16-by-25-foot room, the system performs admirably. And in a small- to medium-sized room, you may never need more. Thanks to the speakers' soft dome tweeter, the highs are extended yet smooth and never harsh. (continued)



GAIN MOMENTUM.



Audiophiles know Dan D'Agostino as the world's most skilled and passionate designer of high-powered solid-state audio systems. His Momentum monoblock amplifier—a 300 watt tour de force—has been met with accolades by critical listeners worldwide. The Momentum stereo amplifier delivers 200 watts per channel and is factory upgradable to monoblock configuration for ultimate system flexibility. With the Momentum series, revolutionary concepts in amplification employ innovative materials and a fresh-slate design. The Momentum amplifiers draw less than 1 watt of power at idle despite their impressive output, and are stable at high frequencies into the lowest-impedance speakers. Efficient cooling is achieved with venturi-equipped copper heat sinks whose beauty matches their function. And true to Dan's obsession with perfection, every detail of the Momentum series establishes a new benchmark for build quality in the high-end arena.

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When listening to tight harmonies—like those from Crosby, Stills, & Nash, Crowded House or Utopia—the Atohms keep things sorted, throwing a deep and wide soundstage while giving each vocalist a distinct and separate space. The classic harmonies on CSN’s “Our House” are a joy to bask in, with these small monitors painting a large aural canvas and also disappearing completely.

Most audiophiles will agree that a well-designed two-way monitor offers coherence that few speakers (other than full-range ESLs) can match, and the Atohms never disappoint. On a number of high-resolution Blue Note Jazz rereleases (courtesy of HDtracks), the recreation of drums, percussion and horns is sublime, even at relatively high volume. The limits of the Devialet Ensemble is only truly pushed when playing really heavy (and often heavily compressed) rock recordings or bass-heavy EDM tracks at high volume. One can only defy the laws of physics for so long, but when used within its very wide comfort zone, the Devialet Ensemble will allow you to easily engage in the music and forget about the gear—perhaps more easily than anything we’ve encountered.

Qualityphiles Take Note

Every aspect of the Devialet Ensemble system is well sorted out. Everything is luxuriously and carefully packaged, the instructions are well written and you need nothing else to get rolling—and you even get a decent pair of speaker cables included in the box.



Set the configurator (and register your Devialet system) via the company’s website and you’ll be enjoying music in 10 minutes. The Devialet Ensemble system is easier to set up than an iPhone 6.

If you haven’t experienced Devialet, you will be in for a major aesthetic treat to accompany the high-quality sonics. Everything is finished flawlessly. Perhaps comparing it to Apple isn’t even high enough praise; the fit and finish on the Devialet is more like that of an Aston Martin or a Bentley. While many dyed-in-the-wool audiophiles complain about time and money spent on casework, I beg to disagree. If I’m dropping \$10K on a stereo system, I want it to look awesome too. The Ensemble will be right at home in the company of other objects of high style, no matter what your personal style.

For the purpose of this review, we’ve used the Atohm speakers with both the Devialet 120 (my personal reference) and the Devialet 200, which is in for review, but it looks like the 200 is going to replace the 120 in my system for its phono capability (not for any lack of sonic ability). Though the 200 has more power and expanded functionality, the sound quality is virtually identical; the entry-level 120 sounds just as good as the top-of-the-range models. *(continued)*

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REVIEW

Whether you are a maniacal audiophile or just a music lover wanting a turnkey system, Devialet's Ensemble is as close to plug and play as it comes. It makes no sonic compromises, even with some of the world's finest speakers. And upgrades are as easy as visiting the Devialet website. Upgrade the firmware and go, making Devialet a sound long-term investment. If it were a car, the Devialet would be a Porsche Boxster S—not quite a 911 GT3, Ferrari or Aston, but so *damn* close that you won't want to bother coming up with all that extra cash.

One listen is all it takes to see why the Devialet Ensemble system is, by far, our favorite system going—and the component I've chosen for my home audio system. ●

Devialet Ensemble
\$9,995 (speaker cables included)

www.devialet.com (factory)
www.audioplusservices.com
(North American importer)



The REL S/2

High Performance, Small Footprint

A s an enthusiast of planar loudspeakers and mini monitors, the agonizing question is always whether to jeopardize the tonal purity and coherence of these speakers in search of the bass extension that they lack, or to just deal. Inevitably, low frequency extension always wins the day for this listener, because music just doesn't feel right without that weight.

The last thirty years of my audiophile experience has included a quest to increase LF energy without the bloat and hangover that usually makes these things boom boxes. That might be suitable for a discotheque; it never works with a pair of panels. A few times it's come close, but other than the MartinLogan subs with MartinLogan speakers, it's never been a wonderful union. A subwoofer keeps up with a pair of panels, has no problem keeping up with a cone speaker and that's great news for the rest of you that don't share my passion for the ESL.



REL always comes to mind and for good reason. REL produces compact, high performance subwoofers, taking a different approach than the other manufacturers. Rather than relying on a pair of line level outputs, which require another pair of potentially costly interconnects; they use a high impedance connection to the speaker outputs. (Though they can be connected via line level or LFE should you so desire)

This makes REL subwoofers instantly compatible with *any* system you care to mate them with, but more importantly, by feeding from the speaker outputs, they now pick up the *character* of the bass from the rest of the system. Change the power amp, change the bass tonality - It's a cool approach, one I've not only grown accustomed to, but after trying everything else, the REL way still sounds the most correct and integrates more seamlessly into my system than anything else I've tried.

However what really sets REL apart from the others is that they see their subwoofers as a "sub bass system," intended to be run with a full range main system, augmenting the lowest of frequencies, rather than the sub/sat system way that most other manufacturers suggest. In theory, it looks easier to implement a high pass filter, letting the main amplifier do less of the work, passing a lot of information above 40hz to a subwoofer (many sat/sub systems cross

over at 80-120hz) the woofer sounds muffled, muddy and worst of all, easily discernable as a separate speaker in the room. Crossing over down low allows the subwoofer to disappear in the room much easier, even more so when using multiple subs.

Even the most massive of full range speaker systems that we've used have always benefited from a REL subwoofer, albeit one of their larger models. (Our review of the G2 is here www.tonepublications.com/review/rel-gibraltar-g-2-sub-bass-system/) Using a REL sub in this way adds a third dimension to the stereo perspective, with much more depth and spatial information available. Paradoxically, when using a REL subwoofer with a speaker system capable of useable bass output in the 25hz region, switching the sub in and out of the system always results in a dramatic enlargement of the soundfield presented in all three dimensions – even if I can't always detect a lot more LF output. It's almost spooky – but it makes a huge difference in the realism and dynamic range of a system.

Different approach, same result

REL's John Hunter, formerly of Sumiko, was one of the main brainiacs behind their "masters training," and is a Jedi Knight when it comes to speaker setup. *(continued)*



REVIEW

He was kind enough to pay us a visit to install the S/2 subwoofers you see here in two separate systems; one in art director Jean LaCrosse's system featuring a Naim Qute 2 with a pair of KEF LS-50 speakers and my home system, featuring the new Simaudio MOON AH430 DAC/Pre/Headphone amplifier, PrimaLuna Prologue 3 amplifier and a pair of vintage Acoustat 1+1 speakers.

In both systems, the setup was quick and easy, though varied in scope, with the S/2 blending seamlessly and efficiently into the main systems, augmenting their

response, yet maintaining the character of the main system, as REL intends.

Once the main speakers were optimized, it was a snap to get the S/2 into position, and again, the results were as stunning with the LS50s as it was with the Acoustats. While Hunter's standard test track is Jennifer Warnes rendition Leonard Cohen's "Ballad of the Runaway Horse," mine is Thomas Dolby's "My Brain is Like a Sieve." Both tracks illustrate the same effect of proper setup providing maximum bass integration with the main speakers. *(continued)*

Product: 122 Integrated Amplifier

P R I M A R E

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Primare began in the mid 1980s by producing some of the audio industry's most celebrated products with their famed 900 and 200 series. These products not only broke new ground in presenting music in a new clean manner, but also proved that audio components could be beautiful works of art. In the same way that sound was presented with a new philosophical approach of "no sound," the aesthetic also had to be absent of unnecessary clutter and noise; simplicity in circuit design combined with simplicity of aesthetic design.

Today Primare embarks on a new era of two-

channel playback with a full range of new products. With continued belief in the importance of physical media, Primare has created three revolutionary new series of products each designed to take advantage of newer high-resolution music formats provided by computer audio. While these may be the frontier, Primare has created a full range of new sources designed for the many different media from analogue to BluRay as well as products that focus on musicality and simplicity in high-performance multi-channel.

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REVIEW



Interestingly, LaCrosse, who is always skeptical of upgrades, actually laughed when the S/2 was switched in and out of a good system to begin with – it was just a lot less fun without. This is the heart of the S/2 experience in a nutshell; it's not a subtle upgrade.

Hunter is quick to say “set the gain higher and the crossover frequency lower,” which again has actually proved useful advice with any sub I’ve set up, but with the REL units, it’s more about pressurizing the listening room. When you get it just right, it’s like finding perfect VTA on a turntable, the music opens up and the system is much more dynamic than it was before. If you don’t have a REL dealer to set yours up, this is the grail to search for, this maximum transfer of energy that presents the lower frequencies in an articulate, powerful way, while never drawing attention to the subwoofer – and it gets even better if you have two of them.
(continued)

Tech talk

As mentioned, the S/2 is a very compact subwoofer, containing a 250-watt amplifier with a front firing 10-inch woofer and a downward firing 10-inch passive radiator, which is tuned to a slightly lower frequency than the main cone, extending the response of the main driver. Interestingly, REL uses the same cone and surround in the passive as the main driver, adding to the seamless quality of the bass produced and avoids any kind of LF anomalies that are usually associated with a ported design. The result is bass response that comes across fast and smooth. This is easily demonstrated by a few quick riffs on a standup or fretless bass. Whether you prefer Stanley Clarke, Sting, or someone completely different, once you hear this level of resolution, you'll be spoiled for anything else.

For an additional \$299, you can add a REL Longbow wireless transmitter to your system, eliminating the need for cables entirely. Hunter assures me that I will not hear any compromise in bass performance, but the Longbow was not available at review time, so watch for a follow up review as soon as one can make it to the TONE studio. This will make the S/2 (which is already equipped with a Longbow receiver) even more versatile, especially in multiple subwoofer installations.

Award winning sound

While I've enjoyed every one of the REL subwoofers I've had a

chance to own and review, the S/2 is a personal favorite, because it hits the sweet spot for the \$1,495 price asked. Its bass performance will augment all but the largest floor standing, full range systems, yet it works brilliantly with a pair of mini monitors, Magneplans or ESLs without fuss. There is no better upgrade you can make to a system with limited LF response than the REL S/2. You could spend more than this on a power cord for a minimal change in sound quality, or you could add an S/2. (Or even a pair of S/2s)

Considering REL's stellar reputation for build quality and customer support makes it easy to award the S/2 one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2014. ●

The REL S/2 subwoofer
\$1,495

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PREVIEW



BAT VK-655SE Power Amplifier

\$16,500
www.balanced.com

For those of you that just thought Balanced Audio Technology made great tube gear, think again. A few years ago we reviewed their VK-42SE preamplifier and it was stunning – underlining this companies ability to be the master of both sides of the fence.

The VK-655SE is more of the same, with 600 watts of power on tap and a massive, 1800 joule power supply, it delivers the big, dynamic, punchy sound that BAT is famous for. And being solid state, it will drive any load with ease. If this 140-pound behemoth still doesn't have enough juice for you, the VK-655SE can be bridged for mono operation!



Simaudio MOON Neo 430HA Headphone Amplifier

\$3,500 (\$4,300 with internal DAC)
www.simaudio.com

Just spend the extra money and get the DAC, you'll be glad you did. With full DSD capability, the 430HA is much more than another pretty headphone amplifier. Perhaps one of the worlds finest headphone amplifiers without the DAC, ticking the box to add it makes the 430HA one of the best preamplifier/DAC combinations you'll find for anywhere near this price.

Utilizing much of the technology present in Simaudio's Evolution components in a more compact chassis, and capitalizing on Simaudio's build quality results in a piece that can be the cornerstone of your whole system. It's a perfect way to enter the mega quality personal audio space, but then add a power amplifier and a pair of speakers for a fabulous 2-channel system when time, space and budget allow. Even if you don't listen to headphones, the linestage/DAC combination is so good; the 430HA is still a killer value.

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"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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www.gamutaudio.com



Dali Rubicon 2 Speakers

\$2,995/pair
www.dali.com

Dali's new Rubicon series incorporates what they've learned developing their flagship Epicon series at a reduced cost. This two way, stand mount system provides stellar performance, with an emphasis on coherence, wide dispersion and proper phase domain response.

The end result is a small speaker that sounds much larger than it is, while disappearing in the room entirely – the hallmark of a fabulous small monitor. Thanks to Dali's tremendous scale of production, which we will also showcase in the upcoming review, it's no surprise that these Danish masters can produce such an incredible speaker at such a reasonable cost.





Rega DAC-R

\$1,795
www.rega.co.uk

A couple of years ago, like everything else they do, Rega quietly produced their half chassis DAC for under a thousand dollars that provided stellar performance at a budget price of \$995. The new DAC-R continues this tradition with a few substantial upgrades. The biggest upgrade is full 24bit/192khz capability from all inputs. The original DAC was wonderful, but limited high resolution processing to the SPDIF inputs only, kept computer audiophiles at bay.

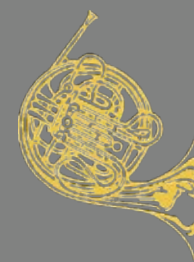
Though the new DAC-R looks identical to the model it replaces, everything under the cover is new and redesigned. Multiple filter choices are still available on the front panel, with Rega's suggestions as to how they are to be applied. All resolutions are supported, up to 24/192, but in typical Rega fashion, there is no provision for DSD. While .0001% of the audiophile community will squawk at this, it's a non issue for the rest of us and no reason to avoid the DAC-R. Remember, this is Rega we're talking about – they were the last audiophile company to produce a CD player.

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Plinius Inspire 980 Integrated

\$4,450
www.pliniusaudio.com

Plinius' new 980 and 880 Inspire integrated amplifiers created quite a stir at this year's Munich hifi show and for great reason. The 980 is compact, powerful and can handle every source you can throw at it with a built in streamer, DAC and phono stage. Its 80 watt per channel amplifier will power nearly everything, so all you need to do is add a pair of speakers, a turntable and go. Should you not require streaming audio via Ethernet, the \$3,650 880 is sonically the same. Both are an incredible value considering the performance provided. ●

Grand Opening!

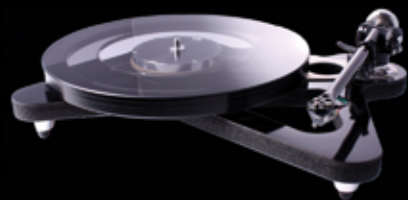
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