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14



84

- 11. PUBLISHER'S LETTER
- 12. TONE TOON
By Liza Donnelly



72

features

- 18 Old School:
The Harmon Kardon 730
Ahead of Its Time
By Jeff Dorgay
- 72 Personal Fidelity:
Aurender Flow
By John Darko
Cardas EM5813 Ear Speakers
By Mark Marcantonio
- 114 995: **Sounds That Won't Break The Bank**
Arcam irDAC
Packed with Power
By Mark Marcantonio



95

tone style

- 84 The Wino: Winter Whites
Four White Wines That Add a Burst of Sunlight to Winter
By Monique Meadows
- 95 Ortofon DS-1 Digital Scale
Versatile and Accessible
- 96 Snap-on LED 2000 Work Light
Shine a Light Everywhere
- 99 GIK Freestand Acoustic Panel
Portable Genius
- 100 RecordWall-it
Elegance in Form and Function
- 102 Hello Kitty Fruit Roll-Ups
Happy Fun Time for Lengthy Set-ups
- 103 Power Curl
Wind and Go

CONTENTS



66

©Staple Singers Courtesy of Sony Music Archives

music

- 14. LIVE:** Lloyd Cole plays Portland's Alberta Rose Theatre
By Jeff Dorgay
- 26. SPIN THE BLACK CIRCLE:**
Reviews of New Pop/Rock and Country Albums *By Bob Gendron, Andy Downing, Todd Martens, Chrissie Dickinson, and Aaron Cohen*
- 104. JAZZ & BLUES:** Anouar Brahem, Jack DeJohnette, and Rudresh Mahanthappa *By Aaron Cohen and Jim Macnie*
- 122. AUDIOPHILE PRESSINGS:**
Grateful Dead, and Two from Don Henley *By Jeff Dorgay*



35. Sleater-Kinney *No Cities To Love*

CONTENTS

gear previews

- 127. GamuT M2250i Mono Power Amps**
- 128. Dali Epicon 8 Speakers**
- 131. Octave HP 700 Preamplifier**
- 132. Wireworld Pulse Cables**
- 134. Naim Mu-So**
- 137. Gryphon Kalliope DAC**

gear reviews

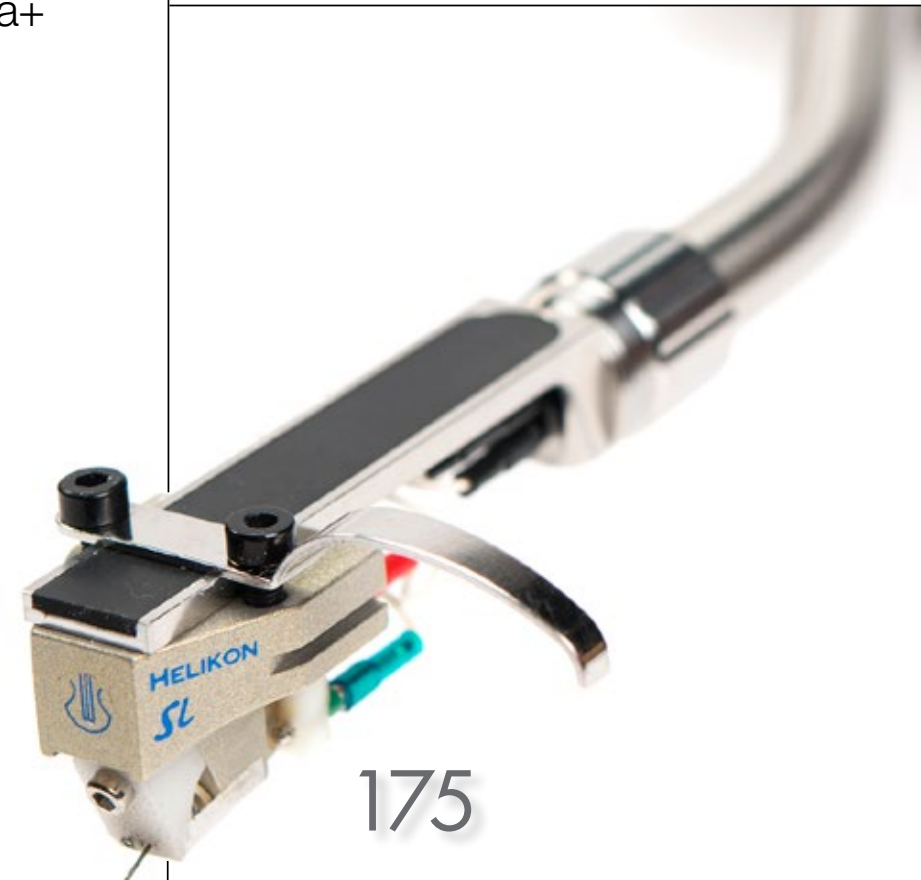
- 138. Conrad-Johnson LP125sa+ Power Amplifier**
By Andre Marc
- 146. Gamut D3i Dual Mono Preamplifier**
By Rob Johnson
- 154. MOON by Simaudio Nêo 260D CD Transport**
By Mark Marcantonio
- 164. EgglestonWorks Emma All You Need**
By Jeff Dorgay
- 175. Glanz Tonearm Making the Familiar New Again**
By Richard H. Mak

web review

- 186. VPI Classic 2**
- 189. Ortofon 2M Black**



146



175

- 190. Slummin'**
- 192. Music Links**
- 195. Manufacturer Links**

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PUBLISHER'S LETTER

Now that the fevers of the New Year and the Consumer Electronics Show have settled down, we can get back to business as usual—and dig into the exciting new music and gear of 2015. Sorting through my CES notes reveals an interesting trend: mid-range hi-fi is making a big comeback. And while I know that gear in the \$5,000-to-\$8,000 range might still feel out of reach, everything has to be put in perspective.

With so many mega-bucks components having been released in the last five years, it's refreshing to see so much of this technology finally making its way down the ladder, which means that obsessed music lovers can now put together a system in the \$10K-to-\$20K range that is much more than just “musically satisfying.” You can now get deep into what's lurking in your favorite recordings in a way that used to cost six figures.

And even though many manufacturers hate to hear me say this, there is still the secondary market. That \$5,000 preamp you can't afford today will be a \$3,000 used preamp in a few years. As always, I draw the parallel to the automotive world: I've never quite been able to stretch for a brand new Porsche, but I've owned quite a few nice pre-owned models that cost me less than a new Accord—and I know which car I'd rather drive.

Yet, for those who love that feeling of being the first one to unpack the newest toys, the new components in this issue from Simaudio, Conrad-Johnson and Egglestonworks (just to name a few) are incredibly cool. These brands have taken advantage of what they've learned during decades of manufacturing and applied that experience to the latest components and manufacturing technologies.



And to help build a bit more excitement there, we are starting to chronicle when we take these lovely components out of the box for the first time—so if this trips your trigger, keep an eye on the What's New section of our website.

Another new feature this issue celebrates our strategic partnerships with Tidal hi-fi music streaming and Music Direct. As much as we love great gear, we are always trying to lead you to new music, and so on the last two pages of every issue, we will have a directory labeled “What you have heard in this issue.” This will provide you with a link to Music Direct should you want to purchase the vinyl records mentioned in the issue, and a link to Tidal to stream not only the albums we've reviewed, but also individual tracks we've used in our gear reviews. Our hope is to introduce you to some fresh tunes and to give you access to what we hear when evaluating audio equipment, as you may not have all the same records in your collection that we have in ours.

So, as we head full bore into 2015, we hope to continue to be your favorite audio concierge, leading you to more music, gear and fun. Enjoy!

THEN



NOW



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Lloyd Cole

Alberta Rose Theater
Portland, Oregon

February 4, 2015

Text and Photos by
Jeff Dorgay

Lloyd Cole's current album, *Standards*, is a welcome throwback to his collaboration with Matthew Sweet on 1991's *Don't Get Weird On Me, Babe*. Yet when Cole rolled into Portland for a rare tour appearance, he ditched any backing support. Instead, he simply relied on two acoustic guitars—and some dry humor. In between songs, Cole let everyone in on a little secret: The whole exercise of tuning is not about actually tuning the instrument, “but to create tension.”

No longer the angry young man he was in the 90s, Cole is now middle-aged, married, and an amateur golfer in his spare time. Accordingly, he presented songs in a relaxed albeit highly spirited manner, sharing bits of his past and motivations for melancholy fare many fans know by heart.

LIVE MUSIC

Romping in and out of newer material while revisiting his back catalog, Cole did not disappoint diehards, some of which came with vinyl LPs in hand, hoping for an autograph. He split the concert into two 45-minute sets, with the first heavily weighted towards *Standards*, which he frequently noted was on sale in the lobby—before adding he'd also be returning to the bar to hang out for a post-show beer.

Cole's guitar prowess runs deeper than most contemporary singer-songwriters. Anchored by his nimble, delicate touch on the fretboard, the acoustic approach worked wonders with the sparser arrangements. Cole allowed himself get lost in the creative process throughout the evening. During "Women's Studies," it felt as if he was letting the crowd in on something more precious than should be shared with strangers. Perhaps some of his wounds have not fully healed.

Yet before the mood turned overly morose, Cole upped the pace and charged through a brief medley of Commotions tunes. "Medleys are illegal until you hit 45, and then that's all you want to do," he observed, winking as he spoke. And as he broke into "Music In a Foreign Language" and "Like Lovers Do," any lingering sadness disappeared.

It's clear Cole knows just how much tension to dish out.

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The Harman Kardon 730 AHEAD OF ITS TIME

By Jeff Dorgay

When I was graduating from high school in 1976, what I wanted most was a Harman Kardon 730, a pair of JBL L100s and a Technics SL1200 turntable. That was my dream system. The 730 went for about \$400, the JBL's slightly more and the Technics with a Shure M91ED around \$350, so for about \$1,200 you could put together a pretty rocking system. Revisiting the 730 with a pair of L100s and my somewhat geeked out SL1200, I'm still amazed at just how musical, valid and relevant this combination sounds.

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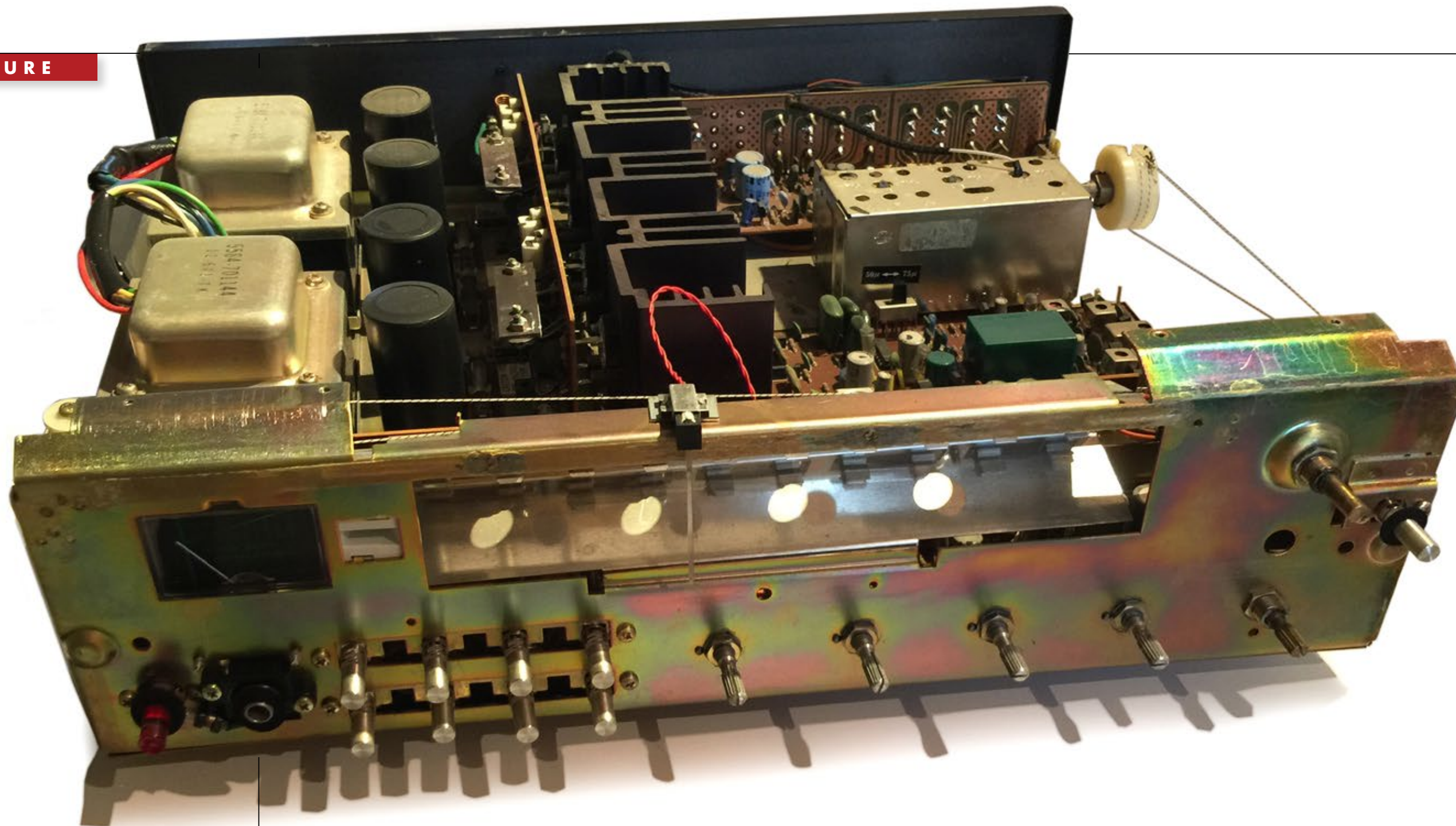
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FEATURE



Perusing my favorite internet forums, the 730 is described as warm by some and dark by others. Through both the JBL L100s, L26s and the contemporary Dali Rubicon 2s, I'd call the 730 just right. Yes it is a bit on the warm side, but for vintage solid state, I'll take this any day over the Pioneer, Sansui and Kentwood's of the day. I'd even give this one a nod to the receivers in my stable from Marantz with similar power ratings.

Don't let the 40-watt per channel rating fool you. Truly dual mono in construction, with two separate power transformers and power amplifier boards, the 730 renders stereo images like crazy. Connecting the system together with modestly priced AudioQuest cable (which is light years beyond the crap we had in the 70s) and plugging into a Running Springs Haley power conditioner takes this vintage ride into the current century with a sound that easily outperforms any of the \$500 - \$600 integrated amplifiers you might buy today. And they don't usually include a phono stage or a tuner.
(continued)



Even though the 730 has relatively modest tuner specs, here in Portland, Oregon it pulled in quite a few stations, near and far, along with delivering incredibly good fidelity. Should you be living in an area with decent radio stations you will be pleasantly surprised at just how good plain old FM radio can still sound. And if you have this experience, Sirius XM will be an even more dreadful experience than it is now.

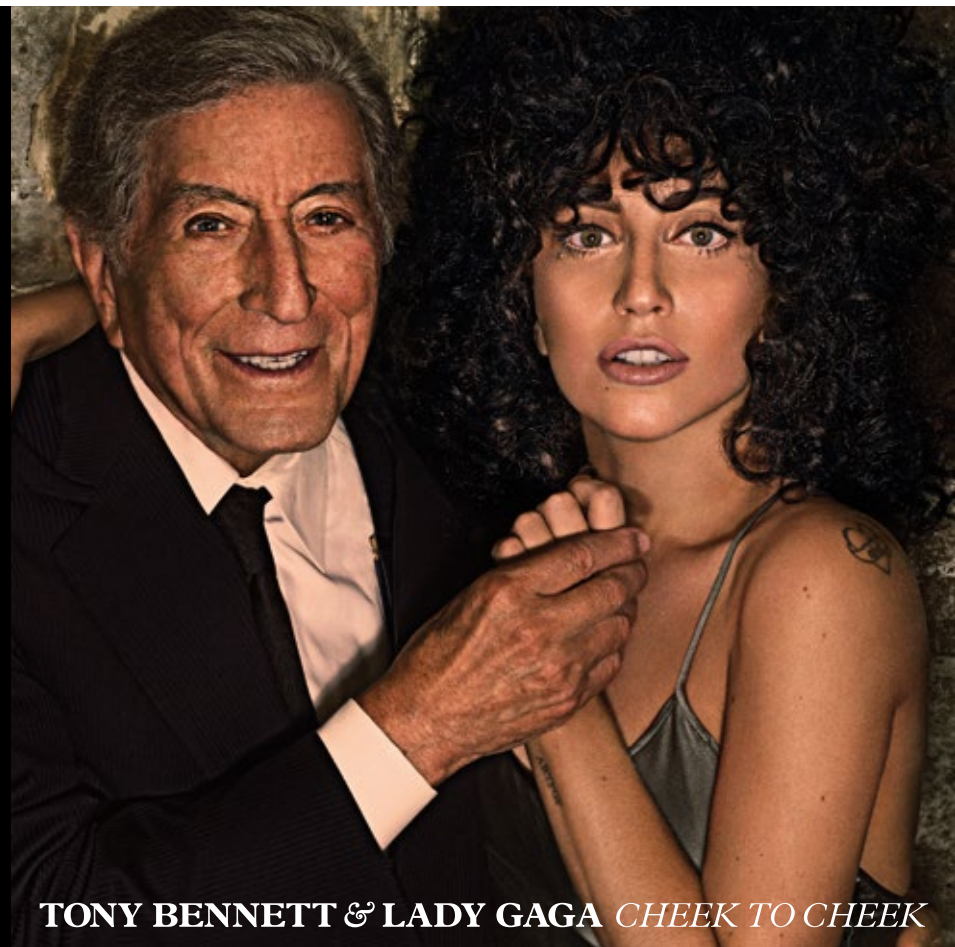
Pairing up our Thorens TD-125, refurbished by Vinyl Nirvana and an Ortofon 2M Black and SME 3009 makes for a spectacular analog experience that reveals more music than I ever remember this receiver capable of back in the 70s. Low and high frequency extension is excellent, painted on top of an incredibly quiet background, again proving that a nice mix of new and old technology can be a good thing indeed.

The tweakasaurus that can't leave well enough alone can bypass the circuit breakers protecting the output devices, resulting in more transparency but less margin for error. Should you go down this path an accidental crossing of the speaker terminals will fry the output stage. Local vintage dude, Kurt Doslu from Echo Audio in Portland, Oregon warns that the output stages were somewhat prone to failure

anyway, but that the semiconductors are still readily available. While you've got the hood open, I suggest doing a full recap (or at least the power supply) and keep this one around forever. Another weakness in the 730, as with all 70s receivers is the fuse type dial lights. If the one you've found or purchased has functioning lights, never fear, they will fail soon. *(continued)*



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FEATURE



A set of green LED replacements will save you the frustration of future disassembly. The red, lighted power switch is another story – take that to a professional unless you are a champion at the game Operation.

The manual states that the 730 can power 8-16 ohm speakers, but can even power one pair of 4-ohm speakers without problem and the 91db Eggleston Emma speakers in for review turn in a pleasing performance. Though not able to drive them with true potency, the 730 is able to push a pair of Magnepan MMGs to a decent background level.

With parts readily available, strive for a unit with as close to perfect cosmetics as possible. Capacitors are relatively easy to find and replace, a front panel, not so much. A beater 730 can go for as little as \$50, while a mint example shouldn't cost more than \$200. Plan on spending about that much again to make it perfect electrically, if you have a great vintage technician at your disposal and considerably less if you are a proficient DIY'er.

Whichever way your journey takes you, the Harmon Kardon 730 will make an excellent cornerstone to an enjoyable system while keeping within a reasonable budget. ●

NEW RELEASES



Screaming Females

Rose Mountain

Don Giovanni, LP or CD

For the past decade, Screaming Females have toiled in respectable clubs, appeared at major festivals, and been celebrated in mass media outlets ranging from the *Chicago Tribune* to Pitchfork to the *Los Angeles Times*. During that span, the New Jersey trio released five studio records, including 2012's Steve Albini-engineered *Ugly*, as well as a recent live set that hints at the electrifying nature of its live shows.

In an era where many buzzed-about bands break up quicker than Hollywood couples divorce, Screaming Females are practically dinosaurs.

They're also fronted by one of the most distinctive leaders in the industry, and it matters not that the person happens to be female. Melissa Paternoster's virtuosic guitar chops not only hangs with the big boys but comes on with such confidence and imagination, it's enough to make much of the competition run away crying to their mommies. Staunchly independent—and furnished with a siren-wail voice that, along with the group's disarming name, may be partially responsible for her unit's continued under-the-radar status—Paternoster approaches her instrument as a roller-coaster designer views steel, wood, physics, and computer-aided design schemes.

On *Rose Mountain*, the band's sixth effort, she toys with concepts of acceleration, gravity, kinetics, and surprise to captivating effect, utilizing six strings and an amplifier to create loops, curves, turns, peaks, free-fall drops, and surprises. No matter how thrilling the ride, Paternoster remains in control, exhibiting a balance and (occasional) restraint that give these ten songs an irresistible blend of caffeinated edginess and power-pop melodicism. The result is the Screaming Females' most accessible, and finest, work to date.

While the ensemble's early records lean in rough-hewn D.I.Y. directions associated with basement-honed punk, Paternoster and Co. explode such labels here by sharpening their hooks, streamlining arrangements, and still retaining an aggression, rawness, and verve associated with the underground. Produced by Matt Bayles, *Rose Mountain* serves as an example of the kind of transitional set burgeoning bands need to make at a certain point in their career.



©Photo by Lance Bangs

The album not only preserves the Screaming Females' integrity and persona, it heightens their strengths and displays deeper songwriting and vocal abilities.

Informed by Paternoster's experiences with chronic mononucleosis in 2013, songs address healthcare bureaucracy as well as personal abandonment and tenuousness in regards to sickness. Death, fractures, and impairments litter the narratives as bold, convincing parallels are drawn between physical illness and its impact on the mind. Medical imagery and fragility inform the sea-sawing "Broken Neck." Uncertainty and anger swirl on the

tension-stricken "Empty Head." The tightly wrapped title track finds Paternoster seeking peace as she attempts to navigate irrational circumstances. "I'm not like the others," she declares, gently, as if trying to convince herself she'll survive the walls-closing-in turmoil.

Throughout, increased breathing room between notes and Paternoster's more focused singing lend the material an emotional gravitas buttressed by an assortment of punchy riffs, fluid leads, spinning-top solos, and interlocking rhythms. The catchy bridge and chorus on "Wishing Well" bound then burst like frozen pipes, all the while back-

ing vocals echo Paternoster's desperation. Coming on with the obvious insistence of a frayed nerve, "Ripe" does aural cartwheels, mixing gnashed-teeth distortion with a racing tempo and assertive force. Shaded with regret and sorrow, "Hopeless" underlines Paternoster's intimate connection to every word on the album, the ballad building in momentum and giving way to an organ-accompanied midsection that illustrates its finality.

At its core, *Rose Mountain* is about feeling, and what it means to feel. In other words, it's rock in its most authentic, crucial, and organic form. —**Bob Gendron**



Will Butler
Policy
 Merge Records, LP or CD

Arcade Fire, despite occasional appearances to the contrary, has a lighter side. Though its albums are serious business—the most recent, *Reflektor*, strikes a reverential tone toward dance and Caribbean music—its accompanying tour had welcome moments that felt like a lark. There were giant puppet heads, crowd dance-offs, and wink-wink arena-rock covers of Guns N' Roses, Blondie, Kansas and more. Its members may have donned war-like face paint, but Arcade Fire came to celebrate.

Policy, the first solo album from Will Butler, little brother to Arcade Fire leader Win, puts forth the thesis that the younger Butler may in fact be the key tenant of the goofier side of the band. A multi-instrumentalist in Arcade Fire—one could play spot-the-Will throughout any of the group's shows, as he's likely to hop from guitar to synthesizer to drums to dancing wildly like a fool—Butler also plays many a part on *Policy*.

There's scrappy garage rock, synthesizer-addled dance pop, and diversions left and right into E Street-style shimmying and 80s-era dance. And there's probably too much packed into these eight songs and 28 minutes, as if Butler was nervous all his ideas may disappear lest he leave one on the cutting-room floor. *(continued)*

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BY PLINIUS AUDIO



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MUSIC



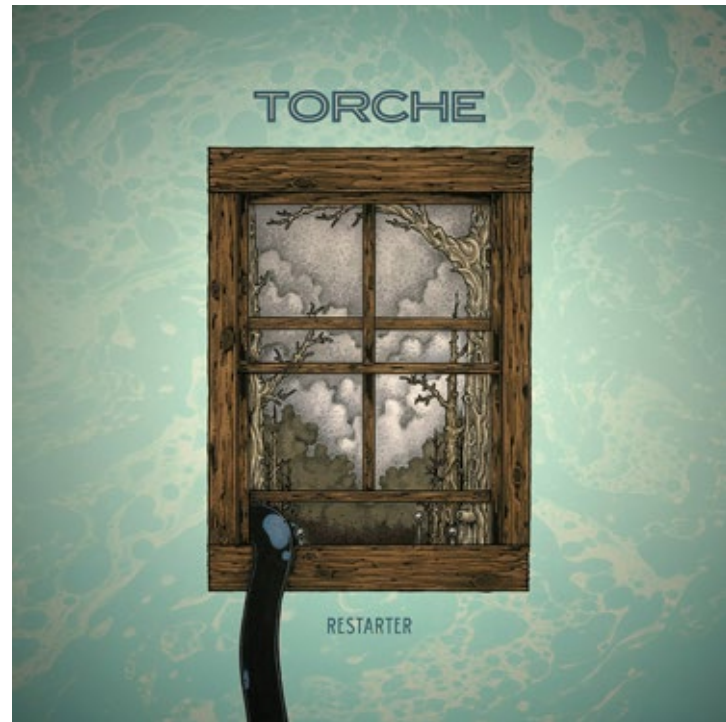
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Sometimes, he's backed by a five-piece choir that resembles a hipster's take on girl-group harmonizers. They're chirpy, and it's easy to picture them dancing in Converse sneakers. Charming, too, except for the rare moment or two they make like ghouls and add a haunted-house dimension to *Policy*. Butler can't be accused of lacking ambition.

Overall, the tone is serious, but not, as Butler comes off as a musical Ferris Bueller who wants to pledge his love for someone by offering to buy her a pony one moment only to then wise-crack that he knows a mighty-fine recipe for "pony macaroni" the next. There are, thankfully, melodies, especially on more hurried songs such as "Take My Side," on which Butler seems on the verge of out-running the guitars with each passing verse. "Witness," too, is a keeper, with the jack-of-all-trades Butler tapping an excitable, piano-driven vibe on par with Elton John's "Crocodile Rock."

"Son of God" and "Something's Coming" try to have fun with the higher power, the former's folksy strumming having more success than the jug-like bounce of the latter, where the deity is sitting around on the couch. The bad joke could be forgiven, but groove-less funk cannot (is that a bass or kazoo?). "Anna" tries to go for broke, and earns points for its light-stepping beat. But then the song stumbles with an ill-timed sax. "What I Want" emerges as the strongest showcase, a reckless rock song on which Butler's voice starts to mirror that of his brother. In the final verse, the singer realizes just how crazy his panting obsession with his lady friend begins to sound. "I'm not saying that we should rush this," he hollers, adding, moments later, "but maybe we could think about getting a dog."

If that line brings a smile to your face, than this is more than just a lighthearted breather from Butler's more demanding, more famous band. It's a win. —**Todd Martens**



Torche
Restarter
 Relapse, LP or CD

All it takes is one glance at the tracklist for *Restarter*, the latest from Miami sludge-pop kings Torche, to realize the band is done playing around: “Annihilation Affair”; “Barrier Hammer”; “Blasted.” The sonic landscape matches this aggressive tract, building on massive waves of guitar riffage, bestial drums, and the backfiring words of frontman Steven Brooks, who makes repeated reference to mankind’s demise. “Terror awaken!” he proclaims on the opening cut, a decree that sounds directed at his fellow bandmates rather than the surrounding masses.

With some notable exceptions—the charging herd of “Loose Men,” for one—the songs here tend to be slower and heavier, calling to mind the band’s 2007 EP *In Return*. The darker direction could have been influenced, at least in part, by the more reflective zone Brooks entered as the band approached its 10-year anniversary last year.



“I was 30 years old [when Torche formed], and, personally, it was a dark time for me,” he said in a recent interview. “The year before, I lost my other half in a car accident, so I was ready to get on the road and play music. [Revisiting] those songs did put me back in that headspace.”

That’s not to say *Restarter*—an apt title for a record on which the musicians sound reenergized—is a dour affair. Rather, the band members give themselves over to the material, knocking out towering numbers like the pulverizing “Barrier Hammer” and the monumental title track. An eight-minute-plus opus, the latter tune closes with an extended, shriek-

ing coda, as though the players can’t quite force themselves to let go. Honestly, the track could have stretched on for twice as long and it still wouldn’t have felt the least bit bloated. Then there’s “Minions,” an absolute road-grader that rumbles with military-grade authority. “Come my minions,” Brooks cries, calling to his amassed army as the band cuts a wide swath of destruction.

Gone are the comparatively Technicolor, black bubblegum leanings of 2012’s *Harmonycraft*. They’re replaced with the sludgier, tougher sounds of “Believe It”—the sonic equivalent of unprocessed tar sands—and

“Annihilation Affair,” which could pass for stoner rock in the most literal, geology-based sense. Heck, even the album’s shortest cut, “Blasted,” which clocks in well short of two minutes, hits hard enough to leave a deep crater.

“Give into the sound,” Brooks howls on “No Servants.” It’s a decree that proves all but impossible to resist on this absolute monster of an album. —**Andy Downing**

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MUSIC



Sleater-Kinney
No Cities to Love
Sub Pop, LP or CD

Sleater-Kinney stopped touring in 2006. Then came the comedy. Underground heroes from the early to late 90s, Sleater-Kinney, intentionally or not, felt like an answer to a male-dominated alt-rock scene of the Pacific Northwest. The all-female group's punk-rock affronts led the riot grrl movement with a pair of chopped up guitars that—for believers—functioned as a call to arms.

The trio hasn't released an album since 2005's *The Woods*, a loud and brash lashing at societal anxiety. Sleater-Kinney quietly faded, but respect for the band only swelled. That's due in part to guitarist Carrie Brownstein, whose work with "Saturday Night Live" alum Fred Armisen on the television show "Portlandia" pokes fun at our newfound tendency to place artisanal culture on a pedestal. "Portlandia" emerged as a revelation for Sleater-Kinney fans.

Bandmates Janet Weiss and Corin Tucker made cameos, and suddenly the dead-serious band appeared to have a lighter side. Sleater-Kinney's return, however, is no laughing matter.

No Cities to Love, the group's first recorded work in a decade, isn't the sound of a band taking a victory lap. "Bury your idols," Sleater-Kinney challenges listeners on the first single, "Bury Our Friends," which seemingly appeared out of nowhere late last year. The accompanying 32-minute album follows suit by taking a look around America and not finding all that much to laugh about. Even by Sleater-Kinney standards, it's abrasive—a 10-song, ballad-free effort that's rock n' roll at its most impatient.

The us-versus-them vibe begins at the onset. Lyrically and sonically, this is combustible music, be it the rabid dog and broken limbs of "Fangless," the scratching-for-a-fight chorus of "Surface Envy," or the threat that the powerful "should really look down" on "No Anthems." It's also noisy, but guitars are pushed to their creative limits, mimicking a low-down bass one song, a groovy synth the next, or building to an all-out flare-up (often). *(continued)*

MUSIC



©Photo by Brigitte Sire

Weiss, caught in the middle between the guitars of Brownstein and Tucker, assumes the unenviable role of juggling chaos.

The two guitars on “Fangless” sound like two lit fuses, one snaking its way to the bomb and the other zig-zagging, with the rhythm kicking and bouncing to keep the explosion at bay for as long as possible. “Price Tag” makes it clear Sleater-Kinney came back with something to say. Tucker takes us through the day in the life of the debt-ridden: The clothes are too tight, the kids want non-generic cereal, and the good jobs are gone. Musically, it feels like a wrestling

match with pounding drums, guitar clang, and a finale that’s on high alert as the voices of Tucker and Brownstein briefly sync before going stepping back in the ring.

The clenched-fest edge persists until the title track, on which Sleater-Kinney provides a sing-along chorus. But don’t get comfortable. “I’ve grown afraid of everything that I love,” Brownstein declares. Even, perhaps, her band, as Sleater-Kinney doesn’t appear above addressing its hiatus and plays with something to prove. As evidence, “Gimme Love” emerges as a scattershot collection of intense vocals and wiry instrumentation while the venom-

ous “A New Wave” uses fuzzy, highly caffeinated guitars to “invent our own kind of obscurity.” Just in case, you know, no one is listening the second time around.

And then comes the surprising “Hey Darling,” a rock song that feels like a long-lost pop nugget, complete with Tucker skipping along to the beat with a series of “la-das.” It’s a love song, but a paranoid one, as the narrator resists the temptation to explore a partner’s smart phone. Even at its most musically lighthearted, *No Cities to Love* is still volatile and more important, irrepressibly vital.

—**Todd Martens**

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MUSIC



A Place to Bury Strangers

Transfixiation

Dead Oceans, LP or CD

While A Place to Bury Strangers' Oliver Ackermann still knows his way around an effects pedal, *Transfixiation*, the fourth full-length from the New York noise-punks, is among the leanest and most venomous in the band's catalog. Songs like "Straight," a full-throttle highway romp, and the wiry "Supermaster," which carries itself with all the slit-eyed menace of Robert DeNiro's prison-tatted ex-con in *Cape Fear*, are almost primal in nature, coming on like roughhewn cave paintings scratched haphazardly into bedrock.

True, the band can still conjure industrial reverb-caked walls of sound—see "Fill the Void," a dark, echoing wasteland layered with plaster-cracking guitar and thunderous drumming courtesy of Robi Gonzalez, or the corroded "I Will Die," which sounds as though it were recorded on crumpled construction paper and summarily lit on fire. More often, however, the material here captures the raw, teeth-clenched intensity of the trio's live show.

According to the band members, *Transfixiation* almost didn't happen. Initial sessions took place in the wake of an extensive tour in support of 2012's *Worship*, and the combination of physical and mental exhaustion nearly caused a permanent rift in the group. "The way it was broken off was so intense," says Ackerman in a press release. "I felt like we had to stop, and I wasn't even sure if the album was going to get finished or we were going to be friends again."



©Photo by Dusdin Condren

While the fracture has long since healed, the resulting songs still appear to bear some of the scars. Throughout, Ackerman flits between confusion (“I lost myself,” he growls on the acidic “We’ve Come So Far”), regret (feelings of guilt prominently feature on the album-opening “Supermaster”), and vein-popping rage. “If you fuck with me/You’re gonna burn,” he cautions on “Deeper,” an abrasive track built on rumbling bass, caustic vocals, and a veritable torture chamber of shrieking, pulsing guitars tones. If Hannibal were looking for a new theme song, this would be a natural fit.

Yet even at its darkest, the material conveys a loose-limbed wildness. It’s exhibited by free-swinging tunes like the sonically scuffed-up “I’m So Clean” and dizzying “Love High,” which comes on like sun-warped the Jesus & Mary Chain. Best of all might be “Now It’s Over,” a machinelike grinder that, in spite of its title, feels like a band in the midst of a much-needed reboot.

—**Andy Downing**



NIGHTHAWK
AROUND-THE-EAR SEMI-OPEN HEADPHONES



audioquest



Belle and Sebastian

Girls In Peacetime Want to Dance
Matador, 2LP or CD

Belle and Sebastian's ninth studio album certainly opens like a Belle and Sebastian album, what with a narrator in bed reading a French novel. Here we go again. The Scottish kings and queens of all sounds delicate and twee are singing about reading fancy books once more. Expected? Maybe, but maybe not after releasing two records that brought a dance-orientated and rock-focused drive to the group's two-decade-old orchestral pop. This isn't a good sign. Scanning the track list is also a potentially foreboding move, as there's even a song title that name-checks Sylvia Plath.

Fears that the six-piece settled into symphonic complacency are soon eroded, however. Near the end of the album-opening "Nobody's Empire," leader Stuart Murdoch drops a line that cuts to the heart of *Girls In Peacetime Want to Dance* and grabs the listener by the throat. "If we live by the books and we live by hope/ Does that make us targets for gunfire?" Murdoch sings, his voice cool, soft, and calm even as he wonders if his entire world is being shaken upside-down.

If *Girls In Peacetime Want to Dance* isn't Belle and Sebastian's political album, it's certainly the collective's most topical effort. Anxious characters pray alone in the kitchen, guns no one needs get purchased, and a friend is "an ugly monster that will eat your face." Sure, a darker side always resided beneath the group's ornate orchestrations, but here, no effort is made to hide the bad news. Religion, and how to manage it, once again figures heavily, and the album teems with characters that see their faith tested in trying times.

It may be bleak, but it also has a groove. There are string sections (of course), but it isn't always clear when the strings begin and the synthesizers end. Rhythms are brought to the forefront, and considering Belle and Sebastian's songs remain of the lighter variety, the less-embellished tunes risk beating their way right past the listener. Tracks such as politically frustrated "The Party Line," however, see Belle and Sebastian shimmying their way to the club,



©Photo by Soren Solkaer

complete with some funky Chic-meets-Daft Punk guitars. Meanwhile, "Enter Sylvia Plath" goes full mid-80s Europop. "Let me live in the shadows of your words," Murdoch sings on the latter, a dance number on which the narrator wants an escape from day-to-day exhaustion.

Girls In Peacetime Want to Dance glistens when Belle and Sebastian continue to push out themselves out of the comfort zone. "Play for Today," featuring a vocal assist from Dee Dee Penny of the Dum Dum Girls, gives off a 60s pop shimmer and gospel kick. "The Everlasting Muse" may mine well-trodden territory for Murdoch and his mates by looking for inspiration in a girl, but it pulls the rug out from the listener with a klezmer chorus. "Perfect Couples" marries a world beat with a bubblegum harmony, and finds he band at its cynical best with guitarist Stevie Jackson taking pleasure in other couples' misery.

The album doesn't stray far from topics of faith. The politicians are worthless and the prayers go unanswered in the patiently lilting "The Cat with the Cream." "Everybody bet on the boom and got busted," Murdoch croons as a slow-thumping rhythm marks the inevitable passing of time. "Today (This Army's for Peace)" is more hymn-like but still answerless. Nearly 20 years into its career, and the only salvation Belle and Sebastian can find remains in song.

"Today, I want to slip back into the dream I had," Murdoch sings, no doubt worn out by the reality around him. —**Todd Martens**

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MUSIC



Bob Dylan
Shadows In the Night
Columbia, LP or CD

Bob Dylan’s 2009 album of holiday standards could be seen as an example of the Bard having a little fun with the public, but make no mistake: *Shadows In the Night*, the 73-year-old’s stripped-down set of songs largely popularized by Frank Sinatra, is no laughing matter.

Nobody is going to argue that Dylan’s weather-beaten, gravel-textured voice belongs on the same level as Ol’ Blue Eyes’ baritone, Tony Bennett’s crooning, or even many of the contemporaries that tackled Sinatra projects. Yet the Minnesota native’s measured, cautious pace—and equally importantly, elastic phrasing, gentle timbre, and seeming self-awareness of his own abilities as a balladeer—begets an emotional honesty lacking on many of the forgettable Great American Songbook efforts released during the past several decades.

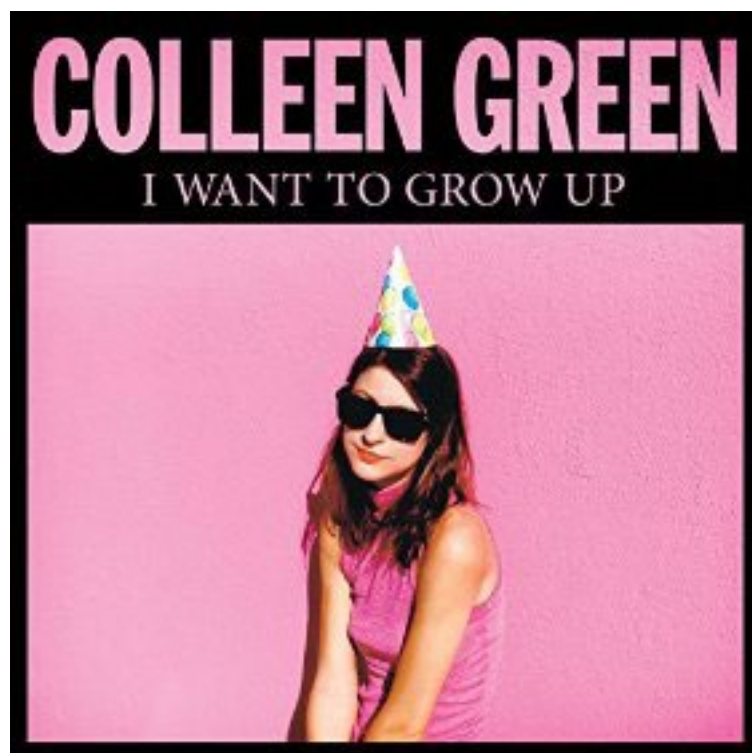
Via restrained arrangements and resigned moods, the music often falls in line with several of Dylan’s better late-career records—including parts of *Time Out of Mind* and *Love and Theft*.

Focusing on Sinatra’s alone-at-the-bar saloon fare and wisely steering away from upbeat swing, Dylan succeeds in peeling away the big-band layers to leave minimalist arrangements that frame his vulnerability, regret, and loneliness. He expresses the latter feelings by taking his time with the lyrics, be it stretching syllables like taffy or drawing out spaces between words.

Having eliminated the traditional string elements—and save for three tunes, the horns—Dylan needn’t compete with a band. Rather, one complements him, with his longtime touring mates supplying discreet backgrounds salted with country and blues flavors. Donny Herron’s aching, gliding pedal-steel guitar lines mirror the singer’s loneliness on material such as “Full Moon and Empty Arms” and “What I’ll Do.” Dylan even manages to bring fresh perspective to “Autumn Leaves” and “That Lucky Old Sun,” investing each standard with a sense of tragic certainty Shakespeare—surely, a peer in spirit—would’ve appreciated.

Captured at Capitol’s Studio B, a location Sinatra frequented, *Shadows In the Night* claims no overdubs or separate tracking. Dylan and Co. recorded live, with no headphones or vocal booths. What’s in the grooves is basically what went down, and most songs were completed in one or two takes. The resulting intimacy and spontaneity lend further credibility to an album that, by looking to the past, speaks volumes about the need for more musical truthfulness in the present.

—**Bob Gendron**


Colleen Green

I Want to Grow Up
Hardly Art, LP or CD

The marriage rate is declining. Those who are getting married are waiting longer to tie the knot. Some experts point to shifting gender roles. Others blame the economic decline. Then there's the illusion of never-ending choice promised by dating sites and dating apps. The bottom line: Dating is the worst. So what's a hopeless romantic to do? If you're indie-rock singer-songwriter Colleen Green, you pen a catchy, punky record about the topic.

I Want to Grow Up isn't just an album of love-gone-wrong songs. It's an album about what it means to attempt romance in 2015, as it taps into a rather timely generational divide. Careers, at least the sort enjoyed by prior generations—working for one or two companies and enjoying a cozy retirement plan—are now rare. Adolescence, meanwhile, is seemingly never-ending, as even today's most serious popular movies usually involve at least one man in a cape. Worse, the idea that any of us will be more successful than our parents' generation increasingly seems like a pipe dream.

Suddenly, adulthood sounds pretty smashing. And so, the 30-year-old Green declares on the record's title track that she's "sick of being young," flipping the script on the standard rock n' roll stance of promoting Peter Pan syndrome. "I think I need a schedule," sings the tender-voiced Green, whose vocals hang every so slightly behind distorted power chords as she sings about just wanting some dang definition to her life. She says the song is a nod to "I Don't Want to Grow Up" from her pop-punk idols the Descendents, but those West Coasters believed maturity was to be avoided.

This is an artist that's sick of immaturity—or at least her own ability to grow up. Green isn't above contradicting herself. She wants to rid her body of "toxicity" on the chirpy "Things That Are Bad for Me (Part I)" and can't wait to get stoned on "Things That Are Bad for Me (Part II)," which darkens up the approach with stomping, doom-metal riffs.

©Photo by Eric Penna

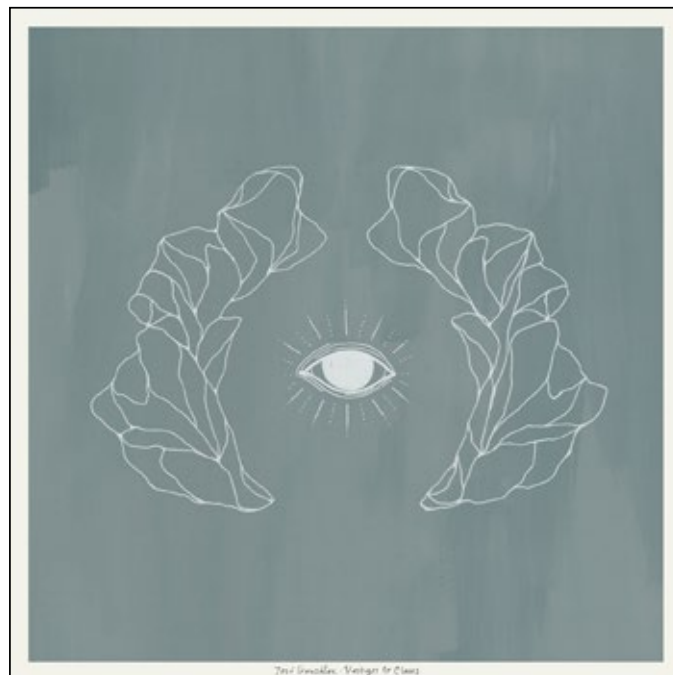
Elsewhere, she's fed up with the tendency to fall for the wrong guys on "Wild One," which goes down as sweetly as a milkshake-sipping 50s pop nugget, and struggles to manage her self-diagnosed ADD-affliction on the breezy, anti-small-talk anthem "Pay Attention."

I Want to Grow Up is Green's first effort recorded with a backing band. She's joined here by Jeff the Brotherhood's Jake Orrall on guitar and Diarrhea Planet's Casey Weissbuch on drums. But the bedroom-recorded feel of her early work persists, especially on the drum-machine-enhanced "Deeper Than Love," a woozy six-minute conversational confessional on which Green wonders if she's the "marrying kind" while admitting she wants to know "real love so desperately." She tracks her faults, her fears, and makes it clear that while dating may be the worst, the subject still makes for terrific pop songs. Some things never change. —**Todd Martens**

It's been seven years since Jose Gonzalez released his last album, *In Our Nature*, a pretty, melancholic folk set that doubles as a master class in restraint. While countless things changed in the years the Swedish singer-songwriter has been away, the music on the long-in-the-works *Vestiges & Claws* sounds virtually untouched by the passage of time.

The album's ten tracks all exude a bedroom intimacy, colored with handclaps, acoustic picking (the strings squeak and vibrate with in-room clarity), and Gonzalez's calming vocals, which rest atop the arrangements like a pristine blanket of fresh snow. In the past, the musician charted a more cryptic course—and undoubtedly, there are lines here the language-obsessed could spend weeks breaking down and diagramming, (“Why can’t you/Take a leaf off your mouth?” he asks on one tune.) But more often than not, Gonzalez writes with newfound clarity, stepping back and taking stock of both the environment (he sings of “landscapes blurred with rain” on the wilderness walk of “The Forest”) and his place in it.

“Finding ways to make sense of life,” he intones on the opening “With the Ink of a Ghost,” easily among the most meditative tunes in his low-key canon. Similar sentiments arise in the slow-moving “Every Age,” which could alternately be termed “Ice Age,” a patient, insular ditty where Gonzalez reflects on his standing in the world. “We don’t choose where we’re born/We don’t choose in what pocket or form,” he sings over insistent strumming and minimalist percussion. “But we can learn to know ourselves/On this globe in the void.”



Jose Gonzalez

Vestiges & Claws
Mute, LP or CD

Vestiges & Claws isn't all head-in-the-clouds philosophizing, however. On occasion, Gonzalez dispenses common-sense advice with the practicality of a newspaper columnist. Such is the case on the comparatively urgent “Let It Carry You,” where he casts aside troubles and pledges to find a better way forward.

While the artist has undoubtedly adopted a bigger-picture mindset, the songs still hinge on the smallest details. Gonzalez recorded the album at home in Gothenburg, Sweden, functioning as his own producer. A last-man-on-Earth feel bleeds into the universally austere surroundings. The relative peacefulness of this output does, at times, cause the music to fade into the background. Songs like “What Will” and shuffling “Afterglow,” while pretty, can feel somehow slight or inconsequential. Perhaps this shouldn't surprise. After waiting seven years for Gonzalez to prepare a follow-up, what are the odds he'd begin rushing now? —**Andy Downing**



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We're living in bleak times. Terrorist attacks, a widening racial divide, a growing fear of the police, school shootings on the regular—and by

the time you read this, another global tragedy has likely taken place. If there's a silver lining to this mess of a universe, it's that artists should not be lacking for inspiration, and maybe, just maybe, music will start to feel important again.

It's a theory, at least, and one the Decemberists help advance with parts of *What a Terrible World, What a Beautiful World*, the band's first album in four years. With "12-17-12," the Decemberists capture attention with a rather striking folk-pop song, and one inspired by the words of President Barack Obama following the horrific school shooting in Newton, Conn. "What a world you would make here," sings Colin Meloy while a harmonica cries in the background and a beat marches like a hushed military procession. It's a song about loss, and it's all the more powerful for its level of restraint.



©Photo by Autumn DeWilde



The Decemberists

What a Terrible World, What a Beautiful World Capitol, 2LP or CD

But like the record's title suggests, this is a tale of two albums, and not all of the Decemberists' return effort—never guaranteed after the band announced a hiatus—is nearly as gripping. "12-17-12" is something of a departure, lacking the layers of orchestration and woodsy symphonic flourishes often prevalent in Decemberists' arrangement. It's also a stand-alone track, independent of a larger concept inspired by a forgotten folk tale or seafaring legend.

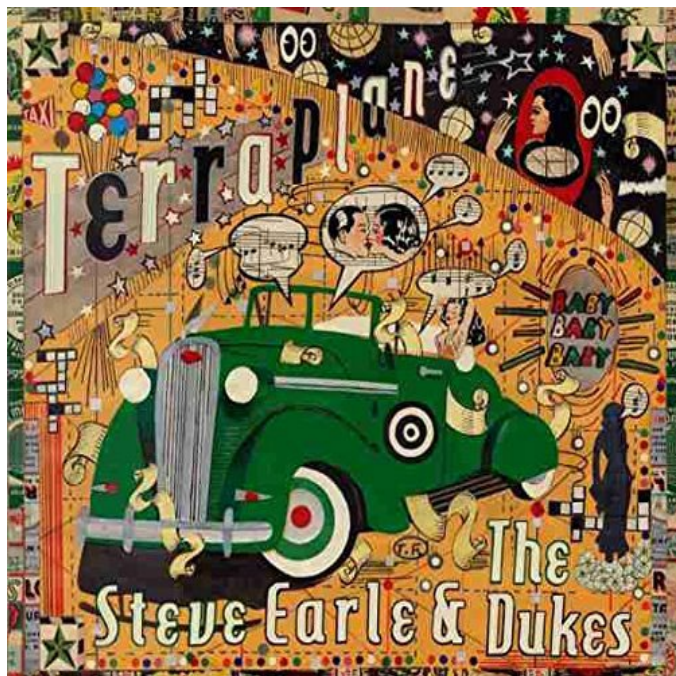
Sadly, parts of the set add up to a rather

bad look for the Portland band. The album-opening "The Singer Addresses His Audience" wants to imagine the ways in which artists and fans can get all sorts of tangled up, but it's more bitter than funny. Likewise "Anti-Summersong," a tune that name-checks a past Decemberists favorite and gets doled-up for a dance-off at the local saloon, circa 1924. Meloy's attempts to distance himself from his past work are tackily cheeky at best and a middle finger at worst.

Then there's a matter of pacing, as the middle of the album slags with one too many ballads, including the Western movie cast-off "Carolina Low."

Still, this review starts with a discussion of "12-17-12" for a reason. *What a Terrible World, What a Beautiful World* may be a mixed bag, but the Decemberists still have the ability to be quite good. "Easy Come, Easy Go" takes a humorous look at death, boasting a cabaret kick, Southwestern grit, and beat fashioned out of a horse trot. "Philomena" is a goofily vulgar waltz, "Make You Better" serves as evidence the Decemberists have the power to be a sly rock band, and "Mistral" should be every bar's last-call sing-along for the next three years. Perhaps the Decemberists have largely often relied on conceptual projects for a reason. Here, as band leaves such ambitious thinking to the wayside, its focus is divided.

—**Todd Martens**



Steve Earle

Terraplane
New West, LP or CD

I am better off alone,” Steve Earle moans on *Terraplane*, continuing, “I can’t say that I’m surprised.” The Americana singer-songwriter’s revelations come a little too late in terms of his most recent marriage. He and Allison Moorer separated more than two years ago, making the redheaded country crooner Earle’s seventh ex-wife and latest female muse to inspire a batch of break-up tunes. Whether the Virginia native permanently takes the personal conclusion to heart remains to be seen, but at least he got his most notable record in more than a decade out of the experience.

Once one of the leading lights of the roots movement, Earle launched a promising career with a trio of acclaimed albums in the late 1980s before chemical addictions caught up to him, cost him a major-label deal, and ultimately, landed him in jail. After a nearly five-year hiatus, he sobered up and produced a second trio of records for Warner Bros. that ranks among his finest work.

Solid if somewhat predictable efforts have since followed, with only 2002’s *Jerusalem*—notable for its creative boldness and inclusion of the controversial headline-making song “John Walker’s Blues”—and 2009’s *Townes* tribute standing above the fray.

With Earle’s acting and writing endeavors making it seem as if his music is a lesser priority, *Terraplane* injects much-needed urgency and hardscrabble gruffness back into his now-familiar mix of country, rock, folk, and blues—with an emphasis on the latter. In terms of both style and mood, the blues function as the artist’s primary obsession throughout the 11-song set, as the clay-thick red dirt of Earle’s adopted home state of Texas seeps into harmonica-strewn fare such as “Baby Baby Baby (Baby)” and “The Usual Time,” which swings to and fro like a creaky saloon door.

Unlike most of today’s one-note revivalists, Earle doesn’t attempt to recreate a certain era or approach. His gnarled guitar shuffles against in-the-pocket backbeats on boogie-charged electric numbers, and on acoustic-based fare, picks and pokes with traditional East Coast Texas flair. Amplified or unplugged, a majority of the songs drive and grind, with a rejuvenated Earle excited about independence. Rather than wallow in sorrow, Earle accepts his fate as a way of life, embracing drifter existence on the gale-force ramble “Acquainted With the Wind” and celebrating newfound personal freedom on the street-corner rag “Ain’t Nobody’s Daddy Now.” Worries behind him, Earle focuses on seeking out pleasures to cure any lingering sadness or lonesomeness.

Indeed, on the lust-filled stomp “Go Go Boots Are Back,” Earle sounds meaner and grittier than he has in years, a singer whose desires won’t be denied. Similarly, on the album-closing “King of the Blues,” a stamping rhythm ties a mess of distorted chords into knots as Earle, reaching into the back of his throat to deliver the myth-rich narrative with outlaw gusto, makes the tributary song worthy of its title. —**Bob Gendron**

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JD McPherson

Let the Good Times Roll
Rounder Records, LP or CD

JD McPherson is deeply informed by the past, but he's no retro act. A post-punk greaser with an uncanny feel for vintage rhythm and blues, the Oklahoma native has carved out an impressive niche for himself since his 2010 debut on Chicago indie label Hi-Style Records and subsequent move to Rounder Records.

Let the Good Times Roll burnishes his reputation as an inventive artist adept at blending the past and present. McPherson found a kindred artistic partner in Mark Neill, a producer experienced in working with roots artists that combine both classic and modern sounds (Old 97's, Los Straitjackets). Together, they create an arresting song cycle that fuses an understated punk sensibility with powerfully realized R&B, rockabilly, and psychedelic soul.



©Photo by Kelly Kerr

McPherson is also a world-class singer with consummate phrasing. His versatile voice fluctuates between gritty alto and keening tenor, filled with tortured admissions and smooth entreaties. It's a sound that echoes past soul greats. As a Hammond organ lays a spooky and suggestive foundation, McPherson conjures David Ruffin's tortured ardor on the strange and paranoid "Shy Boy." On "Bridge Builder," McPherson's shimmering ache channels the titanic Sam Cooke.

Many tracks here drive along on throbbing, minimalist beats.

There's a spectral essence to McPherson's earthy, ethereal, and always addictive songs. It's as though the music is floating through the static of a transistor radio or snaking out of a dashboard on a foggy night drive.

The haunted narrator of "It's All Over But the Shouting" tells his tale of woe set against the kind of boogie groove pioneered by the likes of Jackie Brenston and Ike Turner. And the raw, entrancing beat of "Bossy" feels as if it's hammered out on makeshift equipment built from buckets, bones, and wire. It tingles with a swampy mysticism

somewhere between the Cramps and Screamin' Jay Hawkins.

Throughout, a stellar band comprised of upright bassist Jimmy Sutton, drummer Jason Smay, keyboardist Ray Jacildo, and multi-instrumentalist Doug Corcoran backs McPherson. They know how to mix it up with aplomb. With *Let the Good Times Roll*, McPherson and Co. have made one of the best albums of the new year with songs of fire and ice. A deeply gifted roots artist, he colors it all with a soulful shade of blue.

—**Chrissie Dickinson**



©Photo by Joshua Black Wilkins

Loneliness—and the fears that accompany the threadbare emotion—has long served as the inspiration for innumerable pop songs. The subject also provided the jumping-off point for many classics in the traditional country canon, with singers such as Hank Williams, George Jones, and Waylon Jennings making careers out of the sound of being despondent and continuing their erring ways en route to less-than-ideal circumstances.

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Justin Townes Earle

Absent Fathers
Vagrant, LP or CD

Yet as many artists discover the hard way, it's one thing to sing about forsakenness and another to truly understand what it means to be on a first-name basis with the feeling. The profound sadness tied to solitary existence and lingering heartsickness cannot easily be faked. The late contemporary singer-songwriter Jason Molina, who passed away in 2013 at the age of 39 from alcohol-induced organ failure, knew such deep-seated ache, sorrow, and isolation all too well. You can hear it on many of the remarkable records he made under the banners of Songs: Ohia and Magnolia Electric Co. Molina's is a haunting beauty, a torment that reaches deep into listeners' souls and doesn't let go.

Justin Townes Earle can relate to such sentiments. Abandoned by his musician/actor father, Steve, when he was just two, he became addicted to hard drugs at a time when most of his peers were still busy worrying about their Little League stats. Multiple rehabilitation stints, at least one high-publicity arrest, and several near-death experiences later, the 33-year-old appears to finally be finding inner peace, having kicked chemical substances and gotten married within the past 18 months.

The release of *Absent Fathers*—the bookend to the equally strong *Single Mothers*, issued in October—goes further to suggest the foggy gloom long surrounding the younger Earle's world is lifting. Spare, relaxed, and moody, the ten-track set primarily clings to downbeat hues and understated rhythms. Songs such as the crawling, stare-at-the-clock lament “When the One You Love Loses Faith” and stripped-to-the-bones “Day and Night” rightly focus on Earle's low-key voice, a pliable instrument teeming with weariness and anguish yet too stubborn and invested to give up.

Rather than wallow in the melancholy of troubled thoughts, busted relationships, and abused freedoms, Earle's weary deliveries convey a relatable compassion and unmistakable authenticity made even clearer by unfussy production. On the strolling “Least I Got the Blues” and languid “Slow Monday”—where the sluggish passing of time only serves to cause Earle to damn himself for acting a fool—country-laced pedal-steel guitar lines stretch across big-sky horizons and accentuate the singer's unsettled state of mind. Picking up the pace on “Someone Will Pay” and R&B-etched “Call Ya Momma,” he ditches whiskey-nursing deliberation in favor of something approximating moving on.

“Why do you always think the worst of me, babe?” Earle asks during “Why” as a full band supplies a steady beat and honky-tonk accents. Like most of the record, the concise tune finds Earle mired in despair of one sort or another. But it also witnesses the singer considering other perspectives and contemplating better possibilities, the heartache a necessary stopover on the way to the hopeful catharsis intimated throughout the outlines of the subtly powerful *Absent Fathers*.

—**Bob Gendron**


Twerps

Range Anxiety
Merge, LP or CD

Warning: Things are going to get cute. Melbourne's Twerps are the sort of musicians that write a song about the joy of marriage and label it "Fern Murderers." You know, because the plant has a tendency to be used as an accessory as a wedding item. They're also the sort of folks that write lyrics such as "your voice has a good vibration" that pertain to talking on the phone to a loved one and, on "White As Snow," may or may not be singing about a real-life Disney princess. It's too adorable to know for sure.

For the right frame of mind, Twerps are quite lovely. It doesn't hurt that the quartet also knows its way around a melody or two. "I Don't Mind" layers a lazy-day swinging bass with a muted beat and captures the band's life and love philosophy with the words "I don't mind if we waste it away."

Product: 122 Integrated Amplifier

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MUSIC

Nothing else matters if you're in the right company. Twerps create such a charming, old-fashioned frame of mind that some songs, including "Back to You," where synths bounce like a kazoo gone wild, even sound constructed with toy instruments. Yes, practically everything here exudes charm. "Stranger" is a love letter reconfigured as a jangle-pop song. "New Moves" finds the best cure for a breakup comes via helpful harmonies. "Shoulders" turns a few simple guitar chimes into an intoxicating haze.

The vibe is loose, as boys and girls trade vocals, turning the buzzing heartache of "Love at First Sight" into a bitter call and response and the slow swoon of "Adrenaline" into an alluring back-and-forth exercise. Each of Martin Frawley's guitar strums sound cushioned, Rick Milovanovic's bass floats like pollen on a slightly windy summer day, Alex Macfarlane drums with light brush strokes, and Julia McFarlane brings a sense of wistfulness with dryly nostalgic vocals.

As musical reference points, the band cites a handful of beloved yet little-known cult acts, groups such as the Go-Betweens and the Clean. Those are on par, as all three groups share an ability to observe men and women with endearing approachability. That's true even when Twerps are being a bunch of creepers, as on the album-closing "Empty Road," where stalking is unfurled with spinning-wheel beauty. —**Todd Martens**



Various Artists
Another Day Another Time: Celebrating the Music of "Inside Llewyn Davis"
 Nonesuch, 3LP or 2CD

Initially trumpeted by critics as an Oscar contender and a thematic relative of the Oscar-winning directors/screenwriters' smash *O Brother Where Art Thou?*, the Coen brothers' 2013 film *Inside Llewyn Davis* failed to win over public interest. The soundtrack, designed to channel the vibe of the Greenwich Village folk scene in 1961 and anchored by contemporaries such as the Punch Brothers and Justin Timberlake (who starred in the movie), disappeared nearly as quickly from view.

It seemed, however, the project's overseers knew such an undertaking would remain under the radar. Having admitted as much, and to create additional buzz, the Coen brothers and producer T Bone Burnett staged a benefit concert at New York's Town Hall in September 2013. The affair featured actors and musicians from the film as well as a cadre of artists that trade in the sort of roots fare—old and new, traditional and original—connected to or informed by the scene that attracted Bob Dylan to the East Coast and, ultimately, changed the course of culture.

While such one-time events often poorly translate to records and video, *Another Day Another Time: Celebrating the Music of "Inside Llewyn Davis"* retains a curious allure thanks to the consistency of style and performances. A host of marquee names—ranging from Joan Baez and the Decemberists' Colin Meloy to Elvis Costello and Jack White—supply star power and bow with expectedly solid turns. Highlights include Baez delivering a stark "House of the Rising Sun" and White, refreshingly free of shtick, transforming his own charmingly innocent "We're Going to Be Friends."

Yet this acoustic-based set succeeds most between the lines, via several up-and-comers that take full advantage of the platform. Carolina Chocolate Drops singer Rhiannon Giddens transcends what she's shown thus far with her main group on the antebellum-informed "Waterboy" and Celtic standard "S'iomadh rud tha dhith orm/Ciamar a ni mi 'n dannsa direach."

©Photo by Rahav Segev

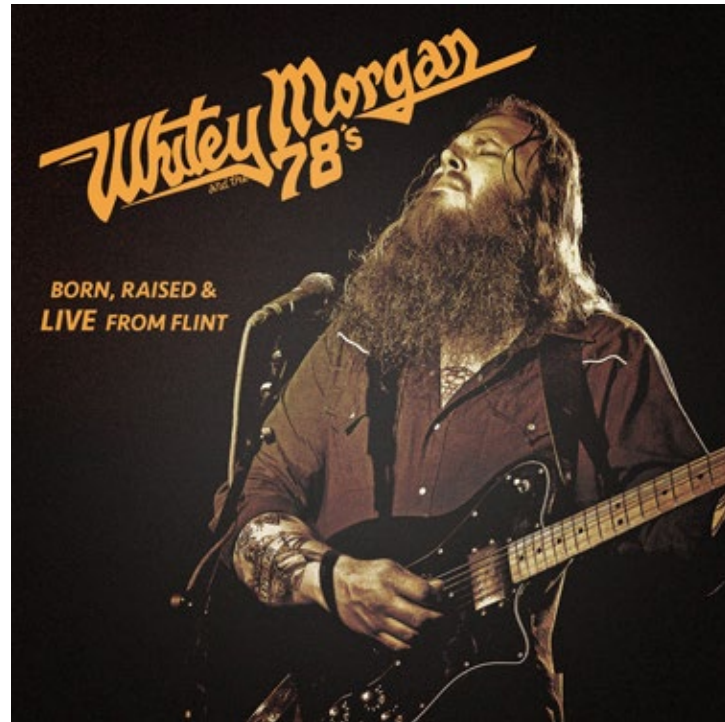


The arresting readings reveal a voice pregnant with gospel, texture, grace, and power. Similarly, the manners in which the Secret Sisters dial up tender harmonies on the mournful "Tomorrow Will Be Kinder" and Lake Street Drive skit through "You Go Down Smooth" give more reason to be optimistic about the health of traditional-minded folk in the 21st century.

And while he's already familiar to Americana aficionados Punch

Brothers member Chris Thile again proves he's ready for an even bigger stage throughout. Along with Gillian Welch, who is superb both in small ("The Way It Goes") and ensemble pairings ("Didn't Leave Nobody But the Baby"), Thile functions as the evening's jack-of-all-trades. He grooves with his main group on "Rye Whiskey" and shines in a variety of settings in which he carries the instrumental weight.

At more than two hours, the 34-track collection occasionally suffers from momentum losses. The Avett Brothers stick out as revivalist pretenders and actors Oscar Isaac and Carey Mulligan add little to the proceedings. Still, the spirit of the past, promise of the present, and hope of the future in the form of Welch, Thile, Giddens, and Co. make it easier to overlook such flaws. —**Bob Gendron**



Whitey Morgan and the 78's

Born, Raised & LIVE from Flint
Bloodshot Records, CD

Filmmaker and activist Michael Moore is the most famous son of hardscrabble Flint, Michigan. But Whitey Morgan is surely the city's most distinctive grandson. With a big beard and tattoos sleeving his arms, the gritty singer-songwriter-guitarist makes rip-snorting country-rock that gets people dancing, even in the toughest of times.

Recorded in front of a rowdy hometown crowd at Flint nightclub the Machine Shop, Morgan and his road-seasoned band, the 78's, offer a fiery set that mixes material from their previous releases with choice covers. It's all delivered with muscular precision. Morgan and crew reproduce a 1970s country-rock sound with loving fidelity. Even the unrepentant stage patter seems a throwback to an earlier era.

"How about a drinkin' song?" Morgan asks, introducing the scorching "Turn Up the Bottle." He affectionately acknowledges his dedicated fanbase: "You guys are drunk as fuck."

Morgan and his mates clearly remain in thrall to the sound and mythos of such classic outlaws as Waylon Jennings, David Allan Coe, and Hank Williams Jr. The band synthesizes such influences and more in expertly rendered music.



©Photo by Clay Abbott

There are touches of the sinewy virtuosity of southern-rock reprobates Lynyrd Skynyrd and the bravado and beauty of the Marshall Tucker Band.

Despite their backward glance, Morgan and the 78's are liberated by their love for the past, not smothered by it. Like neo-outlaw Jamey Johnson, they mix a rough-and-tough mien with a poetic viewpoint. A big, fresh, openhearted spirit underlines the performances. It's impossible to resist the stinging electric guitars seamlessly trading up leads, the rock-solid rhythm section keeping time, and the pedal-steel guitar painting with aural flourishes.

As such, the hard-touring outfit rocks the joint into orbit with the bristling opener "Buick City Blues." The quit-my-job anthem "Another Round" name-checks rough-hewn legends Hank Williams, Merle Haggard, and Jerry Reed. And the band tackles Johnny Paycheck's "Cocaine Train" with such roaring exuberance it's hard to think of the last time a cautionary drug tale sounded so fun and danceable.

Of course, outlaw country's pendulum swings between bad-boy braggadocio and vulnerable male confession. Keeping with tradition, Morgan crows about his wicked ways in a swaggering cover of Johnny Cash's "Bad News," then shifts gears to sensitively croon about desire on a rendition of Bruce Springsteen's "I'm On Fire." No doubt, that.

—**Chrissie Dickinson**



The Staple Singers

Freedom Highway Complete
Legacy, 2LP or CD

On April 9, 1965, the Staple Singers arrived at their hometown New Nazareth Missionary Baptist Church in Chicago to play as part of a service inspired by the string of Civil Rights marches in Alabama. Just a month earlier down South, 600 protestors stood up to billy clubs and tear gas. Two days later, Martin Luther King, Jr. led the charge. Then, on March 21, more than 4,000 Army and National Guard troops protected activists completing a route now recognized as the "Selma to Montgomery Voting Rights Trail."

Moved by the historic demonstrations and King's messages, Pops Staples, the Staple Singers patriarch, penned the anthemic "Freedom Highway." Underlined by a shuffling rhythm and insistent "Made up my mind/And I won't turn around" refrain, the song received its premier at this transformative concert, captured by record-studio equipment and later issued as a heavily edited album.

Long out of print, the record is newly expanded by seven tracks and 33 minutes on *Freedom Highway Complete*. For the first time, the emotion-packed event unfolds in an ambient sonic mix that conveys the fervent interplay between band, congregation, choir, and clergy. More importantly, the reissue brings to light a release that more directly underlines the connection between church doctrines and secular causes than any gospel album in history.

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MUSIC



Staple Singers Courtesy of Sony Music Archives (L to R) Yvonne Staples, Pervis Staples, Mavis Staples, Roebuck 'Pops' Staples (front)

Writing about the pivotal gathering in his terrific *I'll Take You There: Mavis Staples, The Staple Singers, and the March Up Freedom's Highway* book, Greg Kot states: "Church music was no longer just about making it through this world to get to the next one; it was also about living right now in the streets all African-Americans shared." The observation resonates throughout these 77 minutes. Putting an end to any doubts about his music's conviction and purpose, Pops introduces the slow-burning "What You Gonna Do?" by affirming: "I want to make heaven my home, but I want to enjoy myself a little down here, too."

Recognizing the seriousness of what's at stake, he and his family-based ensemble back up the cultural and social import with a performance delivered with a passion, potency, soulfulness, confidence, and faith-entrenched spirituality that suggest their lives (as well as that of their audience) depend not only on every note—but also on carrying out the lessons and will imbedded in songs such as the robe-swaying "When I'm Gone" and narrative-based "The Funeral." Still a few years away from recording at Stax and burning down the stiff boundaries surrounding gospel, pop, rock, and R&B, the Staple Singers sound unstoppable in their mission for equality, justice, and peace.

Such resolve abounds. It's in the throaty ache of then-25-year-old Mavis Staples' voice (her lead on "Tell Heaven" rivals anything on Aretha Franklin's acclaimed *Amazing Grace*); smooth background harmonies behind an equally fiery Mavis on the standard "Precious Lord, Take My Hand"; call-and-response proclamations of "When the Saints Go Marching In" and "Build on That Shore"; and, especially, Pops' inimitable guitar playing, his blues-

baptized passages snaking through the set with equal parts brooding menace and revivalist celebration.

By the time it's over, the collection plate is passed, the handclapping and stomping offered up to heaven, the teachings preached, the rewards promised, and the higher power summoned. As for the saints? They're still marching. —**Bob Gendron**



Ultra-High Frequencies: The Chicago Party
Numero Group, 2LP/DVD or CD/DVD



Universal Togetherness Band
Universal Togetherness Band
Numero Group, LP or CD

When “The Chicago Party” aired briefly on a Windy City UHF television channel in 1982, few could have mistaken the program

for “Soul Train.” Former Chicagoan Don Cornelius’ nationally syndicated show featured teens and young adults dancing to some of the most popular artists of the day; the dance floor of “The Chicago Party” combined older adults’ moves with upcoming musicians, castoff comedy acts and, occasionally, a mysterious transvestite. But the programs shared an inspired spirit, and watching *Ultra-High Frequencies: The Chicago Party* can be just as infectious as its celebrated predecessor.

Chicago musicians James Christopher and Willie Woods hosted the program at their South Side club, CopHerBox II (that pun means what you think it means). They seemed to learn television production as they went along, but the emphasis was on showcasing the community, not on video technique.

There’s nothing overly slick about these acts, and such realness exemplifies archival label Numero Group’s aesthetic. This 2LP/DVD or CD/DVD package is the latest in the company’s incredible work in uncovering valuable, and mostly unheralded, chapters in R&B, especially from the Midwest. Its 2009 *Light on the South Side* compilation combines a book of Michael L. Abramson’s vivid black-and-white mid-1970s photos of blues clubgoers with a double LP of songs that would have been on those venues’ jukeboxes. Comparing similarities and differences between the audiences in those pictures and the CopHerBox clientele dancing on the “Chicago Party” videos could fill another book.

Not that such a study could detract from the sheer fun in watching these episodes that aired for all-too-brief amount of time. Sketches like a courtroom where a judge (in an anachronistic wig) declares Christopher and Woods “perverted crazy men” seem tossed-off but derive from a tradition in comic R&B that stretches back to the short films of 1940s singer Dusty Fletcher. And while the array of comedy bits, dancers, martial artists, full-figured models, and a ventriloquist on “Chicago Party” may lack

polish, the lesser-known and usually Chicago-connected singers and groups are more than worthy of the wider audience they should receive with this release.

The LPs (or CD) include 16 tracks that the performers lip-synched on the program. While hip-hop gathered steam elsewhere, the city’s storied steppin’ dancers still held sway here (a beach-party episode co-hosted with radio station WBMX touched on emerging house music). Singer Donnell Pitman’s charisma is the focus of his “Love Explosion,” but so is the underpinning funk bass line. Rahmlee’s “Think” sounds like a lost Earth, Wind and Fire track—and, in fact, he was the featured trumpeter in that band’s horn section. Closer-counter’s “Let Yourself Go” blends old-school harmonies with faster-paced beats.

Universal Togetherness Band also performed its proto-rap “Pull Up” at the CopHerBox II for “Chicago Party” cameras. Yet his group’s music and story deserved its own Numero Group release. Keyboardist/vocalist Andre Gibson formed the ensemble while he was a student at the city’s Columbia College. But, as Jon Kirby mentions in the extensive liner notes, Gibson’s experiences in music went

back to his upbringing in the Washington Park neighborhood. Along with popular R&B, he also received considerable jazz training through the public schools’ music programs. Thanks to Columbia sound-engineering instructor Malcolm Chisholm, UTB were given time in a couple of the city’s premier studios when these tracks were recorded between 1979 and 1982.

The eight songs here affirm UTB deserved a bigger fanbase than it drew during its existence. All the tracks are persuasively upbeat in tempo and mood, especially the leadoff “Ain’t Gonna Cry.” While Gibson’s well-crafted tunes nod to musical trends of the time, the group avoids anything too obvious. The dance tune “Real Thrill” borrows some elements from disco, but Arnold Gibson’s drum patterns turn it in a different direction. Another track, “My Sentiments,” reflects the ethereal soul of Shuggie Otis, but that mood is then shaken up through Mike Young’s saxophone solo.

Like Christopher and Woods on “Chicago Party,” UTB accentuated spirit over polish, which is why these discoveries sound better than so many of their more famous contemporaries from 33 years ago. —**Aaron Cohen**

FEATURE



Aurender Flow

By John Darko

Aurender first teased their portable DAC / headphone amplifier at the 2014 Munich High End Show. Back then it was called the “V1000” – not exactly catchy.

Six months later at the Rocky Mountain Audio Festival in Denver, Aurender’s Sally Jeung and Harry Lee offered first listens to members of the press while also canvassing for a more promotional-friendly name. Eyeing its wavelike profile I suggested Flow – a name that Aurender would ultimately run with when bringing the device to market the following month.

Casual observers could be forgiven for thinking that the Flow is Aurender’s response to the Chord Hugo, but it’s not. Even a little hands-on time shows it to be a different beast entirely, not least because of its MSRP: at US\$1295 the Flow sells for almost half the price of its UK rival.

The differences don’t end there. The Flow isn’t an in-pocket portable like the Hugo. There are no elastic straps for smartphone attachment and the rubber feet found on its base aren’t there to cushion a smartphone; they are to prevent the Flow from sliding across the desktop. Besides, the Flow’s weight (450g/15.9oz) and highly informative display screen, handsomely encircled by a velocity-sensitive volume ring, also point to desktop deployment.

The leather carrying case that ships in the box is free of cutout holes for the Flow’s digital input and quarter-inch headphone sockets, cementing its desktop assignation further. That said, it’s still a go-anywhere device – one

that will readily make the to-and-fro between home and workplace.

Then there’s Flow’s most unusual feature: its internals house a slot for an optional, user-installable mSATA drive (up to 1TB). Now the music library storage burden moves from host computer to the unit itself. Don’t mistake it for a DAP though – a PC or Mac is still required to extract data from the Flow’s internal drive before the host device’s playback app feeds a datastream back to the device via the supplied USB 3.0 or USB 2.0 cable.

Usability considerations don’t end there. Along the Flow’s right side are control buttons that talk to iTunes: play/pause and playlist navigation are possible without ever needing to interface with the connected computer, iPhone or iPad. The latter find connectivity via the ubiquitous Camera Connection Kit. Android phones connect via the included OTG cable, but do check that your model supports USB audio output before putting credit card to counter. *(continued)*

FEATURE

FEATURE



There's no coaxial S/PDIF socket here but a Toslink input brings Astell&Kern portables, Apple TVs and some CD spinners into the picture, for which resolution is capped at 24bit/192kHz for PCM.

The Flow is backwards compatible with any USB 2.0 cable. I used a microUSB-terminated Light Harmonic Light-speed 1G USB cable (US\$99) to ensure consistency when conducting comparisons with other devices. If you don't believe "audiophile" USB cables make a difference, that's fine; the supplied wire won't impede the XMOS USB and Sabre ESS9018K2M chips from handling data streams up to 32bit/384kHz PCM and DSD64/128.

Unlike the Hugo, the internal 4450mAh battery will recharge from any USB port. Off-grid listening time is pegged at around seven hours. Navigating the on-screen display via those same side-facing transport buttons allows for user selection of three charging modes ("never," "always," or "only when Flow is silent") and digital filters (three for PCM and four for DSD). The way in which Aurender elegantly implements user options like this really sets it apart from much of the competition.

Now – time to listen.

I'd describe the Flow's sound as calmly authoritative. It's the opposite of showy. Fans of flashier micro-dynamics might find the overall presentation a little too conservative but I find its unobtrusive presentation far more conducive to all-day listening. And with so many headphones out there nowadays, especially those that already pack an abundance of transient incision, it's easy to find an appropriate match. I didn't have to look very far.

The Flow delivers ample go-juice to take the 600 ohm Beyerdynamic T1 to stout SPLs without surrendering acoustic mass. You can't say that about the Resonance Labs Concero HP. With its in-built filters, case-mounted volume control and the same ESS silicon handling decoding, the smaller, less expensive Canadian is probably the Flow's nearest rival. However, the Concero HP sounds thinner of body and slightly ragged with the top-flight Beyerdynamic. One only has to look at each unit's specifications sheet to see why: the Flow pushes 43mW into 600 ohms while the Concero can only muster 23mW.

FEATURE

Back to back with the Chord Hugo, the Flow plays it slightly cooler and a little "wetter." A comparative lack of top-end air lends the Flow a more intimate sonic presentation than its British rival. That might be an issue for owners of the dark chocolate flavored Alpha Dogs from MrSpeakers – with which I prefer the Hugo – but it's a win for headphones with an already well-extended top end like the Sennheiser HD800. They sound terrific here. Experience tells me this isn't a result found with just any headphone amplifier.

It would be foolhardy to dismiss the Flow on the basis that it can't match the Chord Hugo's treble finesse. Its more humid air plays especially well with cans that present with more "papery" dryness. Think: AKG K-701/2 or Sennheiser Momentum.

The brushed aluminium finish that Aurender deploys across their product range makes for a terrific aesthetic match with the KEF M500 on-ears, which scale really nicely when fed with better amplification. The more considered manner in which the Flow serves up detail and layer separation plays neat counterbalance to the *(continued)*

FEATURE



aurender

snleuqel

KEF's sometimes more excitable manner, once again dialing down the potential for listener fatigue when tackling Genesis's *The Lamb Lies Down On Broadway* or Swans' *The Seer*. Office bound folk should sit up and take notice here.

Talking of which, the Flow's infinite volume rotary makes for a wonderfully tactile experience for which one might observe favorable similarities to Devialet's remote control. Ergonomics are often the first thing given the chop when building to a price point, but thankfully Aurender knows that inside every good audiophile is a desire to physically turn the volume up or down. Moreover, anyone who spends the day fumbling for media keys or mouse-clicking in software apps as colleagues come and go will know what I mean.

The Aurender Flow is a great way to get the very best from your favorite headphones in a tidy form factor. Its numerous considerations to the end user coupled to an elegantly powerful sonic presentation make it a delight to use on a daily basis. That it sports the most physically satisfying volume pot in its market segment only strengthens the Flow's performance-value quotient.

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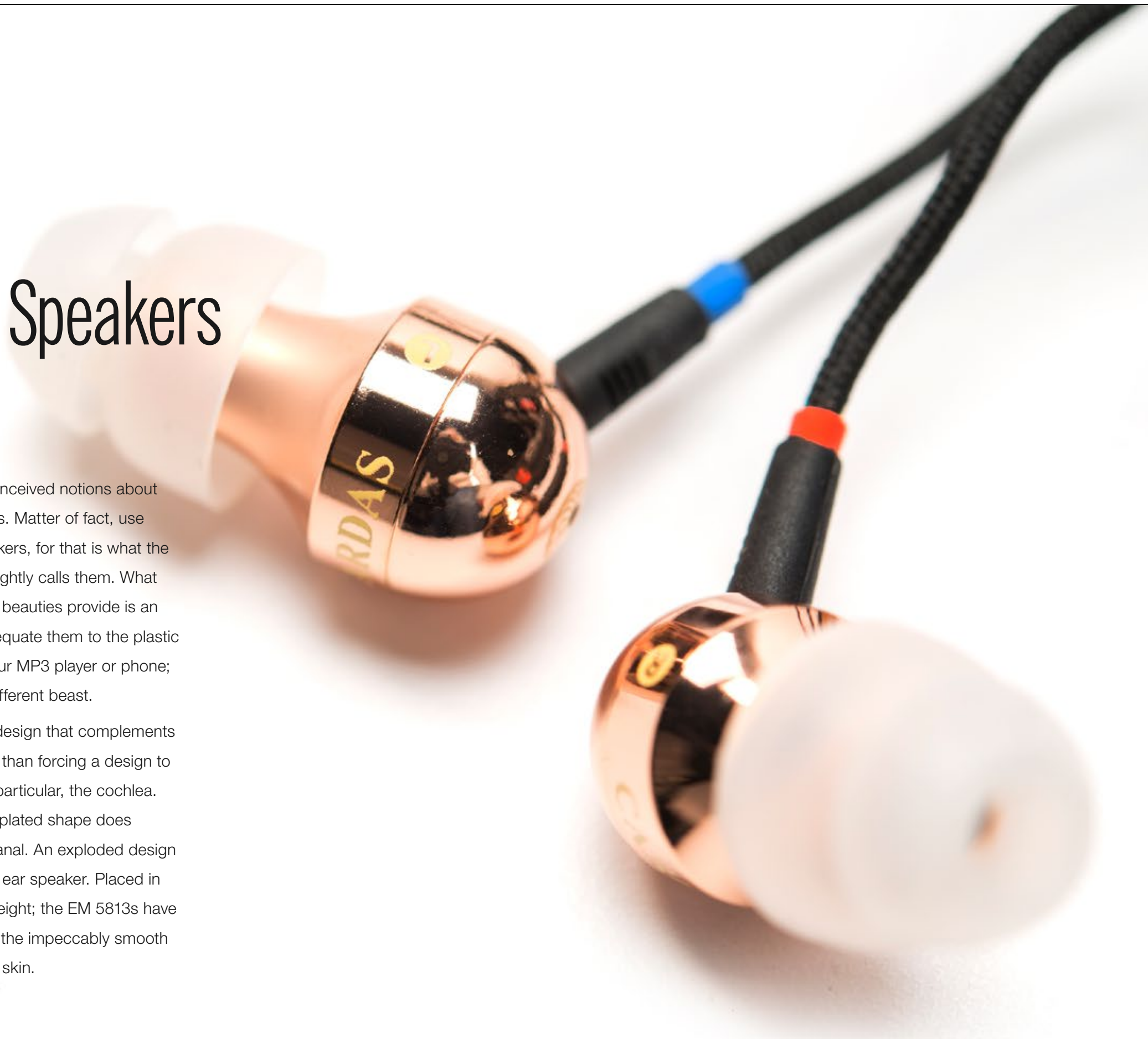
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Cardas EM 5813 Ear Speakers

By Mark Marcantonio

Put away any preconceived notions about in-ear headphones. Matter of fact, use the term ear speakers, for that is what the Cardas EM 5813 rightly calls them. What these copper-tipped beauties provide is an in-ear concert. Don't even try to equate them to the plastic junk that came packaged with your MP3 player or phone; the EM 5813s are a completely different beast.

George Cardas starts with a design that complements the parts of the human ear rather than forcing a design to work with the ear's membranes and, in particular, the cochlea. Upon inspection, the brass with copper plated shape does present a natural balance with the ear canal. An exploded design view shows 10 separate pieces for each ear speaker. Placed in hand, the first thing one notices is the weight; the EM 5813s have some serious substance. The second is the impeccably smooth exterior; the seams don't catch fabric or skin.



FEATURE



The EM 5813s consist of a United Nations of parts, as the components come from three different continents. The cable is the headphone version of Cardas Clear Light, a *TONEAudio* favorite. No thin casing here, once the two channels come together the cable is thicker than a medical IV tube. The jack uses a 90-degree design that some will like and others hate, but it protects against foolishly pulling the connection apart without grasping the head of the jack.

The single, polyethylene naphthalate film driver design is a revelation. There is an openness that all other in-ear headphones struggle to replicate. Elton John's

vocals from his terrific *Live from Australia* via an iPod Classic in lossless show the deeper resonances of middle age in "The King Must Die." In "Sorry Seems to Be the Hardest Word" the strings of the accompanying orchestra have actual texture and detail.

Even though the EM 5813s are an ear speaker, I don't recommend them for running as I found the extra weight of their outstanding materials caused them to lose a secure fit. Bicycle riding, walking, and weightlifting were no problem. The length of the cable may seem too long, but by using the included Velcro tie strap I never noticed a difference.

FEATURE



Pink Martini's opening horns and harp at the beginning of "Mar Desconocido" is lustfully rich. Every instrument in this multi-layered song has plenty of space via the EM 5813s' presentation. The female vocals in the next track, "Taya Tan," are clear, full, and effortless. Matter of fact, the entire *Hey Eugene!* disc sounded as if it were a higher resolution 24/96 instead of 16/44 bit rate.

Included are two sets of rubber tips: white and blue. I preferred the white, but it's a personal choice; therefore, make sure to try them both. For travel warriors I found the EM 5813s to have excellent natural noise isolation, even when sitting the back of the plane. I noticed that I needed about 20% less volume than with the Apple 2nd generation or a pair of Skull Candy in-ear products.

Wanting to hear how truly good the EM 5813s are, I plugged them into *TONEAudio*'s 2014 overall product of the year, the Oppo HA-1 headphone amplifier. With its efficient design, it didn't take much to get the EM 5813s rocking with Molly Hatchet's signature "Flirtin' with Disaster" via TIDAL streaming service. The EM 5813s punched, jumped, and thrashed with dominating energy. They'll satisfy in a home system for all but the most prejudiced of headgear enthusiasts. *(continued)*

FEATURE



The Cardas EM 5813 Ear Speakers clearly illustrate what can happen by starting with a clean slate. By looking beyond Mylar film, George Cardas found a solution giving the listener so much more detail than with previous designs. Combined with an understanding that the human ear is an extension of the ear speaker design the listener is treated to something that is truly a game changer. The EM 5813 Ear Speakers will make you wonder how you ever lived without them. ●



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By Monique Meadows

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Though many people prefer red wine in winter—those big, powerful and rustic reds that offer notes of spice, smoke and maple, and that can help fend off the winter chill—white wines can do the same, by offering a bit of sunlight in the glass and on the palate. Spring and summer typically call for lighter white wines with mouthwatering acidity, refreshing citrus and tropical flavors. But in colder months, deeper and fuller-bodied whites with less acidity pair well with winter comfort meals like soup, chili and pasta—or anything baked with cheese. The following white wines offer plenty of body and food-friendly acidity, making them perfect for sipping after a long day of skiing or by the fire on a cold night.



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TONE STYLE

2012 Vignerons de Buxy Buissonnier Bourgogne Côte Chalonnaise Chardonnay

Burgundy, France \$13

A wine cooperative founded in 1931, Vignerons de Buxy, like many wineries from the Chalonnaise region, presents wonderful value compared to its counterparts in Meursault, Puligny and Chassagne. Its Buissonnier Bourgogne is a nice introduction to Chardonnay of southern Burgundy. Made from 100 percent Chardonnay grapes grown on soil with high limestone content, giving the wine brightness and minerality, this wine offers a lovely combination of fruit, acidity and creaminess. It is aged first in stainless-steel vats and then in oak barrels, which provides gentle notes of oak with flavors of melon, pear, citrus zest and a hint of honeysuckle.



TONE STYLE

2013 Weingut Andreas Diehl Gewürztraminer Kabinett

Pfalz, Germany \$16

Husband-and-wife team Andreas and Alexandra Diehl produce white and red wines on their 87-acre estate in the town of Edesheim in Germany's South Pfalz region, near the French border. The region is sunny with a mix of soils, and although the Riesling grape dominates the region's vineyards, Gewürztraminer is also planted here. Gewürztraminer is known for its sensational aromatics, spice and slight sweetness. This example is aged in stainless steel to emphasize freshness. It delivers floral notes on the nose leading to flavors of citrus and spice, as well as peach, nectarine, lychee and passion fruit. The wine is off dry, meaning that it is slightly sweet on the palate. It pairs well with Chinese, Indian, Thai, Moroccan and other spicy foods, as well as fatty cheeses and rich game.



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TONE STYLE

2012 Weingut Netzl Weissburgunder Bärnreiser

Carnuntum, Austria \$28

Austrian wines are becoming more and more popular, especially Gruner Veltliner. Pinot Blanc, a Burgundy varietal known in Austria as "Weissburgunder," is also getting a lot of attention. This barrel-aged example from Weingut Netzl is the perfect winter table wine or great for enjoying on its own. Planted in rich soil warmed by the area's Pannonian climate and cooled by its proximity to the Danube river, these grapes produce aromatic fruit-forward white whites, which benefit from dry summers and warm autumns that allow grapes to fully ripen.

The grapes for this 100-percent Weissburgunder are harvested by hand from vines averaging 30 years old. Part of the wine is fermented in small French oak barrels and left on the lees for five months, giving the wine a creamy texture, while the remainder is fermented in stainless-steel tanks to preserve the wine's beautiful freshness and ripeness. This winemaking care produces alluring aromas of tropical fruit, honey and an oaken, spicy nuttiness. The palate offers a heady mix of vibrant fruit flavors, creaminess and a fresh acidity.

TONE STYLE

2011 Domaine du Bagnol Cassis

Provence, France \$29

The vines at Domaine du Bagnol—located in the Provence-Alpes/Côte d’Azur region in southern France, not far from the city of Marseille—grow on rocky soil near the sea, amidst a landscape of gentle hills and below an outcropping of limestone, which can lend wine vibrancy. Bold and rich, the Cassis Blanc is a blend of three varietals: Marsanne, Clairette Blanc, and Ugni Blanc, which are fermented for three weeks in temperature-controlled cement tanks to preserve freshness. The wine is dry yet juicy and extremely aromatic. Treat yourself to a bottle of this gorgeous wine—drinking it is like being transported to Provence.



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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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TO NE STYLE

Ortofon DS-1 Digital Scale

\$167

www.musicdirect.com

While gadgets aren't always fashionable, a properly set up turntable is always in style. And what better way to adjust tracking force than with a digital scale? We've tried some of the cheapie, Chinese-made digital scales in the \$40–\$60 range, but they have all had relatively short lifespans.

Clearaudio's Weight Watcher is excellent, but starting to tip the price scale at \$300 these days—so think of that model as the S-Class Mercedes of digital scales. Ortofon's DS-1 is made in Japan, easy to use, and thanks to its smaller paddle, makes it more versatile with a wider range of cartridges than the Weight Watcher. At nearly half the price, it makes this accessory accessible to a wider range of audiophiles.





Snap-on LED 2000 Work Light

www.snapon.com
\$49.99

Here's another good reason to have overlapping interests. How many times have you needed extra light behind that audio rack of yours? The Snap-on 2000 delivers 2000 lumens of light, is incredibly portable, doesn't generate any heat and barely draws any power. And because it uses LEDs you won't destroy a costly halogen bulb should you knock it over while struggling to find the SPDIF output of your DAC, or fumble for the plug in your oil pan.

Should you need to light your YouTube extravaganzas, three of these make a great portable lighting kit, able to go anywhere on a moment's notice. Best of all, you can buy these at Target for \$25 if you stay sharp rather than going to Amazon or eBay.

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PASS

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www.gikacoustics.com
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GIK Acoustics has been making affordable, approachable acoustic treatments for years now, and we've been using them with excellent results since nearly the beginning of *TONEAudio*. Nothing works better and provides more bang for the buck in your listening room than a modest complement of GIK panels, traps and diffusors. For about \$500–\$1,500 you can transform a room and get all the sound that the gear on your rack is capable of delivering.

Now, they've adapted a great studio trick (and many of their panels are used in studios) to the home environment by putting a pair of stands on one of their panels, making it a freestanding panel. Both audio and photo studios like to call these GOBOs, but you'll call it pure genius for a couple of reasons. Being able to make minute adjustments rather than just attaching panels to walls is great, but the portability of these panels is also excellent for those living in an environment where they can't permanently install sound treatment. Mark where they should be, bring them out for a long weekend or listening session and then back in the closet when you have to entertain non-audiophile guests! Awesome.

TONE STYLE



RecordWall-it

www.recordwall-it.com
\$7.95

For those of you who like to display your albums on the wall, or keep better track of what's currently spinning on your turntable, the RecordWall-it is an elegant solution that doesn't require you to take the frame apart when you want to change the album art, and if you're good at keeping things level, you can use two side by side for double albums.

The RecordWall-it comes in basic black and is easy to mount, thanks to the countersunk holes molded in the plastic. If you are just mounting album covers for permanent display, you can probably get away with just screwing into your drywall; record jackets don't weigh that much. However, if you will be changing the album covers often, we suggest mounting to the wall stud, or if that isn't handy, using a pair of 25-pound wall anchors. Either way, this is one of those handy little gadgets that will leave you wondering how you ever did without it.



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Power Curl

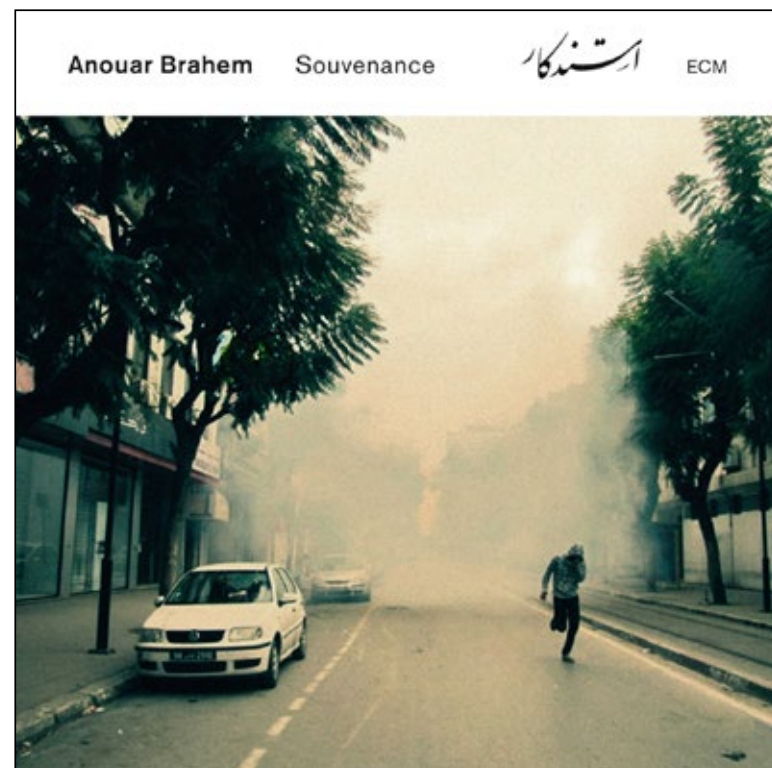
\$9.99

www.quirky.com

Tired of always finding your MacBook charger in a giant ball? Quirky's Power Curl comes in different sizes, depending on your model, and they come in some fun, or should we say, quirky colors. The power supply fits in the central, square hole and the power cords both wind around separate spools, much like monofilament thread on a weed whacker. There is just enough space on the spools to wind both cords all the way on the spool for travel.

As cool as the quirky colors are, a few trips in your purse, briefcase or backpack will leave the Power Curl somewhat scuffed, so perhaps black might be a better option, but it's still handy as hell. And if you need to keep your iPhone/Pod/Pad chargers organized as well, the Power Curl Mini (only \$4.99) is just the ticket. This one is ADD approved.

JAZZ & BLUES



Anouar Brahem
Souvenance
 ECM, 2CD

remained the somewhat in the dark about Anouar Brahem's charms until I was asked to review 2006's *Le Voyage de Saha*, a luminous trio date. Knew he was an oud player, knew his chops were impressive, guessed his blend of Arab folk influences and western chamber music was valuable enough for further investigation, but had only put one ear to about half of the seven ECM dates that preceded my assignment.



©Photo by Arthur Perset

Man, when I got into it, I fell hard. The grace balancing Brahem's ensemble work is a powerful force defined by a simmering fervor. Such poise—a signature trait—couldn't be anymore coercive than it is on *Souvenance*, a double-disc set that finds Brahem's quartet in cahoots with a chamber orchestra. A soundtrack for animated reflection, it's simply gorgeous.

Albums like this make a few demands. While it can impress even if you don't fully focus on it, its riches multiply when you do. The muted strings of Brahem's instrument (a five-stringed lute perfectly designed for a "music of whispers," he once said) are occasionally upfront, but not always.

They're forever on the hunt, finding ways to blend in with the piano or bass clarinet, and often putting accented foreground moves on the hushed drones and swirls of the orchestra. Brahem's not a string soloist in the way of, say, John McLaughlin or Carlos Santana. His oud's persona has more to do with tiny phrases that manage to dodge the spotlight even while standing front and center. Beguiling to say the least, especially when his work on "Improbable Day" and the album's title cut is so fetching in its ardor.

This is the first time the leader has written for strings, and ultimately it's the equilibrium of the charts that gives the music such zest. *(continued)*



©Photo by Arthur Perset

Brahm knows how to set moods, especially when it comes to shadowy scenes that exude rumination. The opening moments make their mark with an ominous glow. Conductor Pietro Mianiti guides his charges gently, using Brahm's designs in a way that touts splendor. In moves that conjure Gil Evans' muted use of color, the Orchestra della Svizzera Italiana comes and goes as needed, highlighting passages and disappearing into the ether. As bassist Björn Meyer puts a heartbeat to "Youssef's Song," the ensemble brings surprisingly rich hues to what's formally a pastel vibe.

In the press notes, Brahm speaks about reacting to the 2011 insurrections around the region of his homeland. By extension, flashes of agitation surface in the music to assure a dynamic character. But *Souvenance* is ultimately a program of delicacies, each piece yet another chance to hear how a series of very substantial hymns can pick up more power by embracing their ethereal complexion. —**Jim Macnie**

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MADE IN CHICAGO
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ROSCOE MITCHELL
HENRY THREADGILL

Live at the Chicago Jazz Festival

Jack DeJohnette

Made In Chicago
 ECM, CD

Two years ago, drummer Jack DeJohnette returned to his native Chicago and accepted an invitation to perform at the city's jazz festival. The job included an offer to form any band he chose. His sub-sequent selection of accomplished colleagues functioned as a kind of family reunion.

In the mid-1960s, DeJohnette—along with saxophonists Roscoe Mitchell and Henry Threadgill—joined pianist Muhal Richard Abrams' Experimental Band. Shortly afterward, DeJohnette pursued his career in New York while Mitchell and Threadgill joined Abrams' visionary cooperative, the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians. And as the latter thrived in the ensuing decades, fellow peer and bassist Larry Gray worked with a number of different Chicago-based jazz legends, especially the late Von Freeman. Captured here as *Made In Chicago*, their concert together at the city's Millennium Park emphasized a collective effort with shared responsibilities for new compositions.

Mitchell frequently comes on stage with an array of woodwinds, a few of which remain atypical of jazz ensembles. For this event, he uses three different kinds of saxophones (including sopranino), a baroque flute, and bass recorder. He also develops an array of distinctive (sometimes contrasting) textures through this arsenal, such as using extended circular breathing to suggest movement or to kick up a polyphonic storm alongside Threadgill's alto saxophone or bass flute. *(continued)*

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L-R Henry Threadgill, Roscoe Mitchell, Jack DeJohnette, Larry Gray, Muhal Richard Abrams

DeJohnette reacts by bringing melodic qualities to the drums. Abrams' composition, "Jack 5," also features deliberate tempos and his longstanding technique of showing the tonal qualities of silent passages. The approach frees up DeJohnette to respond in consistently imaginative directions.

Gray, who doubles on cello, complements the exchanges with his own kind of lyricism. His arco bass lines serve as a subtle cohesion to Abrams' higher-register notes and woodwind leads on Mitchell's "This." Rather than break the tension in the latter piece, DeJohnette adds another layer with his quiet use of mallets. The drummer's "Museum Of Time" begins with Abrams performing arpeggios that lead into firm chord changes underneath Mitchell and Threadgill's singular harmonies, all of which enhance the beauty of the core melody.

Threadgill, meanwhile, remains one of

the most formidable composers in contemporary jazz. His "Leave Don't Go Away" pushes the musicians to challenge each other by way of shifting tempos while DeJohnette's underlying funk beats remain rock-solid. The disc ends somewhat spontaneously with the free-blowing and collectively improvised "Ten Minutes." The catharsis is earned.

While ECM has, for the most part, emphasized sessions in pristine studios, the label's famed audio fidelity comes across on this live date, reaffirming that Millennium Park's Jay Pritzker Pavilion is one of the best-sounding large outdoor venues in the country. But, here too, DeJohnette and company prove expert at making the acoustics work for them as if they were in a more intimate space. Fifty years on, these musicians continue to dare most of the jazz world to play catch-up. —**Aaron Cohen**



Rudresh Mahanthappa

Bird Calls

Adam O'Farrill
Matt Mitchell
François Moutin
Rudy Royston

ACT



Rudresh Mahanthappa

Bird Calls

ACT, CD

It's an inventive tack. The 43-year-old bandleader doesn't tackle Bird head-on. Instead, he rearranges high-vis titles such as "Now's The Time" and "Dexterity" to suit the needs of his crack ensemble (pianist Matt Mitchell, bassist François Moutin, drummer Rudy Royston, and trumpeter Adam O'Farrill comprise the group), honing in on a melodic phrase or a thematic lick and then scripting the action from there. So while you never hear an overt Parker tune, echoes of their impact consistently emerge. The saxophonist spent his early years absorbing Bird, and while the genuflection is passionate, it's anything but pious. From the ensemble frenzy of "Chillin'" (a nod to "Relaxin' at the Camarillo") to the daredevil swoops of "Copuram" (based on "Steeplechase"), a charged charisma remains front and center.

Mahanthappa has previously investigated the music of his South Indian heritage, and intimations of that sound help

individualize several of these pieces. The album is also bolstered by six curt tracks (each deemed "Bird Calls") that intersperse the band tracks with pithy improvs and consistently revitalize the record's flow.

Perhaps the group gets closest to Parker's original whomp on "Both Hands," which takes its cues from "Dexterity." The fleet intro, the stormy unison lines between the leader and O'Farrill (who's uproarious throughout)—bop's aggression stands in the center spotlight and it's there where you can most easily recognize the prototype's bold character. Just like Bird realigning elements of 1940s standards to fuel his muse, Mahanthappa grabs what tickles him from these tunes—could be a handful of notes, could be an attitude—and puts it to work. Just call it thriving on a riff.

—**Jim Macnie**

One thing's become clear in the last 30 years: There are endless ways to address jazz repertory. From Hal Willner's upending of Thelonious Monk on 1984's *That's The Way I Feel Now* to last year's inflection-by-inflection photocopy of Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue* by Mostly Other People Do the Killing, options continue to spill forth. The most fetching bend iconic material towards a personalized view. You can certainly place Rudresh Mahanthappa's *Bird Calls* in that category. Here, the saxophonist and his quintet bring their collective temperament to pieces inspired by Charlie Parker nuggets. The music—both inspired and explosive—squeezes the orthodoxy of bebop into something more modern.

FEATURE

Arcam irDAC

Versatility Packed With Power

By Mark Marcantonio

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OPTICAL 1

OPTICAL 2

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M O O N

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M O O N
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MUSICAL ECSTASY

FEATURE



There's something about visual and operational simplicity that resonates with me, which is why I'm drawn to Arcam's irDAC (\$700), an understated unit about the size of a John Grisham paperback novel.

Its minimalist design is refreshing. The front panel includes white lettering and a thin green LED for each input and a small remote sensor; the top panel includes just the Arcam irDAC moniker and a small round power button. Though the unit is just 7 inches wide, the back panel, while crowded, still allows for easy gripping of wires. It includes L/R analog outputs, an RCA digital out, two coax, two optical, USB-A and -B and a USB switch, and a power toggle and input for the external power brick.

FEATURE



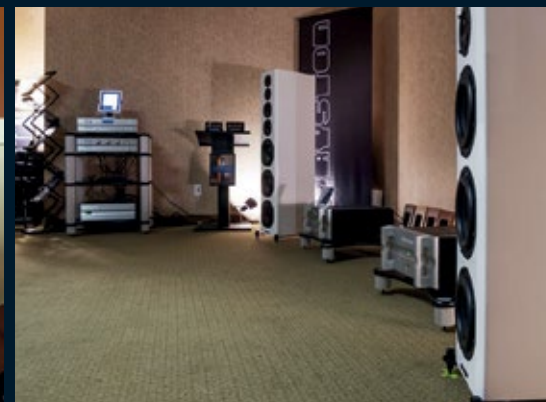
The irDAC sounds mellow right out of the box. After about 100 hours of constant play, the depth opens up, creating an easier and more expansive soundstage. Credit the Arcam engineers for a design consisting of the Texas Instruments PCM796 chip, isolated digital and analog stages, and eight total power supplies—not to mention Arcam's well-known emphasis on minimal noise and jitter. The two optical, two coaxial, and USB-B inputs are all 24-bit/96-kHz asynchronous without a driver, and 24/192 once the software is downloaded and installed.

Playing various file sizes, the irDAC consistently offers up easy musicality. Don't expect it to push music to the sonic cliff; it stays a couple of steps back from the precipice, but remains smooth, which still an excellent place to be for this price.

Arcade Fire's "Keep The Car Running" is always too harsh to play from my iPhone into my reference system, but with the irDAC, this track comes through with greater ease. Barry White's "I've Got So Much To Give" is the definition of smooth, and the Arcam presents it naturally, never sounding harsh or overly digital. Not so long ago, this level of musicality used to cost a *lot* more. You may not be able to tell whether the cymbal is located 6 or 6.5 inches from the center of the mix, but you'll appreciate the presentation nonetheless.

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FEATURE



FEATURE

Playing the Bill Evans Trio, the irDAC sounds relaxed, but it still gets the essence and energy of the high-frequency content in “Swedish Pastry.” Throughout the *At Shelly’s Manne-Hole* recording, the piano is easy and laid back, much like the club it was recorded in, and the irDAC resolves enough detail to pick up the distant voices in the audience.

When it’s either/or, this reviewer always prefers a natural presentation to the final bit of resolution. The last time our staff was this smitten with an inexpensive DAC was the Neko Audio D100 (priced at about \$1,100), making the irDAC an absolute steal for \$700. Portraying the nuances in Elvis Costello’s “Veronica,” the irDAC is nipping at the heels of my current reference, the Simaudio 300D.

Between the balance of the harp and the deep notes of the horn in Sinatra’s “Nice ‘n’ Easy,” or the delicacy of the clarinet and oboe lushly presented in Beethoven’s Ninth, the irDAC’s complete absence of shrillness allows hours of non-fatiguing listening—something budget DACs never used to be capable of.

How non-fatiguing is the irDAC’s sound? A nearly eight-hour eulogy-writing marathon that should have left me alternating between music and silence instead triggers a relaxed flood of creativity. And I find myself digging deeper into my digital jazz collection.

With the irDAC, the lossless streaming service TIDAL sounds just as terrific from my MacBook music server as it does from my iPhone, via the iPod port. The irDAC and the \$20-per-month TIDAL service is a fantastic combination for those craving good sound

and a large music library on a limited budget. The ability to access the digital signal from an iDevice is a major bonus. A friend comes over with a few tracks on his iPhone, and we’re listening within moments. Sadly, the Arcam does not recognize the iPod Classic, a mainstay of many audiophiles, so perhaps the company will address this in a future firmware update.

Oftentimes, products in the sub-\$1,000 category come with “yes, but” at the end of the review. This is not the case with the Arcam irDAC; it performs all the critical functions with ease and provides every input type necessary for complete digital integration. It’s so good that our publisher has decided to purchase the irDAC as *TONE*’s reference in the sub-\$1,000 category—and we happily give it our first Exceptional Value Award of 2015. ●

Arcam irDAC
\$700
www.arcam.co.uk



AUDIOPHILE PRESSINGS

By Jeff Dorgay



Grateful Dead

American Beauty

Mobile Fidelity, 180g 45RPM 2LP set

GRATEFUL DEAD

Because the Grateful Dead was always a band that paid close attention to the sound quality of its live performances and recordings, even a random copy of any Dead album usually sounds pretty good—provided it hasn't been played to extinction. Mobile Fidelity did a stellar job on the original single-album reissue of *American Beauty* in the 80s, but they are rare, with sealed versions fetching about \$150 and opened albeit gently played copies ranging from \$45-\$75. By comparison, original, opened, green-label WB versions in excellent condition can usually be found for about \$30-\$40.

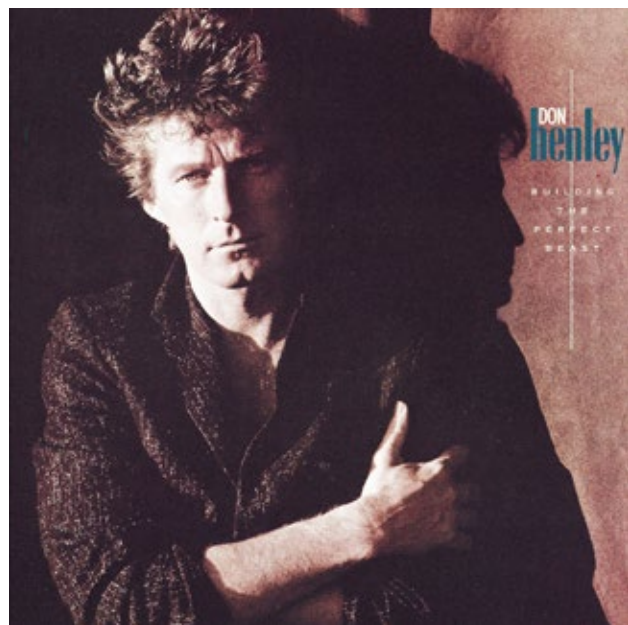
With many records, choosing between versions can often be a dilemma. But most Dead fans usually want everything, so consider this more a pairing than a choice. The early Mobile Fidelity version presents a wider soundstage than the new 45RPM reissue, with all vocals more out in front of the speakers. The current release lines everything up on nearly the same plane.

Tonally, the early Mobile Fidelity is slightly crisper, and more etched on the very top end. Your personal taste and overall system tonal balance will determine what you prefer. On our reference system, the Lyra Atlas cartridge tends to favor the new version, while the Clearaudio Goldfinger delivers a more homogenous playback with the older disc. The green label is smack dab in the middle of the two.

While all three versions sound close tonally and spatially, the current 45RPM edition is the champ in terms of noise floor. It's an amazing testament to the staying power of analog in that a high-quality tape, when well-preserved and expertly handled, can deliver such a quiet background.

Keep in mind the difference between these three pressings is decidedly small, and all three are excellent. Mobile Fidelity has done a phenomenal job.

DON HENLEY



Don Henley

Building The Perfect Beast
End of the Innocence
 HD Tracks, 24/96 Download

Love or hate the Eagles, drummer Don Henley is a huge part of that sound, having co-written most of their major songs. During his 14-year hiatus from the Eagles, he penned three solo albums, with the first, *I Can't Stand Still*, being mostly forgettable. But as MTV kicked into warp drive in the mid-to-late 80s, the two efforts featured here were huge (*End of the Innocence* is Henley's most lucrative solo effort, with sales of 6 million). If you were tuning in at the time, you couldn't help but notice.

Building The Perfect Beast was originally mastered by Doug Sax. Stephen Marcussen performed the duties on *End of the Innocence*. The original Geffen LPs feature the overcompressed, somewhat bright, almost MP3-like sound characterizing many Geffen albums of that period—a shame considering the quality of the work performed and all-star cast assembled to produce both albums.

Both records work around the core of Henley and Danny Kortchmar, with Larry Klein and Jim Keltner providing most of the rhythm section. The cast of extras is staggering, with Patty Smyth, Lindsay Buckingham, and Axl Rose only part of the who's who that guested on these sessions. Surprisingly, the original CDs of these recordings actually have more breath and expanse than the LPs. Then again, by 1989, LP production was rapidly winding down.

The 24-bit/96kHz downloads from HD Tracks improve on the original CDs in terms of overall dynamics, a slightly bigger soundfield in all three dimensions, and more meat on the bone in the lower midrange/upper bass. But most of these differences could simply be due to using a different source. The top end is still brittle and harsh. Multiple swaps between the CDs and the HD Tracks versions reveal more low-level detail, with minor gains made in the separation of the multiple layers.

Unless you are a huge fan, this looks a lot like another cash grab, attempting to convince us that high resolution equals quality. Remember, you can buy either of these two efforts in a used CD store for about three bucks each.

INSPIRE

BY PLINIUS AUDIO



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Why does anyone start a loudspeaker company?

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PREVIEW

GamuT M250i Mono Power Amplifiers

\$23,500/pair
www.gamutaudio.com

Many know GamuT for their range of loudspeakers that combine gorgeous Danish cabinet design, with advanced Danish driver technology. We have used their past S9 flagship as a reference here for years and the current RS5 is in for review. Needless to say, our publisher is a huge fan of the brand and their amplifiers, like their speakers have always produced a neutral, musical, natural reproduction of music.

With 250 watts per channel into 8 ohms available, (500 watts into 4 ohms and 900 into 2 ohms) the M250i takes a

slightly unique approach in that it features a massive power supply and dual mono construction, yet instead of a large bank of output transistors as many high powered amplifiers do, the M250i uses only two enormous MOSFET power transistors, each capable of passing over 500 amperes of peak current. Their approach to simplicity pays off in spades – this is a very *non* solid state sounding amplifier. Watch for our review shortly, both on the M250i by itself and in the context of a full GamuT system.



PREVIEW

Dali Epicon 8 Speakers

\$20,000/pair
www.soundorg.com
www.dali-speakers.com

A recent visit to the Dali factory in Denmark revealed a nearly 250,000 square foot facility full of highly skilled workers dedicated to every aspect of loudspeaker design and construction. The stylish cabinets and sophisticated drive units are all built and tested in house. And the result in their flagship speaker is stunning. These speakers sound as wonderful as they look, perhaps better. Dali calls the Epicon 8 a “3 + half-way” system, utilizing a ribbon supertweeter for the uppermost segment of the frequency spectrum.

Unlike most other speaker manufacturers, who usually cross the ribbon tweeter over at a much lower level (usually in the 4,000 – 5,000hz range) Dali crosses their supertweeter over at a nearly inaudible 15,000 hz level, eliminating the LF breakup and brittleness often associated with ribbon tweeter based design. The result is brilliant, with a smoothness we’ve never heard from a speaker of this nature. Our review will be live shortly, along with a chronicle of our factory visit.



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



DR. FEICKERT ANALOGUE



bluehorizon

Okki Nokki

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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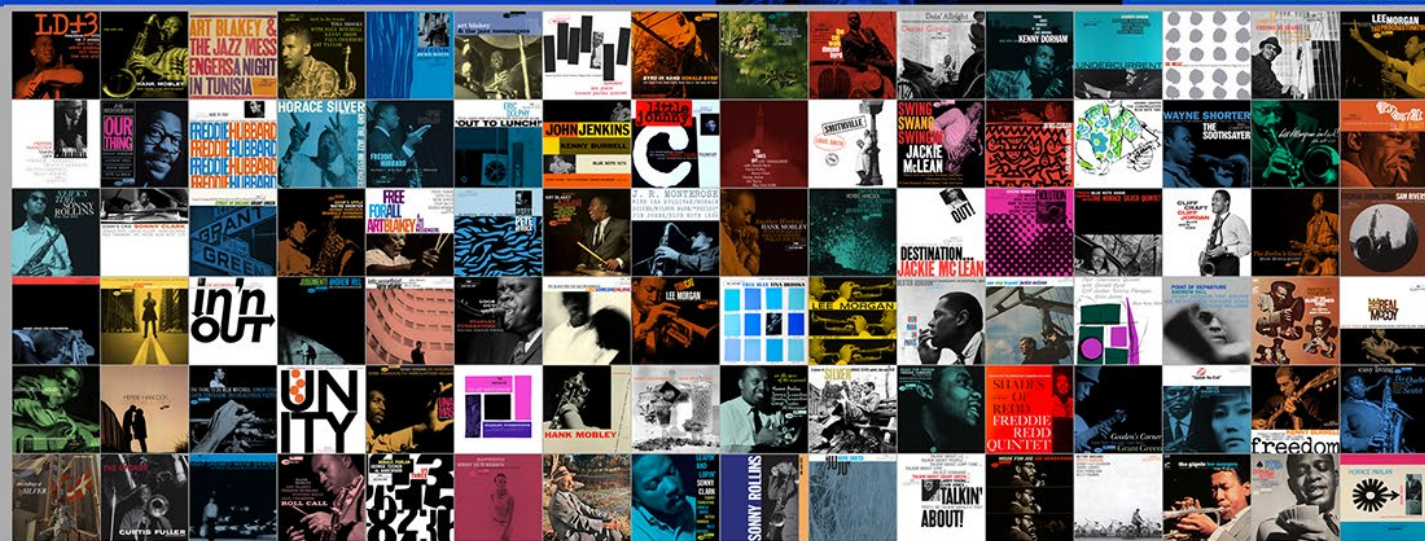


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PREVIEW

Octave HP700 Preamplifier

\$16,000

www.octave.de

Some of you might freak out that the HP700 features tone controls, but Octave has included those and more in their flagship HP700 Preamplifier. Like their Phonomodule we reviewed a couple of years ago, the HP700 takes a modular approach, offering a wide variety of phono modules, RCA and XLR input modules and RCA or balanced XLR output modules, allowing you to customize it to your system.

Basically a vacuum tube design, the HP700 utilizes an enormous, external power supply, sophisticated voltage regulation and soft start circuits, with Octave claiming a 20 year life for the tubes. Electrical, mechanical and aesthetic design are beyond reproach, making the HP700 a true destination preamplifier. A perfect companion for their sublime Jubilee monoblocks. Full review in process.



Music Matters, Ltd.

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Wireworld takes their designs seriously, using the best materials and assembly. They produce some of the world's finest cables, yet the Pulse combines their capabilities resulting in cables that are accessible and affordable. We've yet to hear such modestly priced cables make such a big difference. Now, let's go out on our favorite internet forum and argue about it!

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John Bamford, HiFi News, 2014

Gamut is Danish design in shape, sound and finish. Manufacturing a complete range of amps, players, speakers and cables.

www.gamutaudio.com



Naim Mu-So

\$1,500

www.naimaudio.com (factory)

www.audioplusservices.com
(north american distributor)

You can always count on Naim to do two things. They always do it their way and they never do anything half assed. The new Mu-So was introduced last summer at the Munich High End show front and center as you entered the Naim/Focal suite, taking up a major corner of the show's main floor. Taking style cues from their \$240,000 Statement amplifiers, everyone present was ogling the Mu-So with awe; it's a very stylish piece. Naim has out Appled Apple on this beauty, from the super cool volume control to the hidden wifi antenna. Not to mention the super stylish acrylic base that begs to have a spotlight blasted through it.

However, this is not another cutesy sound bar. It totally rocks with six active, bespoke drivers powered by 450 watts. Best of all it features every form of connectivity you can imagine. Naim refers to it as a "wireless music system," and while it can connect any way you might imagine, it can also connect via a hardwired connection with a line level, ethernet or USB cable, which you'll want to use if you want to plug your iPad/pod/phone in and use it as a DAC. And a glorious DAC it is along with a 32 bit DSP optimizing the system for wherever you want to place it in the room.

That's only the tip of the iceberg, the Mu-So is oh so much more. If you are a Naim fan, you will love the Mu-So. You will need one. Watch for our review.

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John Darko, DIGITAL AUDIO REVIEW



"The best ever for my system"

René Van Es, THE EAR

aqua
acoustic quality

PREVIEW



Gryphon Kalliope DAC

\$26,600

www.Gryphon-Audio.dk

Flemming Rassmussen builds some of the most technologically advanced audio components in the world and some of the most beautiful. The casework, bathed in black with its fine extrusions only hint at the miracle inside. Able to accommodate every kind of digital file now available, the Kalliope takes no prisoners.

We've just finished the photos and begun critical listening, but it's instantly apparent that the Kalliope is something special indeed, even at first blush it is one of the finest DACs we've had the pleasure to audition. With effortless dynamics (thanks in part to 12 farads of reserve in the power supply) and a complete lack of graininess, the Kalliope makes you look at your turntable and think why bother? Review in process.

Conrad-Johnson LP125sa+ Power Amplifier

Experience makes the difference

By Andre Marc

Conrad-Johnson has earned the respect of audiophiles over three decades by doing things its own way—which means no product churn. The iconic American firm ignores fleeting trends and exercises low-key marketing, putting sonics first, with an unrelenting focus on short signal paths and parts quality, and building each component by hand at its facility in Fairfax, VA.

Conrad-Johnson does not ignore styling either. The distinct champagne gold finish of its components makes them easily recognizable. And while the products in its top-tier ART model line are indeed sonic works of art, even CJ's entry-level amps and preamps are built to an astonishingly high standard. The company offers solid-state and vacuum-tube designs, but it is best known for its tube gear.

Smack in the middle of its lineup is the LP125sa, a 125-watt power amplifier utilizing KT120 tubes. The base version retails for \$8,250, though the subject of this review is the "plus" version, which includes CJD Teflon capacitors and ultra-high-performance metal-foil resistors used in the circuit. The LP125sa+ commands a \$1,750 premium over the base model. It comes with a three-year warranty, and Conrad-Johnson's service is known to be exceptional.

conrad-johnson



The amplifier is hefty, weighing in at 82 pounds. Its understated appearance is classic CJ, with a tube cage supplied to protect the eight KT120s. The circuit also employs one 6189 tube and two 6N30Ps. CJ switched over to KT120 power tubes from the classic 6550 a few years ago—and for good reason. The KT120 offers significant performance improvements in the areas of power output, bass, midrange clarity and tube life, and it is universally accepted as a great output tube—so much so that many manufacturers have designed new circuits around it and even retrofitted it into older designs.

CJ says the LP125sa+ audio circuit consists of three stages: a wide-bandwidth single-ended triode amplifier for the input signal; a cathode-coupled triode phase-inverter stage for balanced, low-impedance drive; and the KT120 tubes paired with sizable output transformers. *(continued)*

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

REVIEW



The only thing required at initial setup is biasing the four KT120 tubes with the supplied tool, which is as easy as turning the pot until a red LED goes out. (This was required only once over several months of listening.) The amplifier is low-maintenance and tube life is long if basic care is taken.

Before critical listening, I allow the LP125sa+ to warm up for approximately 20 minutes. Many listening sessions turn into marathons, with the amplifier producing some of the sweetest, lifelike and engaging sound I've heard from my main system. This amplifier sounds far more powerful than its stated 125 watts per channel suggests, cruising on even the most demanding and dynamic music.

The LP125sa+ offers impeccable sonic refinement, free from electronic artifacts. The music seeming to appear out

of the ether, the amp delivers jet-black backgrounds during quiet passages—in fact, this is the quietest tube amplifier I've ever auditioned.

A quick spin through John Martyn's *The Island Years* box set—containing nearly his entire discography, beautifully remastered from the master tapes—is quite telling. Martyn's music is a wondrous impressionistic and complex stew, and the LP125sa+ keeps up at every turn. Whether during Martyn's early psychedelic acoustic folk, his mid-period white funk, or his later trip hop, the amp is ahead of the curve, providing superb texture to acoustic instruments and laying out these classic tracks in a way that reveals interesting touches in the mix. Martyn's vocals are rendered in an amazingly human way—to the point that you can fool yourself into thinking it's a microphone feed rather than a recording.

The 24-bit/192-kHz version of the Simon & Garfunkel catalog is equally stunning through the LP125sa+. The analog glory of these original recordings comes through and the vocal harmonies are fantastically present. The CJ amp does not smooth over warts, as anomalies in the recording are clearly present. Its ability to produce micro detail comes through in spades.

The single most distinct characteristic of the LP125sa+ is its sonic elegance; its natural tone and overall timing are simply addicting. Regardless of what source material and associated gear, the amp provides a rock-solid foundation. Another distinct area of note is its timbral purity—which is often a moving target, but the LP125sa+ is always consistent, reproducing acoustic instruments with an effortless-ness and lack of fatigue that few amplifiers can. (continued)



Additional Listening

By Jeff Dorgay

My journey with Conrad-Johnson began around 1979 with its PV1 preamplifier and MV-50 power amplifier, and in the last 35 years the company has included a major cross section of its components. While reviewers are not supposed to have favorites, I must confess to always coming back to CJ in my reference system, just as I always seem to gravitate back to BMWs after trying other cars.

Lew Johnson and Bill Conrad have always had a way of building components that sound incredibly lifelike. In the last 10 years since the company added its CJD Teflon capacitors to the mix, overall resolution and extension has increased dramatically, but without sacrificing the lifelike tonality for which CJ products are famous. At that point in my audiophile journey, I was a solid-state devotee, until I heard the MV-50; it was a revelation.

Today, the LP125sa+ simply reinforces what I love about CJ products. Having heard its ART components on numerous occasions, I've always hoped for a more affordable amplifier incorporating that DNA, and the LP-125sa+ delivers that promise.

Experience with new and old CJ products suggests that you should spend the extra money for the CJD cap upgrade, unless you long for the CJ sound of 25 years ago. The units without the big Teflon caps definitely have a bit more "vintage CJ" under the hood, though I prefer the current sound and can't suggest the Teflon caps highly enough.

While the LP125sa+ does a fantastic job driving my Dynaudio Evidence Platinum reference speakers, I absolutely fall in love with it driving my vintage Acoustat 2+2s. I wish *this* amplifier had been available back in the mid 1980s when I originally had these speakers! My MV-50 just didn't have enough giddyup to rock the 2+2s, but the LP125sa+ is pure heaven, providing bass extension and control that was never available then. It lifts a major veil that I used to attribute to the speakers, but now I realize it was due to the limitations of the electronics.

On all but the most inefficient speakers, 125 watts per channel in a modest- to medium-sized room should be enough to float your boat. I highly suggest giving the LP125sa+ a listen. You can spend a lot more than this on a great vacuum-tube power amplifier, but this one's a honey, as well as a beast. At nearly 100 pounds, the LP125sa+ is not for the faint of heart (or weak of bicep). Unless you are really buff, get a friend to help move it into place, keeping in mind that the weight bias is at the back, where the transformers are.

Like all CJ products, this amplifier features single-ended RCA inputs, so choose your preamplifier accordingly. Hint, hint: You can still pick up a prime example of CJ's ACT 2 preamplifier for a reasonable price on the secondary market and the synergy with the LP125sa+ is phenomenal.

If you're looking for your last tube amplifier, this is one of the finest. Highly recommended.

**Conrad Johnson
LP125sa+**

MSRP: \$9,995

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Understated Powerhouse Gamut D3i Dual Mono Preamplifier

By Rob Johnson

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REVIEW



Denmark's GamuT has a reputation for incorporating the best parts into beautiful chassis. But as with many of its products, it is the details of the company's new D3i preamplifier that make it a standout. GamuT's engineers are highly skilled designers with backgrounds in psychoacoustics—which basically means that they're focused on aesthetics *and* physics, and that they spend a lot of time fine-tuning using their ears, as well as test equipment.

As with artfully designed Danish furniture, the casing of the D3i offers beautiful, understated elegance. Its brushed-aluminum front panel comes in a choice of silver or black, and the body is black regardless of faceplate choice. The top of the unit features two sets of vents for heat dissipation, with a series of oval slits toward the rear of the case and a forward set of vents spelling out the company's name. At about 4 inches tall, 17 inches wide, and 16.5 inches deep, the unit is rack friendly; and it weighs 26.5 pounds. Supporting the unit's heft are four specially designed

feet, which help isolate the chassis and sensitive internal components from unwanted vibration. The power switch is hidden just beneath the front panel.

Two huge machined knobs rotate to set the source and volume, while three dime-sized buttons across the center of the unit control the illumination level, home-theater bypass, and mute. To help navigate the options, a control panel window resides in the middle of the faceplate and small blue indicators beneath it identify the selections. The unit comes with a remote that offers control of other GamuT products, should an owner have them in the chain. For those not requiring the home theater bypass function, the CD input can be configured as a regular input, controlled by the volume control, but the functionality must be activated on the rear panel.

The D3i is a solid-state preamp designed in a dual-mono configuration, with the left and right channels functioning independently. Even beyond circuitry, each side has its own power supply—which results in extremely clean playback. *(continued)*



Getting Started

As with most preamps, the setup process entails simply attaching the power cord and interconnects. It offers a mix of RCA and Neutrik XLR inputs to facilitate linestage functionality: Four sets of RCA unbalanced connections are labeled for tape, tuner, home theater bypass, and RIAA—the latter of which is accompanied by a grounding post, making the D3i turntable-ready with the owner's choice of outboard phonostage. And a set of balanced inputs is available for a CD player. Several output choices enable connection to the preferred power amplifier: two sets of balanced outputs, a single set of RCA outs, and a pair of Tape Out RCAs for those connecting directly to a recording device.

Even before burn-in, the GamuT is not overly warm or romantic, but very pleasantly relaxed. The organic-sounding playback does not command attention by bloating, magnifying, or over-accentuating sonic elements. It's rather like sitting six rows back from the stage at an unplugged musical performance, without the sonic degradation of the lower-quality audio equipment used at many amplified-music venues. These attributes prove beguiling and consistent regardless of the music type or recording quality.

(continued)

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Sonic Impressions

Defying the band's low-fi punk roots, Fugazi's album *13 Songs* rarely sounds this good. Because the D3i's sound is so natural, it's easy to settle into the music and forget about the preamp. Music simply floats out into the room with an enticing sense of ease. This preamp presents vocals with solid and upfront imaging, reinforcing the illusion of a live performance. Cymbals twinkle with a complex mix of texture and frequency. Horns avoid a bright edginess, gathering instead a refined and emotional element, as experienced in Miles Davis's album *'Round About Midnight*. String instruments offer a similarly detailed and realistic-sounding pluck or strum, or draw of the bow. And piano notes are delivered with both firm plunk and delicate decay.

With the D3i, GamuT manages to create a sense of depth that places instruments toward the back of the soundstage, seemingly behind the rear wall, with the left-to-right soundstage exceeding the physical boundaries of the

speakers when tracks pan to the extremes. At the same time, musical elements remain realistically conveyed. For example, Jeff Buckley's voice during his rendition of "Hallelujah" emits from a seemingly human-sized source; it's not stretched out artificially to fill space between speakers. On top of that, his vocal crescendos are free from the wince factor that the hard edge of some preamps can create.

Despite the musical ease described above, D3i does not compromise bass definition or drum punch. Taught, low notes have no problem reaching out to vibrate a listening seat. Kick drum, snare, toms and bongos have realistic tonal flavor with appropriate impact and texture, but without an eye-blinking level of magnification. Combining all these marvelous attributes, the D3i leaves itself open for little criticism.

Stellar Performer

The GamuT D3i ranks among the best preamps I've had the privilege to experience as part of my own reference system. After spending a few weeks with the unit,

I've found that it brings out all the detail and presentation I enjoy, but without sonic edge or detrimental artifacts. It portrays music with an organic and natural ease that makes it easy to settle in for long listening sessions. Plus, as a solid-state component, tubes never need to be replaced. Simply turn it on and let it work its magic. And it is home-theater ready should the owner choose to add more channels.

The only barrier for a potential D3i owners is its lack of an onboard phono stage, should you be so inclined. However, GamuT will be offering an onboard phono stage later this year and the price will still be under \$10k. If you find yourself trying to justify the investment of a D3i, here's one way of thinking about it: For many dedicated audiophiles, flipping equipment is a regular habit. Over time, the losses associated with the trades add up. Those seeking a long-term companion, while other audio sources and amps rotate around it, may find the GamuT D3i to be an ideal choice. ●

GamuT D3i
Dual Mono Preamp
MSRP: \$8,250

MANUFACTURER

GamuT Audio

CONTACT

www.gamutaudio.com

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MOON by Simaudio

Nēo 260D CD Transport/DAC

By Mark Marcantonio



With more and more audiophiles getting into digital music these days, it is no wonder that many manufacturers are releasing CD players that are also high-quality DACs. Canada's MOON by Simaudio has joined the crowd with three models, the Evolution 650D (currently a reference component in our publisher's system) and, for this review, the more-affordable Nêo 260D.

The unit is available as simply a CD transport (\$1,999) or with a 32-bit DAC able to play files with resolutions as large as 24 bits/192 kHz (\$2,999). Like the pricier Evolution series 650D, the Nêo 260D is a full-function CD player with four digital inputs: S/PDIF, RCA, TOSLINK and USB. In typical MOON fashion, technical and design elements of the Evolution line make their way down to the Nêo line—specifically, in this case, the four-point gel-based mounting system. Paired with power-supply and circuitry improvements and their rigid casework (all done in-house), this adds up to a digital player that all but eliminates mechanical and electrical noise.

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Fit and finish are exceptional—no sharp edges, and screws are recessed to avoid catching—though, for some of the casework, the aluminum of the Evolution line is replaced by plastic in the Nêo line to save cost. But, most importantly, the company does not scrimp on the connections, which are level and tight.

The ergonomics of the Nêo 260D are first-rate, with all system and playback controls flanking the LED display, which has two brightness levels, and the lettering and symbols large but not distracting. Included is a plastic remote with well-defined controls, though I wish the color contrast were greater.

The transport spins and pulls up the track information very quickly. Even when spinning a badly scratched disc that no other CD player in my home can even read, the Nêo 260D pulls up the information and manages to play every track with only one skip.

What's the Difference?

The one word that describes the sonic signature of all MOON products is *natural*. They offer a ton of resolution but don't embellish. The Nêo 260D renders Jethro Tull's classic track "Mother Goose" with a richness in the upper-mids and treble that my less-expensive MOON series 300D DAC does not—and that's the difference between an average transport and a really good one: how much it improves a poor-sounding disc and how much information it can extract from a phenomenal one.

Billy Joel's album *52nd Street* is my torture-test favorite. While the vinyl copy produces a three-dimensional soundstage, the original CD is flat and lifeless. While the Nêo 260D's rendering of this disc doesn't fool me into thinking it's vinyl, it does manage to expand the soundstage enough that Joel's voice during the fast-tempo ballad "Stiletto" offers up an improved sense of drama. The xylophone in the opening of "Rosalinda's Eyes," which normally sticks right at the grille of the speaker, is now a foot or so deeper into the soundstage, bringing some life to a previously sterile disc.

Recreating the recording environment is always a plus—and a more difficult task when the listener knows the venue. A live acoustic version of Toad the Wet Sprocket's "All I Want," recorded at a local radio station's annual compilation, benefits greatly from the Nêo 260D's ability to recreate the small concert room, with vocals demonstrating the natural reflections of the intimate setting. From the same CD, Blitzen Trapper's "Thirsty Man" provides plenty of air and space for the lead guitar. Again, the Nêo 260D creates greater separation than my current reference, drawing me further into this amateur but engaging recording. Simaudio's Lionel Goodfield confirms that the Nêo 260D's DNA comes from the top-of-the-line Evolution series 650D and 750D rather than the MOON 300D. (continued)

REVIEW





Going Deeper

The Bill Evans Trio's "Our Love Is Here To Stay" exhibits tremendous clarity with an equal balance of musicality—particularly the resolution of the drum kit, the definition of the acoustic bass, and the richness of the rich piano. Even on recordings where the piano leans toward edgy, the MOON does an excellent job navigating through difficult sonic zones without losing musicality. The somewhat forward-tilted Alison Krauss album *Forget About It* further illustrates the Nêo 260D's ability to retrieve maximum detail without sonic sacrifice.

But tremendous recordings illuminate the full beauty of the Nêo 260D, making it easy to forget you are listening to digital at all. Hans Zimmer's melodic soundtrack to the film *The Holiday* is a real treat, with the MOON keeping traditional acoustic and electronic instruments defined during the pleasant overarching melody in the main theme, "Maestro." The Nêo 260D's natural sound stays true to the relaxed playing of each artist.

Not Just a CD Player

With four digital inputs on the optional DAC, the Nêo 260D can be the digital hub of any home system. During my

review, I used a JVC SACD player, Wadia iTransport with iPod, Apple TV, and MacBook connected simultaneously. Counting the CD transport, I have five sources to choose from—a true digital dream. (With the MacBook, I find equal satisfaction running iTunes with Amarra and Pure Music.)

Playing digital files through the Nêo 260D is a treat, especially with high-resolution files. A 24/44.1 version of Barb Jungr's raw track "Many Rivers To Cross" oozes with emotion, the Nêo 260D digging out the harmonies

in the chorus and granting each voice a distinct place. Switching to a 24/192 file is a cinch, thanks to an easy-to-read display. Dougie MacLean's "Caledonia," with its simple acoustic guitar and strings, floats through the room, capturing the air, delicacy and pace of the tune, with MacLean's gentle guitar and voice expanding and contracting effortlessly.

Final Score

The Nêo 260D once again reaffirms why MOON gear is so popular among the *TONEAudio* staff. Most audio companies do one

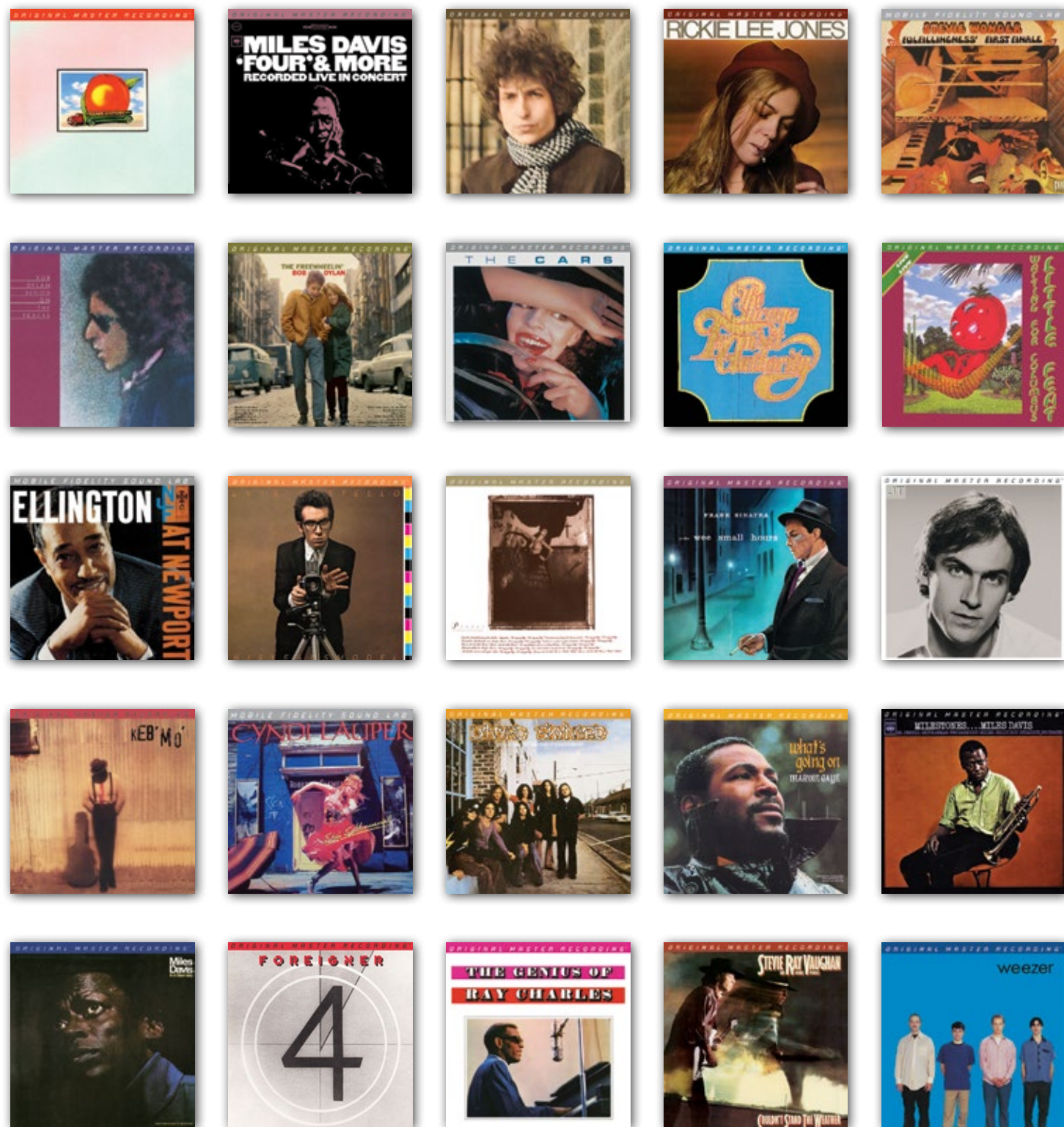
type of equipment well—not so with Simaudio; each of its products is first-rate for its price point.

The Nêo 260D delivers tremendous resolution, an incredibly low noise floor and top-notch parts and construction, but most importantly, it offers a natural musical presentation. I thought my days of using a CD player were over—but the Nêo 260D CD Transport/DAC has me seriously rethinking my digital-equipment strategy.

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Additional Listening

By Jeff Dorgay

Having used their flagship Evolution series 750D extensively and now using the Evolution series 650D as my reference digital player, I can easily see the lineage. Their engineering continues to refine the company's products, giving the consumer a healthy dollop of cost-no-object products at workingman's prices.

No, the Nêo 260D does not give you 88 percent of the Evolution series 650D for a third of the price, but it probably does give you 50 percent—or maybe even a bit more. And realistically, the Nêo 260D makes a ton of sense in a sub-\$20,000 system, whereas the 650D, especially with the outboard Evolution series 820S power supply, will be right at home in even a stratospheric system.

You always get a bit more than you pay for with MOON by Simaudio products, and if you like the way the company does things, each product reveals more musical impact and nuance as you go up the product line. Much like with Porsche or BMW, you just get more of the brand's essence as you spend more money.

As Simaudio's Lionel Goodfield is quick to point out, the Nêo 260D "is first and foremost a transport; the drive mechanism and suspension are virtually identical to those in the 650D and 750D." Like its more expensive stable mates, the Nêo 260D is built in-house and not supplied by an external manufacturer. And while I enjoy the DAC part of the equation, I concentrate during my review on using it solely as a transport, pairing it with a wide range of DACs—from the inexpensive Meridian Explorer all the way up to the \$109,000 dCS Vivaldi stack.

If you need a great DAC and want the ability to play an actual disc now and then, the extra \$1,000 for the Nêo 260D with onboard DAC is well worth the added cost. Those with a great DAC already installed in their system and wanting to either replace an aging (or dead) transport will be amazed by the Nêo 260D's sound quality. Fifteen years ago a transport this good would have a \$10,000 price tag attached; This MOON does it for just \$3,000. Now that's progress.

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The EgglestonWorks Emmas

ALL YOU NEED

By Jeff Dorgay

Great things come from Memphis. It's the BBQ capitol of the world. Elvis is from Memphis. My wife is from Memphis. And the Eggleston Emmas are from Memphis. Though the price of gasoline and big screen TVs keeps going down, speakers seem to be getting more expensive all the time, so it's refreshing to hear a pair of speakers that cover all the bases for \$3,995.



Of course, my priorities are warped, and I'm sure we'll get plenty of sniping about "considering a \$4,000 pair of speakers affordable," but I do. In a world of six-figure speakers, four grand for a pair that accomplish this much is a major bargain. Infected Mushroom's latest release, *Friends on Mushrooms*, proves that these little southern belles can rock the house, even with a modest amplifier—in this case, a 35-watt-per-channel PrimaLuna ProLogue Four sporting a set of EL34 output tubes. Wow, wow, wow! Wu-Tang's "Ruckus in B Minor" has plenty of boom (the record, not the speaker) and though the mix is somewhat compressed and harsh, the Emmas can cope, even at high volume, keeping the mix intact; it never sounds pushed or polite, with the speakers reproducing only what's on the recording.

Slowing it down a bit with She & Him's "This Girl's in Love with You" reveals the delicate side of the Emmas, which do a smashing job of exposing inner detail and female vocal texture. Even a really shitty-sounding record like the Aquadolls' *Stoked on You* proves palatable with the Emmas as a conduit; they wring every bit of information out of this playful yet dreadfully compressed exercise in slightly surf punk.

If the Shoes Fit, Find a Dress to Match

As I've said time and again, all you need to enjoy music is a Tidal subscription, your smartphone and a pair of earbuds. Sure, a few hundred well-spent bucks will get you an old receiver and a great pair of vintage speakers—but if you really want to unravel what's lurking deep in your recordings (and get a glimpse at what the folks with mega systems are hearing), you're going to have to shell out some money. *(continued)*

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I won't call \$10K a point of diminishing returns; it's more like the point where the excitement begins in earnest. Yes, that is serious money, but it's no more than what a six-year-old Harley Davidson or a 10-year-old Miata would set you back. And unless you live in a really sunny area, you'll probably spend a lot more time listening to your audio system than you'll spend riding a Harley or driving a Miata with the top down.

Though I feel every part of a system is equally important, I've always been a firm believer in making the speakers the first major component purchase, because they interact with your environment more than anything else. There's no point in blowing a fortune on source components and amplification if you can't buy speakers that keep up with the rest of the system. In a perfect world, I'd suggest finding the speakers you love first, spending as much as you can, and then building the rest of the system around them.

Also in a perfect world, a manufacturer's time and money spent on researching ultra-high-performance machines trickle down to the hardware the rest of us can afford. EgglestonWorks builds some major speakers—like its Andra IIIs, which are used in recording and mastering studios around the world and as reference speakers at hi-fi shows.

Having heard the Andras numerous times (and being a big fan), I was shocked when I heard the Emmas last summer at the Newport Beach hi-fi show. When EgglestonWorks' principle Jim Thompson demoed the speakers, I was expecting a \$10K-to-\$12k price tag and couldn't believe that they were only \$3,995. I don't usually get fooled to this extent, but the more time I spend listening to the Emmas, the more I'm convinced that they are one of those rare components that perform well beyond what is normally offered at a given price. *(continued)*

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Simple Setup

With a footprint of only 7.5 by 14 inches—less than the majority of stand-mounted monitors—the Emmas occupy little floor space, and at about 3.4 feet tall, they place the tweeter at ear height for most listeners when seated. Thanks to a 4-ohm nominal impedance and 91-dB sensitivity, the Emmas don't require much power to sing. The 20 wpc from either my Nagra 300B push-pull amplifier or 845 SET does the job nicely. EgglestonWorks does not provide a "maximum power" spec for these speakers, which are able to play incredibly loud without distortion—a hallmark of the company's monitor speakers. I can't imagine needing more than 100 wpc of clean power to achieve high sound-pressure levels with these speakers.

Thanks to considerable vertical and horizontal dispersion, the Emmas are not terribly room dependent, nor are they tough to get sounding good quickly, even if you have an environment that doesn't allow optimum placement. I'm able to achieve excellent results in both my small (11-by-14-foot) and large (16-by-24-foot) rooms, though for obvious reasons it's a little bit trickier to achieve a balance of bass extension and imaging in the small room. That being said, I would still not shy away from using the Emmas in a small room, and with their efficiency, you certainly won't need much amplifier power.

As with every speaker we audition, achieving bass balance in the room is paramount, with everything else usually falling into place once the speaker is locked in. In the large room, the Emmas end up about 8 feet apart and slightly toed-in, while in the small room, they are only about 6 feet apart with no toe-in and GIK 242 panels at the first reflection points. After about an hour of jiggling the speakers back and forth, I install the machined spikes for the final bit of room synergy. *(continued)*

The speakers' two 6-inch woofers move a lot of air, with a lot of speed. Thomas Dolby's "My Brain Is Like a Sieve" proves instrumental in finding the perfect sweet spot of maximum bass output without sacrificing soundstage width and depth. Once optimized, the Emmas disappear into the room as easily as our little KEF LS50s, but with a lot more full-range heft.

The current Aphex Twin album, *Syro*, doesn't have a single sound that could be considered accurate, but its electronic wonder (if you're an Aphex Twin fan, that is) is a massive ball of electronic effects, showing off the spatial abilities of the Emmas to full effect. Yes, violins sound great played through the Emmas too, but they also can create a huge musical landscape—especially in a moderate-sized room, again fooling you into thinking that these are much more expensive speakers.

The Emmas' fit and finish is at the top of the class. While these don't have the Aston Martin-like finish of a pair of Wilson speakers, they still have a smoother paint job than my neighbors' new C-Class Mercedes. The Emmas we have in for review come in a gorgeous olive-brown color that has everyone arguing whether it is actually green or brown. Of course, white, black and silver are also available.

Relax and Enjoy

To recap, with the Emmas for four grand, you won't get the same performance as with EgglestonWorks' flagship Audra IIIs, which offer a level of resolution that you'll have to spend the big bucks to get; there's no free lunch in the world of high-end audio. However, what they *have* done at EgglestonWorks with the Emmas is make some very intelligent choices. If you don't need the massive dynamic swing that the Emmas' larger siblings provide, and can live with a bit less bass extension and high-frequency dreaminess, you'll be amazed at how close the Emmas come in a modest-sized room at moderate to less than ear-splitting levels.

The Emmas are so easy to set up, drive and pair with ancillary components that they will be the last part of your system you'll ever feel the need to upgrade. And if you never feel the need to spend \$50K on a hi-fi system, they could easily be the last pair of speakers you'll ever need.

I'm keeping the review pair for my home system, and I believe that's the highest compliment I can pay them. And we are awarding the Emmas one of our first Exceptional Value Awards for the year, too. These are great speakers. ●



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The Glanz Tonearm

Making the Familiar New Again

By Richard H. Mak

Though the Glanz brand is perhaps new to some, the company dates back to 1953, when it was owned by Mitachi Acoustics. In 2008, Masataka Hamada San—who was designing moving-magnet cartridges for Mitachi (as well as JVC)—acquired a special license from the Mitachi family to put his newly designed tonearm under the Glanz name, as a tribute to the brand that nurtured his early career in audio.



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The Glanz tonearm follows the design tradition of the famous S-shaped arms prevalent in the 1970s, such as those from Fidelity Research, SME and Ortofon. Weighing more than 2.2 pounds, the Glanz arm feels a lot like Fidelity Research's vintage FR-66S. It is made entirely out of polished stainless steel and has almost no plastic parts, other than the lift. And it comes with a nearly 4-foot-long DIN-to-RCA oxygen-free-copper cable.

The Glanz tonearm comes in three versions: the 230 mm MH-94S, 245 mm MH-104SX, and 305mm MH-124SX—all of which retail at \$8,495, regardless of length. (The MH-123SX is tested during this review.)

Philosophically Speaking

The design philosophy of the Glanz tonearm begins with an effort to minimize mechanical loss, wherein mechanical vibrations absorbed by the tonearm prohibit the stylus from fully transducing the electrical signal, causing distortion and signal degradation. Hamada San's tonearm eliminates unnecessary components and uses heavy, non-elastic materials (such as stainless steel) chosen for their resonant properties.

Direct contact between various metal surfaces and no rubber or plastic parts maximize energy transference, an approach that calls for an extremely high level of machining precision to ensure components fit together perfectly.

Finally, applying the right damping material for the arm tube, the top of the headshell and the counterweight mechanism helps control the resonant frequency.

The tonearm looks and feels elegant. The quality of its construction is rivaled only by that of the DaVinci Master Reference Virtu and the FR-66S; the former costs nearly twice as much and the latter is no longer in production but commands a price similar to the Glanz on the secondary market.

The bearing assembly is what sets the Glanz apart from other S-shaped tonearms on the market today. A two-plane gimbal pivot utilizing stainless-steel ball bearings at each end governs the movement of the arm wand. The bearings, which are precision mounted and have no impact on the sound whatsoever, are reminiscent of the high-quality, chatter-free bearings of tonearms from Breuer Dynamic and DaVinci.

(continued)



Setup

Setting up the Glanz tonearm is relatively simple and straightforward, with only a couple minor nuisances. Mounting the tonearm requires a 1.18-inch (30 mm) hole to be drilled into an arm board or plinth; a paper template is provided to identify the exact location. Unfortunately, the threads of the mounting base are not particularly deep, so through my 1-inch-thick arm board, I'm barely able to secure enough threads on the mounting nut, even with the washer removed. Without any bushing or washers, a large plumbing wrench is necessary to achieve proper torque and secure the mounting base—which requires a high degree of care to avoid scraping anything with the wrench.

Loosening the setscrews with hex keys adjusts the height of the tonearm (VTA) and the counterweight (VTF). The counterweight is first fastened onto a sleeve, which in turn gets inserted into the arm tube. However, tightening this setscrew only secures the counterweight onto the outer sleeve, which leaves the inner sleeve unsecured and subject to accidental rotation. If a slip of the hand accidentally rotates the counterweight, VTF will have to be readjusted again. (The company has made changes to current models so that the counterweight can be fastened securely.)

Hamada San is a loyal devotee of the Ortofon SPU line of cartridges, and is proud to admit that

he has designed the Glanz with SPU cartridges in mind, though he does provide a detachable headshell for use with non-SPU cartridges. He also takes azimuth adjustment out of the equation, believing that the added mechanical structure ultimately degrades the sound quality. He also recommends disabling the anti-skating adjustment found on the Glanz tonearm, feeling that this also brings more hindrances than benefits.

My experience leads me to differ with Hamada San on the importance of azimuth adjustment. The venerable DaVinci Grandezza tonearm once relied on similar arguments, only to later include them to its Master Reference Virtu. The horizontal balance of a cartridge will affect the angle in which the stylus sits on the record groove, thus affecting crosstalk and channel separation—both measurable parameters that cannot simply be dismissed. It will have a dramatic effect on the sound, causing sonic images to lose focus and appear blurry.

Fortunately, aftermarket headshells, such as the Yamaha HS-1A and the Jelco HS-25BR, have an adjustment screw that allows you to rotate the cartridge on its axis to provide azimuth adjustments. So while I may disagree with Hamada San on the relative merits of azimuth adjustment, changing to a headshell with this feature can easily solve the problem.



So How Does It Sound?

During the 10-month review period, I try six different cartridges with the tonearm to get a firm handle on its sonic characteristics. The Glanz is unmistakably neutral, allowing each cartridge's personality to come through, rather than injecting sonic colorations of its own.

Just as Hamada San has intended, SPU cartridges perform remarkably well with his tonearm. SPUs are typically low compliance and, in theory, best mated with a higher-mass tonearm to bring the resonant frequency into the ideal zone. Although the effective mass of the Glanz is unspecified, the literature describes it as an arm of "very high mass."

The SPU Synergy and the shorter-than-normal SPU-A (which requires an extension adapter) project a more tube-like sound, with an emphasis on the mid band, which is sweet, natural and more laid back. I can appreciate why Hamada San is a fan of the SPU sound; it makes you focus more on the music as a whole rather than the individual hi-fi qualities that audiophiles are often guilty of pursuing.

My favorite cartridges with the arm, however, are not SPUs, but the Phasemation PP-1000 and the Goldfinger Statement, which both project much higher definition and frequency extension than any SPU cartridge. The lively and vivid character of the Phasemation PP-1000 cartridge (see *TONEAudio*, issue 59) is displayed with unmitigated realism. (continued)

REVIEW

On Agnes Obel's album *Philharmonics*, the Glanz allows the dark, unsettling and deeply melancholic feeling to come through the seemingly innocent melodies. Every nuance of the piano is delivered to the listener, as are the changing characters of Obel's soft, velvety voice. On many occasions the piano notes sound cracked and fragmented, prompting me to repeat the music segments on a different

arm/table combination to see where the issue is. The crackling is simply the Glanz/Phase-mation combination retrieving every imperfection embedded in the record grooves. Should your cartridge be up to snuff, the neutral and transparent characterizes of the Glanz arm will accurately portray recorded signals, delivering the good and the bad. *(continued)*



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On Arthur Grumiaux's *To My Friends* violin encore album, the Glanz/Goldfinger combo allows Grumiaux's aristocratic style to touch listeners with radiance and mellow subtleties. While the Glanz may not be the most detailed tonearm with the utmost frequency extension, it renders string instruments with enough transient response and harmonic decay to keep most finicky audiophiles happy. When paired with the same cartridges, the Glanz delivers more detail, ambience and speed than both the SME 3012 MK2 and Ortofon RS-309D.

The Glanz excels at symphonic and grand orchestral presentations. From Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* to Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, the Glanz always meets the challenge, portraying a limitless soundstage in all dimensions. It projects a three-dimensional image with solidity, weight, and high dynamic contrast, rather than with the faint haze of many lesser tonearms. *Romeo and Juliet* fully demonstrates the ability of the Glanz to render low frequencies, such that the bass drum has startling pressure and solidity, with fast transient response and rise times and well-defined texture. Few tonearms on the market rival the Glanz in terms of sheer bass quality.

Don't let the old school shape fool you; the Glanz MH-123SX is a modern tonearm housed in a vintage-looking body, with workmanship and quality that instantly set it apart from its vintage lookalikes.



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The Glanz Tonearm
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www.vpiindustries.com

We reviewed VPI's Classic 1 back in issue 46 and it was a revelation, its sound anything but "classic" in the sense that it sounded nothing like the famous VPI turntable that was its predecessor – the Scout and Scoutmaster, with their acrylic platters. Instead the Classic 1 with its massive aluminum platter feels more like an update of a true classic, The Empire 598, which VPI founder Harry Weisfeld makes no bones

about mentioning as one of his favorites. And at the original price of \$2,699, (now \$2,999) there still is nothing that can touch the belt drive VPI that beats with a heart and tonality of a classic idler wheel table, yet has none of the drawbacks.

The Classic 2, builds on that design with a tonearm featuring VPI's adjustable VTA that can be easily set and reset for additional cartridge/ tonearm wand setups, making

this upgrade highly versatile for the more advanced vinyl enthusiast that would like to investigate more than a single cartridge, without going to a multiple tonearm turntable. The sound of the Classic 2 is virtually identical to the Classic 1, though after living with it for some time, its ease of fine tuning may provide better sound for the more finicky.

● Here's a link to our full review.



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Cardas Audio, Bandon, Oregon

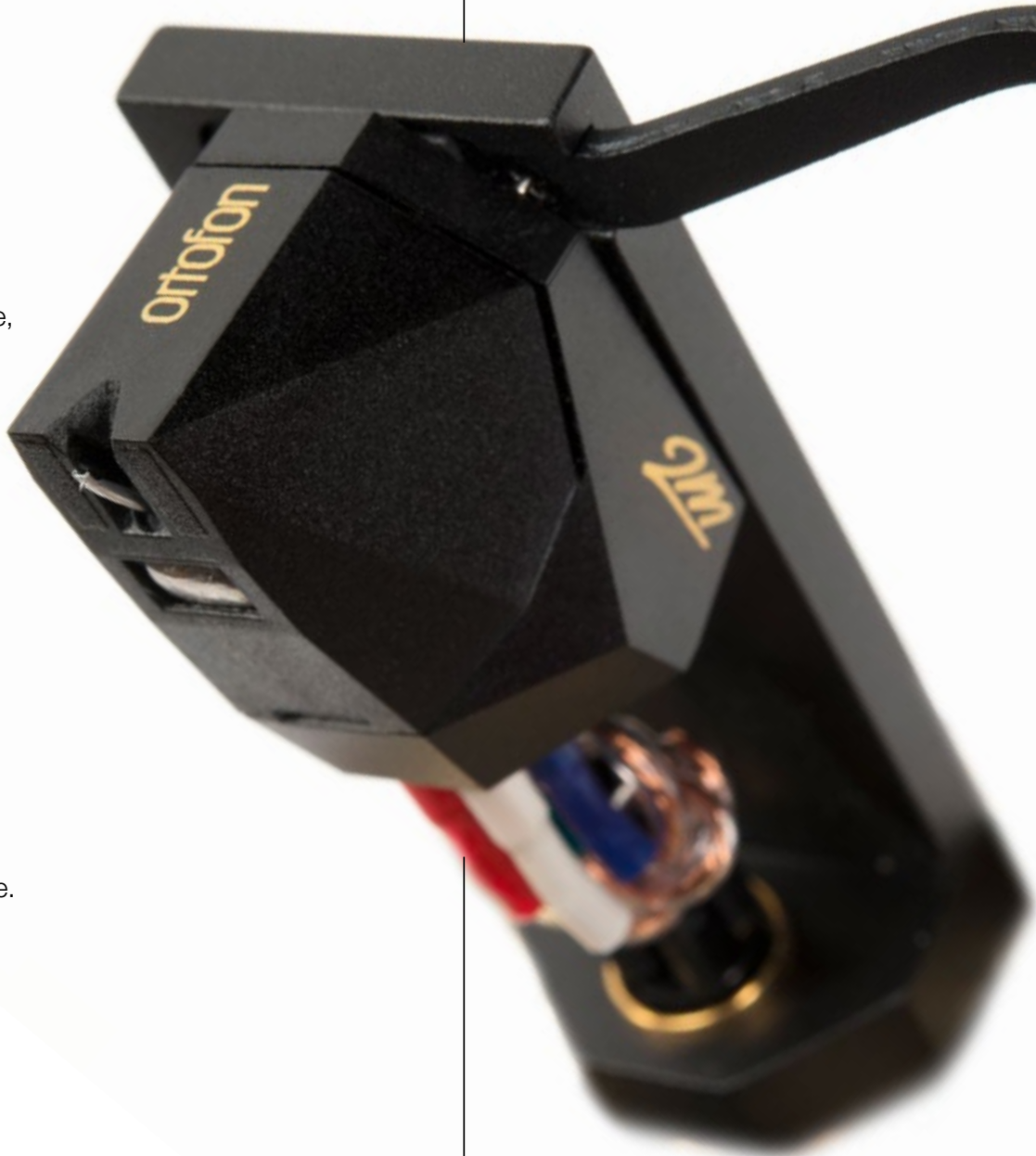
FROM THE WEB

Ortofon 2M Black

\$799
ortofon.com

We're probably the last ones to the dance on this one, but Ortofon's 2M black is still a very viable cartridge. As the top of their moving magnet range, it features a sophisticated shibata stylus, just like the one on their Jubilee cartridge. The sound of the 2M black borders on the delicacy of Ortofon's moving coil cartridges, perhaps the most refined MM cartridge on the market, with a neutral tonal balance, good speed/dynamics and the robust overall sound that characterizes the MM design.

● [Read our full review here.](#)



B A R G A I N

SLUMMIN'

This issue, my overexcitement got the best of me... Discovering this rare treat in a garage, I tried to needle the owner down from the \$50 price tag and lost out on the sale. Later, our friend Kurt at Echo Audio let me know exactly what this little jewel is. Made in 1959 with an original price tag of about \$200 (in 1959 dollars!) used six 12AX7s, a 5V3 rectifier and four EL34 tubes. It even has a tape head input!!

Super cool, but we missed it. Kurt at Echo says, "It's like a PAS 3 and a Stereo 70 rolled into one chassis, but better sounding. Expect to pay as much as \$1,200 for one in this condition."

You've been warned. ●



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Where to find the music you've seen in this issue.

Sponsored by Music Direct and Tidal

In an effort to help you find the albums we've been reviewing, we've started this handy index at the back of the magazine. This issue, we have a listing of all the albums reviewed, and as we go forward, we will try and link to all of the music that our gear reviewers use in their hardware reviews, in an effort to help you listen for the same things we are.

Wherever possible, each title will have a link to directly purchase the vinyl from Music Direct, as we have done in the past. To make the game even more interesting, we also have links to Tidal's digital music service, allowing you to stream if that's the way you prefer, or just to take a good listen or two before plunking down your hard earned cash for physical media.

Either way, we hope this helps expand your musical enjoyment.

A Place to Bury Strangers

Transfixiation

Purchase LP from Music Direct
<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-266582-a-place-to-bury-strangers-transfixiation-vinyl-lp.aspx>

Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<https://listen.tidalhifi.com/album/39894032>

Belle and Sebastian

Girls In Peacetime Want to Dance

Purchase LP from Music Direct
<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-263880-belle-and-sebastian-girls-in-peacetime-want-to-dance-limited-edition-vinyl-4lp-box-set.aspx>

Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<https://listen.tidalhifi.com/album/39549422>

Will Butler

Policy

Purchase LP from Music Direct
<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-278116-will-butler-arcade-fire-policy-vinyl-lp.aspx>

The Decemberists

What a Terrible World, What a Beautiful World

Purchase LP from Music Direct
<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-269821-the-decemberists-what-a-terrible-world-what-a-beautiful-world-vinyl-2lp.aspx>

Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<https://listen.tidalhifi.com/album/39668610>

Bob Dylan

Shadows In the Night

Purchase LP from Music Direct
<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-269420-bob-dylan-shadows-in-the-night-vinyl-lp.aspx>

Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<https://listen.tidalhifi.com/album/40393409>

Justin Townes Earle

Absent Fathers

Purchase LP from Music Direct
<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-269816-justin-townes-earle-absent-fathers-vinyl-lp.aspx>

Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<https://listen.tidalhifi.com/album/37638730>

Steve Earle

Terraplane Blues

Purchase LP from Music Direct
<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-278093-steve-earle-and-the-dukes-terraplane-blues-vinyl-lp.aspx>

Jose Gonzalez

Vestiges & Claws

Purchase LP from Music Direct
<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-281834-jose-gonzalez-vestiges-and-claws-vinyl-lp.aspx>

Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<https://listen.tidalhifi.com/album/40784073>

Colleen Green

I Want to Grow Up

Purchase LP from Music Direct
<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-281862-colleen-green-i-want-to-grow-up-vinyl-lp.aspx>

Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<https://listen.tidalhifi.com/album/39837510>

JD McPherson

Let the Good Times Roll

Purchase LP from Music Direct
<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-280061-jd-mcpherson-let-the-good-times-roll-vinyl-lp.aspx>

Screaming Females
Rose Mountain
Purchase LP from Music Direct
<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-280771-screaming-females-rose-mountain-vinyl-lp.aspx>

Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<https://listen.tidalhifi.com/album/40715807>

Sleater-Kinney
No Cities to Love
Purchase LP from Music Direct
<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-263884-sleater-kinney-no-cities-to-love-vinyl-lp.aspx>

Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<https://listen.tidalhifi.com/album/39346081>

The Staple Singers
Freedom Highway Complete
Purchase LP from Music Direct
<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-280034-staple-singers-freedom-highway-complete-vinyl-2lp.aspx>

Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<https://listen.tidalhifi.com/album/2018437>

Torche
Restarter
Purchase LP from Music Direct
<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-278688-torche-restarter-vinyl-lp.aspx>

Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<https://listen.tidalhifi.com/album/40837063>

Twerps
Range Anxiety
Purchase LP from Music Direct
<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-277490-twerps-range-anxiety-vinyl-lp.aspx>

Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<https://listen.tidalhifi.com/album/39629525>

Various Artists
Another Day Another Time: Celebrating the Music of "Inside Llewyn Davis"
Purchase LP from Music Direct
<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-265147-another-day-another-time-celebrating-the-music-of-inside-llewyn-davis-various-artists-vinyl-3lp.aspx>

Whitey Morgan and the 78's
Born, Raised & LIVE from Flint
Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<https://listen.tidalhifi.com/album/39199326>

LINKS

Jazz

Anouar Brahem
Souvenance
Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<https://listen.tidalhifi.com/album/37302402>

Rudresh Mahanthappa
Bird Calls
Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<https://listen.tidalhifi.com/album/40810958>

Where to find the gear you've seen in this issue.

- ALO Audio: www.aloaudio.com
 Alta Audio: www.alta-audio.com
 Anthem: www.anthemav.com
 Aqua: www.aquahifi.com
 Auralic: www.auralic.com
 Audio by VanAlstine: www.avahifi.com
 AudioVision SF: www.audiovisionsf.com
 Audio Research: www.audioresearch.com
 AudioQuest: www.audioquest.com
 AVID: www.avidhifi.co.uk
 BAT: www.balanced.com
 Benchmark: www.benchmarkmedia.com
 Boulder: www.boulderamp.com
 Burmester: www.burmester.de
 The Cable Company: www.thecableco.com
 D'Agostino Audio: www.dagostinoinc.com
 Dali: www.soundorg.com
 dCS: www.dcsLtd.co.uk
 Dynaudio: www.dynaudio.com
 Echo Audio: www.echohifi.com
 GamuT: www.gamutaudio.com
 Focal: www.audioplusservices.com
 KEF: www.kef.com
 IsoTek: www.isoteksystems.com
 Lyra: www.lyraanalog.com
 MartinLogan: www.martinlogan.com
 Mobile Fidelity: www.mofi.com
 Mystere: www.mystere-usa.com
- Music Direct: www.musicdirect.com
 Music Matters: www.musicmattersjazz.com
 Nagra: www.nagraaudio.com
 OCTAVE: www.octave.de
 Oppo: www.oppodigital.com
 Paradigm: www.paradigm.com
 Pass Labs: www.passlabs.com
 Peachtree Audio: www.peachtreeaudio.com
 Plinius: www.pliniusaudio.com
 PMC: www.soundorg.com
 PrimaLuna: www.primaluna-usa.com
 Primare: www.vanaltD.com
 Red Wine Audio: www.redwineaudio.com
 Rega: www.soundorg.com
 Rogers HiFi: www.rogershighfidelity.com
 Simaudio: www.simaudio.com
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 TIDAL: www.tidalhifi.com
 Upscale Audio: www.upscaleaudio.com
 Wadia: www.wadia.com
 Wireworld: www.wireworldcable.com
 Vienna Acoustics: www.vanaltD.com
 VPI: www.vpiindustries.com

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