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No. 71 May 2015

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Decware's Mystery Amplifier

Ending the Argument:

Graditech's Lumi 3 Speaker Cables

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The Wax Rax RC-2

A first look at the Apple watch,
soapy goodness from Lush,
Flagstone outdoor speakers and more!

SPRING AWAKENING:

Reviews of New Albums From
My Morning Jacket, METZ,
Waxahatchee, Torres, Django
Django, Caexico, Buena Vista
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A Conversation With
Breakout Singer-Songwriter
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CONTENTS

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

76



features

- 16 Old School:
Sansui AU-717
Quite the Powerhouse
By Jeff Dorgay
- 66 Journeyman Audiophile:
Dali Rubicon 2 Speakers
Higher Fidelity
By Bailey S. Barnard
- 76 Finding Her Diary Voice:
A Conversation with Singer-Songwriter Courtney Barnett
By Andy Downing
- 80 Personal Fidelity:
Astell&Kern AK240
Half a System in Your Pocket
By Bailey S. Barnard
Master & Dynamic MH40 Headphones
Up to the Challenge
By Jeff Dorgay
- 138 995: **Sounds That Won't Break The Bank**
AudioQuest JitterBug
Jitter Be Gone
By Jeff Dorgay



CONTENTS

120

tone style

- 98 Beer Snob
VooDoo and a Drama Princess
By Bob Gendron
- 105 Dodge Challenger SRT Hellcat
Redefining the Midlife Crisis
- 106 Madison Fielding Flagstone
Planter Speakers
- 110 Henge Dock
Mac Vertical Dock
- 112 Blue and White KEF LS-50s
Modern Play on the Original
- 115 Muku Shutter Release
A Camera Bag Must-Have
- 116 Choosing Your Apple Watch
By Rob Follis
- 119 Rock Star Soap
The Clean Smell of Fame
- 120 WAX RAX RC-2 Record Cart
400 Record Challenge



CONTENTS



©Milford Graves and Bill Laswell by Dominic Huber

music

- 14. SNAPSHOT:** British blues-rock legend Joe Cocker, live at the 17th Annual Santa Cruz Blues Festival
Photo by Jerome Brunet
- 24. SPIN THE BLACK CIRCLE:** Reviews of New Pop/Rock and Country Albums
By Bob Gendron, Todd Martens, Chrissie Dickinson, Andrea Domanick and Aaron Cohen
- 124. JAZZ & BLUES:** Chris Lightcap, Joe Lovano & Dave Douglas, Charles Lloyd, Milford Graves & Bill Laswell, and the Word
By Aaron Cohen and Jim Macnie
- 144. AUDIOPHILE PRESSINGS:** Mastadon's *Blood Mountain*
By Bob Gendron



28. My Morning Jacket *The Waterfall*

CONTENTS

148. SHORT TAKE: VPI Classic Two

gear previews

- 152. Boulder 2160 Stereo Power Amplifier**
- 155. OPPO HA-2 Portable Headphone Amplifier**
- 156. Aurender W20 Server**
- 158. ARC GSPRE Preamplifier and GS150 Power Amplifier**
- 161. Cardas Clear Reflection Cable**

gear reviews

- 162. Decware Zen Mystery Amp Single Chassis Brilliance**
By Jeff Dorgay
- 174. Balanced Audio Technology VK-655SE**
By Jeff Dorgay
- 184. iFi Retro 50 Defying Definition**
By Jeff Dorgay
- 196. PASS XA160.8 Monoblocks All You Need**
By Jerold O'Brien
- 206. Graditech Lumi 3 Speaker Cables Ending the Argument**
By Jeff Dorgay



196

web review

- 212. Naim Mu-so**
- 215. Simaudio MOON Evolution 760A Power Amp**
- 216. Conrad-Johnson MF 2275**
- 219. Slummin'**
- 220. Music Links**
- 222. Manufacturer Links**

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PUBLISHER'S LETTER

W

ith our tenth anniversary just on the horizon, we are thinking of a major change at *TONEAudio*. We're going to do a limited run of our magazine in print. Yes, you heard right, print. When we started the magazine in 1995, our friends in the advertising and magazine worlds were all singing the same song – “how do we get out of print?” Though Adobe's PDF technology was relatively new, and not everyone had major internet bandwidth, we charged ahead with an all-electronic magazine that *looked* like a print magazine. I still enjoy the idea of reading an issue with a beginning and end, much like a concept album that's been assembled and programmed with care.

This is by design, and while I'm all for the vast amount of information available on the web – on just about anything – it's easy for a website to sprawl out of control. Ours certainly has, and among other things, you can expect to see a complete redesign of the *TONEAudio* website by the end of this year to make it more readable and more accessible.

We wanted a magazine that was big and bold, with photography on par with the world's best audio and music magazines. And I'd like to think we've achieved that. Yet ten years later, both our readers and advertisers continue to ask in record numbers when we are going to print *TONEAudio*.

So, we are looking for some of you to pony up and subscribe if this is the way you would like to get at least some of the information from *TONEAudio*. We are planning on making two of our current nine issues available as a hard copy that you can hold in your hand. The first will



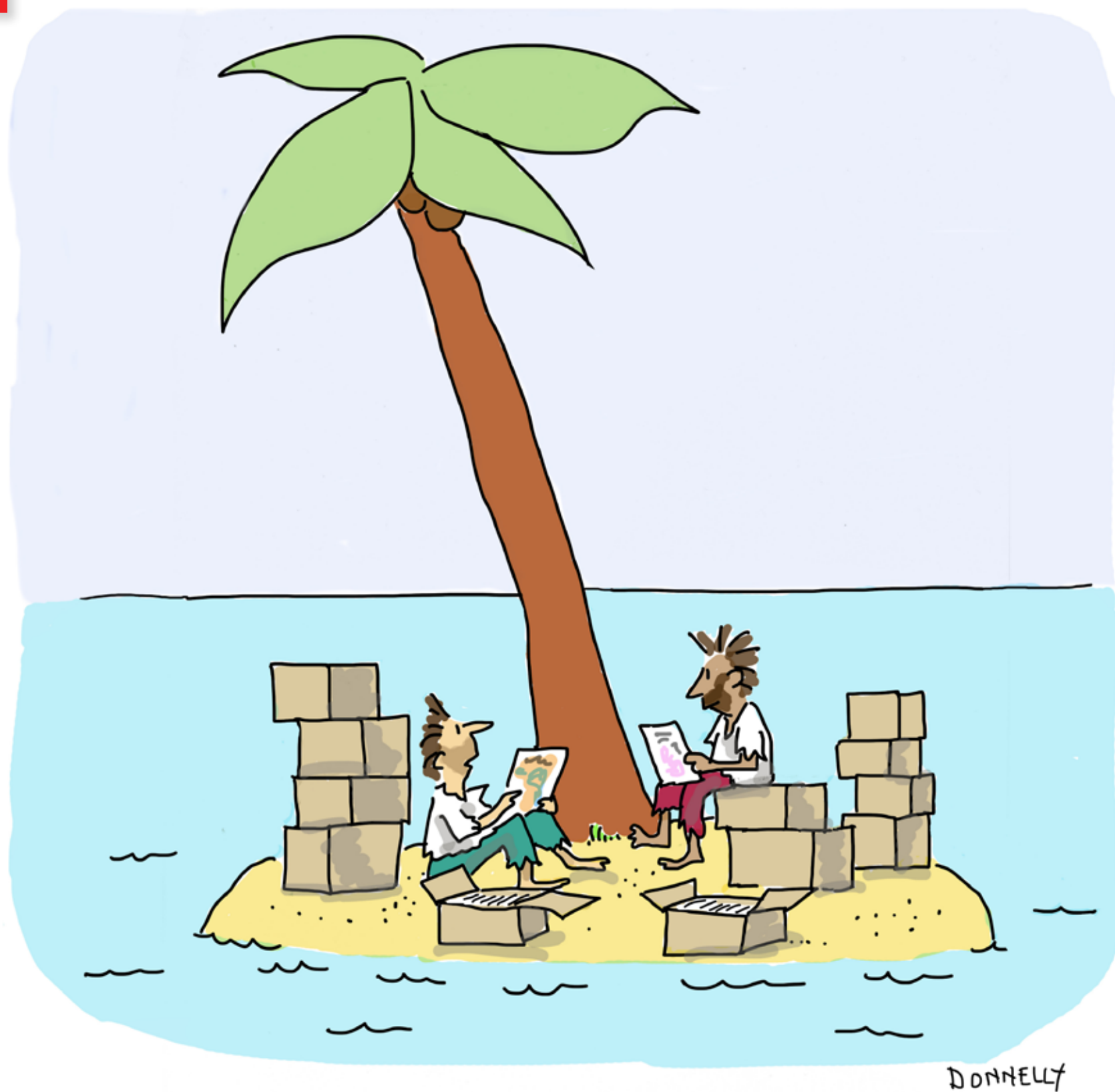
be our tenth anniversary issue, out in October, which will now incorporate our awards for the year as well. The second will be in spring of 2016, and it will also be a special, themed issue. Both issues will be close to 300 pages and printed on heavy stock to take full advantage of our design.

Think of it in the same way as you would an analog record. These two issues of *TONEAudio* will be only available via direct subscription; they will not be available on the newsstand. They will have a cover price of \$11 each, to reflect the investment in printing that we are making, and for now, these first editions will be printed in relatively low quantity, until we get a feel for how successful these will be.

Sometime in July, we will have ordering information and a shopping cart set up on the *TONE* website, but for now, if you'd like to get an advance bargain, please head over to Kickstarter, where we will give you an early adopter price of \$8 for both issues, delivered in a nice poly bag, directly to your door.

<http://kck.st/1zFCWMc>

I hope you'll enjoy it as much as we will producing it. *TONE* in print – who knew?



*"So if you could take one record back to civilization,
which one would it be?"*

PUBLISHER Jeff Dorgay

MUSIC EDITOR Bob Gendron

GEAR EDITOR Bailey S. Barnard

MANAGING EDITOR Rob Johnson

WEB EDITOR Ellen Green

ART DIRECTOR Jean LaCrosse

MEDIA SUPPORT Terry Currier
Tom Caselli

TECHNICAL DIRECTOR Chris Petruskas

RESEARCH Earl Blanton
Ken Mercereau

AUDIO HISTORIAN Ken Kessler

SENIOR CONTRIBUTOR Ben Fong-Torres

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS Aaron Cohen
John Darko
Lawrence Devoe
Chrissie Dickinson
Andy Downing
Jacob Heilbrunn
Jim Macnie
Richard Mak
Andre Marc
Mark Marcantonio
Todd Martens
Monique Meadows
Jerold O'Brien
Jaan Uhelszki
Connor Willemsen

SOCIAL MEDIA CONTRIBUTOR Monique Dorgay

CARTOONIST Liza Donnelly

WEBSITE bloodymonster.com

ADVERTISING DIRECTOR

Christina Yuin
toneaudiosales@gmail.com

Editor Questions and
Comments:
tonepub@yahoo.com

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Joe Cocker

British blues-rock legend Joe Cocker, live at the 17th Annual Santa Cruz Blues Festival in Aptos, California.

Photo by Jerome Brunet

Over the years I've had the honor of meeting and shooting some of the biggest names in the music business. In most cases, the bigger the name the more modest they are. Rock's most influential singer-songwriter, Joe Cocker, stands as one of the most humble I've ever meet and will truly be missed.

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

Limited edition prints are available.

FEATURE



FEATURE

OLD SCHOOL —Sponsored by HiFi Hawaii

Sansui AU-717 QUITE THE POWERHOUSE

By Jeff Dorgay

I remember the day like it was yesterday: I was pestering the guy at Pacific Stereo in the mall, begging to audition the Sansui AU-717 amplifier and a pair of JBL L-100 speakers that I was lusting after—and yes, the speakers had the orange grilles. As I watched those woofers pound in an out, listening to Supertramp’s “Rudy” and driving everyone else out of the store, it was the moment of truth. Time to put up or shut up. The amp was \$549 and the speakers were \$549 a pair. “How about \$900 for the whole thing?” I bargained.

At this point, the audio consultant (as they used to call ‘em back then) laughed at me and said, “Kid, I’ll let you have the whole thing for \$800 *if you’ve got the money.*” He and the manager weren’t laughing when I peeled 800 smackers out of my jeans, insisting in my best Eddie Haskell voice that the two gentlemen carry my new system out to my car and throw in the 20 feet of free speaker wire promised by the sign on the front desk.

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The most-read Old School column we've ever done was back in issue 30 when we featured the JBL L-100 speakers—seems many of the boomers in our audience either had a pair, wanted a pair, or still have a pair of L-100s. Either way, many good stories are always told about these speakers; they're like a great vintage car in that respect, so I keep them around for posterity. Visitors to the TONE studio always take note of them off in the corner, and they always bring back fond memories. When a cursory 4:00 a.m. eBay search turned up a pristine AU-717, it was time to press the *buy it now* button.

Some components stick in your mind forever, but it's tough enough to remember what you heard a week ago most times and some will argue that your auditory memory is fleeting at best. That's an argument we'll leave for the nearby audiophile forum, but for now I ask that you humor me

when I tell you this damn amplifier even *smells* familiar.

In 1978, a 40-pound amplifier felt like a monster, but next to my reference Pass Xs 300 monoblocks (with a combined weight of almost a ton, literally), the AU-717 is comparatively gentle on my back. I hook up the JBLs with the necessary zip cord, and it's time for the trip down memory lane to begin.

Keeping a foot in the 21st century, I stream digital files via Tidal and the dCS Paganini stack—which costs way more than my parents house did when I had this Sansui/JBL system on the first go. Crazy as this seems, the purity of the dCS as a source truly reveals just how good the Sansui really is. And even by today's standards, this modest setup still easily reveals the differences between the \$60K dCS stack, the \$30K Gryphon DAC and the \$9K Simaudio 650D. *(continued)*

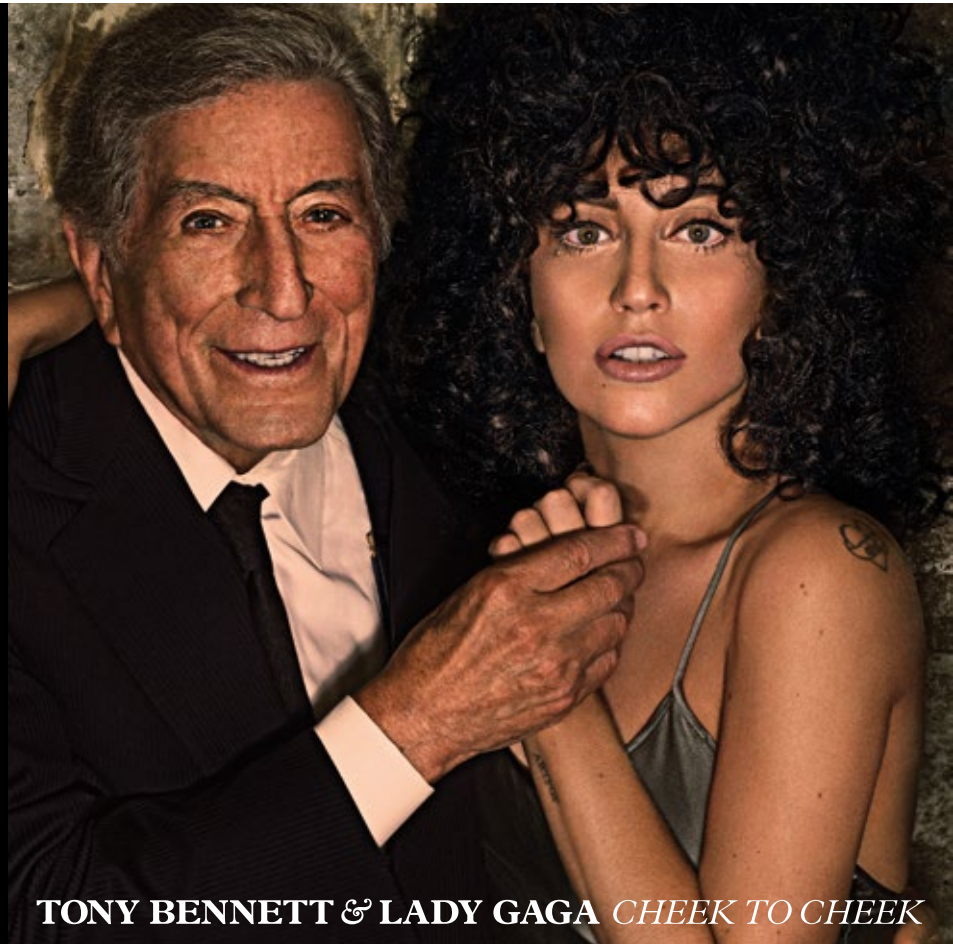
FEATURE

Extended listening to this combo proves musically involving, and re-visiting the music I was listening to in 1978 is particularly fun. Mick Fleetwood's drumming on *Rumours* is splendid, as is Peter Frampton's guitar work on *Frampton Comes Alive*. The combination just works, and while the vintage combo is a bit grungier and foggier than my reference system, the whole experience is welcome and highly palatable. Even after hours, you don't realize what you're missing until you go back to the big system.

The AU-717's moving-magnet phonostage proves equally enticing, using our restored Thorens TD-125, courtesy of Vinyl Nirvana, with an SME 3009 tonearm and Ortofon VMS 20 mk. II cartridge. Later on, swapping the Ortofon MM for the Denon 103 and a step-up transformer takes the magic a step further, producing a degree of warmth and relaxation that makes spinning vinyl on these great components from the '70s tough to let go of. Seriously, if I quit my job as a hi-fi reviewer tomorrow, I could easily live with this system.

Of course, the AU-717 has a pair of tone controls for bass and treble that can be switched out of the signal path for purists. Those who enjoy using them will appreciate the variable frequency settings of 3 kHz/6 kHz for treble and 200/400 Hz on the low end, making them more useful than standard controls that have no adjustments. These controls seem well suited to the JBLs in my room, allowing me to touch-up the slight brightness in the speakers' upper registers. *(continued)*





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The 85-watt-per-channel Sansui amplifier is rated conservatively, and reviews from *Stereo Review* and *Audio* from when the AU-717 was new indicate that it produced around 100 watts into an 8-ohm load; more than enough to drive all but Magnepans to a major level. Connected to a more modern speaker, like the Dali Rubicon 2s (featured on page xx of this issue), the AU-717 turns in a superb performance. Bass control is excellent, and this amplifier plays *loud*, with plenty of headroom to spare.

Considering this amplifier now commands a price tag of \$400 to \$800, it has survived the test of time well. Expect to pay a premium for perfect cosmetics and the accessory-rack handles, which can fetch

up to \$150 a pair on their own. By now, these amplifiers will probably need most of the capacitors under the hood replaced, so if the seller claims that your AU-717 has been recapped, try and see as much physical proof and documentation as possible before paying top dollar.

A full overhaul done correctly will set you back about \$400 to \$500 and should include removing the corrosive glue used at assembly, which has become corrosive over time and will degrade the sound significantly and can also cause other problems. Once properly re-done, the AU-717 is definitely a premium integrated amp that you can enjoy for years to come. ●

NEW RELEASES

**METZ***METZ II*

Sub Pop, LP or CD

Rioting in Baltimore spurred by police mistreatment just months after violent protests ignited by related issues of discrimination and force by badge- and baton-wielding authorities in Ferguson. Melting ice sheets in Antarctica and Greenland. Record-setting drought in California. Mass kidnappings and executions carried out in Africa by terrorists under the banner of religion. Growing disparity between the wealthy and the poor. Wholesale cuts to social programs designed to aid the destitute and elderly. The American democracy devolving into a pay-to-play system favoring the elite. In times like these, astute musicians have no shortage of topics to inspire them.

Yet, a majority of rock and pop artists carry on as if nothing is wrong in the world. The electronic community, in particular, seems blind and deaf to its surroundings, treating concerts as hedonistic celebrations of the self. And while there are key exceptions—Run the Jewels and Kendrick Lamar, for starters—most hip-hop performers have also lost connection to their groundings, choosing materialism and cliché over ear-to-the-ground social commentary and street-borne reportage. True, few audiences prefer to be subject to a constant stream of bad news and depressing circumstances. But at its most vital, music channels shared frustrations, concerns, and objections into songs that awaken the public consciousness, criticize the status quo, and speak out on behalf of the repressed.

Nobody will mistake METZ for a protest group.

Unlike some of today's message-centric punk acts, the Canadian trio doesn't have an agenda or openly spout off about corruption, wars, politics, imperialism, or racism. Most of the band's *METZ II* features largely distorted lyrics, with singer/guitarist Alex Edkins yelping, howling, and growling with a red-throated intensity that matches his mates' hostile aggression. But just underneath Edkins' desperate wails, which reveal fully formed and comprehensible words on close listens, reside deep-seated anger, disgust, doubt, disappointment, and discord. The group's floorboard-shaking blend of hardcore, noise-rock, punk, and industrial disciplines sends up such feelings up with fire-starting intent.

At their root, METZ's songs rage against chilling scenarios the band recognizes demand comeuppance—not dismissal or

disregard. Loss, death, technology, routine, and environmental ruin figure into conversations, and METZ's ugly, dark, physically bruising tunes serve as immediate reactions. Enormous volume levels, frayed notes, primal feedback, and abrasive outbursts spill from stomach-punching arrangements that, for all their ferocity, retain identifiable structure and direction. Drummer Hayden Menzies' thunderous playing remains central to the songs' ability to keep a distinct shape. Not since Nirvana's Dave Grohl has a rock drummer sounded as enormous, controlled, and concussive on record.

Sonically and emotionally, METZ splits the divide between healthy catharses and threatening revolt amidst a tumult of booming percussion and aluminum-compacting guitar riffs. (*continued*)



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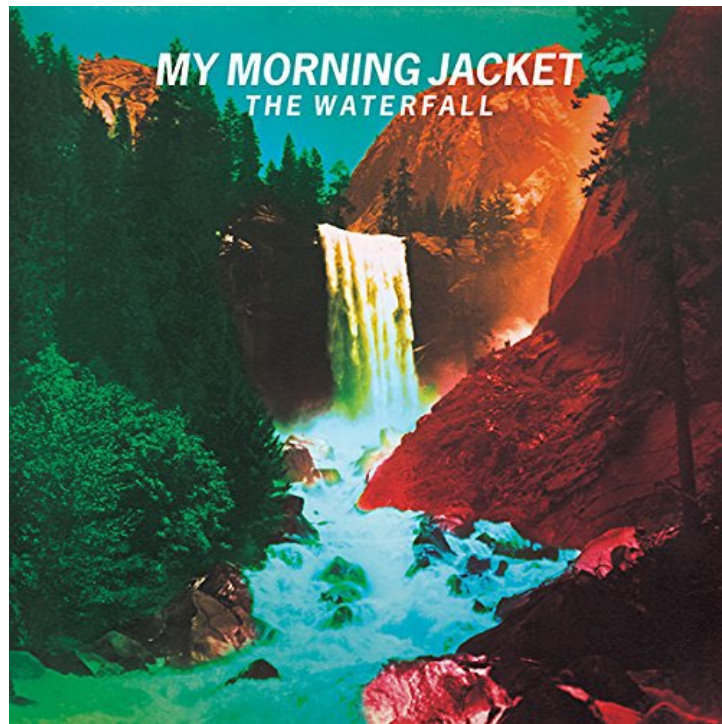


©Photo by David Waldman

Bolstering the assault of its debut album by adding of baritone guitars, tape loops, and pianos to the fold, and stretching tracks to slightly longer lengths, METZ wraps its collective hands around throats with a combination of near-exhaustive fervency and instinctive authority.

"I'm waiting for the ambulance to come," Edkins yowls on the crushing "Wait In Line," documenting a litany of objections and annoyances. "You let me down" accuses Edkins with blue-in-the-face vitriol on the pugnacious "The Swimmer." During the machine-stamp grind of the aptly named "Spit You Out," the frontman comes on as if he's coughing up poison to purify his system. "You can't see me," he later taunts, matter-of-factly, on the atom-splitting "Landfill," infused with a brief pause that allows listeners a false sense of security.

Indeed, METZ offers no shelter on its uncompromising sophomore effort, and instead, finds satisfaction in going where few contemporary artists dare to venture. Akin to modern-day states of affairs, it may not be pretty, but the effects are far too seditious and invigorating to be ignored. —**Bob Gendron**



My Morning Jacket

The Waterfall

ATO / Capitol, 180g 45RPM 2LP or CD

My Morning Jacket frontman Jim James was a hair-whipping astronaut. His steps were large, booming, spacious—the kind of movement one makes when walking on the moon. Only instead of a spacesuit, James was wearing an oversized sport coat and flailing at a guitar. At least that’s what this particular My Morning Jacket live show looked like. Few of us get to walk on the moon, and let’s say this about My Morning Jacket: None of us get to walk in James’ footsteps.

For all the sonic tinkering My Morning Jacket has been bringing to its rootsy Southern sound over the past decade and a half or so, the band’s most powerful instrument is James’ voice.

Here, on the band’s first album in four years, and seventh overall, James’ vocals remain a pliable, soulful device. One moment he’s soaked in studio effects and aiming for the stars. The next he’s segueing into an expressive swoon. Notably, as the band ages, he’s only getting more determined to bring out his falsetto.

The Waterfall isn’t My Morning Jacket’s most risk-taking work. The group remains a jam band that knows a thing or two about melodies. Consider the ensemble a no-nonsense, hard-rocking group that isn’t afraid to bring out some R&B-inspired grooves. If *The Waterfall* isn’t reaching for the outer limits, it’s My Morning Jacket comfortably sliding into orbit. This is a relatively focused classic-rock-leaning work, full of enough instrumental flourishes to keep diehards happy. For the rest of us? It’s best to let James’ voice be the guide.

James has been vocal in describing *The Waterfall* as largely influenced by the setting in which it was recorded—a picturesque studio about 30 minutes north of San Francisco. Perhaps that explains an over-reliance on nature imagery, but *The Waterfall* more easily achieves a cohesive ambience than much of the group’s past work. There’s a sense of warm magic here—keyboards that get lost in the constellations, vocal effects that place James in flight above the arrangements—that coats the 10 songs in a soft, glowing aura.

“Believe (Nobody Knows)” begins like a fairy tale, with light strings and starlight keyboards guiding it into more energetic territory. James sings like a storyteller, his airy voice carefully focusing on every word until he reaches an arms-wide chorus. “In Its Infancy (The Waterfall)” has more sounds and loops working under a guitar-keyboard foundation, but the vibe—one of sun-setting psychedelics—is similar. *(continued)*

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MUSIC



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Lyrical, James remains grounded on *The Waterfall*. “Get the Point” comes on as a tender, passive aggressive breakup song, almost humorous in how badly its narrator wants to get out of a relationship without actually saying the words. Slide guitars shoot in the background like slow-moving comets, and James’ gentleness strives for affection even when the message is the opposite. “Big Decisions” conveys its own ideas of relationship frustration, but here, the setting gets smothered with more buzz-soaked guitars. James does what appears to sound like a brief Elvis impression, and though the song carries the album’s loudest chorus, the keys opt for a nursery-

rhyme feel to keep it all enchanting.

For the past 10 years or so, the primary knock against this band owes to the fact that My Morning Jacket’s albums fail the capture its rambunctious, celebratory live shows. That’s true (and true here), but also a little unfair. My Morning Jacket utilizes its albums as a template for dabbling. The Louisville-bred group took an Allman Brothers influence and ran with it, and if not all of My Morning Jacket’s experiments work (see some of the band’s dallying with studio technology and funk), its at least has had the guts to mess with the formula.

The Waterfall is almost a conscious effort fight against the

group’s penchant for distraction. Yes, there are a few clunkers—“Only Memories Remain” and “Like a River” get uncomfortably close to the blue-eyed soul of Chicago, for instance—but by and large, My Morning Jacket doesn’t try and tempt fate. Instead, the group goes for an overall mood and tone rather than individual left turns, and by and large, it’s a good look. Check “Compound Fracture” as it rumbles over the horizon groove with background “ooh-woo’s” and pastoral melodies. “There’s no evil, there’s no good,” James sings, his voice just shy of a falsetto. As it turns out, there’s plenty of room for exploration without hitting the extremes. —**Todd Martens**



Courtney Barnett

Sometimes I Sit and Think, and Sometimes I Just Sit
Mom + Pop, LP or CD

Courtney Barnett makes it virtually impossible to listen to her outstanding full-length debut while doing something else. Forget about experiencing it as background noise, or even texting as it plays. You could call it one musician's foolproof way to defeat attention-deficit disorder and today's easily distracted, multi-tasking audiences. Yet Barnett isn't out to change the way people listen by pulling a stunt. Instead, the magnetic pull of her *Sometimes I Sit and Think, and Sometimes I Just Sit* owes to a savvy combination of witty songwriting, evocative melodies, concise arrangements, and sly deliveries that comes around too infrequently in an ego-centric age absent creative gatekeepers.

Akin to the most memorable "Seinfeld" episodes, the Australian native showcases a knack for transforming common occurrences and everyday thoughts into meaningful observations and deep think pieces. She conveys insightful outlooks and brainy details in rambling albeit simple, conversational turns of phrases that wouldn't be out of place at an unassuming neighborhood pub. Free of excessive jargon and forced irony, Barnett refreshingly avoids satirical postmodernism. She's also not solely preoccupied by love or 21st century dating—or, at least, not yet so permanently scarred that she fully gives into the topics—expanding her outlook toward larger issues encompassing human interaction, integrity, responsibility, and self-worth.

Via rhymed couplets and snappy descriptors, Barnett possesses the relatable consciousness of a smart novelist. And through her tangle of stripped-back pop hooks, deadpan singing, and bounding garage-rock grooves, she exhibits the gruff appeal and winking humor of a rough-around-the-edges bartender—a profession she knows well, having worked full-time in a Melbourne tavern until February 2014. In her off hours, the art-school dropout utilized honed her artistry, headed an indie record label, and cobbled together enough songs for a succession of self-released EPs reissued last year as *The Double EP: A Sea of Split Peas*. Critically acclaimed appearances at major music festivals followed. Yet none compare to her achievements on *Sometimes I Sit and Think, and Sometimes I Just Sit*.

Placing a fresh spin on the adage "leave them wanting more," Barnett reshapes the apparently ordinary into incidents infused with aha moments, unexpected revelations, and candid admissions. Seemingly plain on the surface, her vignettes skirt obvious conclusions. She challenges anyone within earshot for their undivided attention on the album-opening "Elevator Operator," which skips along to a contagious beat and Barnett's matter-of-fact sing-speak vocals that begin the second the song starts. In less than three-and-a-half minutes, she sketches vivid profiles of two characters to the extent their habits, moods, and identities are fully formed. An aptly surprising ending clinches

the tale, which ostensibly involves routine and shallowness but goes further to address expectation, awareness, and perspective—themes that course throughout the record.

In Barnett's universe, features often seen as trivial signify larger concepts. Cracks in the wall and patterns on the ceiling beget revelations about a relationship in "An Illustration of Loneliness (Sleepless In New York)." Communicated with equal parts spunk and bite, Barnett's backing band curls snake-like rhythms around her half-lazy, half-droopy singing. On the country-folk strummer "Deprestron," she both flips the script on the charms traditionally associated with suburbia and confronts swept-under-the-rug circumstances connected to property sales. In the process, Barnett assails not only real-estate customs that encourage buyers to bury history, but myriad practices and procedures that cause people to lose

sight of feelings and responsibility.

Indeed, the singer employs understatement and nuance to imply there are serious costs and consequences connected to habits that remain out of sight and behaviors taken for granted. "Dead Fox" grapples with environmentalism, waste, and consumption as Barnett contemplates fruit sold in the market, trucks that pass by her, and animals slaughtered for her food. "Kim's Caravan" is similarly subversive, its slowed pace and echoing distortion indicative of the song's weighty meditations on culpability and exploitation. As she does many times on the album, the 26-year-old utilizes simple notions—and identifiable situations—to express broader points in astute manners.

Barnett also understands how to have fun. She takes shots at indecisiveness and facades on the catchy "Nobody Really Cares If You Don't Go to the Party," ringed

with driving guitar riffs, nasal accents, and spunky vibes. During the spring-loaded "Aqua Profunda!," the singer dizzily recounts an encounter with an attractive stranger at a swimming pool and wraps anxiety, desire, embarrassment, and disappointment up into one hilariously sincere two-minute story. And on the tongue-in-cheek "Pedestrian at Best," Barnett lashes out at pretense, sanctimonious, and presumption with savage impact.

At its core, the stomping song recalls the rawness, insistence, and volume of mid-period Nirvana, the group whose chords Barnett learned when she first picked up a guitar. If *Sometimes I Sit and Think, and Sometimes I Just Sit* is any indication of the Australian singer's trajectory, countless young upstart musicians will be sitting at home and using Barnett's work in the same way during the years to come. —**Bob Gendron**





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Kathryn Calder

Kathryn Calder

File Under: Music, LP or CD

Kathryn Calder is the sort of musician everyone wants to cheer. Her life, one of tragedy and unexpectedly fortuitous occurrences, is the subject of an upcoming documentary. Her solo work often comes to grips with love and loss—namely, the experience of losing a parent to Lou Gehrig's disease. Her better-known gig, as a vocalist and multi-instrumentalist in New Pornographers, occurred when Calder learned her long-lost uncle was Carl Newman, the band's leader.

On her third solo release, Calder captures the sound of good news/bad news, hovering in a suspended synth-pop animation where celebration or mourning awaits every turn. There's an openness and restraint to many of the arrangements—a finely plucked string here, a tambourine beat there—but also warmth, a studio-enhanced trait that's all about the soft landing for her invitingly affectionate alto.



©Photo by Tristan Shouldice

Kathryn Calder the album, not the person, is by and large a quiet affair. It's pretty, but the kind of pretty that doesn't call attention to itself. Blink, and songs like "Beach" float into the atmosphere, as if not wanting to disturb or disrupt the listener. But Calder rewards you for searching for details, and these songs remain on a quest for light—or, the moment of optimism after, as she sings in the hymn "Slow Burning," "my nightmares become my haunted house."

A digital sheen keeps some of the instrumentation a mystery. Is that a rusty fence being strummed on "Song in CM"? Are those firefly-lit keyboards on "Take a Little Time"? Calder delivers lessons in how to make sad songs feel anything but. Acceptance is a recurring theme, and the low-to-the-ground momentum of "Take a Little Time"—one of a small handful of tunes on which groove takes precedence over emotion—blows open in its final moments, as church-like keyboards simmer as Calder sings of forgiveness.

By contrast, "When You See My Blood" begins with the soft click and clatter of rummaging through a kitchen cabinet in the early morning. Tightly wound finger-plucking push and pull it in different directions, and a trombone-like synth further hints that something is wrong in the land of domestication. "Arm in Arm" sounds as if it can evaporate at a moment's notice, at least until Calder's fit-for-a-choir voice brings sunny harmonies. On "Blue Skies," the vocalist engages in a quest to find beauty in the somber.

You could call it the overriding mission on the album, where a stark admission sometimes amounts to acknowledging a lack of sleep. Nothing is ever too specific to be overwrought. "Our life will still remain," she sings in "Pride By Design," encapsulating the roll-up-the-sleeves toughness her songs display in holding the bad days at bay. It's calming, but it's calm at its most no-nonsense. —**Todd Martens**

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Katie Crutchfield, who performs under the guise of Waxahatchee, is what it might sound like if a bundle of nerves could talk. On her group's third and most structured album, *Ivy Tripp*, the Alabama native takes stock of circumstances, possibilities, and worries from close-up perspectives informed by first-hand experience and imagined scenarios. Dealing with relationships and expectations, Crutchfield addresses themes to which most 20- and 30-somethings can easily relate in a clever fashion largely free of irony yet loaded with sharp-tongued directness. She navigates the balance between keeping her distance and getting intimate, and when accusations fly, doesn't spare herself from blame.

waxahatchee

ivy tripp



Waxahatchee

Ivy Tripp

Merge, LP or CD

While Crutchfield observes love from a cautionary stance, she refrains from viewing it with a jaundiced eye. Since the band's 2013 breakout and largely solo-based *Cerulean Salt*, she's also gained more confidence, which is on display throughout the more put-together record. Waxahatchee's lo-fi roots remain visible, yet many songs call for a full band, and some even rock out with the four-on-the-floor beats and dynamic thrusts. Each claims ownership of a subtle hook or wordless melody. Crutchfield's modest country-tinged voice emerges as a fuller instrument, too, with her phrasing weaving between dips and divots created by spare bass lines, humming organs, and stair-climbing percussion.

Against raw and exposed arrangements, the vocalist often seems as if she's singing thoughts to a best friend or delivering a break-up notice to an ex amidst the commotion at a bar. And where Crutchfield could appear overly

fragile and insecure on past efforts, the 26-year-old comes across with deeper maturity and self-assuredness here. She's still confessional, openly vulnerable, and occasionally sad, yet she also expresses unmistakable determination and punk-derived toughness.

"You're less than me/I am nothing," she repeats on the fuzz-coated scrawl of "<," demonstrating both the will to knock herself down a notch and float above the ruinous fray of a wrecked romance. On the chiming bash-and-pop of "Under a Rock," Crutchfield confronts insatiability and expendability as she evaluates her role and future. Similarly unflinching, the beautifully minimalist piano ballad "Half Moon" reflects the vocalist's penchant to evaluate states of affairs with painful honesty. "Our love tastes like sugar/But it pours all the life out of me," she sighs in a tattered tone, resigned to accepting loss and moving on.

Indeed, *Ivy Tripp* might be

pockmarked with moments of despondency and uncertainty, yet the record never wallows in despair. Crutchfield often gives reason for optimism in spite of outlying challenges. She takes space to locate her bearings on the rubbery "Poison," admits a need for companionship the deceptively innocent "La Loose," and relishes peacefulness on the acoustic "Summer of Love," a devotional tune accented with the natural sounds of the outdoors and a barking dog.

"I'm not trying to have it all," Crutchfield sing-states with authoritativeness on the back-and-forth emotional teeter-totter that is "Breathless," before closing the serious dirge with a frolicking la-la-la coda that could've been pulled straight out of the hills scene in *The Sound of Music*. It's the mounting echo of an intelligent artist that may not know exactly what she wants, but who realizes sorting through anxieties ultimately leads to finding one's identity.

—**Bob Gendron**



Torres
Sprinter
 Partisan, LP or CD

Let's have fun with discomfort. That's the welcome mat Mackenzie Scott, who performs under the name Torres, seemingly lies out in front of the listener on her sophomore *Sprinter*. Brace yourself. When Torres is on, her patient and piercing delivery is laced with a don't-mess-with-me intensity.

She gets right into it. Torres opens the album singling closely—the kind of close that feels dangerous, not intimate—to the plick-pluck of amplified guitar notes. The young artist wants the listener to lean in, to get a front row seat for her often throat-throttling mix of confusion, anxiety, and anger. How's the view? Often riveting, the sound of a new voice coming into its own.

"Heather, I'm sorry that your mother, diseased in the brain, cannot recall your name," she sing-taunts on "Strange Hellos," soon following up the line with static-enhanced guitar passages, a rash of hard-hitting cymbals, and a mess of scattershot emotions. She sings of hate, then of love. But guilt is the feeling her Gothic-dark songs seem to find the most perverse pleasure in exploring.

No wonder, then, she's soon singing, "I am a tired woman/In January I will just be 23." Yes, there's a lifetime of anxiety in these nine songs, which at varying points tackle the scars of religious shame, the fear of losing a parent, and the ominous hints of sexual abuse. They do so with a hybrid electronic-organic mix that will doubtlessly earn Torres comparisons to PJ Harvey and Shirley Manson. Just think less alt-rock and more the aural embodiment of a venomous black widow spider. On the first half of the record, Torres is going in for the kill, and earns it with the heavy guitar churn of the title track, a song in which everyone is a potential predator.

Elsewhere, "Son, You Are No Island" slowly pours digital gasoline on the patriarchy, as obscured vocals and rhythms that sound like critters in the night work to disorientate the listener. *(continued)*

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The article went viral, attracting hundreds of comments, causing a stir on Facebook and Twitter, finding its way onto forums, and soaring through the blogosphere. Versions of the article showed up in nearly every language on Earth—and soon prompted other, more considered responses. AudioStream.com's Michael Lavorgna posted the **finest commentary on this brouhaha** that I've seen to date (www.audiostream.com/content/ethernet-madness), and the BBC's *Radio 5 Live* had me on air for an interview. Thanks, desperate-for-news bloggers, for getting me such rarified media attention!

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MUSIC

Alien-like throbs move to and fro, industrial metalwork beckons, and Torres still manages to provide relief, letting her voice cut loose in the final moments to ensure everyone knows she's in control. While she's never weak, Torres doesn't let us get a firm grasp on just who she is. She suggests a lighter side on "Cowboy Guilt," where her often-acidic vocals take a break to harmonize and guitars quiver like electromagnetic radio waves. On "A Proper Polish Welcome," she sings as if in church. Yet the underlying burn of ambient effects and watery, suffocating notes make it clear the place she occupies isn't holy.

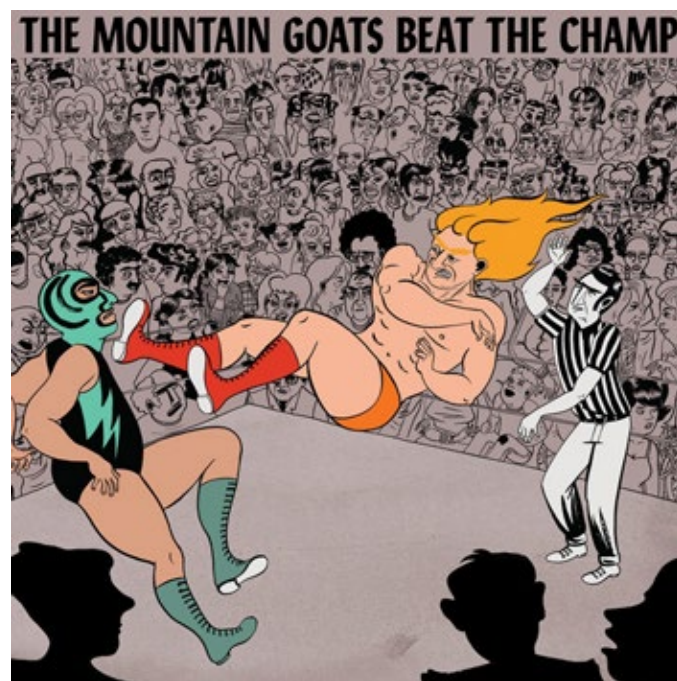
Produced by Rob Ellis, who's worked with the likes of Harvey and Bat for Lashes, the album boasts clean albeit claustrophobic sonics. Torres' vocals feel private, as if recorded in a bedroom. Computerized sirens, vibrating ticks, and noisy interruptions ensure the album's persona stays confused. Portishead guitarist Arian Utley, who ensures the instrument is never less than fuzzed-up and murky, supplies additional atmospherics.

It's perhaps no surprise that after such an emotional workout, the album starts to tire out in its second half. *Sprinter* walks to the finish line as its final three tracks are quiet, foreign balladry. Song breaks become abstract and mood takes over. To be certain, they include striking moments—images of riding a Ferris wheel alone, the quest for family secrets—but Torres is best when she doesn't let us settle into place.

—**Todd Martens**

©Photo by Shawn Brackbill





The Mountain Goats

Beat the Champ
Merge, 2LP or CD

The Mountain Goats don't make albums for casual listening. Filled with prose and narratives that drive the music, their records demand attention and focus—the kind typically reserved for novels. It makes sense, then, that the band's first album to follow frontman John Darnielle's debut novel, 2014's *Wolf In White Van*, ranks among the group's most contemplative and conceptually ambitious yet.

To fans that have come to know and love the Mountain Goats for making songs about everything from failed death-metal bands to the Bible, *Beat the Champ* will come as a rich if somewhat unconventional addition to their canon of underdog tales. For the unconverted, satisfaction won't come as easily. The record requires patience both musically and lyrically. It's a work that finds appreciation through headphones—not via the background din of a dinner party.

On the surface, *Beat the Champ* is about professional wrestling, Darnielle's childhood escape of choice. But by his own admission, some tracks are more complicated, “more about death and difficult-to-navigate interior spaces than wrestling,” as he explained in a press release. “I wrote these songs to re-immense myself in the blood and fire of the visions that spoke to me as a child, and to see what more there might be in them now that I'm grown.”

It's a bold move, even for someone whose songwriting is defined by a penchant for the unconventional and un-cool. The songs explore the lives of fans and wrestlers, both inside the ring and out. Subjects range from odes to heroes (“The Legend of Chavo Guerrero”) to small-town escapism (“Werewolf Gimmick”) to identity and loneliness (“Unmasked!”). Often, Darnielle ties the content to emotional highs and lows—the very feelings that wrestlers caricature and offer catharsis through—rather than linear narratives. The approach works with varying degrees of success.

“Foreign Object,” about a fed-up underdog wielding a hidden weapon, serves as a delightfully id-fueled rage-fest of a tune that'll be sure to inspire sing-a-longs at shows and among anyone that's ever been bullied. “Gonna stick you in the eye with a foreign object!/Gonna poke you in the eye with a foreign object!,” promises the gleeful chorus. Similarly, “Werewolf Gimmick” narrates a wrestler's meltdown as he struggles to reconcile his identity in the ring with the fact he's ultimately performing for “nameless bodies in unremembered rooms”—and that he's one, too. Backed by a pummel of heavy drums, the whole track is so hyperbolic, it manages to be both hilarious and heartbreaking, and one of the band's best works to date.

©Photo by Lisa Gotwals



Darnielle's gift as a storyteller has always been his ability to use the specific to illuminate the general. That's part of why the Mountain Goats have successfully championed those nameless bodies and unremembered rooms for more than two decades. That said, when *Champ* veers away from particulars and into the abstract, the album struggles to overcome its pet-project feel.

The thoughtful jazz arrangement of “Fire Editorial,” for example, gets undercut by rambling allusions to various wrestling riots that have little payoff or relevance for those not already in the know. At other times, the music buries or distracts from otherwise compelling narratives. “Animal Mask,” about a young wrestler and his protector, is delivered via Sesame Street-style singsong melodies that take the tune from sweet to saccharine. And the flourishes of pop and classical accents that crop up on songs like “Heel Turn 2” occasionally come off as twee and unremarkable.

Ultimately, *Beat The Champ* isn't the Mountain Goats' most accessible work. But like pro wrestling itself, the album offers more than what's on the surface. For those willing to devote the time, plenty of rewards await.
—Andrea Domanick



©Photo by Fiona Garden

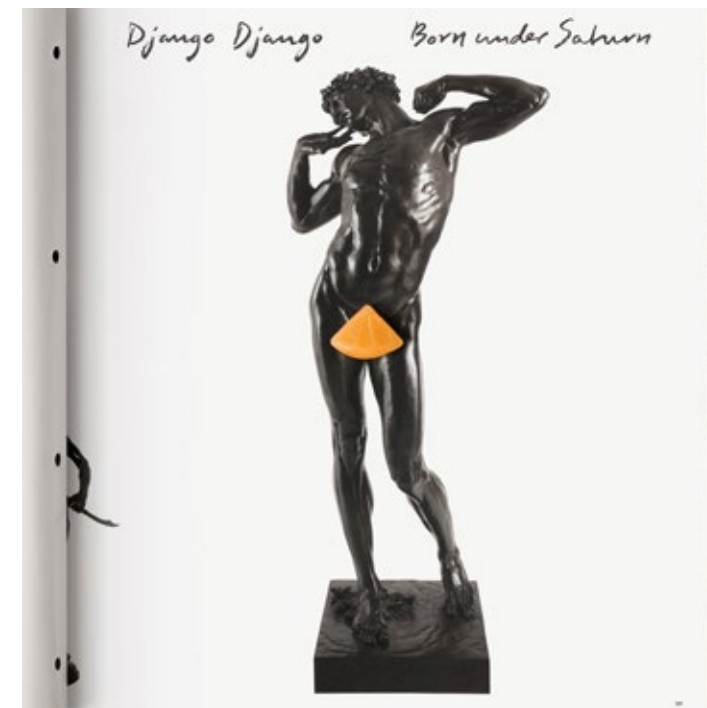
Scottish quartet Django Django constantly obscures its mission statement. Is this a surf-rock act for our modern, dance-driven times? Or maybe a group of electronic gear heads with a love of guitars? But then how to explain the sudden shifts into frantic, tribal rhythms? And what about those harmonies? Django Django is a perpetually-in-motion beat-driven target, a melting pot of studio wizardry, Dick Dale-influenced riffing, and we're-all-in-this together vocals.

On its second release, the team of drummer Dave Maclean, bassist Jim Dixon, guitarist Vinnie Neff, and keyboardist Tommy Grace has an album in *Born Under Saturn* with seemingly more ideas than its 13 songs and 50-minute-plus running time can handle.

A creaky, rattlesnake groove in a tune that treats a breakup like a contractual negotiation? Sure, why not. A 1950s spy-movie guitar overlaid with what sounds to be a car screeching to a halt? Bring it on. A Spaghetti Western landscape with a beat potentially fashioned out of a glass jar? Sounds great.

Like LCD Soundsystem before, with Django Django, anything goes. After a promising self-titled 2012 debut, one that earned Django Django a bevy of raves from across the pond and slots on numerous year-end lists, *Born Under Saturn* comes across as a high-energy affair that cuts across nearly any genre—as long as it's danceable. It's a multi-cultural rave with guitars, and while some of the freshness wears off over the course of the hour, the record maintains a trippy, spacey journey in which the phasers are set to "surprise."

Nearly each one of the arrangements feels circular, and takes a fluid approach to songcraft in which there's no bad time to add a new layer. "Giant" starts with a piano that chugs like a locomotive, with keys getting brighter as the song builds. There's also a crash of cymbals, a dash of fuzz, a guitar looking for waves to ride, and synths that crest like an orchestra in the song's final act. "Found You" digs deeper via a coral reef of prickly beats, damning handclaps, and distant harmonies. Vocals always feel distant, as arresting phrases only occasionally come into view. "I've seen your face in better days," sings the collective, one verse wrapping around the other as an out-of-nowhere electronic bagpipe-like sound brings the tune to a close.



Django Django
Born Under Saturn
 Ribbon Music, LP or CD

Meanwhile, "First Light" takes the Autobahn to the dance floor, "Reflections" emerges as what would happen if you put funhouse mirrors in *Tron*, and "Shot Down" doubles as a five-minute static charge. Things slow down as the album winds down. The more meditative tracks are packed into the album's final half. When there's not a festival of sounds surrounding the vocals, multi-tracked voices take a more prominent seat and bring the songs down to earth.

Nonetheless, Django Django approaches every arrangement with an inventor's zeal. "Don't think that you know me, I'll always be a stranger," the group sing-chants in "4000 Years," as fine a thesis for this upbeat mix as any.

—Todd Martens

In an episode of the TV series "The Walking Dead," the survivors make their way into a mysterious compound called Terminus, tentatively seeking refuge. The soundtrack to this hopeful scene is the Bill Fay song "Be Not So Fearful," sung by A. C. Newman of the New Pornographers.

Few things are more emblematic of pop-culture arrival than having your work interpreted by an indie rock-darling and placed in a pivotal scene on cable television's most popular show. It doesn't stop there for Fay. The singer-songwriter has been hailed by critics and embraced by a post-punk intelligentsia that includes Nick Cave and Jeff Tweedy.

It wasn't always so. The British musician released two distinctive albums at the dawn of the 1970s, both of which promptly sank into obscurity. Much like English singer-songwriter Vashti Bunyan, Fay is an artist that fell through the cracks during his initial career only to be discovered years later by a new generation of music fans. Fay released a comeback album of original studio material, *Life Is People*, three years ago to near-universal acclaim. Now, he returns with *Who Is the Sender?*, a record that contemplates many of life's philosophical questions. (continued)



Bill Fay

Who Is the Sender?

Dead Oceans, LP or CD

TONEAudio Magazine's 10TH ANNIVERSARY PRINT Edition

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Joined by a fine crew of musicians that play, among other instruments, Hammond organ, cello, and hurdy-gurdy, the singer-pianist keeps his arrangements hushed and introspective. A shy, muted singer, Fay forces the listener to lean in to catch every word. He possesses a slight voice filled with confessional tones, and while his tales may be gently told, the effect is akin to getting smacked with a velvet hammer.

On "War Machine," Fay watches a hawk in the distance. "It's his nature to kill, but mine isn't," he softly sings, before dropping a doozy: "But we all kill in ways that he doesn't/As we pay our taxes to the war machine." Fay quietly indicts us all in our complicity. The backing vocals are distant and mystical, like ghosts rising from a battlefield.

At the top of his game throughout the album, Fay delicately mixes poetry and commentary into ambient soundscapes. Nature imagery on "Underneath the Sun" gets torn apart by the specter of human violence, while the title track serves as a respectful thank-you to the mysterious higher power that guides the artist's hand. Fay's journey into the spotlight has been long, but the wait was worth it.

—**Chrissie Dickinson**

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**Death***N.E.W.*

TryAngle Records/Drag City, LP or CD

“If it wasn’t for change, none of us would be here,” sings Death’s Bobby Hackney on *N.E.W.*, Death’s first proper non-archival release. He isn’t kidding. Times change, tastes change, and a once-defunct band is suddenly alive again.

So let’s hear it for crate diggers. Death, for all intents and purposes, was lost. Formed in Detroit in the early 70s, this band of three black brothers made a lot of noise that not many people heard. The sound: Punk, long before punk rock broke, but dirtier and brighter. There’s some Detroit guitar sludge in the riffs—a sound not dissimilar from the Stooges—but also exuberance. Lore claims the band tinkered with funk and reggae—all done under the name Rock Fire Funk Express—but all that changed when the Who came to town, and the three teens tuned their bedroom-born sound to rock.

That probably would have been the end of the story. But after a 2012 documentary, *A Band Called Death*, descendants of the original band members discovered the hidden past of their forebears. At the same time, record collectors were grooving to Death’s early releases, namely the harsh “Politicians in My Eyes” and sexual exhilaration of “Keep on Knocking.” The former is biting—a sharp mix of anger, frustration, militaristic rhythms, jagged guitars, and aggressively in-your-face vocals. Each song is young and brash, and both high-energy. The newfound attention caught the interest of hip Chicago-based label Drag City.

While founding member and principle songwriter David Hackney eventually succumbed to lung cancer, brothers Bobby and Dannis resurrected Death. With friend Bobbie Duncan stepping in for David, Death in 2015 sounds an awful lot like Death in 1975. That’s doubtlessly intentional, as many songs on *N.E.W.* have their genesis in the early-to-mid 70s. Death, as shown in the documentary, seems a labor of love for David. He supposedly told record mogul Clive Davis he’d be unwilling to change the name of the band, thereby dooming Death to decades of near-obscurity. *N.E.W.* feels like a lively and long-overdue tribute.

“Relief,” for instance, is a about the unbridled joy of rock n’ roll. Just try not to smile when Bobby’s vocals get all upper register and excitedly fast for a few seconds. The tune channels the passion of falling in love with rock for the first time, and it’s designed for bed-jumping and air-guitar gymnastics. That sense of rejuvenation carries on throughout. “Look at Your

©Photo by Peter Wolf



Life” serves as a stop-and-start call to arms, while “PlayTime” is as silly as the title implies, with grown men encouraging everyone to “grab their toys.” “Live the moment of your life,” Bobby hollers, singing the last few words as if he’s Gonzo the Muppet.

A few moments of reflection crop up as well. “At the Station” is a doomy dirge that looks at opportunities past and present. But mostly, Death on *N.E.W.* wants to make the best of the time it has left. “Story of the World” starts out an acoustic ballad—one not exactly optimistic in its view of the universe—but once the guitars leap into a sprint and the drums become a fury of cymbal fireworks, it’s clear Death isn’t going to go down without a party. “Our world is in the hands of fools,” Bobby pleads during a mid-song break before his band comes to the rescue. Ultimately, the trio concludes with “You Are What You Think,” and does so with flexible guitars that blur the line between solos and riffs.

Such sonic shifts pepper the album, one that’s over and done in about 30 minutes. Death waited a long time for this spotlight, but the collective certainly isn’t going to wear out its welcome. “Sorry I was gone,” Bobby sings through gritted teeth on “Resurrection.” The biggest drag is that more weren’t around in the early days to know they should miss him. —**Todd Martens**

For more than two decades, Lightning Bolt has embraced barely controlled chaos as a secret ingredient and ear-shredding volume as an invisible third member of the band. Legendary in noise-rock circles, the Rhode Island duo made its name by embracing underground principles and pushing them to extremes on both album and, particularly, in performance. Drummer Brian Chippendale and vocalist/bassist Brian Gibson frequently eschew stages in favor of setting up in the midst of the crowd on venues' floor. They've also played kitchens and sidewalks, donned crazy wrestling and serial-killer masks during shows, and generally avoided anything related to convention.

While the group's non-traditional thinking serves it well during anything-goes concerts—in which the element of surprise, frenetic tempos, and blaring decibels are the only givens—it obscures the band's talents on album. Ever since its self-titled 1999 debut, Lightning Bolt has refused to record in a studio with proper high-fidelity gear, instead releasing lo-fi material that sounds as if it was captured in a cardboard box. Avant-garde aesthetics aside, the approach seemed to resemble unnecessary self-sabotage. *(continued)*



Lightning Bolt
Fantasy Empire
Thrill Jockey, 2LP or CD

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Peeling back the curtain on the collective's tumultuous assault and manic array of fuzzed-out distortion, rampaging grooves, and free-jazz-inspired percussion, *Fantasy Empire* functions as a long-needed lightbulb moment. Recorded at Machines With Magnets studio, Lightning Bolt's sixth proper album doubles as a deserved breakthrough for two musicians whose terrifying precision, intensity, and rumble can finally be heard full bore. Music that previously came across as a jet-speed muddle of thwacks, thuds, and turbulence now possesses honest-to-goodness detail and dynamics.

Volatile tunes such as the wood-mulching masher "Over the River and Through the Woods" and yowling stomper "King of My World" retain all the madness of previous work, yet also emerge as genuine songs with

identifiable structures and (gasp!) textures—not simply abstract excursions into fury and pandemonium. Whether on the electric-can-opener riff that underlines the onslaught dubbed "The Metal East" or the berserk rhythms getting sawed off in all directions during the epic "Snow White & 7 Dwarves Fans," Chippendale and Gibson maintain a focus and discipline that set them apart.

They're also wise enough to realize the importance of breathing room, and balance the attack with decelerated intervals. Subtle additions, like loops and reverb, further contribute to the sense that Lightning Bolt has officially transcended art-project status and elevated itself to a band that's now as good on record as it is on the stage—whatever the latter might represent on any given night.

—**Bob Gendron**

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About halfway through *Golem*, when the guitars have shushed, the vocals ceased, and the drums stopped pounding, a maddeningly disconcerting moment ensues. Things aren't quiet. Rather, there's an audible charge, as if the electrical cords are still shaken by what just transpired. Then the voices start. Words are incomprehensible, but the sound is akin to a CB radio beamed into the cosmos.

Were these noises here all along, the unsettling backdrop just hanging off the aural periphery? Listen again. There's what appears to be a gust of wind, a steady and distant rhythmic thumping, and a piercing riff that quivers like a tattoo needle diving into skin. The rest is a wash. There are solos, written in cursive, that break free for instants of clarity, but Wand isn't after clarity. *Golem* is hard rock, coated in static, and music that even when it's racing fast appears to move with all the propulsion of a tank.

Wand, on its sophomore record, goes for a tech-meets-fantasy vibe. Call it Black Sabbath in which songs occasionally come on as if digital swords have spliced them, or the Melvins with a sunnier disposition. When things get dark, Wand drops a song such as "Floating Head" to suddenly shift the mood. Where there was once doom, now there's a celebratory falsetto, light-speed guitar streaks, loosey-goosey bass lines, and call-and-response solos that get more chipper with each pass. No wonder the band cites sci-fi novels and Nintendo role-playing games as having as great an influence as any style of music.

The L.A.-based quartet wasn't always so intense. Last year's *Ganglion Reef*, released on the record label belonging to Ty Segall—the West Coast's foremost practitioner of all things garage rock—delivered its psychedelics with a slightly more hippy vibe. Melodies exist underneath the dirge. Strip away the heavy coats of fuzz and Wand, with its sweetly light and barely legible vocals, would no doubt be rather pretty. But the band largely keeps its fare quick and weird, with Daniel Martens' guitar taking like a lightning bolt to otherwise tightly wound songs.



Wand

Golem

In the Red, LP or CD

Golem begins with a roar. "The Unexplored Map" goes straight for the swamp, and "Self Hypnosis in 3 Days" comes charging out of the entryway only to have riffs chopped left and right, as if the reel-to-reel machine has gone haywire. "Melted Rope" pulls the momentum back. It allows for a brief moment to hold hands with that special someone and plug in the lava lamp, but don't get too cozy. "Flesh Tour" is all stuttering rhythms and "Planet Golem" heads straight into Mordor. Vocals fade in—Cory Hanson coos mysterious lines like "talk to the shadow"—and then dissolve into the mix. There's probably a fantasy novel hidden inside these lyrics, but no book sounds as great as "Reaper Invert," a blurry guitar death march to the heavens. —**Todd Martens**



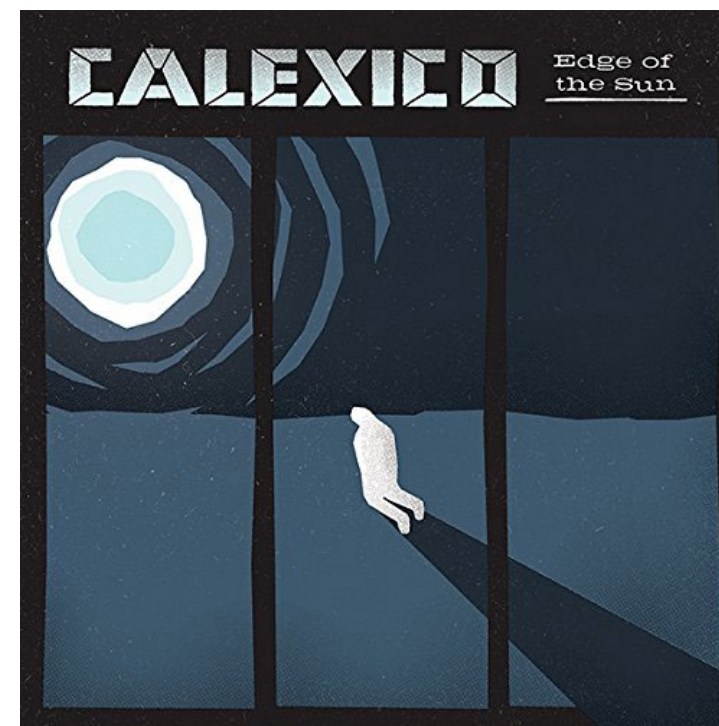
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Calexico
Edge of the Sun
Anti- Records, LP or CD

Few artists can slip into different stylistic skins while also maintaining identities distinctly their own. It's the hallmark of painters like David Hockney and of musicians like Beck and Bjork. Calexico may not share that level of renown or impact, but the group's gift for creative osmosis is the same.

The Arizona-based band, consisting of core members of Joey Burns and John Convertino, spent the first half of its nearly two-decade career exploring genres ranging from country to post-rock to jazz to Tejano. These influences crystallized the band's sound on 2008's *Carried to Dust*, a record the collective has since struggled to top. Five albums later, *Edge of the Sun* settles comfortably into Calexico's well-explored corner of the rock universe. When a band can command its sound as adeptly as Calexico does here, perhaps innovation is overrated. *(continued)*



©Photo by Jairo Zavala

Recorded partially in Mexico City, *Edge of the Sun* is one of a handful of Calexico recordings made beyond the band's home base of Tucson. But much like 2012's *Algiers*, recorded in New Orleans, the influence of a new locale isn't immediately apparent in the group's sound. Rather, the new context inspired Calexico to open the record up for collaboration—a smart move, particularly considering some of the collective's best-loved work has been in cooperation with artists like Iron & Wine's Sam Beam and My Morning Jacket's Jim James.

Beam returns on *Edge of the Sun*, and counts as one of seven guests on the 12-track set, which also includes Neko Case, Ben Bridwell of Band of Horses, Spanish singer Amparo Sanchez, and multi-instrumentalists from the Greek band Takim.

The sophisticated material takes on the spectrum on which the band built its name. At its best, *Edge of the Sun* is lush and visceral, a forward-looking record that captures the tension and momentum of someone reaching to climb out from the shadows. The Sanchez duet "Cumbia Donde," for example, begins with a languid synth line and a question ("when will I get there?"), eventually building to a crescendo of trumpets as Burns declares with near-evangelical urgency: "I'm on my way!"

"World Undone," meanwhile, returns to the simmering blues noir that marked Calexico's earliest records. The tense, foreboding track is made all the more satisfying when a wave of Takim's strings and percussion kicks in at the end—the inevitable crash you always knew would come. As Burns quietly growls, "Still waiting on the fence/Too many times before/What keeps you here anymore?," it's clear just how much he's come into his own as a singer adept at wrapping his voice around the needs of each song.

The album's weaker moments arrive on midtempo tunes, with "When The Angels Played" and "Miles From The Sea" feeling like generic indie-rock filler thrown in to bookend the hunger and electricity darting through the other songs.

Such padding keeps holding Calexico back from making a record that continues to advance its music. Success has afforded the beloved group a richer, more polished sound in recent years, yet the band could benefit from more of the rawness and focus found on efforts such as 1998's *The Black Light*. If and until that happens, *Edge of the Sun* remains a worthy roadmap on how to get there.

—**Andrea Domanick**



Buena Vista Social Club

Lost and Found
Nonesuch, LP or CD

In 1997, the record *Buena Vista Social Club* took off as an unexpected international sensation. Recorded in Havana and produced by Ry Cooder, the project featured some of the most revered veteran players in Cuban music, some of whom came out of retirement for the recordings. Their entrancing take on traditional styles netted a Grammy, critical acclaim, and the best-selling album their home country had ever produced. And the collective—named after the legendary Havana nightclub Buena Vista Social Club—became world-music superstars. The success of the original release spawned tours, more albums, and a documentary by German film director Wim Wenders.

Nearly 20 years on, *Lost and Found* reminds us what all the initial fuss was about. The 14-track set gathers unreleased tracks from the band's original Havana sessions, as well as cuts recorded in subsequent years by various members of the group. Making the release even more poignant is the fact that a number of the participants in the extended Buena Vista Social Club musical family have since passed away, including conga player Miguel "Anga" Diaz, singer Ibrahim Ferrer, bassist Orlando "Cachaito" Lopez, and pianist Ruben Gonzalez.

Lost and Found opens with the infectious "Bruca Manigua," a sensual dance number written in the 1930s. Recorded live in front of an enthusiastic audience in France, it features a big band laying down an irresistible mix of brassy horns and swaying Latin beats. When the mellifluous-voiced Ferrer makes his entrance, the crowd erupts in wild applause. He also delivers an impassioned onstage performance of the slow-burn bolero "Como Fue."



©Photo by Ebet Roberts

Compay Segundo, the late powerhouse guitarist and vocalist, takes his turn on "Macusa," played in the percussive Afro-Cuban "son" style. Written by Segundo, the track dates to the original Buena Vista recordings in 1996. There are many other gems. An all-female choral group lights up "Tiene Sabor," a sultry midtempo number that recalls a night on the dance floor at a 1950s Havana nightclub. And on "Rubin Sings!," a sensual bass line snakes beneath the sound of Gonzalez vocally imitating a piano riff.

When a musical project is wildly successful, it usually begets a stream of bottom-of-the-barrel reissues of subpar material. This isn't the case with *Lost and Found*, a fine remembrance of a group of musicians that deservedly captured the world's imagination.

—**Chrissie Dickinson**

Higher Fidelity

DALI Rubicon 2 Speakers

By Bailey S. Barnard

Toward the end of “Master Song,” the second track on Leonard Cohen’s breakout 1967 album, Cohen’s pursing lips sound eerily present through the 1.1-inch soft dome tweeter of DALI’s two-way Rubicon 2 speakers. This remarkable tweeter reveals all the imperfections and detailed character of this vinyl pressing. Similarly, on “The Stranger Song,” the speakers’ 6.5-inch drivers pick up several mic pops—as Cohen hits phrases like “plays for shelter” and “holy game of poker”—doing so with jarring airiness, a result of the DALI speakers portraying this rough but rich recording with loads of nuance and clarity.

It’s details like these that help immediately illustrate speaker quality. And DALI—an acronym for Danish Audiophile Loudspeaker Industries—has gained a reputation for producing high-quality, high-fidelity speakers at relatively reasonable (even mid-fi) prices.





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FEATURE

Of course, at \$2,995 per pair, the Rubicon 2s are far from budget speakers, but they do display characteristics you'd sooner expect from much larger and costlier models. For their size and price, the level of fidelity these speakers deliver is astounding.

Setup and Specs

Measuring about 14 inches tall, 7.5 inches wide, and 13 inches deep, the Rubicon 2s are appropriate for placement on a shelf or bookshelf, tabletop/desktop or on stands. For this review, I try placing the speakers at the forward corners of my 21-inch-tall Salamander Synergy hi-fi rack and on my 35-inch-tall speaker stands. I find that the stand placement gives the speakers the necessary height to cast a deep enough soundstage to reach the listening position about 9 feet from the speakers (though stands 28 to 30 inches tall would have placed the tweeters right at ear level, so I raise my listening seat to help make up the difference). The speakers are ported out the back, so they should be placed at least a foot or so from the back wall. Placing the speakers about 2 feet from the wall and about 6.5 feet apart (with only very slight toe-in) presents the most satisfying soundstage for this reviewer. *(continued)*



FEATURE

Beyond the time required to find the optimum placement, setting up the speakers is an absolute breeze. The gold-plated, plastic-encased terminals are big and sturdy and make it abundantly easy to connect the speaker wire. Bi-amping is not an option, but DALI says that amps with an output of as little as 40 watts will do the job. The Simaudio Moon 600i integrated amp I'm currently using as a reference really makes these speakers sing, but it is pumping 250 watts into the speakers' 4-ohm impedance load. DALI's specs say the speakers deliver a frequency range from 50 Hz to 26 kHz, with a sensitivity of 87 dB and the crossover set at 3,100 Hz.

The cabinet of the Rubicon 2s is MDF and available in one of four finishes: black or white in high-gloss lacquer, or veneers of rosso or walnut (walnut shown). At about 18 pounds each, the speakers are pretty hefty for stand/shelf models, which contributes to the sense that these are high-quality speakers with refined fit and finish.

Back to the Music

London Calling is one of my favorite all-time albums and is way more nuanced and better produced than most people realize (especially since it's largely considered a punk album—but it's so much more than that). As a result, it's a great test record for speakers, many of which struggle to deliver the 180-gram vinyl version's full depth and richness.



FEATURE

During the title track, Topper Headon's hi-hat hits are crisp and bright through the Rubicon 2s, which highlight Headon's complex rhythms and fast stick work. In general, these speakers lean toward the bright side of the spectrum, though they are not lacking in warmth. Through lesser speakers with less-capable tweeters, the electric guitar on this track can sound gritty, even muddy, but the Rubicon 2s parse through the grit, revealing an almost jazzy tone to this punk riff.

The Rubicon 2s deliver "Sacrifice," the fourth track on the Roots' 2002 album *Phrenology*, with more low-end bump than I'd expect from speakers this size. When the kick drum and bass guitar hit, I'm surprised to feel my chest rumble, which leads me to believe that the speakers' 50 Hz low-end spec is not an exaggeration. It doesn't rattle the walls of my apartment or anything, but it's plenty of bass response and quite the feat for 6.5-inch driver cones.

Further illustrating the low-frequency capabilities of these speakers, the opening track of Wilco's *Whole Love* on vinyl is an almost techno-sounding amalgamation of a strong beat with orchestral strings, electric guitar, amplified piano, and all sorts of trippy effects and tiny electronica noises bouncing around the soundstage. The little DALI speakers capture this big and complex recording with laudable deftness, casting a broad soundstage that extends well into the listening area and is ripe with detail and a well-sorted-out multitude of instruments. (continued)

FEATURE



The snare hits as the song crescendos toward the end of the track are fast and realistic (coming from someone who is a drummer and has seen Wilco live), and as the bass builds, the drivers deliver a really solid LF response—there's a lot of air coming from these speakers.

Acoustically Speaking

I like using John Gorka's *Gypsy Life* on Blu-ray as a reference, because it lets you see the physical location of the musicians and gives you the option to listen to the 24-bit/96-kHz stereo mix. Delivering this audio-video experience is my extremely capable Oppo BDP-105 universal disc player. During the title track (my favorite on the disc), the DALI drivers convey Gorka's baritone vocals with loads of depth and clarity. The speakers give a notably accurate portrayal of the soundstage, with the fretless electric bass, mandolin, Gorka's vocals and acoustic guitar, and female backup vocals placed from left to right, just as they are in the recording studio. *(continued)*

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FEATURE

The bassist uses an EBow (a little battery-powered device that mimics a bowed instrument), which gives the bass a really cool ambient vibe that the Rubicon 2s portray with plenty of air and vibrato; the mandolin is delicate but still abundantly present; and the female vocals are wonderfully subdued as they complement Gorka's deeper voice. The DALIs perfectly place all these elements in the mix, giving the track an extremely lifelike feel.

I will say that these speakers don't quite push the mix as far out as I'm used to with the larger Stirling SB-88s and the floorstanding ELAC FS249s that I've been using as reference speakers. By comparison, the Rubicon 2s lack the more substantial physical depth and three-dimensionality of the larger speakers. But compared to the other shelf/stand speakers and monitors I've demoed, the DALIs do present considerable spatial presence.

A CD of a live recording of Shostakovich's String Quarter in C minor (with Leonard Bernstein at the helm of the New York Philharmonic) sounds quite engaging through the Rubicon 2s. The frantic violin pulls dominate the left side of the soundstage, with the cello and contrabass responding at the right. The simultaneous melodies are captivating and displayed well out in front of the speakers, though perhaps not pushed all the way out to the listener or as far beyond the peripheral boundaries as larger speakers might. That being said, the Rubicon 2s do deliver extraordinary accuracy, depth, and richness for speakers of this size.



FEATURE

A Worthy Contender

There are plenty of options for high-quality stand/shelf speakers or monitors in the \$3,000 range—from Bower Wilkins, Sonus faber, Harbeth, and numerous others—and the \$2,995 DALI Rubicon 2s certainly hold their own. Their most praiseworthy characteristics are their accuracy, clarity, and broad frequency response, with an especially notable bass response for their size.

The tone of the Rubicon 2s tends to be a little bright with higher frequencies, though the mid and bass regions do come through with a subtle amount of warmth that lends the speakers really nice balance. Placed in a moderately sized room and paired with the right stands and a decent amount of power, these speakers can really sing and fill a reasonable amount of space with extremely satisfying music. ●

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Finding Her Diary Voice

**A Conversation With Upstart
Singer-Songwriter Courtney Barnett**

By Andy Downing

Australian singer-songwriter Courtney Barnett has a way of making even life's most mundane moments feel profound.

On the musician's proper debut, *Sometimes I Sit and Think, and Sometimes I Just Sit* (Mom+Pop Music, review this issue), which follows a pair of celebrated EPs, she espouses the budgetary benefits of purchasing a coffee maker ("I'm saving \$23 a week"), sleepily stares at hotel room ceilings ("It's a kind of off-white/ Maybe it's a cream") and, on "Depreston," casually tours a for-sale home on a quiet suburban cul-de-sac.

Yet, much like Louis C.K.'s FX series "Louie" or Richard Linklater's coming-of-age tale *Boyhood*, these seemingly trivial moments add up to something larger, with the singer uncovering deeper truths, almost as if by accident. Witness the dreamy, slow moving "Depreston," where an open house in a far-off neighborhood triggers a stream of panicked thoughts. "I can't think of floorboards anymore," she cries. By the time she starts repeating the line "You could knock it down and start rebuilding," it's unclear if she's even still talking about the house.

Similar apprehensions creep into "Pedestrian at Best," a full-on anxiety attack set to churning guitar, on which Barnett struggles with self-loathing ("I'm fake, I'm phony, I'm awake, I'm lonely, I'm homely, I'm a Scorpio") and the crushing weight of expectation. "Put me on a pedestal and I'll only disappoint you," she roars. She doesn't, of course, and over the course of the album's 11 cuts, she consistently proves herself one of the sharpest, funniest, most original songwriters currently making the rounds.

Was it difficult going into recording the full-length album knowing people would be paying attention this time around?

Well, you know, I thought about it and then stopped thinking about it. It's the last thought you want in your mind when you're being creative, so I just came to the conclusion that it wasn't that important.

Was there any point where you started to equate that line in "Pedestrian at Best" — "Put me on a pedestal and I'll only disappoint you" — with the music itself?

Hmm, yeah, well, basically. I guess that's what it's essentially about, plus a million other things—friendships and relationships, and my own relationship with music and the world. *(continued)*

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INTERVIEW

From your perspective, does it feel like that song is the closest you've come to capturing what it's like to be inside your own head?

Probably, yeah, because it just jumps around like crazy. That song tackles so many subjects. It's just all over the place, which is how I think.

Your songwriting approach almost reminds me of the movie *Boyhood*, just in the way the songs are less about these life-altering events and more about little day-to-day moments that gradually add up to something bigger.

It's just how I write, and it's what I find interesting. I think [I developed that approach] by keeping a diary, and just keeping track of what I was doing and writing down conversations and things that had happened. That diary voice is quite factual. It's not trying to be anything too poetic; it's just how it is. Then I basically read it out loud to music and had songs. That's probably how it gets that attitude.

Are you known as a good storyteller among your circle of friends?

No, definitely not [laughs]. I'm terrible at telling stories. I think that's why I write songs. I can take the time to make sure they're good, and then kind of display them when they're ready. Sometimes songs take four years or something [to complete]. You don't know. Some songs just come back one day and finish themselves. There's no kind of end point to a song. If you can't finish it straight away, that's ok.

Working like that, how do you know when something is ready to release into the wild, as it were?

I guess it's hard sometimes to make that decision, because you can keep writing and rewriting forever. I think you just know when it's right. It feels finished when there are no cringe-y bits that make you want to spew when you listen. That's probably a good sign.

You studied visual art. Do any of the skills you developed in those pursuits lend themselves to songwriting?

Yeah, I reckon. I still do a lot of visual art as well. It's hard to pinpoint what the skills are, but I've noticed the simplicity I like in visual art tends to find its way into the music.

Your songs tend to have a strong central narrative. What drew you to songwriting for that creative release versus short stories or non-fiction or poetry?

Yeah, I do quite a bit of poetry and short-story writing, but obviously all my energy goes into songwriting. I think the combination of being able to express those things through lyrics, and then really setting the mood through music and kind of finding the right energy that suits the story or the emotions or whatever feels like this perfect combination.

I read an interview where you said you'd been referring to yourself as a songwriter since high school, you just weren't writing any good songs. Do you remember the point where it clicked for you?

When I was about 18, I started performing, and I was getting pretty happy with [the songs] by then. But I really wasn't totally happy until I made my first EP. That's when I was happy with the songs and the lyrics and how everything sounded. It was a bit of a process, I guess.

It's probably different for everyone, but at that point I'd played more live and I'd played in loads of different bands and in different genres, and I'd really grown as a musician and a bit more as a person. I was a little bit older, so I had time to step back instead of trying so hard to do something awesome.

That diary voice is quite factual.

It's not trying to be anything too poetic; it's just how it is. ...

That's probably how it gets that attitude.

Taking a more autobiographical approach, were you ever reticent to share the music?

Like, what, scared of what they'll hear or whatever? Not really. It defeats the purpose of songwriting if I consider what people will think or how they'll interpret something. If I want to write something everyone will like I might as well write some pop song that doesn't talk about anything. The purpose of what I do is for myself, and for my own kind of sanity, and to process thoughts of my own. I'm obviously not going to be able to change that without it being completely false. What people think is irrelevant.

Considering you are writing strictly for yourself, are you surprised how many people seem to have connected so strongly with the music?

Yeah, totally! It's crazy. I never thought that would happen. ●

FEATURE

Astell&Kern AK240

Half a hi-fi system—and it fits in your pocket.

By Bailey S. Barnard

Don't freak out—the AK240 high-resolution pocket player costs \$2,500. Now, before you crucify me for even floating the suggestion that a souped-up iPod costing as much as (if not more than) a monthly mortgage payment is somehow worth it, please let me state my case.

By now, you've likely heard of Astell&Kern, a subsidiary of the Korean electronics manufacturer iRiver that focuses on personal audio. Its high-res portable players have gotten a lot of attention since the first one launched in late 2012. The company's product line has subsequently grown to include cables, ear buds, a pocket-sized DAC, a networked desktop music system, and three portable players. Each unit in the latter category is indeed like an iPod on audiophile steroids, able to play the highest-resolution files available today. The top-tier pocket player is the AK240—and yes, it isn't cheap. But if I may...



FEATURE



Ladies and Gentlemen of the Jury

Let me preface this argument by saying that even Astell&Kern's debut, entry-level mini player, the AK100, isn't affordable by many people's standards. However, like the top-of-the-line AK240, the AK100 offers a lot of bang for the buck, according to a number of reviewers—including John Atkinson over at *Stereophile*. "At \$699, it's reasonably priced for what it offers," he said of the AK100 in his August 2013 review. (The second-generation AK100 will set you back \$900.)

Shortly after coming to market, Astell&Kern pulled out all the stops with the AK240: dual Cirrus Logic 4398 DACs, 32-bit/384 kHz and DSD playback, Wi-Fi and Bluetooth connectivity, 256 gigabytes onboard storage (plus 128 GB from microSD), USB charging for 10 hours of playback, a sleek carbon-fiber and duralumin chassis, a 3.3-inch OLED touchscreen, and a pretty damn intuitive interface. Basically, the thing kicks ass—you really do have to hear it (and play around with it) to believe it. But no matter which way you slice it, \$2,500 is still a lot of scratch for something you can only listen to via a mini headphone jack.

But Wait, There's More

The AK240 has a second, smaller jack right next to the headphone jack that enables balanced XLR playback through your home stereo. That's right, you can plug the AK240 directly into your power amp via a pair of XLRs. This means that the little device can play the role of a digital music server, a preamplifier, and a stereo DAC—just add a power amp and speakers. The strange-looking but effective cable that makes this feat possible has a pair of full-size XLR male outputs at one end, and at the other end is a small but sturdy metal-shelled box from which protrudes a mini headphone plug and another smaller plug, which connect in tandem to the AK240.

Of course, in order to utilize this functionality, you have to purchase this compatible cable, which Astell&Kern had build just for its devices and which costs an extra (ahem) \$700. But \$3,200 for half of a hi-fi system is pretty freakin' good when you consider what most audiophiles are willing to pay for a separate player/server, preamp, and DAC.

So How's It Sound?

In short, it sounds great—amazing even. You'll be very hard-pressed to find a better

FEATURE

high-res pocket player at any price. I've been hoarding the demo unit from Astell&Kern for several months now and have listened to it with ear buds from Apple, Grado, and AKG (among others), as well as with my six-driver JH Audio custom-molded in-ear monitors and a borrowed pair of Audeze LCD-3 open planar-magnetic ear cans. And let me tell you that the capabilities of the AK240 are only limited by the headphones you plug into it. Through the in-ear monitors, a 24-bit/192-kHz version of *Dark Side of the Moon* sounds so eerily detailed that you're likely to experience acid flashbacks (even if you've never dropped acid).

Astell&Kern included a bunch of high-res and DSD files preloaded on the AK240. One such DSD recording of Andrew York's "Bantu" (by whom I don't know, as it isn't specified in the track info) is a standout. The track, which features four acoustic guitars and loads of awesome guitar-body percussion, fills a surprisingly realistic acoustic space around your head, with harmonic guitar plucks and guitar-body hits portrayed with abundant detail, dynamics, and three-dimensionality. *(continued)*

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Another preloaded track is a 24/96 version of Willie Nelson's "Dark as a Dungeon," which I already know well. Through the AK240 and the Audeze LCD-3 headphones, Willie's vocals are big and raspy, the standup bass has a spacious but not overbearing boom, the banjo plucks are sharp and detailed, and the fiddle pulls are rich with presence. Most notable to this reviewer is the lifelike airiness of the harmonica, which sways back and forth like a ship upon slow waves in the center of the mix.

Mini Preamp

The AK240 holds its own while serving as a preamp to even premier power amps. I recently visited by pal Jason Lord down at the Source AV in Torrance, Calif., where he set me up with a pair of Sonus faber Olympica III speakers and D'Agostino's new \$45,000 Momentum integrated amp.

I bring out Astell&Kern's special dual-XLR-to-mini cable, connect the AK240 to the D'Agostino, tap the *Balanced Out* button on the AK's touchscreen, and have myself a pretty epic three-piece hi-fi system (four pieces if you count both speakers). Through this setup, 24/176.4 versions of some Bach cello suites from János Starker sound breathtaking—literally, you can hear Starker's every breath as though he's standing just a few feet in front of you. The soundstage is perfect and the cello comes through with remarkable depth and clarity across the frequency spectrum. *(continued)*

FEATURE



It isn't long before I throw on some Zeppelin and quickly expose the low-end limitations of the Sonus faber speakers. Jason at the Source is quick to swap them out for a pair of Focal Aria speakers, which deliver Zeppelin, Metallica, and other hard-hitting music with loads of oomph and grit—and probably more Robert Plant and James Hetfield than you want screaming in your face. Whether or not that's your thing, the experience is awesome to say the least.

Cutting Cords

Fitting right in with a world where everything seems to be going wireless these days, the AK240 is equipped with Bluetooth functionality for sending music from the player to Bluetooth-enabled speakers and the like. I'm easily able to sync the AK240 with my old Jambox, Sennheiser's brand-new wireless Momentum headphones, and my Sony home theater receiver—and they all sound as good as any wireless playback I've heard.

Additionally, if the AK240's potential 384 GB of storage isn't enough for you, the device is able to play music wirelessly from a home network using its built-in Wi-Fi and Astell&Kern's MQS streaming software, which you can download to both Mac and PC computers from the company's website.

Of course, during wireless playback, you won't be able to

FEATURE

experience the full gusto of high-resolution files, but it still sounds pretty damn good for wireless. Even if you're too snobby to listen to music wirelessly, it's still a cool feature to have—and props to Astell&Kern for implementing it on what is otherwise an entirely audiophile-grade device.

The Verdict

The handheld size of the AK240 belies its enormous capabilities. Just to recap: It's a high-res pocket player with wired and wireless functionality, and when using the optional cable, it can plug directly into a power amp via XLR—which means that in this application, the AK240 serves as a music server, a preamp, and a stereo DAC. And all of that is really the unit's secondary purpose. In the AK240's primary role as a super-powered iPod, I will go so far as to say that it's second to none.

If \$2,500 is still more scratch than you're willing to pony up, the other two pocket players in Astell&Kern's current lineup aren't quite so expensive. And while they don't offer the same level of resolution retrieval as the AK240, they both have the same balanced output ports for pairing with your home system—special \$700 cable sold separately. ●

Astell&Kern AK240
\$2,500

www.astellnkern.com

Master & Dynamic MH40 Headphones

Up to the Challenge

By Jeff Dorgay

It takes the growling bass line of “Bitch, I’m Madonna” just 10 seconds to convince me that the MH40 headphones are winners, but not just because of their sound. Aesthetically, they seem influenced by cars like the Jaguar E-type and the Ferrari 250 GTO—unquestionably two of the most beautiful automobiles ever produced.

The earpads feel just right, with light-brown leather as soft as a Ferrari’s wrapped around a brushed-aluminum frame, and all the high-stress bits made of stainless steel. No detail is ignored. Even the cable has a vintage vibe; it’s covered in braided silk and not coiled. These headphones almost feel like they’re from another era.



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With so many mediocre headphones now on the market, it's nice to see a new contender offering a pair for \$399 that seem like they should cost a lot more. Rather than taking an off-the-shelf OEM driver and building a pretty enclosure around it, Master & Dynamic has produced its own 45 mm neodymium drivers with their own signature sound, one that I think most music lovers will enjoy.

Going back to another era myself, the 1980s, I stream the System's *Don't Disturb this Groove* over Tidal via my recently updated Sooloos music server. It's abundantly apparent that the MH40s have more than enough resolution to expose the differences between Tidal's crystal-clear 16-bit/44.1-kHz data stream and those of files from Rhapsody or Spotify. These headphones also easily reveal the delta between CD-quality files and higher-resolution 24/96 and 24/192 tracks—not bad for a pair of headphones costing less than \$400. (Can I remind you again that they are drop-dead gorgeous?)

Not all headphones are all things to all people, but these are damn close. For this writer, a solid-bass foundation is essential. While Madonna hinted that the MH40s can muster serious bass, Public Enemy's *Yo! Bum Rush the Show* leaves no doubt. (continued)

FEATURE



These phones can deliver substantial low-frequency output without fatigue or overhang, never sounding sloppy on any of my favorite old-school hip-hop tracks. Equally enticing is Aphex Twin's latest, *Syro*, on which I'm rewarded with even bigger bass. The ethereal quality of this contemporary electronica album, chock full of slick synthesizer sounds, creates a massive sound ball surrounding my head.

The MH40s have enough weight to stay on my head, but not so much that they cause mechanical fatigue, making them easy to enjoy for hours on end. Unlike the synthetic material used for the ear pads of many phones in this price range, the leather pads of the MH40 offer breathability and don't make your ears sweat.

Cables either one or two meters long come standard, with an 1/8-inch mini headphone plug on each end; one to plug into the phones, the other into your portable device. (A 1/4-inch adaptor comes in the box.) Having a detachable cable makes it easy to upgrade the cable for improved performance. Both the Cardas Clear and Wireworld's latest Pulse headphone cables allow even more music to come through—and even though that's another article, it's nice to know that these phones don't have a dead end. *(continued)*

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BY PLINIUS AUDIO



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FEATURE



Master & Dynamic even offers a headphone stand for \$59 that is way more stylish than the banana holders I've been using and yet they're not crazy expensive like some of the ones I've seen.

So what's that *other* mini jack for on the other ear cup? For \$129, you can get yourself a noise-isolating boom microphone that delivers voice with clarity and makes the MH40s the perfect choice for the home-office music lover. Just plug into your smart phone and rock! You'll never miss a call again when listening to headphones at your desk. And for the overly enthusiastic listener who never wants to take off the MH40s, a mute button is provided on the bottom of the right ear cup, for when you have to blot out the music and interface with other humans. And the vented design lets in enough of the outside world to thank the pizza delivery guy and get back to work designing your next masterpiece.

The Perfect Cocktail

The more time we spend with the MH40s, the more we all enjoy them, on every kind of music. They prove up to task with male and female vocals, providing a natural presentation of both, with a slight hint of upper bass bump that none of us finds unobjectionable. In a very informal comparison, our \$500 Sennheiser HD 650s (with ALO cable) sound dark and the Sennheiser HD 700s sound thin, when switching back and forth to the MH40. If anything, the overall tonal balance of the MH40s reminds me more of Vandersteen 1Ci speakers than of something like the KEF LS50s.

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FEATURE

Playing an exceptionally wide range of tracks through multiple sources reveals that there is nothing that the MH40s do not play well with. Their 32-ohm impedance makes them easy to drive, and while they will expose more music through a high-quality outboard headphone amplifier, they deliver rewardingly musical performances with both Apple and Samsung Galaxy phones, as well as with a variety of tablets and laptops. This is important, especially for the new headphone enthusiast, because you can get a major taste of what the MH40 can do with your laptop or phone; yet, when the headphone bug bites you deeply, an outboard amplifier will strengthen your enthusiasm.

My reference Simaudio MOON 430HA headphone amp takes the MH40s to an entirely different level than my iPhone 6+—but you can't take the Sim with you. For the mobile headphone user, OPPO's new HA-2 portable headphone amp, weighing in at about 8 ounces and having an incredibly good onboard DAC, has the sonic fundamentals of a mega headphone amplifier setup, but it fits in your pocket.

The only thing you don't get with the MH40s is the last bit of top-to-bottom smoothness and transparency that you get from a top pair of planar phones—but all of those have a much higher price tag. The Master & Dynamic website says the MH40s were tuned to complement a diversity of musical tastes, and I have to agree. The company has delivered a first-rate pair of phones in every respect—a home run for a new manufacturer and a testament to how sophisticated personal audio has become.

We are happy to give the Master & Dynamic MH40 headphones one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2015. ●

Master & Dynamic MH40 headphones
MSRP: \$395

www.masterdynamic.com

BEER SNOB

By Bob Gendron

Seven Brides Brewing

DRAMA PRINCESS PALE ALE

Silverton, OR

As microbreweries sprout across rural and urban landscapes like weeds between cracks in a sidewalk, many skeptics have wondered aloud if the tipping point is drawing near. The growing selection of upstart offerings can be overwhelming for even those dedicated to trying new breweries let alone attempting to keep up with each manufacturer's styles. Plentiful options are always welcome, but too much of a good thing can push enthusiasts toward what they already know. There's safety in familiarity, and it's never fun to drop a ten-spot on a bomber that tastes incredibly average.



With so many bottles and six-packs competing for shelf space, the scenario evokes the retail segment of the music industry in the 1980s and 1990s. Unable to stream—legally or illegally—a record, buyers took a gamble on splurging for albums often without knowing whether or not the music justified the price. At least listeners could rely on a network of journalists that, in the pre-Internet age, largely had to demonstrate some semblance of authority, context, and expertise to keep their position. Now, experienced or not, everybody's a critic, and with very few exceptions, the beer business lacks dependable go-to resources.

Outside of instinct or a visit to the brewery itself, then, taking a chance on a beer such as Seven Brides Brewing's Drama Princess pale ale frequently comes down to the attractiveness of the name and/or appeal of the label. Those factors swayed *TONE*Audio Editor Jeff Dorgay, who found the branding amusing and clever, and shipped a bottle to me for a test run. (Like many upstarts, Seven Brides doesn't currently distribute outside of its home state.)

Unlike its namesake, Drama Princess stays modest from start to finish. An English-style pale, it pours cleanly, with an opaque orange tint and healthy

white head. Inhale and you'll detect aromas of pine, lemon, and floral zest. Mild biscuit notes appear in both the nose and the taste, with the beer's light-body character lending to its drinkability, smoothness, and lemon-tinged accents. It soon gets out the way and doesn't linger on the tongue, again reinforcing its simplicity. Drama Princess is solid and satisfactory, but it isn't fantastic—which is fine, as the beer reflects both the problem and solution to the explosion of the craft scene.

Yes, there are dozens upon dozens of better ales on the market. Drama Princess doesn't come close to the must-find level of, say, Ballast Point's Sculpin or Deschutes' Mirror Pond. Yet, in the region where Seven Brides exists, Drama Princess can be enjoyed fresh, and undoubtedly tastes superior to what comes out of a bottle that undergoes the temperature changes, physical handling, and storage associated with shipping beer across hundreds of miles. In short, not every microbrewery needs to aspire to mass distribution and shelf space. Smaller batches and geographic exclusivity are huge selling points. Just ask Wisconsin's New Glarus or Indiana's 3 Floyds.

What's often forgotten in the excitement of this unprecedented beer boom is that it all comes down to community: Drinking local, creating a destination, using locally sourced ingredients, and mirroring the *terroir* of the environment. Hitting these notes, Drama Princess reminds us there's still plenty of more room for more home brewers to take the plunge and take their creations public—even if that audience may be smaller than what some beer geeks picture in their minds.



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TONE STYLE



Rogue Ales

VOODOO DOUGHNUT LEMON CHIFFON CRUELLER ALE

Newport, OR

And now for something a little wacky. Venerable Oregon-based brewer Rogue Ales teamed up with iconic Rose City hangout Voodoo Doughnuts several years ago on Voodoo Doughnut Bacon Maple Ale. Bold and assertive, the pink bottle—adorned with maple leaves, pigs, and the top-hatted Voodoo mascot—turned out to be more likeable than the liquor within. Overly sweet and artificially smoky, the beer proved more novelty than success. Several follow-up collaborations between the Pacific Northwest institutions, including Pretzel, Raspberry & Chocolate Ale and Chocolate, Banana & Peanut Butter Ale, kept the eclecticism and enhanced the drinkability factor. *(continued)*



Rogue continues its apparent effort to become the Ben & Jerry's of beer with its latest Voodoo-related batch, Lemon Chiffon Crueller Ale. Created without artificial ingredients, additives, or preservatives, it counts lemon juice, lemon extract, vanilla beans, vanilla extract, and—wait for it—marshmallows among its baker's dozen of ingredients. Yes, it resembles a liquid dessert. And definitely, it tastes of lemon—and lots of them. But surprisingly, it remains accessible, and doesn't immediately send one running to the dentist's office for relief from cavity decay.

Rogue recommends pairing this wittily named beverage ("cruller" is intentionally misspelled) with dessert or, yep, donuts. Do so at the risk of gulping multiple pints of water to rinse away the sugar. You could instead sip it, and definitely share it, as a single 22-ounce bottle is more than enough for everyone except the most lemon-oriented palates. No, it isn't for everybody, and the astringency and sweetness prevent it from joining the ranks of top-shelf fruit beers such as Unibroue's Ephemere and Founders' Cerise. Weirdness aside, Rogue deserves props for turning Lemon Chiffon Crueller Ale into more than just a curiosity item. Pass the whipped cream. ●



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TONE STYLE

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Dodge redefines the mid life crisis at a very approachable \$60k with the Challenger SRT Hellcat. Quite possibly the only other 4 wheeled vehicle that possesses this much sheer thrust is the million dollar plus Bugatti Veyron. Nothing else from Porsche, Ferrari or Aston Martin has this kind of grunt, nor do they have anything this outrageous.

The minute you put the pedal down, connecting 706 horsepower to the pavement, you'll forget about your stereo. It would have been incredibly cool if they had included an in-dash 8-Track tape player as an option to round out the retro-resto theme all the way. Dodge has managed to hit all the styling cues with the Hellcat and it

makes all the right noises. This is a case where the original pales in comparison to the remake – we had nothing like this in the 70s. The Hellcat even claims 22mpg on the highway, but a cursory survey of a few Hellcat owners says to expect about 9mpg, at least for the first few months.

Count on exhausting your giggle gland with this one. And quite possibly, your hopes of ever having reasonable car insurance again. Just to be sure, put your attorney's phone number at the top of your favorites list on your smartphone.



Madison Fielding Flagstone Planter Speakers

High-fidelity outdoor sound
By Jeff Dorgay



W

ater and speakers don't usually mix well. But when your speakers double as planters, you have to water them, if you don't want the foliage contained therein to wither and die. Like most planters, the Flagstone PlanterSpeakers—which come in three sizes, each containing a three-way weatherproof loudspeaker—feature a drain at the bottom for water runoff. The speakers are passive, so power is required—and their performance with the Audio Research GS series amp and preamp and Gryphon DAC proves seductive.

After some initial listening to “Big Log” from Robert Plant’s *Principle of Moments*, I subject the Flagstones to about 100 hours of Lou Reed’s *Metal Machine Music* on the back porch, via the vintage Harman/Kardon 730 receiver from the “Old School” column in the previous issue of *TONE*. This experience reinforces that these are high-quality outdoor speakers—not those rock-shaped speakers you might have seen in recent years. A great vintage receiver might be a good place to start, but I’d suggest a better-quality source to get the most out of the Flagstones.

With a 10-inch downward-firing woofer and a front panel, of sorts, with a 4-inch Audax midrange and 1-inch dome tweeter, these speakers are certainly well equipped. Outdoor placement helps fight room effects, so in some respects the Flagstones are easier to set up than speakers in your living room. Of course, ultimate placement of the speakers will be dependent upon whether or not you want a more traditional stereo



soundstage and listening spot in your outdoor area. Not limited to the speakers you see here, there are a wide range of sizes and shapes available, so check their website for something that will blend with your décor – and there are some new configurations on the way.

Positioning the speakers for rear firing, about 5 feet from any outdoor walls, creates a more diffuse area-filling presentation. This minimizes the precision of the soundstage that you might be used to from listening in your living room, but it bathes your outdoor listening space in music; it also requires more amplifier power to deliver a sufficient sound-pressure level. A forward-firing orientation requires less power, offering a more focused stereo image, though this arrangement doesn't produce the best sound at a party—unless maybe it's an audiophile party where everyone is competing for the sweet spot! (*continued*)

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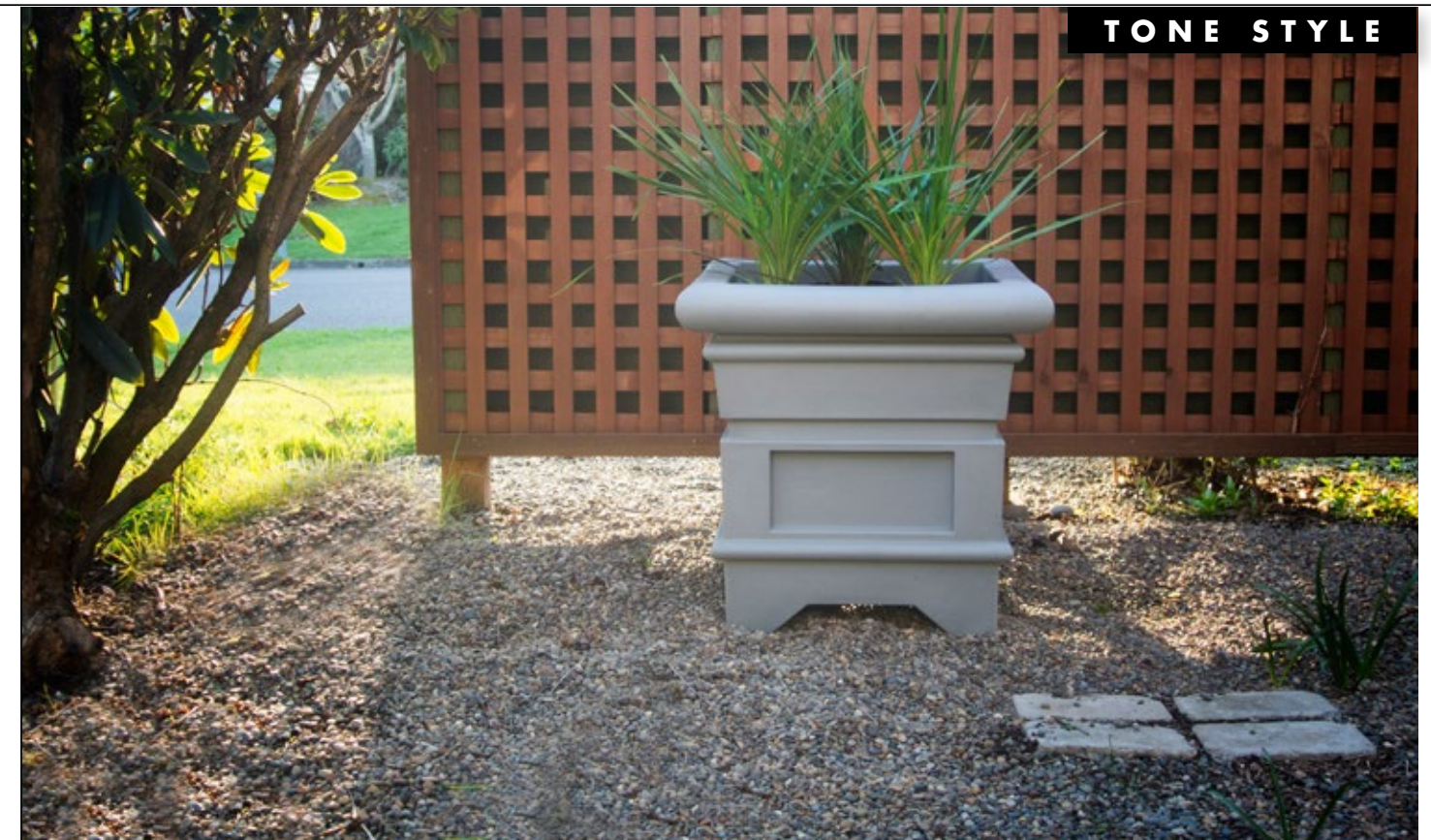


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The Flagstones feature an 89 dB sensitivity rating; yet, compared to a few other speakers currently in the *TONEAudio* studio with a similar rating, they produce a couple decibels less sound output, according to the sound-level meter on my iPhone 6. If you only require modest yet high-quality patio sound, 25 wpc of tube power works wonderfully. However, if you're planning on using the speakers regularly in party mode, Madison Fielding suggests at least 100 wpc, with a maximum of 500 wpc. Art Powers Jr., one of the company principles mentions that "under driving the speakers is the biggest problem they have with the speakers out in the field."

The Flagstones possess a wide dynamic range and

excellent coherence throughout, making them a true audiophile speaker in every respect (aside from the fact that they're disguised as outdoor décor). Recent dinner guests particularly enjoyed the combination of the Flagstones with Tidal music streaming, allowing everyone to take turns streaming their favorite tunes from the comfort of the patio furniture. The Flagstones effortlessly handle every kind of music, from female vocals to rock, and those 10-inch woofers prove convincing when the party groove shifts to serious hip-hop tracks. The woofers even convince the neighbors on both sides of our fence to join the party—a good sign.

At \$3,495 per pair, the Flagstones aren't a casual purchase for your backyard,

and the only negative aspect to having such great speakers out back is the fear that someone will hop the fence and make off with them when you aren't home. A cursory call to my insurance agent suggests that, if you purchase a pair (or two), to make sure your homeowner's insurance covers them. You may need to get an additional rider—or at least send your insurance provider a photo of the speakers and copy of your sales receipt. But as long as they're in your yard, it's happy listening.

**Madison Fielding Flagstone
PlanterSpeakers
\$3,495 per pair**

www.planterspeakers.com

Henge Dock Mac Vertical Dock

\$149
www.hengedocks.com

Ready for current and slightly past Mac models (as well as iPod and iPad) Henge has a wide range of docking stations, including their latest horizontal docking station. Those using their laptop as an only computer, wanting to take incorporate a large monitor or two will absolutely love the Henge dock.

Precision finished out of a metallic alloy that matches the MacBook Pro aesthetic, the Henge dock is beefy enough to hold your laptop without worry of a gentle breeze knocking it over. And it slides in gently, with connectors to match all the ones on your laptop, giving you two thunderbolt cables, USB and sound out. It's the perfect way for graphics and video users to integrate two large monitors and maximize desk space.

The Henge dock has performed without hitch in the TONE office both as a graphic workstation and as a music server dock for Tidal, allowing its audio rack footprint to be kept to an absolute minimum. Highly suggested.



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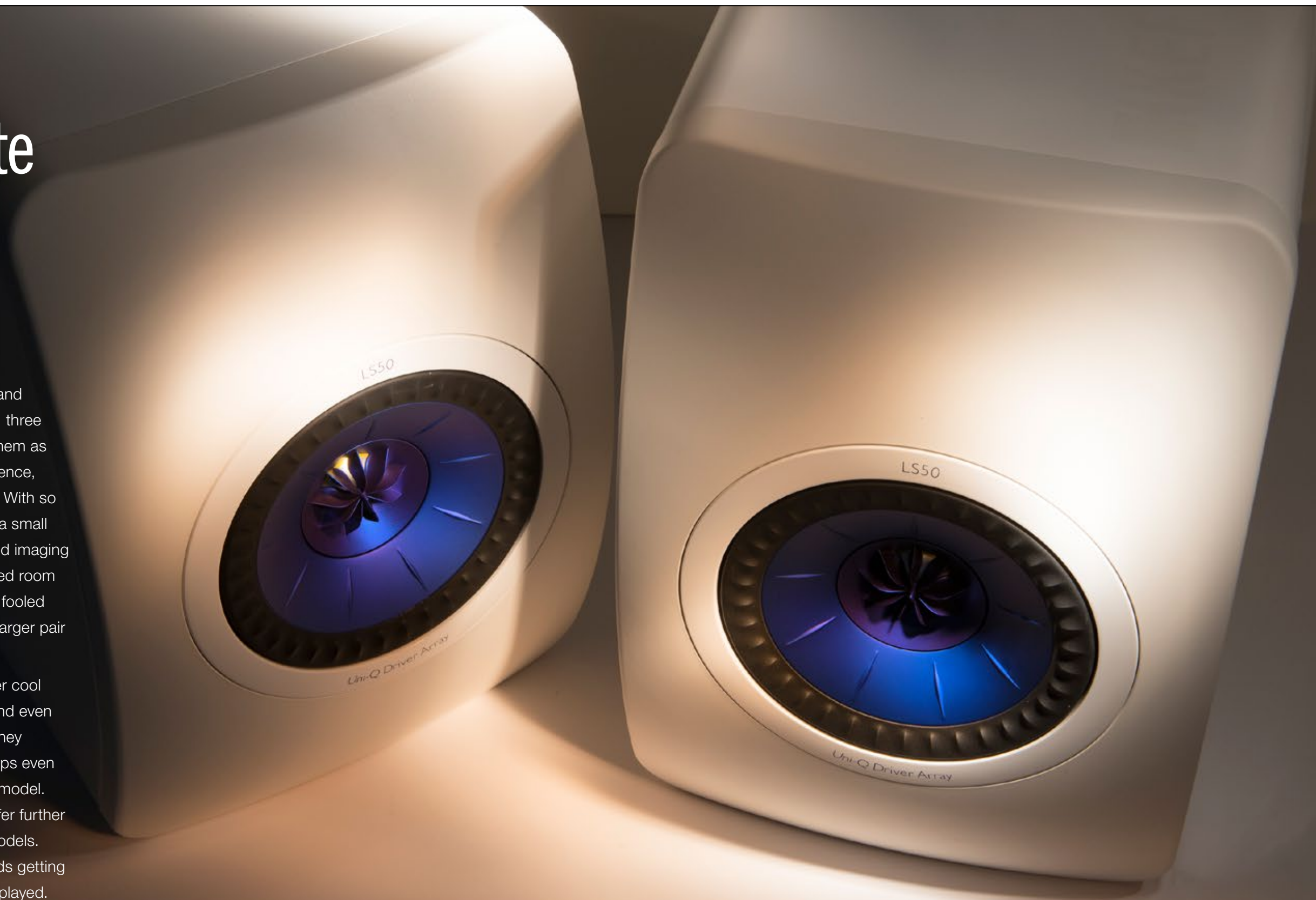
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Blue and White KEF LS-50s

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We love the KEF LS-50 and after almost two years, three of the TONE staff use them as their small speaker reference, so we are still enamored. With so much essence of the KEF Blade in such a small package, these speakers offer scary good imaging and coherence. In a small to medium sized room with great ancillaries, you might even be fooled into thinking you are listening to a much larger pair of KEF speakers.

Much as we'd like to tell you the super cool white and blue LS-50s you see here sound even better than the black and copper ones, they don't. But they do offer a different, perhaps even more modern aesthetic than the original model. Perhaps KEF will take note of this and offer further customization on the LS-50 and other models. This kind of thing goes a long way towards getting speakers in the home environment. Well played.





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Muku's accessory lenses leave a lot to be desired for the budding iPhone photographer, but their remote shutter release is first rate. For all the times you'd like to shoot remote video, time lapse images or just wacky selfie angles, this is something you should have in your camera bag.



Things to consider when choosing your Apple Watch

By Rob Follis



Do you want an Apple Watch?
Of course you do! but what

you MUST do before succumbing online, is take advantage of the Apple Store 'Try On' Programme and get one on your wrist. And of course, down in Melbourne, I was able to participate sooner than most others in the world!

As a long time watch collector, I am in awe of how much 'real watch' DNA Apple have embedded in this thing. Every element of the design has been thought through, the straps and the watch are beautiful objects which just shriek desirability, more so than many I own in this relatively affordable price category.

Most important to me and will be to everyone, is the wearing experience. How large?, how heavy?, how comfortable?, can I read the screen? and what does it look like on my wrist? Much like any watch really. Here were my main thoughts after heading to my nearest dealer for a sneak peek.

Gold, Steel or Aluminium. I'd rather spend \$11,000 on Hi-Fi, so let's forget Gold. Sport Aluminium is light, the straps are sporty and the cost is less. Stainless Steel 'Watch' costs more, looks classier and is heavier. The real choice is the look you like, on YOUR wrist.

Colour. I'll ignore Gold again for financial reasons, but the Sport comes in plain Silver Aluminum or Space Grey, the latter proving very popular. The Steel comes in Polished Steel with only one expensive model so far in Space Black. Of course, our publisher will have to have one in that bright lime green...

Size. If you wear a classic dress watch, a Patek, Jaeger or anything svelte, the 38mm is a must, smaller, sleeker and less obtrusive in use. If you have big wrists and wear chunky dive watches, then 42mm may be a better bet and of course has a larger screen.

The strap. The various watches are packaged with different straps in varied materials and look completely different across the range. Sport watches have soft silicone straps, which are very comfortable, no choice, but you can buy extra straps later. Stainless Watches have a whole range of deluxe straps, three in leather, one in Milanese mesh and one in steel link. All comes down to personal taste and feel, trying on your watch and strap combo is vital.

PASS

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

Oscar Wilde



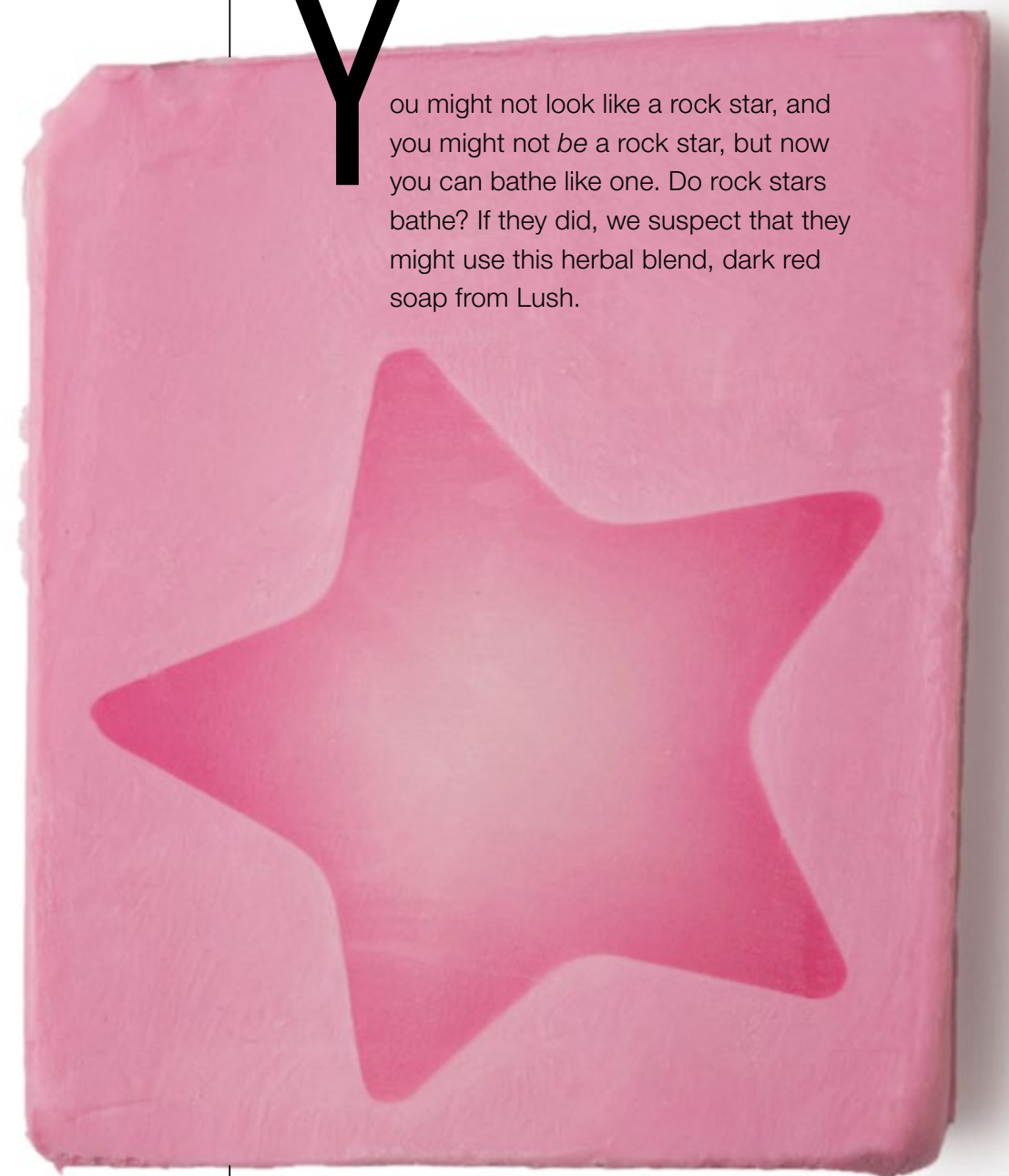
Xs 300: Dual chassis monoblock
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TONE STYLE

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You might not look like a rock star, and you might not *be* a rock star, but now you can bathe like one. Do rock stars bathe? If they did, we suspect that they might use this herbal blend, dark red soap from Lush.



Wax Rax RC-2 Record Cart

The 400-Record Challenge

By Jeff Dorgay

If you're going to snipe at \$1,525 for a record rack that only holds 400 LPs, this product is not for you. It's much more than a record rack; it's a piece of high-end furniture. You either get that or you don't. This product is hand built, finished, and assembled in Brooklyn, New York. It is not something stamped out like thousands of Ikea Expedit shelves, which I still use to store the bulk of my 7,000-LP collection.

In context to its sibling the Wax Rax flagship RC-1—a \$4,200 anodized-aluminum, CNC-machined, no-holds-barred beauty on wheels—the RC-2 is a modestly priced offering. Both in their own ways are amazing pieces of analog art and a testament to Wax Rax proprietor David Stanavich's place in the revival of world-class micro-manufacturing in the United States.

Another argument dissenters might make about the RC-2 is "it only holds 400 records and I'd need to buy 20 of these." Again, this is somewhat of a non-issue, as I doubt you'd want all of your albums floating around your listening room on a wheeled cart. Those of you who really dig the aesthetic of the RC-1 and RC-2 and want to go all the way will soon be able to buy Wax Rax LP-V shelves. They'll be modular and sans wheels; pricing info will soon be available.

Both the RC-1 and RC-2 make it easy to grab a few hundred of your favorite LPs for a few days worth of listening (or reviewing) and wheel them right next to your turntable or listening chair. As a reviewing tool, this portable accessibility is indispensable. *(continued)*

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Vinnie  Rossi

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TONE STYLE

Before getting the RC-2, I would keep about 150 of my favorite reference records on the bottom shelves of my equipment rack and then go back to the vault for whatever the listening session requires.

The amount of time I save not having to dig through the vault multiple times throughout each session justified the cost of the RC-2 in a short time. As a bonus, my listening space has never been less cluttered and my record collection is finally back in order. The larger your music collection, the more you need one.

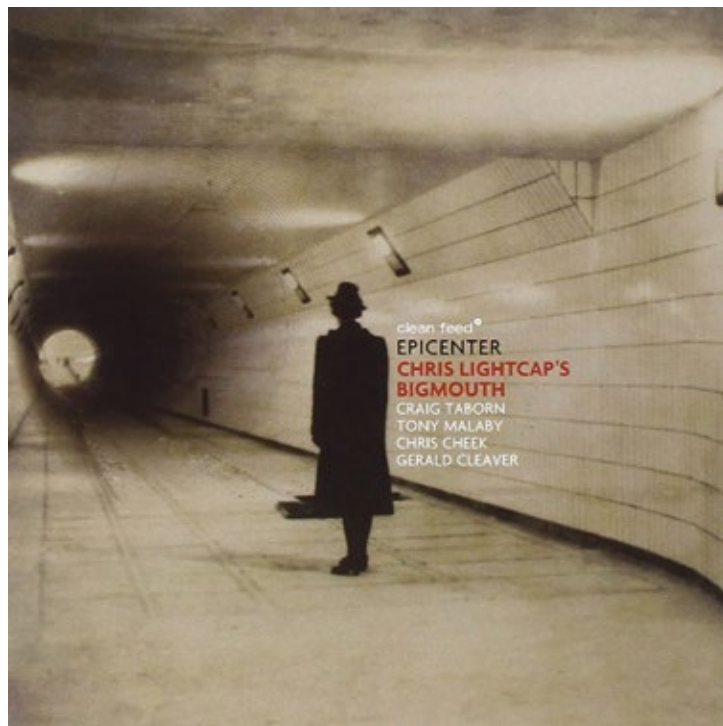
For those with more modest collections and in smaller living spaces, the RC-2 is perfect for making your LPs portable. As attractive as the RC-2 is, it's easily stored in a closet or pantry when not in use; then you can just wheel it out to your listening space when you're ready to start spinning vinyl. This is also a good solution if you have little ones around your house whose prying fingers and noses you'd prefer to keep off your LPs.

As far as analog accessories go, this is among our new favorites. The *TONEAudio* listening area and the guy doing the listening are much better off with the Wax Rax RC-2 around.

www.waxrax.com



JAZZ & BLUES

**Chris Lightcap's Bigmouth***Epicenter*

Clean Feed, CD

A

bout ten years ago, Bassist Chris Lightcap formed his own group on a whim. He had already done the hard work to make a considerable name for himself—so much so that he could draw from the pool of top young New York-based improvisers. Since the late 1990s, he served as a sideman to the likes of Regina Carter, Joe Morris, and Matt Wilson. Lightcap also performed with the great players he recruited for his band, which he may have named Bigmouth with tongue firmly planted in cheek. After the appearance of the sextet's 2010 album, *Deluxe*, it was clear he no longer needed to hide behind irony.

Except for alto saxophonist Andrew D'Angelo, most of Bigmouth returns for *Epicenter*. Lightcap had even more resources to work on for his new pieces, including a grant from Chamber Music America New Jazz Works program. The result is a thrilling collection that interweaves West African music, jazz improvisation, and classical ensembles without any obvious giveaways about determining origins.

Lightcap's compositions gradually unfold. While he eschews overtly complex changes, he packs different worlds beneath their austere surfaces. Craig Taborn's Wurlitzer electric piano drives "Nine South" and

jogs amidst Tony Malaby and Chris Cheek's blended tenor saxophones. African influences are suggested in the way melodic lines may seem like they're repeating, but subtle changes appear—a trait common in Nigerian highlife and afrobeat. Taborn's staccato notes on "Still Well" also upend the instrument's familiar resonance. But most of *Epicenter's* strength comes via quieter passages, like Lightcap's acoustic guitar intro to "White Horse" and Gerald Cleaver's melodic drumming on the title track. "Stone By Stone," in particular, shows how much can be said just by letting choice phrases linger.

"Down East" arrives as a break from the generally suite-like songs. Here, Taborn's aggressive saxophonists' shrieks would have fit on an early Stooges album. In a somewhat related proto-punk vein, *Epicenter* ends with a compelling version of Lou Reed's "All Tomorrow's Parties" on which Malaby and Cheek offer a haunting variation on Nico's icy intonation. While Lightcap maintains a stately pace, the group kicks up a storm that echoes a different song on the debut Velvet Underground album: the blasting free-improv of "European Son." It's not hard to imagine how loudly Reed would have applauded.
—Aaron Cohen



©Photo by Nada Zgank



Joe Lovano & Dave Douglas Sound Prints

Live at Monterey Jazz Festival

Blue Note, CD

It's a matter of buoyancy. When jazz improvisers are really, really swinging, all the ensemble action seems to float. Once it's in play, it can work in innumerable ways. Sometimes musicians bear down and deliver expressionistic ardor. Sometimes they have their most feathery of maneuvers lifted by the collective flutter.

Both tacks were set in motion when Joe Lovano and Dave Douglas' Sound Prints hit the Monterey Jazz Festival on 2013's last day of summer. With a roiling rhythm section in place and a string of live shows under their belt, their zealous chatter speaks in tongues. Both the saxophonist and trumpeter team with eloquence here, and for all the creative friction, everything gels as part of a perpetually simmering forward glide.

Take a second to absorb the opening of "Destination Unknown," one of two Wayne Shorter pieces in this six-song program. The iconic saxophonist remains regarded for the sleight-of-hand tricks he scripts into his tunes, and though the band blows declarative, it almost appears like they're sneaking up into the tune to goose all involved towards glory. In a flash, the midtempo reflection moves into a smooth lurch and the horns are paying homage to the coordinated acrobatics of the Blue Angels jet squad as much as they are Shorter and his looping forays with Miles Davis. *(continued)*



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MUSICAL ECSTASY



M O O N

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MUSIC



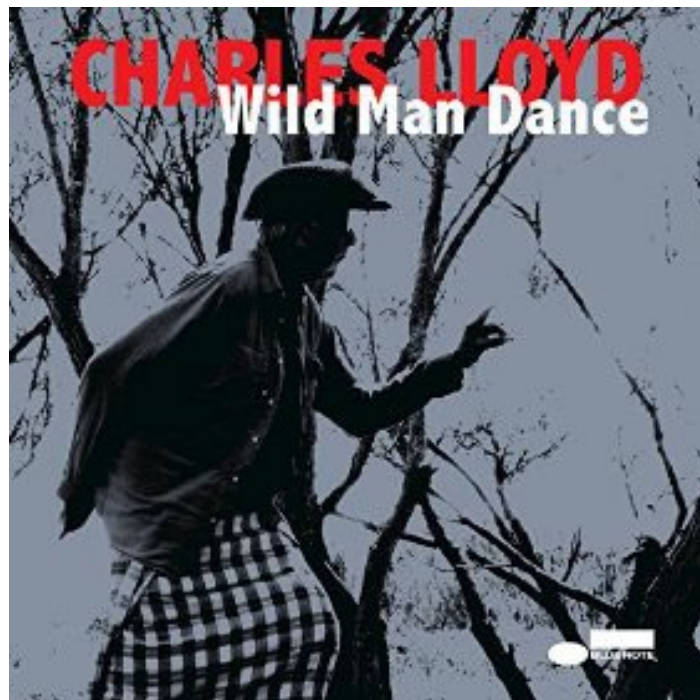
©Photo by John Rogers

Aesthetically, the Lovano/Douglas connection is inspired. The musicians are a decade apart in age, with the 62-year old saxophonist ranking as the elder. Both built careers on the fruits of artistic breadth, and each personalized his own take on freebop. Such lingo dominates Sound Prints, a rambling bluster coinciding with sharp phrases while swing tempos expand and contract with enough ease to keep everything hopping. Coercive counterpoint dominates much of the action, and while

the band's overt nod to Shorter stretches from the group name (a play on his classic "Footprints") to his compositional contributions ("To Sail Beyond The Sunset" serves as the second Shorter tune), a dash of Ornette Coleman's open-ended exclamation bounces around, too. By the time "Power Ranger" concludes, we've heard a deep confluence of both sources.

The rhythm section functions as the epitome of creative turbulence. Drummer Joey

Baron, pianist Lawrence Fields, and bassist Linda Oh sustain the kind of collective splash that fires each measure of the music. Baron, one of the most expressive drummers around, leads the way. His vehemence is limned with agility, and it propels the music, providing plenty of uplift. On "Sprint," he gives his mates ample spring to go sailing towards a place where new improv episodes can be instantly concocted and form can be manipulated with a simple collective impulse. —*Jim Macnie*


Charles Lloyd

Wild Man Dance
Blue Note, CD

For more than five decades, Charles Lloyd has consistently reworked his musical direction without shedding the big, rounded tone that continues to win over large audiences worldwide. His return to Blue Note after a 30-year gap, *Wild Man Dance* documents his sextet's recent performance at the Jazztopad Festival in Wroclaw, Poland. It features even more new dimensions all the while the saxophonist offers a few nods to his past.

Akin to relatively recent discs as 2008's *Rabo De Nube*, Lloyd's band features top improvisers that represent a much younger generation. In that regard, drummer Gerald Cleaver and pianist Gerald Clayton are notable here. He also blends in contributions from his global travels, including Greek lyra player Sokratis Sinopoulos (who performs on 2011's *Athens Concert*) and Miklós Lukács on the central European cimbalon.

©Photo by D. Darr



The Mediterranean strings and Gypsy-inspired percussion are not exactly new to Lloyd. One of his major collaborators in the 1960s was Hungarian guitarist Gabor Szabo, who lived and breathed it all. Lloyd embraces it on his own terms.

Lukács' solo introduces the opening "Flying Over The Odra Valley." Throughout the disc, his sense of timing offers a more assertive take on what could be connected to classic Gypsy swing. For his part, Lloyd holds his own force in reserve, coming in sideways underneath the strings and easing into his easily recognized incantatory style of playing. The chant-like approach picks up steam alongside Clayton and bassist Joe Sanders. Lloyd also builds to a strong crescendo on the lyrical "Gardner." But here, as well as on "Lark," equal weight is given to the rich textures stemming from the slightly dissonant string combination of Sanders and Sinopoulos.

Along with Clayton's spacious lines, the music becomes the kind of jazz-chamber hybrid Bela Bartok may have dreamed about. Lloyd's turning of the initially lilting "Lark" into a blues makes for another graceful transition. Cleaver is just as versatile, especially on "River," which emphasizes both his melodic ideas and combustion. After Sanders' multi-directional pizzicato solo, Lloyd reintroduces Lukács for a fierce jam session. Then, "Invitation" returns to both highlighting Lloyd's subdued tone and making big statements.

The concluding title track sounds more controlled than the name suggests. Yet as Lloyd commands different tempos up to the discursive ending, he's clearly stating that his own life in jazz has been wild enough. —Aaron Cohen

GAIN MOMENTUM.



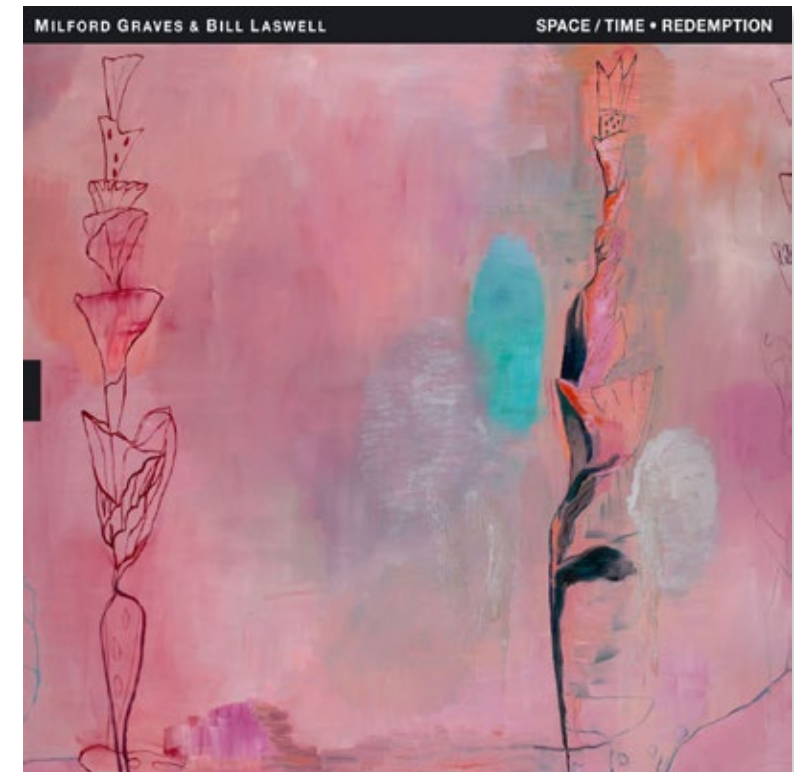
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Milford Graves & Bill Laswell

Space/Time Redemption
TUM, CD

When I began taking notes during my initial spins of this intriguing hook-up, the first phrase I jotted down was “space mountain.” The cosmic roller coaster inside Disneyland’s Magic Kingdom seems an apt analogy for the continuous contours the iconic drummer and esteemed bassist concoct on their second recorded meeting. Here, Milford Graves’ earthy pummels and ritual clangs form an alliance with Bill Laswell’s fuzzed and echo-soaked strings. While the former’s acoustic gravitas uniting with the latter’s electric fierceness might be incongruous on paper, *Space/Time Redemption* is in practice a coordinated sprawl that banks on opposites attracting—and enhancing—each other.

MUSIC

Now 73, and still active on the New York scene, Graves ranks as a revered free-jazz elder that has brought a wealth of inspired idiosyncrasies to the style since the mid-60s. He's also a holistic healer that scrutinizes the rhythms and pitches of human heartbeats for inspiration and wellness purposes. His interplay with the ever-adventurous Laswell helps ground the continuous low-register "swoosh" marking the bassist's string work on much of *Space/Time Redemption*. The duo occasionally forms pulse patterns and works a counterpoint strategy. But in the large, Laswell creates sweeping melodies that appear to lasso the sky while Graves pours all sorts of improvisational gambits into a dense stream of ideas that ultimately sounds impossibly fluid.

Throughout, Laswell abandons his well-known love of groove (he's long applied a calibrated thrust to his work, from dub to electronica) and puts his money down on the kind of open-ended ambiance that embraces color over beats. A run through his 2012 solo disc *Means of Deliverance* sheds some light on where these sounds emerged. In addition, last summer, Graves and Laswell dropped a 40-minute live piece titled "Back In No Time" on *The Stone*. It, too, snakes through various improv environments, yet feels like a digression rather than a formulated search.

Space/Time Redemption serves as a cure-all for that affair. Between the exquisite sound (from mallets to palms, Graves wrings a wealth of textures from his instrument) and enviable focus, the satisfying dalliance suggests jazzadelic romps remain worthy excursions. —*Jim Macnie*

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The Word
Soul Food
 Vanguard, LP or CD

After a 14-year absence, the jazz-jam-band-meets-sacred-steel group the Word is reunited. The group sounds like it's shrugged off whatever changes occurred in popular music since then, just as much as they did in the late 1990s. And even as the annual Jam Cruise continues to set sail around the Caribbean—while the Trey Anastasio-fronted Grateful Dead commands top dollar for concert tickets—the Word's succinct songs and pronounced soul/gospel bent keeps it apart from its counterparts.

Soul Food still reflects the different, if complementary, points of origin among the group's members.

Guitarist Luther Dickinson, drummer Cody Dickinson, and bassist Chris Chew convey the power chords and stomp of the North Mississippi All-stars while keyboardist John Medeski knowingly draws from vintage R&B chord progressions and free-jazz harmonies. Pedal-steel guitarist Robert Randolph now mainly plays the festival circuit with his Family Band, yet here, he's also retained his sanctified roots.

Most of *Soul Food* is consistently upbeat, especially the opening "New Word Order" (inspired by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s oratory) and Luther Dickinson's extroverted chords on "Play All Day." The band supplies a somewhat riotous take on country (as filtered through a Parliament-Funkadelic lens) on "Chocolate Cowboy," with fuel from Cody Dickinson's rapid tempo shifts and Medeski's lines. Other historic reference points abound, such as Chew's bass part on "Soul Food II," which sounds built from Archie Bell's "Tighten Up" and becomes the basis for different multilayered solos. And while Medeski's "Swamp Road" takes inspiration from New Orleans piano great James Booker, it's not too much of a strain to hear Booker T. Jones within its phrasing.

His colleagues' talent aside, Randolph is the standout here. Along with his electrifying attack on "You Brought The Sunshine," he gets into some ominous, if not flat-out weird, tones on "Early In The Moanin' Time." His distinctive textures also keep some posturing electric guitar lines in check during "Come By Here." Randolph turns around to sound ethereal on "Soul Food I," featuring a nimble exchange with Medeski. And he does not seem to mind when the band mixes up the religious and secular on "Come By Here" and "Glory Glory." After all, it worked for Jimmy Smith on *The Sermon*, one of countless examples.

Undoubtedly, all of these tunes will be considerably stretched out when the Word hits the stage. On record, however, the band says a great deal within concise spaces. —Aaron Cohen

©Photo by Dominic Huber



FEATURE

JITTER BE GONE!

By Jeff Dorgay

Precious little is known about the latest audio insect, I mean gadget. AudioQuest set the digital world on its ear two years ago with their DragonFly miniature DAC and headphone amplifier bundled into a package barely bigger than a USB stick. It offered incredible performance for the meager price asked and set a new measuring stick for budget DACs.

Two years later they've done it again, but this time in a slightly different manner. Their latest creation is the JitterBug, a digital filter for your USB bus. As AQ's Steve Silberman puts it, "There's so much noise and parasitic resonance coming from a computer and USB bus we felt there was a real opportunity to clean things up a bit." The JitterBug takes care of noise flowing from both the power and data portions of the USB interface, and as you might suspect, this might vary from setup to setup, because every manufacturer treats this part of the digital equation differently.



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FEATURE

AQ suggests that incremental results can be achieved by using two JitterBugs – on your computer and/or DAC – but in parallel, not series. In some cases they claim excellent results just using it as a noise snubber on unused inputs.

Your results may vary

First, don't expect this to turn a \$400 DAC into a dCS Vivaldi. It won't, and that's not a fair thing to expect out of a \$50 tweak. However, using the JitterBug with everything from my dCS DAC down to the \$500 Arcam R-DAC we reviewed a few issues ago, I did notice a perceptible difference on every system I connected it to using a laptop or phone as a source. Much like the results you get when compressing photos, it's kind of a garbage in, garbage out kind of thing. The better the source and DAC, the less effect the JitterBug made. But for \$50, I still say buy a couple of 'em, just to experiment with.

Per Silberman's initial email, I tried the JitterBug as a noise snubber on my NAS, and it did have enough of a positive effect to happily leave one in place. Perhaps the biggest improvement was in the car, going from iPhone to the audio system in my BMW Z4, which has a particularly dreadful audio system. The JitterBug's presence in the car cleans up the presentation dramatically, getting rid of a lot of the brittleness and digital artifacts that the system has. A short road trip with a couple of unsuspecting non-audiophiles got the same response: "What does that black thing do? The music sounds a lot more relaxed." Exactly. (*continued*)

FEATURE

Taking the JitterBug for a spin in a new Jaguar with a Meridian system and Porsche 911 with a Burmester system yielded equally eye-opening results. The Burmester system, with its prodigious power, becomes another level of magnitude cleaner, revealing considerably more music than without the JitterBug in the system. If you are a Porsche owner, this is the best \$50 tweak you will ever make to your car. (Maybe the only \$50 tweak you can make to a current model Porsche?)

It's all good

Even in the context of a very high-end system, the JitterBug works to great effect when using a laptop as a source, as many of us are starting to do. PC or Mac, good DAC or great DAC, the benefit is there. Minimizing noise and jitter on the USB bus results in a cleaner, clearer presentation. The stereo image opens up and the high frequencies are rendered in a much more analog-like way.

Acoustic music and vocals make the comparison a lot easier. The sound

quality of cymbals, violin and piano is the most profound example of the JitterBug in action. Vocals become more palpable and realistic, with much more body and dimension. It's not so much like cleaning a dirty window, but giving one more round of cleanup to a window that still has some streaks after the first round. Every time I thought the JitterBug wasn't contributing to the sound of my system, it only took removing it for about 30 seconds for the harshness to return.

Whether in the house or on the go, I'll bet you fifty bucks your system will benefit from a JitterBug, no matter where you decide to install one. As AudioQuest did not have measurements to share with us yet, I'll be curious to see what John Atkinson at *Stereophile* has to say about the JitterBug once he's put it on the test bench. This has to be the coolest accessory I've ever used. Hell, go buy a handful of 'em, and give them to your audiophile buddies when they stop by for trick-or-treat this year. Highly recommended. ●



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



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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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AUDIOPHILE PRESSINGS



Mastodon
Blood Mountain
 Reprise, colored LP


MASTODON

Released nearly a decade ago, Mastodon's landmark concept album about scaling a bewildering peak—and encountering bloodthirsty wolves, unified tree-people colonies, and ice gods—has been recently reissued on colored vinyl befitting the record's chromatic characteristics. While the Tolkien-esque premise would flounder in the hands of a lesser band, the Atlanta metal quartet responds to the thematic and musical challenges with aplomb.

Weaving together a web of thrash, prog, psychedelic, and blues disciplines, Mastodon approaches pace, contrast, and angularity with idiosyncratic discipline. Brann Dailor's ultra-dynamic drumming and jazzy faculty for off-kilter spacing and color functions as the anchor. Manhandling complex rhythms, his arm-twisting rolls launch soirees and double-bass thunder ignites percussive landslides. Dailor's mates are equally proficient, their instruments doubling as lances that carve fills that, akin to the songs' breadth, stem from a classical school of thought.

Blood Mountain remains as fresh today as it originally sounded in 2006. Shredding passages mutate into a shoots-and-ladders series of harmonized solos on "Crystal Skull." Acoustic passages and fluid notes lighten the load of the alternately crushing, alternately consoling "Sleeping Giant." Bench-pressing riffs and vocoder effects recreate the alien life forms of "Circle of the Cysquatch." On "Siberian Divide," grinding turns respond to tales of hypothermia and cannibalism.

(continued)



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MUSIC



©Photo by Travis Shinn

Mastodon embraces a cosmic sensibility throughout, turning to Queens of the Stone Age's Josh Homme to supply hallucinatory background vocals for "The Colony of the Birchmen" and delving into fractal folk on the reverb-misted "Pendulous Skin."

Producer Matt Bayles preserves Mastodon's thickness while allowing songs to breathe. Dailor's floor-shaking beats and firm drive illuminate the spacious midrange, and the background vocals fight

for transparency, it doesn't subtract from the forceful footprint and solid tonal balance that account for the involving reproduction of the arrangements' seemingly indefatigable structures.

Reprise's new \$20 pressing is relatively quiet and, with custom-swirled yellow and green wax, affirmatively psychedelic. It marks the first time *Blood Mountain* has been available on LP since a 2010 black-vinyl version, and there's a reason why the band's

studio catalog keeps going out of print. Namely, Mastodon sounds aptly muscular and burly on vinyl. While this edition doesn't register the dynamic impact and three-dimensional forcefulness of 2010's collectable Record Store Day 180g 45RPM pressing—limited to 2500 copies and now fetching upwards of \$150—it's well worth the time of any analog lover that values elite musicianship and hair-raising intensity. —**Bob Gendron**



SHORT TAKE

WORTHY UPGRADE:

VPI CLASSIC TWO

www.vpiindustries.com

\$3,995

Back in Issue 46, I was enamored enough with VPI's Classic One turntable to give it one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2012. Even more, I purchased the review sample to make it a permanent reference, and after two years, the Classic One is my go to table, when I just want to hang out and listen to records without fuss. I enjoy it so much; it's the only table in my home system.

Due to increases in raw materials cost, VPI has had to raise the price of the Classic One from \$2,695 to \$2,995, yet it remains a stunning value – offering build quality and sheer musicality that has few, if any peers at its price. After two years of daily listening, the Classic One, and now the Classic Two feel more like a “greatest hits of analog” product, combining the virtues of a couple of my favorite turntables into one easy to use and easy to set up package. The sheer weight of its presentation reminds me of an idler wheel Garrard or a Thorens TD-124, without the rumble and noise issues. The Classic 2s overall warmth is highly reminiscent of a mid 80s LP-12, without a heavy dose of OCD to keep it running.

The Classic Two's overall aesthetic is no nonsense. With a simple, basic black plinth surrounded by either a black oak or walnut frame, and perched upon miniature versions of their HRX turntable's feet, it is devoid of accouterments. The Classic Two eliminates all pretense and gets down to business playing records, with every penny invested in design and build quality. This is a table you will be able to leave your kids without worry.

Inside the box is everything you need to get your Classic Two up and playing records right now. A classic Shure balance beam tracking force gauge and cartridge alignment protractor saves time and money, not to mention gets you about 95% of the way to perfect performance. For most, the enclosed tools will make you more than happy. Maniacal audiophiles willing to invest in a more precise tracking force scale and alignment protractor will be able to take the Classic Two to an even higher level of analog clarity.

(continued)

An adjustable VTA collar on the tonearm is what makes the Classic Two a Two. The Classic One has a fixed adjustment for setting VTA, while the Two lets you adjust VTA on the fly, like the rest of the tables higher up the VPI range. Though some swear by this, I'm still not one to set VTA on the fly. But what is exceptionally handy is the ability to use the fine vernier adjustment to not only set, but also easily re-set VTA adjustments. Those with multiple tonearm wands can now switch between cartridges with total ease and consistency. That's the magic of the Classic Two and the reason you want to pony up the extra thousand dollars.

I suggest music lovers that stick with one cartridge until it is spent and don't fiddle with their turntables settings will be just as well served by the Classic One, and maybe spending that extra on a better cartridge, VPI's SDS motor controller, or one of their outstanding record cleaning machines, if you don't already have one. While some claim

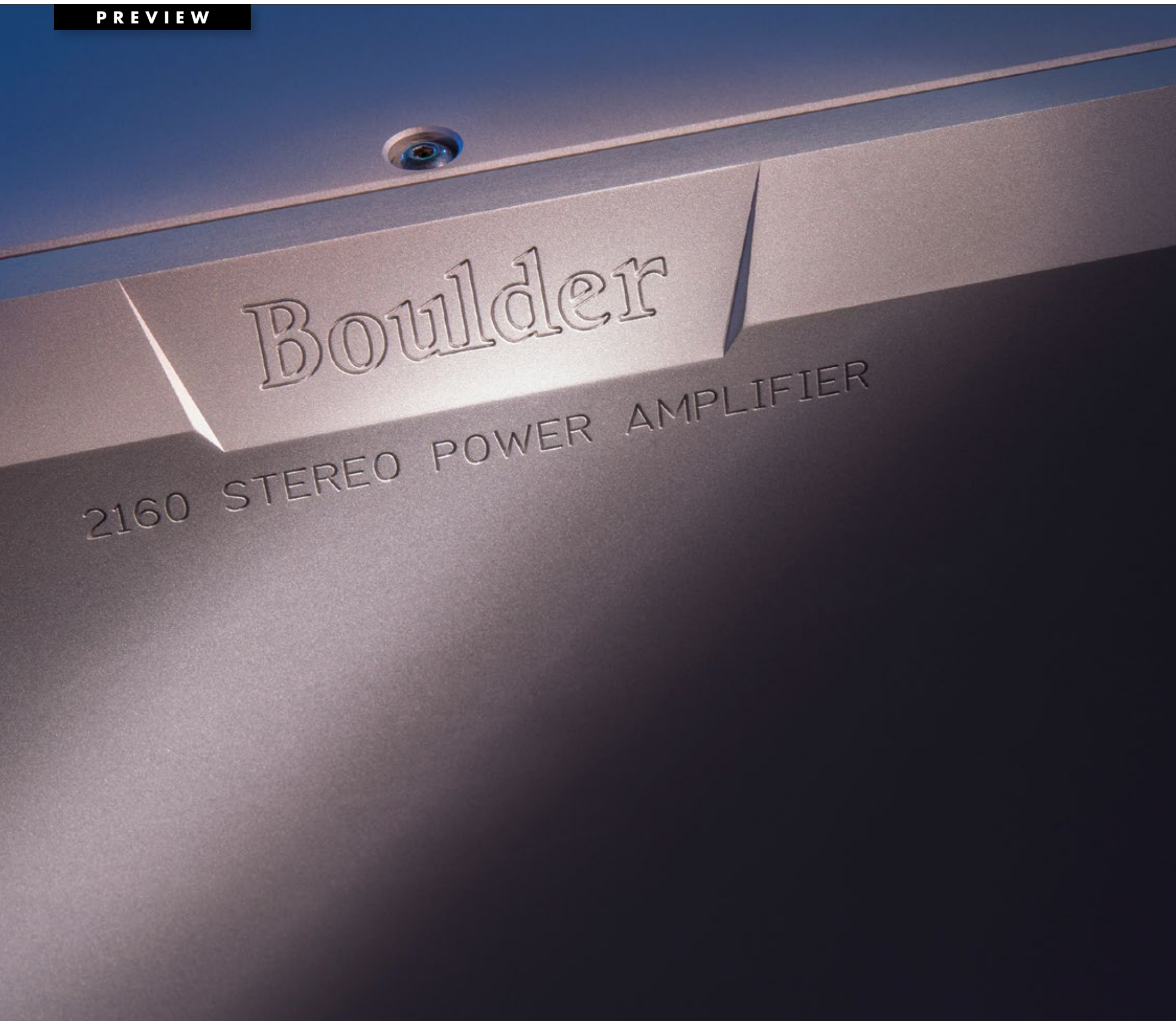
the Classic One sounds better because of its fixed VTA adjustment (possibly a touch more rigidity in the tonearm tower/bearing assembly) a side-by-side comparison of a Classic One and Classic Two with identical cartridges did not reveal an audible difference.

For a full description of the Classic One's sound, click [here](#). But to summarize, both the Classic One and Two produce a big, weighty, full-bodied sound. Utilizing VPIs JMW-10.5i tonearm wand with copper internal wiring. Those seeking even more performance should ask their VPI dealer about upgrading the table to the 10.5i arm-wand with Nordost Valhalla internal wiring.

Small details aside, the VPI Classic Two is one of the finest turntables available for \$3,995. As with the Classic One, we are proud to award it one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2015.

www.vpiindustries.com





Boulder 2160 Stereo Power Amplifier

\$54,000
www.boulderamp.com

Every audiophile cliché that you can think of describing the top of the heap fit the Boulder 3050 monoblock amplifiers. Our publisher feels there is no better power amplifier in existence, but at a shade over \$200,000, not everyone can have a pair.

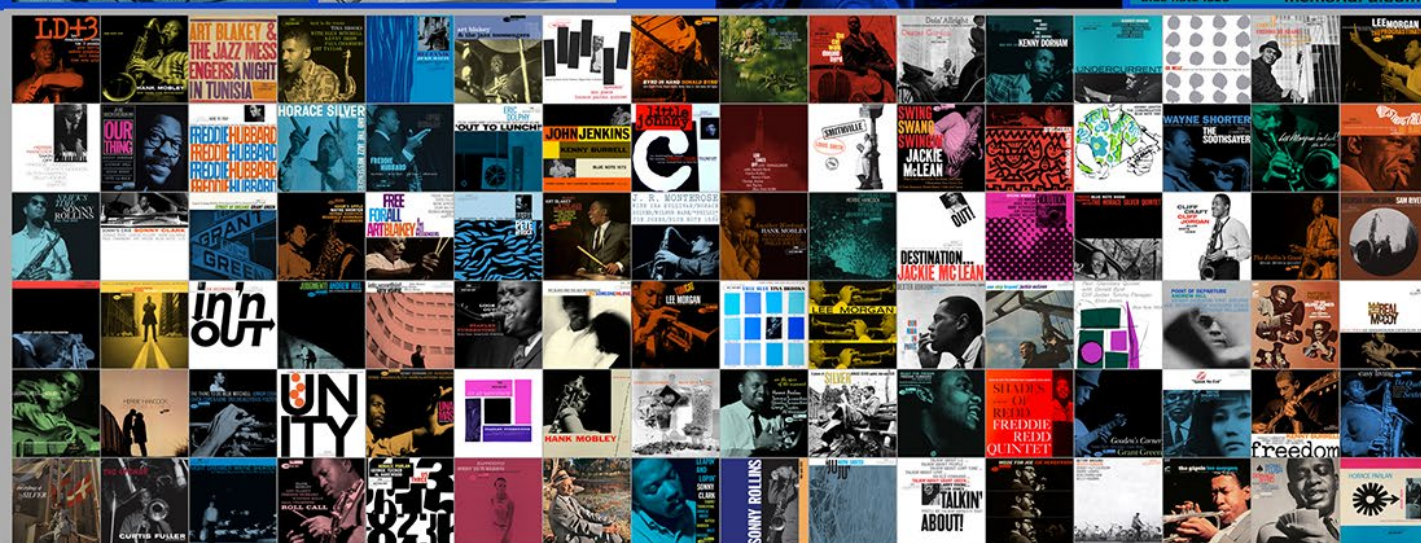
Granted, \$59,000 isn't pocket change, but where the 3050s are more likely to exist in the context of a \$500,000 to multi-million dollar hifi system, the 2160 (the updated version of the highly popular and former Boulder flagship 2060) will probably power systems in the \$150,000 to \$250,000 range. Still extremely high end but not as stratospheric or unattainable.

If you don't have the space in your living room for the biggest Boulders, or would just like a Porsche GT4 and a monster power amplifier for your \$150k, the 2160 might just be the way to roll. Look forward to our incredibly enthusiastic review shortly.

give thyself



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OPPO HA-2 Portable Headphone Amplifier/DAC

\$299

www.oppodigital.com

High-performance portable listening is a phenomenon that continues to grow, with new enthusiasts constantly looking for a way to take their tunes on the go, without having to sacrifice audio quality. For our money, there is no better choice than the OPPO HA-2.

The HA-2 is particularly attractive and compact, and like all other OPPO products, the level of performance for the price is off the chart. Combining a hybrid class AB amplifier design and a 32-bit Sabre ESS DAC chipset into an ultra-slim package, the HA-2 looks more like something Q would build for James Bond to decimate his enemies than a mere headphone amplifier. Maybe there's a button we haven't discovered yet.





Aurender W20 Server

Approx. \$17,000
www.aurender.com

We've been living with an Aurender S10 for over a year now and it has been fantastic. With world-class sound and build quality, the S10 doesn't give you much (if anything) to complain about. You can control Aurender servers with your iPad and the interface is similar to those of a lot of other products on the market, with your music easily arranged by artist, genre or album.

A big part of the Aurender's magic is its solid-state drive buffering the music stored on its internal hard drive, minimizing jitter and other timing errors. The new W20 builds on this success with either a 6- or 12-terabyte onboard hard drive available to store all but the most massive music collections. W20

owners requiring more space need only have NAS available; the W20 enables you to view your entire NAS music collection seamlessly on your iPad.

With the W20, Aurender has taken the world's best sounding music server a step further, by adding the ability to access an external word clock. This is not a subtle upgrade and those with mega systems will likely welcome it, especially considering that there are only a few other digital players with an extra word clock output available, so integrating the W20 with your system means you only need one additional cable.

Watch for our very enthusiastic review of the W20 coming soon.



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ARC GSPRE Preamplifier and GS150 Power Amplifier

\$15,000 and \$20,000, respectively
www.audioresearch.com

The new Galileo series from Audio Research combines over 40 years of amplification know-how with the proficiency in visual design resulting from ARC being part of the Fine Sounds Group and leveraging the Sonus faber design team. The resulting components push the sonic boundaries that ARC is famous for, wrapped in casework deserving of true aficionados.

These are components that you will want to put front and center; gone are the big, black rack handles of yore. And you have to see the new power output meters (which work double-duty to bias the KT150 output tubes) to believe how cool they look in action. The teams in the U.S. and Italy have come up with an amplifier and preamplifier so close to perfection that the only question now is *what will they do for an encore?*

Expect a full review of both components shortly, and a long-term evaluation next year, after we've lived with these two awhile. First impressions don't come any better than this.

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high up the mythical mountain"

Srajan Ebaen, 6MOONS



"There's no doubt that this is the finest sounding DAC to
date to grace my life/system/website with its presence"

John Darko, DIGITAL AUDIO REVIEW



"The best ever for my system"

René Van Es, THE EAR

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www.aquahifi.com

PREVIEW

Cardas Clear Reflection Cable

Price varies depending on cable type,
termination and length
www.musicdirect.com

Cardas claims that its new Clear Reflection cable "combines the traditional Cardas warmth and musicality of the Golden Reference cable with the depth and imaging of Cardas Clear." Our publisher couldn't agree more, having used Golden Reference, Clear and Clear Light in his two reference systems now for the past seven years. Watch for our full evaluation very soon.



Decware Zen Mystery Amp

Single-Chassis Brilliance

By Jeff Dorgay

Edgar Winter's *They Only Come Out at Night* was the first record in my collection, so to say I'm intimately familiar with it would be an understatement. For old times' sake, it's the first album I place on the turntable when critical listening begins for the Zen Mystery Amp (ZMA). Wow! Just when you think you've heard it all and you know a piece of music inside and out, this amp whacks you upside the head—which is enlightening and it's what keeps this reviewing game interesting. The first cymbal crash on Radiohead's "High and Dry" further convinces me that I'm listening to something magical. There's more air and delicacy *everywhere*. The ZMA is all about nuance and finding more information lurking in the details.



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

REVIEW



Arf, Arf

This is one of the most musical, most natural, most realistic amplifiers I've ever had the pleasure to live with—and it's been with me for the better part of a year now. If you want to call BS, be my guest. (I've got my flame-retardant Kevlar suit on, so take your best shot.) After a crazed life of audiophilia and now 12 years of covering high-end audio as my day job, I still haven't heard an amplifier that sounds more musical than the ZMA. My Pass Xs 300 monoblocks are on the short list, as are the Audio Research GS150 and Conrad-Johnson LP120SA+. Compared to the ZMA's 40 watts per channel, all three of those amplifiers have more power on tap, making a wider range of speakers in larger rooms a possibility—but the sheer musical purity of the ZMA is tough to ignore, for a number of reasons.

Ever meet a small dog with a big soul? A 20-pound critter with more bark than a German Shepard or Saint Bernard? That's the ZMA. I've always felt that you need a big amplifier to get big sound, but the ZMA not only plays damn loud for only having 40 wpc on tap, it has a ton of headroom. When it does clip, it does so in such a gentle manner that you'll only notice a slight collapse of the soundstage, rather than sounding like you've just hit a sonic brick wall.

If you can live within the ZMA's performance envelope, there is no reason to buy anything else, even for something two or even 10 times the price. The Holy Grail is right here, built proudly in Illinois. It only takes a brief listen to the ZMA to realize that the only mystery is how Steve Deckert can build an amplifier like this for \$5,695 and still stay in business. *(continued)*

If this piece of audio fine art had a Shindo or Wavac badge on the front, it would easily have another zero on the price tag. Take it from someone who's owned both: Save the dough and buy American. The ZMA is a better amplifier than either—and it carries a lifetime warranty and tech support (for the original owner).

If the \$12,000 Zen monoblocks are out of reach, or you just don't have room for a pair of amps (albeit compact ones), the ZMA is essentially the same amplifier on one chassis, with a smaller power supply, delivering 40 wpc compared to the 60 wpc that the monos produce. I've been using the Decware Torii for the last few years and my only complaint is that I find myself wanting just a little more power. Even though the Torii is the little amp that can, there are times when 26 wpc just isn't quite enough. In every way, the ZMA brings more to the table than the already excellent Torii, but above all things, it brings finesse.

Details, Details

It's up to you whether or not God is in the details, but regardless of what you believe (or don't) in the spiritual department, I submit that musical happiness does indeed lurk in the details. Happiness in the form of musical engagement is, for me, an experience that keeps you riveted to your listening chair, digging one record after the next, searching for those favorite tracks that, once you've heard them through the ZMA, have you searching for more.



After several months, this still happens every time I fire up the ZMA.

Regardless of the tracks chosen, subtlety abounds with this amp, and it continually offers little surprises on so many records that I've been listening to for years. And listening to new music is equally dreamy. Trent Reznor's soundtrack for the recent movie *Gone Girl* is so good it's scary, constantly reminding me of the tension in the film. Reznor is known for his ability to build a dense and ethereal soundscape—and the ZMA, combined with the GamuT RS5 speakers, envelops me in so much more than what I might call a soundstage with another amplifier. The ZMA creates a hyper-real, three-dimensional sound *sphere*. While a record like this does not provide the picture of musical accuracy that your favorite Blue Note might, it does have many layers of minute detail—and through a less-capable amplifier, those details just don't come through in the same dreamy sonic picture that the ZMA paints.

Tracking through well-known albums from Brian Eno and Jean-Michel Jarre prove equally ethereal. Jarre's *Zoolook* features a track, "Diva," with what sounds like water droplets behind layers of synthesizers, with Laurie Anderson saying something in reverse over the top. Trippy as this is, each layer breathes in its own space and, through the ZMA, Anderson's voice sounds as if she's just been let out of an

asylum; it's scary-movie good.

Sounding this good on surreal music, the ZMA excels when the fare turns to acoustic instruments. All of the texture, attack and decay associated with piano, guitar, drums and other acoustic instruments are revealed with shocking clarity. As a photographer, I can only describe this effect by saying its similar to going from a standard-definition picture to HD, and even to the latest 4K. The ZMA presents more and smoother steps of gradation, resulting in bongo drums sounding like actual bongos. There's cheese and then there are cheese-like substances (i.e. Velveeta). Once you hear a piano or violin reproduced through the ZMA, it will be tough to go back to what you'd been using. As Bob Stuart at Meridian likes to say, "When you've heard it right, you can't *unhear* it."

The upper registers of the ZMA are as close to perfect as can be. Cymbals not only have the required meat, they have proper texture and decay. The same can be said for the lower register, which are even tougher for a tube amplifier to get right. Again, the ZMA succeeds brilliantly, producing low notes with tone and texture but also with the proper amount of speed and damping, without being overly damped. A picture may be worth a thousand words, but five minutes of actually experiencing the ZMA might well be one of the biggest "a-ha" moments I've had in high-end audio. *(continued)*

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REVIEW



Setup and Further Listening

The ZMA arrives packed in a padded Pelican Case, with the tube complement in another box. Following the well-documented instruction manual will have you up and running in no time. Even after running the amp for a month, I didn't have to rebias the tubes; and now after more than six months, they've required just a tiny adjustment to stay perfectly biased and matched to each other. Unlike with some tube amplifiers, the ZMA allows you to set each KT66 tube individually and does not require matched output tubes. It's also worth mentioning that Decware encloses a power cord with the ZMA that a lot of other cable guys would nick you an extra thousand bucks for.

While the ZMA has two sets of binding posts, one for 4-ohm speakers and one for 8, Decware does offer an option that can power 8- or 16-ohm speakers—which leads to my only complaint with the ZMA:

The high-quality binding posts are too damn close together. It's tough to tighten them down onto fairly thick spade lugs like mine—but I will say that you can use banana plugs with ease.

Inputs are single-ended RCA jacks, with XLR inputs via Jensen 95khz transformers available as a \$600 option. As Deckert points out, "while not a fully differential balanced circuit, it is still a technically balanced amplifier – and the transformer is your friend. It gives a beautiful shimmer to the top end and better dimensionality not unlike a great moving coil cartridge." I must agree. Using equal lengths of Cardas clear via the XLR and RCA inputs, I do prefer the balanced inputs. *(continued)*



Those with only one source component who want to bypass the preamplifier can tick the stepped attenuator box for an additional \$150. Should you fall in this category, this is the perfect shortcut to creating a highly resolving system on a tight budget (unless you have a world-class preamplifier—but then you’re probably not on a tight budget).

A bit of research on the Decware forum reveals that its claim of long tube life is no scam. Even

after years, many Decware users are still running their original set of tubes! The 6N23P input tubes can be swapped for 6N1Ps or 6922s, but Deckert says the 6N23P is his favorite, and my experience is to follow his lead. While I leave the input and regulator tubes as installed from the factory, the tube swapping goblins do possess me to try a set of NOS Siemens EL34s in place of the KT66 tubes. The sound is just different, with the E34s being

a little warmer and a little softer than the KT66s. Those liking a low-end that is a bit softer, flabbier and less controlled may prefer the EL34s, but I happily went back to the KT66s. Neurotic tube-swapping in my Torii led me back to what Deckert suggested in the first place, so from now I just listen to Obi-Wan.

However, I do believe the combination of 0A3 regulator tubes, fast recovery solid-state rectifiers and 4,500 uF of power

supply capacitance is a big part of the ZMAs exquisite sound. This is way more power supply than any 40-wpc tube amplifier needs, or is supplied with any other similarly powered tube amplifier I’ve seen pass through our listening rooms. The ZMAs large, well-executed power supply translates into dynamic capability, a low noise floor and the ability to execute wide transient swings with ease.

Deckert has told me that his

amplifiers just keep sounding better, as the wire in the output transformers becomes seasoned over the years. My experience with the Torii has been similar. After 100 or so hours of what audiophiles might consider “break-in,” this amplifier just keeps sounding more natural. The same is happening with the ZMA and I’m sure the person who ends up with our review sample will enjoy it even more in five years than I am today. *(continued)*

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REVIEW

Decware Zen Mystery Amp

MSRP: \$5,695

MANUFACTURER

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Engineering Co.

CONTACT

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PERIPHERALS

Analog Source

AVID Acutus Reference
turntable, SP/SME Vtonearm,
Lyra Atlas cartridge

Phonostage

ARC REF Phono 2

Preamplifiers

Robert Koda K10, Pass Labs
Xs 300 monoblocks, Audio
Research GSPre

Digital Source

dCS Vivaldi four-box stack

Speakers

Focal Stella Utopias, Dynaudio
Evidence Platinums, KEF
Blades, GamuT RS5, Dali
Epicon 8, Egglestonworks
Emmas, Acoustat 2+2

Cable

Cardas Clear

Power

IsoTek Super Titan

We mate the ZMA to some insanely expensive speakers: Focal Stella Utopias, Dynaudio Evidence Platinums, KEF Blades and now the GamuT RS5, as well as the Dali Epicon 8. All have a sensitivity rating between 87 and 89 dB and work well at modest to somewhat loud volumes. In my large listening room, I'm able to run the ZMA out of juice when going for fairly loud listening levels, but for most users in a more reasonably sized room, you will have to tax this one to get it to clip.

In my smaller room at more reasonable listening levels, the GamuTs, Egglestonworks Emmas (which were on our cover last issue) and a vintage pair of Acoustat 2+2s prove absolutely heavenly with the ZMA. We use Cardas Clear cable throughout and every speaker we test happens to work best on the output impedance setting that matches the factory rating.

The ZMA sounds great at turn-on, and while it takes longer to fully warm up than other tube amplifiers I've used, the transition from cold to warm is more gradual than any other tube amplifier I've used. Again, it's that gradation thing.

This is the point where many reviewers make wry comments about how they will miss said review product dearly, and in regards to the ZMA, I must admit to having similar feelings. However, I'm looking at this more as an *au revoir* (since I'm saving for a pair of Zen Monos for my retirement.)

The ZMA is more than worthy of one of our Exceptional Value Awards. Considering the level of sound quality and build quality it offers, the ZMA is one of the most exceptional values I've ever encountered. ●



KING OF CURRENT

Balanced Audio Technology's Massive VK-655SE

By Jeff Dorgay

The only promise that BAT's VK-655SE does not fulfill is the company's claim that it has enough energy storage to "to lift most speakers over one meter off the ground." Even at earsplitting levels, neither the 610-pound GamuT S9 nor the 253-pound Dynaudio Evidence Platinum speakers move ever so slightly off the ground.

What the VK-655SE does deliver is musical accuracy, exquisite tonality and bass control. With 1,800 joules of power available, the \$16,500 VK-655SE controls the lower half of the frequency spectrum in a way that precious few amplifiers can muster at any price. For the non-electrical engineers in the audience, a heart defibrillator uses between 200 and 400 joules at its *maximum* setting, so while the VK-655SE won't lift your speakers off the ground, if you connect your speaker cables to your chest and crank it up, it will probably lift you a meter off the ground. Maybe that's what they meant.

Speaking of weight, the VK-655SE weighs 120 pounds, so make sure your back and whatever stand you plan to place it on can withstand that much heft. Popping the lid reveals a pair of monstrous heat sinks, power transformers and capacitor banks. The VK-655 is available in all black (as shown here) or with a black-and-silver aluminum faceplate. In the future, BAT will also offer all silver, so if that is the aesthetic you desire, it's on the way. Fully intended for use in an all-BAT system, the VK-655SE offers only balanced XLR inputs—though we found that the VK-655SE works equally well with Pass, ARC, Nagra, Simaudio and Robert Koda preamplifiers; all were used in a fully balanced configuration.

Let's Roll

The VK-655SE is special straight out of the packing carton. Taking the hot-rodders credo, "If you want it to run hard, you have to break it in hard," I immediately reach for Metallica's album *Kill 'Em All* and play "No Remorse" at near-Armageddon levels. Even during a brief stint of driving the Dynaudios to almost 120 dB peaks, the BAT doesn't strain whatsoever, with the raw power of Metallica thoroughly communicated. While I can't imagine needing more power, you can turn the VK-655SE into a monoblock amplifier and get a bit more, going from 600 watts per channel into a 4-ohm load to 700 watts per channel. (The VK-655SE produces 300 watts per channel into an 8-ohm load as a stereo amp, and 400 watts as a monoblock.)



For those scoffing at the idea of paying twice as much for only 100 more watts per channel should remember that higher fidelity means gaining control, not just getting louder. This is because doing so *doubles* the current output, giving the monoblocks the ability to control difficult loads more effortlessly. Having twice as much power on tap will make those monos run even more effortlessly than running them in a stereo configuration, translating into greater dynamic range and an even quieter background – 6db according to BAT. I notice a similar effect going from a single Burmester 911 MK3 power amplifier to a pair of 911 monos. It is not subtle. I'll stick my neck out and suggest a pair of mono VK-655SEs will achieve the same results.

Experience with BAT's past products featuring the Super Pak upgrade (the company's own variety of oil-filled capacitors to help facilitate all this power storage) showed that these components take a while to sound their absolute best—anywhere from two to 500 hours. The higher current flow of large power amplifiers makes the process a somewhat speedier one; the preamplifiers seem to take longer.

Slightly edgy at initial turn-on, the VK-655SE sounds more open, natural and relaxed in the upper register after about 48 hours of constant play, with a subtle smoothing as the hours rack up, but not as dramatic as the change during the first couple days. For the crabby audiophiles in the crowd who do not believe in component break-in, I highly suggest borrowing a pair of identical amplifiers, running one for a few hundred hours while you leave one in the box for that period of time and then compare the two. *(continued)*

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Engineered for convenience as well as performance, Aurender music players are the ideal solution for large digital music libraries with terabytes of internal storage capacity and support of DSD (DSF, DFF), WAV, FLAC, AIFF, ALAC, MP4 and other formats at native bit and sampling rates,

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REVIEW



There is an unmistakable difference between the amplifier with hours on the clock and the one left in the box.

BAT's Geoff Poore makes it a point to stress that they strive for "dynamic linearity" in their designs. A big part of this comes from their eliminating negative feedback in combination with an unlimited, unregulated power supply – adding to the jump factor that BAT amplifiers are famous for. It's also one of the main reasons this huge amplifier exhibits the dexterity of a much smaller amplifier. Poore reminds me that "using only two gain stages in the VK-655SE eliminates coupling effects between multiple gain stages, further reducing the amount of image smear and degradation that comes with a more complex design."

Where some power amplifier manufacturers claim a dual-mono design, BAT takes it to the extreme. In addition to separate power transformers and power supplies for each channel, the VK-655SE even uses separate power cords and receptacles for each channel! Should you have access to dedicated power lines, I suggest trying separate power lines on separate circuits for each channel. My curiosity with the VK-655SE is satisfied plugging each channel into separate 20-amp circuits. Of course, you don't *need* two power lines for the VK-655SE, but with two separate mains fueling the fire at ear-splitting levels, the amp exhibits even more ease. About 95% of the time, you'll never notice it, but if you really like it *loud*, go for separate AC circuits to power each half of your VK-655SE. *(continued)*

A Quick Comparison

If you believe all amplifiers have the same sound, stop reading now. Though the world's top solid-state amplifiers are starting to sound more similar than disparate, differences in sonic character still exist. Side-by-side comparisons to a few of our regular amps reveal the BAT to excel in speed, dynamics and bass weight. The Burmester and Pass amplifiers in our stable are slightly warmer tonally, while the big Simaudio MOON 880M monosound as natural as the BAT, but more bottomless in power capability—albeit at a higher price than a pair of VK-655SEs. It's almost like comparing an Audi to a BMW or a Mercedes; all are excellent, though they go about delivering the goods in a slightly different way.

None of the speakers we have on hand present a challenging load to the mighty BAT. The current-hungry Magnepons and even our vintage Acoustat 2+2s, which have only an 82 dB sensitivity rating and are not much more than giant capacitors placed across the speaker terminals, do not diminish the amp's performance in the least. Where some amplifiers can be speaker-dependent and struggle at times, the VK-655SE effortlessly powers every speaker we have on hand with ease.

Part of the neutral sound quality of the VK-655SE can be attributed to its use of all N-channel MOSFET output

transistors. The N-channel MOSFET has a higher electron mobility, which makes amplifiers with them appear to have more transient speed than amps with mixed devices. Cursory research on the N-channel MOSFET implies that the N-channel device also has a wider range of operation where it acts like a triode tube—another great thing to have in a power amplifier. Techie bits aside, this amp succeeds brilliantly, especially for \$16,500.

Bigger Is, Well, Bigger!

Some arguments in audiophile circles—about the quality of the first watt and that, because of their inherent complexity, higher-powered amplifiers are not as pure as low-power amplifiers in design and thus sound—don't always hold true. Those arguments certainly don't hold true in the case of this amplifier. While I've heard excellent examples of both low- and high-powered amps, I still tend to prefer the effortlessness of a high-powered one, even at low volumes. The VK-655SE takes a novel approach, featuring no negative feedback and only two gain stages in the entire circuit. In the same way that some large speakers manage to disappear in your listening room like a mini monitor, the VK-655SE has the sheer might of a large amplifier *and* the nuance of a small power amplifier. (continued)

On
Standby

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Listening to acoustic instruments highlights the character of the VK-655SE. Its enormous power reserves might not be noticed with less-demanding fare, but the instant a drumstick hits a cymbal or the string of a standup bass is plucked with force, the boundless reserves of this amplifier deliver the dynamic swing required to convince your auditory system that perhaps you're not listening to recorded music at all.

This is equally true when reproducing a vocalist with a wide range. Whether it's your favorite opera or Prince, the VK-655SE's instant delivery comes through free from the stress associated with lesser amplifiers unable to keep up—and this ability is too often overlooked when jumping on the low-power bandwagon. Simple as it might seem, a big, well-executed amplifier just sounds bigger and has a lack of restraint that further contributes to its overall neutral character.

There was nothing that the VK-655SE couldn't handle effortlessly during this review. In the realm of the reference speakers at my disposal—all with sensitivity ratings of 87 to 90 dB—I can't imagine ever needing more power than this amplifier delivers. BAT gear is known for its fantastic build quality and excellent secondary-market value, so for an amp at this size and price, I also can't imagine ever needing another one once you've stepped up to the VK-655SE. Unless of course you need a second one. ●

BAT VK-655SE
power amplifier
MSRP: \$16,500

MANUFACTURER
Balanced Audio
Technology Inc.

CONTACT
www.balanced.com

PERIPHERALS

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

Phonostage
ARC REF Phono 2SE

Preamplifiers
Robert Koda K-10, ARC
REF5 SE, Pass Xs

Digital Source
dCS Pagaini Stack,
Simaudio MOON 650D

Cable
Cardas Clear

Power
IsoTek Super Titan



Defying Definition

iFi Retro 50

By Jeff Dorgay

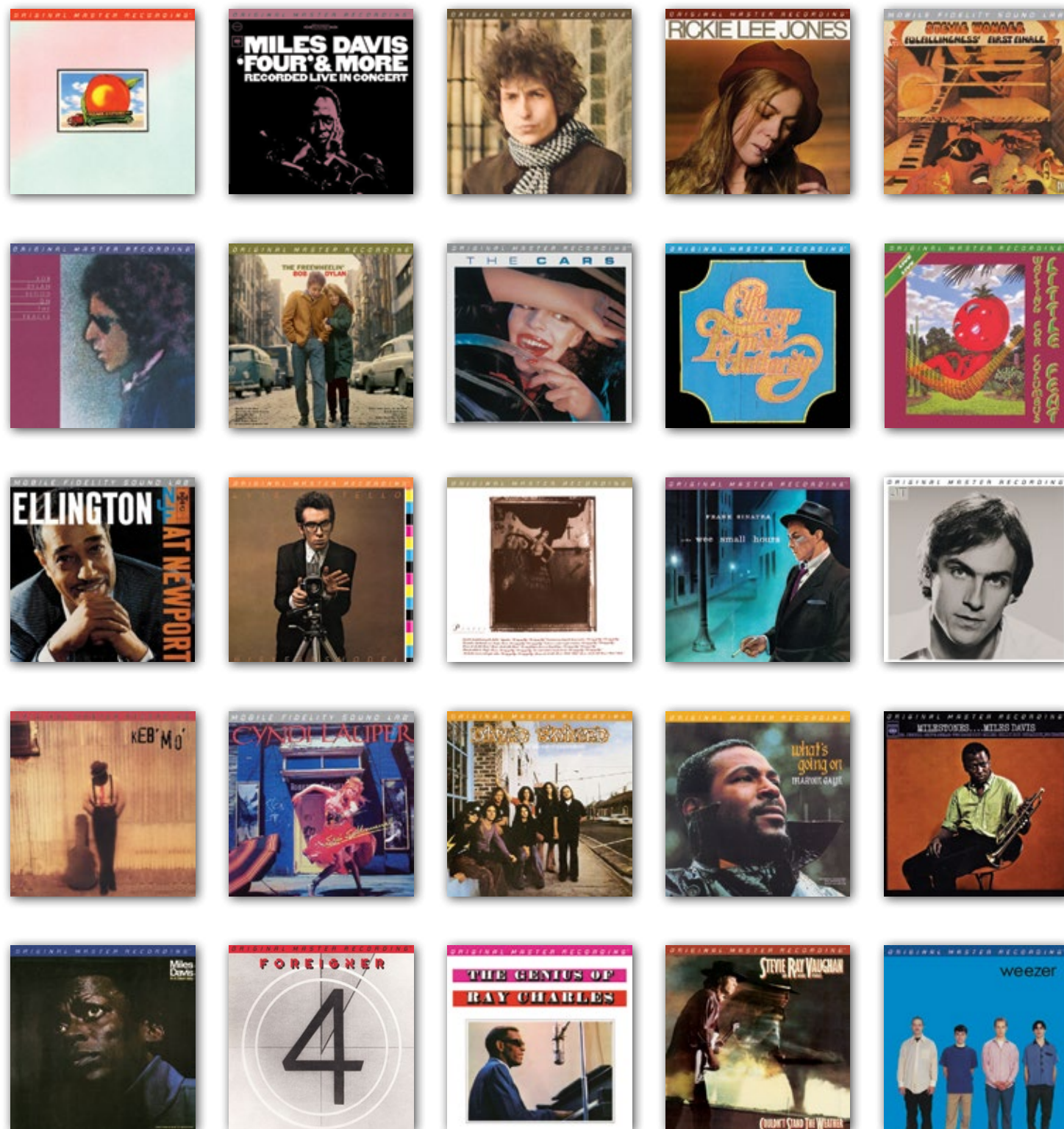
Knowing that a quartet of EL-84 tubes lurk under the hood of the iFi Retro 50, I knew it was time to break out the JBLs – and it was good. Just as with the Dynaco SQA-35 and even the Manley Stingrays, there's just nothing like the sound of a pair of JBL L-100s driven by an EL-84 amplifier. Those little tubes have a soft-spoken magic about them that can't be duplicated by the EL-34 or even an SET amplifier. And the slightly soft character of this output tube goes miles towards taming the upper register of the L-100s.



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REVIEW



Listening to the bongos bounce around the listening room during the opening of Curtis Mayfield's "Pusherman" is delightful, and when his voice folds into the mix, it comes across much larger than life. If I didn't know better, I'd swear the Retro 50 was something that has been in a box for 50 years, the dust just shaken off. It really does groove, with an abundance of musical detail as well – it doesn't just round all the transient attack off to sound groovy. The sound is just more saturated throughout.

Regular readers of *TONEAudio* know that we've given iFi's compact DAC and phono stage rave reviews. They pack major performance in a small form factor and keep the price down as well. So far, we've seen no downside to any of their products that we've sampled. The Retro 50 has both of these and a great headphone amplifier – all on this compact chassis, encased in a bamboo enclosure. Now that's something you never saw on a vintage receiver from the '70s!

The Retro 50 comes packaged with a pair of iFi's Retro 3.5 speakers for \$1,995. Unfortunately at this time, you must buy the combo; the Retro 50 is not available by itself. *(continued)*



Investigating those little speakers

iFi calls the speakers accompanying the Retro 50 “Retro 3.5” in homage to the legendary LS3/5A BBC monitors. The similarity to the LS3/5A ends with the form factor. They don’t really suck, but they don’t really rock either. Judicious use of the tone controls and signal processing at your disposal on the front panel of the Retro 50 mitigates this, but they perform much better in a desktop system than out in the listening room. Sold alone, they carry a retail price of \$795 – forget about them at this price, but as part of the Retro 50 system, not bad.

Fortunately, the Retro 50 is so undervalued, even if you throw the speakers out, it is still more than worth the \$1,995 that’s asked. \$1,500 for the Retro 50 alone would be the audio bargain of the 21st century, maybe forever!

Even after a lot of break-in time, the Retro 3.5 speakers still sound small. Discerning use of the tone controls and the 3D sound processor help tremendously, yet using them in a room much larger than 11 x 14 feet for anything more than background fill is not suggested. Nearfield in my small second listening room is pleasurable, but the speakers still sound overly polite, without having the body that a real pair of LS3/5As possesses. *(continued)*

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The best place for the Retro 3.5s proves to be on the desktop, flanking a 27-inch computer monitor, with a slight tip-up. A bit of toe-in goes a long way, looking for a balance between soundstage width and bass reinforcement. iFi makes it painless for the audio enthusiast to get down to business with audio, USB and speaker cables included in the box. Obsessed audiophiles will want to upgrade these later, and the Retro 50 responds well to a premium wire upgrade.

No matter how you enjoy music, you're covered

Whether digital, analog or wireless, the Retro 50 can handle your source components. In addition to a cracking MM/MC phono stage and DAC, there is an antenna to stream digital files via your smart device, too. For the foreseeable future, the Retro 50 is "obsolete-proof."

The Retro 50 is capable of decoding both DSD and DXD files, and this was the only part of the Retro 50 that I did not explore. With all the rage surrounding this, I just can't get conned into buying my favorite music *again*. But for those of you who are new to the game and investing in these files, you are good to go. If the 24/192 performance of the Retro 50 is any indication, you will not be disappointed with DSD reproduction.

The coaxial and optical digital inputs accommodate files up to 24/192, while the USB input goes all the way up to DSD 512. With 24/192 files, it is virtually a dead

heat between the inputs in terms of sound quality, so whatever strikes your fancy will work well. The gadget geeks in the audience will appreciate the digital input logo changing color with file resolution, just like AudioQuest's Dragonfly. iFi's choice of the aptX codec is a great move, so those using other than Apple iDevices will be very happy. Streaming from a Galaxy phone over Bluetooth is stunningly good with Tidal, and for this writer, all I'd ever need on a desert island are the Retro 50, a pair of JBL L-100s and a Galaxy phone with a Tidal subscription (along with good reception, of course!).

Inputting via analog sources works equally well for those feeling more traditional. The phono section of the Retro 50 is identical to that of the iPhono that Richard Mak reviewed here. It's worth noting that separate MM and MC inputs with 50 and 62 dB of gain are offered, proving perfect for the AVID Ingenium turntable with two tonearms – one utilizing an Ortofon SPU cartridge and the other a vintage Ortofon VMS20 Mk.II. As Mak found in his review of the iPhono, this phono stage is quiet, dynamic and tonally correct. I also had excellent luck with the Denon 103r, Ortofon 2M Black and Grado Statement cartridges. Unfortunately, the Retro 50's phono stage does not offer the gain and loading adjustments of the iPhono, but only so much can fit on this small chassis. Regardless, it provides an excellent avenue for your vinyl journey. *(continued)*



Further listening

The Retro 50, regardless of input, is dead quiet. Even with ears placed right against the tweeters, there is no noise or tube rush coming from the speakers. Though the Retro 50 claims 25 watts per channel, considering that most other amplifiers designed around a pair of EL84 tubes produce about 15–17 watts per channel, I'm guessing the numbers here are slightly optimistic.

What is important is the quality of the sound that the Retro 50 does produce. Regardless of speakers used from the \$88,000/pair Dynaudio Evidence Platinums all the way down to my JBL L-100s, the extended high end

and LF control is surprisingly good. By contrast, a vintage Dynaco SCA-35 (also using a pair of EL84s per channel) sounds extremely soft and much noisier. Because the iFi uses a more modern implementation of the circuit and a beefier power supply than my SCA-35, it sounds louder, even though both hit the same sound pressure level. Remember, volume is the difference between loud and quiet, so while the Retro 50 may not actually produce 25 watts per channel, because it is incredibly quiet, it sure sounds like it puts out that kind of power. *(continued)*

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REVIEW

This amplifier is all about quality and delicacy. Regardless of the speakers you choose, the Retro 50 conjures up a sound-field that is both wide and deep. Tracking through *Neu!* is an amazing exercise in trippiness, with cool sound effects all over the room as if you were nestled in between a six-foot-tall pair of headphones.

The Retro 50 doesn't so much color the lush midrange as maximize texture and tonal saturation. This amplifier is perfect for listening at low to moderate levels.

Acoustic guitars have an extra dash of ambience and thickness about them. Listening to the snap of the acoustic guitar on the title track of Michael Hedges's *Aerial Boundaries* is simply breathtaking. And, of course, solo female vocals are incredibly sexy as well.

Perfect for personal fidelity

Auditioning a small cache of headphones also proves the Retro 50 fabulous. Thanks to its 3D holographic image processor (with three settings) and XBass processor, you can fine tune your headphone experience. The Audenze and OPPO phones sounded the most natural with no processing applied, but with some lower end Grados and a few in-ear phones, the option for extra bass really came in handy. The 3D processor was fun, but it felt more like a slight sampling of an illegal substance rather than realistic.



And for some that will be a good thing – sample to taste. Fortunately the Retro 50 gives you plenty of options, along with a very useful bass and treble control.

Whether you find joy in this ability to alter your system's playback with loudspeakers is up to you, but it is wonderful that iFi has included them, especially at this price. The only thing lacking a bit is the aesthetics. The bamboo casework is a home run, but the front panel, printing and control knobs are slightly cheesy, reminiscent of early Chinese hifi – and not a reflection of the sound quality inside the box. I'd happily pay an extra 100 bucks for an upgraded front panel, but that's my inner interior designer screaming for order.

Like every other iFi product we've used or reviewed, the Retro 50 screams high performance and high value – more than worthy of one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2015. Whether you use the speakers or give them to a friend, the Retro 50 is one of the greatest combinations in the audiophile world today. I can't think of a better place to start your high end audio journey. ●

REVIEW

iFi Retro 50
MSRP: \$1,995
(with Retro 3.5 speakers)

MANUFACTURER

iFi Audio

CONTACT

www.ifi-audio.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog source AVID Ingenium turntable w/SME 3009 and 309 tonearms, Denon 103r, Ortofon SPU and VMS Mk. II cartridges

Digital source OPPO 105 (as transport) MacBook Pro

Speakers JBL-L100, Dali Rubicon 2, Dali Epicon 8, GamuT RS5

Cable Cardas Clear Light

PASS XA160.8 MONOBLOCKS

The Next Logical Step

By Jerold O'Brien

It's no secret our publisher is incredibly enthusiastic about Pass amplifiers. While the company's flagship Xs300 monoblocks have been serving dual duty as his reference amplifiers and the furnace for the *TONEAudio* studio for some time now, his relationship with Nelson Pass is more than a mere bromance. It goes all the way back to the early 1980s, when we lived on Milwaukee's East Side and he talked me into helping him carry his new Threshold 4000A power amplifier up a few flights of stairs.

I'm a tube guy; I've always been a tube guy – the tubey-er, the better. Back in 1980-something, that Threshold was a mind-bender because this massive solid-state amplifier made the room warmer than any tube amplifier I had ever experienced, sounded as musical as anything with glowing bottles, yet had killer bass output and control. It even sported an awesome set of red LED power output meters! The 4000A stayed in my system for a *long* time after our publisher's terrier-like nose for all things audiophile led him sniffing down other paths and, as with one of my prized BMW 2002s, I still regret selling it.



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REVIEW

It's all about control

Don't let Nelson Pass's easy demeanor fool you; he wants control. At least control of your speakers' cones. The major benefit to the massive power supplies and output stages in the two-chassis Xs amplifiers is the amount of control they enforce on your loudspeakers. Not letting the drivers act in a willy-nilly manner keeps distortion and non-linearity at bay, resulting in a cleaner, clearer, less fatiguing sound. Pass is fond of saying that he likes the sound of tubes without the hassle, and the Xs300s deliver this in abundance. But at almost \$90K per pair they are not within the reach of every audio enthusiast.

Enter the XA160.8 monoblocks at \$29,000/pair. Building on the success of the .5 series (you can read our review of the XA160.5 monoblocks here and the XA200.5 monoblocks here) the .8 series of Pass amplifiers takes these designs a major step further. Larger power supplies and a more refined circuit allow these new amplifiers to be biased further into class-A territory. The changes draw more power from your wall, and generate more heat – something we put to good use here in the Pacific Northwest. The results put the 160.8 closer in sound to the massive, two-chassis Xs amplifiers than before. The price tag is still not

pocket change, but a far cry from what the four-chassis, big boys will set you back.

Pass makes it a point to let you know that these are not cookie-cutter amplifiers, with each version sharing an input stage followed by progressively larger output stages. Every model in the .8 series is individually designed from the ground up with all nine amplifiers in the range using different input and driver circuitry optimized for progressively larger output stages. A peek inside the case reveals a prodigious bank of power supply capacitors flanked by equally huge heat sinks, each with "more output transistors than necessary." (*continued*)





With balanced XLR inputs (the XA160.8 is a fully balanced design) and RCA inputs, this amplifier works well with any pre-amplifier. My ARC REF 5 proves a perfect match for the XA160.8, but after spending a bit of time with the top-of-the-line Xs Pre, I'm guessing it's upgrade time again. Even my standby CJ PV-12 turns in an amazing performance with these amplifiers and reminds me of when I used the Threshold 4000A with a CJ PV-2a preamplifier. Time does fly when you're having fun. Watch for our review of that piece very soon. Suffice it to say that the XA160.8 will never be the weak link in your hifi system!

Taking care of business

Vicariously sampling the last four or five Pass amplifiers that have been in for review, it's time to put the latest models front and center in *my* reference system and flog them. Rage Against the Machine's "Take the Power Back" does the trick, as the intro kick drum beats and bass riffs occupy separate spots in the soundstage, neither losing their focus as I turn the volume up, up, up – pushing my head back against the couch. *(continued)*

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

John Bamford, HiFi News, 2014



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REVIEW

Yet near the end of the track as the pace settles to light cymbal work, the delicacy and texture rendered stops me dead. It's so quiet and precise, everything appears to settle into nothing.

Sporting the big, blue circular meters that adorn the face of all the Pass power amplifiers, the 125 pound (each) XA160.8s are a breeze to move after the Xs300s. However, they're probably a stretch for one person lifting, so you should consider getting some help to keep your back in order. For those not familiar with Pass amplifiers, the meter needle stays centered, indicating that the amplifier is operating fully in class-A mode, which for the 160.8, is 328 peak watts. So when that needle starts to bounce, these amplifiers are indeed producing major power.

Driving my Vandersteen 5As with the XA160.8s is absolutely peachy and the synergy with the Audio Research REF5SE is near perfection as well. I have spent some time with the Pass Xs Pre that is here for review, and that's even more revealing. It goes without saying that you won't go wrong with an all-Pass system, and as Mr. Pass says, you'll never have to look for tubes again.

Break-in has been the same experience we've had with all other Pass amplifiers; they sound great straight out of the box and improve linearly over about 300 hours, with a minimal increase in clarity after that.



REVIEW

Though solid state, they take as long as, if not longer than, a vacuum tube amplifier to fully “warm up.” Due to the power draw (550 watts per mono-block) and heat generated, most owners will not want to leave them on all the time. The XA160.8s take about 90 minutes to come out of the gentle mist exhibited at initial power up that dissipates after they reach full operating temperature. You'll notice it in the smoothness of the upper register and the depth of the soundfield portrayed – getting deeper and deeper, drawing you further in to the presentation as they stabilize.

The 160.8s are consistent at low, medium and high volume. They never run out of steam when cranking AC/DC to near-concert levels, yet when listening to solo vocals or piano at levels barely above a whisper, maintain depth and a tonal richness that you'd expect from a flea watt SET amplifier. To say these amplifiers are incredibly linear and dynamic is an understatement.

In the end

We're all worm food. But for now, if you find yourself asking the venerable question, “tubes or transistors,” this tube guy says buy the XA160.8 from Pass Labs. Unless you can afford the Xs monos, then of course you know what you must do.

Additional Listening

Selfishly, it's always wonderful when someone else shares my enthusiasm for a piece of audio gear, and in this case, it's been an ongoing argument between myself and Mr. O'Brien for a couple of decades now. While I agree with his analysis, because of the nature of the Vandersteen 5As only needing to be powered from about 80hz up, (because of their internally powered woofers) these speakers don't give the full scale of the XA160.8s' performance. And, of course, we like to perform amplifier reviews with as wide of a range of speaker systems as possible to see if there are any rocks in the road. I assure you there are none.

As with all the other Pass amplifiers we've auditioned, the XA160.8 continues the tradition of being able to drive any load effortlessly. I began my listening with the toughest speakers in my collection, the Magnepan 1.7s and the Acoustat 2+2s. Both passed with flying colors, and it was an interesting comparison to play the 2+2s with both the XA160.8s and a recently restored Threshold 400A that I used to use with my 2+2s in the '80s.

The more powerful, heavier, 4000A only stayed in my system briefly, but the 400A stayed for quite some time and was always a favorite.

Thanks to so much current on tap, the 2+2s now sound like there is a subwoofer in the room, but more importantly, these speakers, known for their somewhat loose and flabby lower registers are exhibiting taut, tuneful bass in a way they never have. Thomas Dolby's "Pulp Culture" shakes the listening room with authority. An even tougher test is acoustic bass, and again the vintage ESL's dance through all of my favorite Stanley Clarke tunes.

Moving through the gaggle of great speakers we currently have here from Dali, Dynaudio, GamuT, Eggleston and a few others, the XA160.8s have no limitations. To get them to (softly) clip requires ear shattering volume, or perhaps a pair of horribly inefficient speakers. In that case, there are always the XA200.8s and the Xs amplifiers.

No matter what music is served, the XA160.8s perform effortlessly and get out of the way for your enjoyment of it. The biggest delight, aside from knowing you'll never have to hunt down matched quartets of power

tubes again, is just how much of the flagship Xs300s capability is locked up inside these two boxes at one third of the price. Mind you in a "cost no object" system, the difference between the XS160.8 and the Xs300 will still be easily apparent, but it's like the difference between an \$85,000 Carrera and a \$175,000 GT3RS – it's easy to see, feel

and hear the lineage, and for those who don't want to go all the way, will still find the lower-priced sibling highly enjoyable.

I've hinted that the Pass XA160.8s have the slightest bit of warmth in their overall character, which they do. However, this additional richness and palpability is not at the expense of softness, or

compromise in transient attack. If you want a strictly "nothing but the facts" the Pass sound may not be for you, but if you've always loved a touch of the glow that the world's best vacuum tube amplifiers possess without having to chase the glass bottles, you must audition the XA160.8 I guarantee you will be highly impressed. —Jeff Dorgay



The Pass XA160.8
\$26,000/pair

MANUFACTURER

Pass Laboratories

CONTACT

www.passlabs.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source

SME 20/SME V arm,
Koetsu Urushi Blue

Digital Source

Simaudio MOON 650D,
MacBook Pro

Preamplifier

ARC REF 5, Pass Xs Pre

Speakers

Vandersteen 5A
(rest in article)

Cable

Cardas Clear

Ending the Argument

The Graditech Lumi 3 Speaker Cables

By Jeff Dorgay

One of the biggest arguments surrounding audio cables is whether or not they should be considered a tone control. Those floating in that boat will be intrigued by the Graditech Lumi Speaker Cables – the Lumi 3 in particular. Different cable conductors and geometries sound different, and even though I have always been of the mind of keeping the signal chain as close to natural/neutral sound as is possible, rather than “taming a bright speaker with a dull cable,” now and then optimum sound is only a few molecules away. Often the right speaker cable can be the last 5% that brings the system into perfect focus. This is much easier if one isn’t swapping components on a semi-regular basis, and at the prices of today’s premium cable, doing so can be a major disadvantage.

Gradient has been making subwoofers and speakers in Finland for decades. We’ve owned and reviewed a handful of their products over the years and all have been top notch. For years, Gradient was the only company that built a subwoofer with the required speed and delicacy to keep up with the legendary Quad electrostatic speakers, so if anyone understands nuance, it would be these guys. Graditech is the company that designed all the parts for Gradient.

The Lumi cables give you three options. More monogamous audiophiles not changing their system with any regularity – and hence not needing the fine tuneability of multiple choices – will be well served by the Lumi 1, tipping the charts at \$2,399 for a 2.5 meter pair. Lumi 1 features a solid and stranded conductor, albeit different than the ones in Lumi 2, a good all-around choice for most systems. Lumi 2 adds a second option at \$3,099 for a similar pair and the Lumi 3 that you see here commands \$4,399 for the pair, but offers the most versatility. The cables are well-built from a physical standpoint and are relatively stiff, so make adequate preparations for that. If you lean at all towards the more tweaky side of audiophilia, don’t stop halfway; go for the Lumi 3s.

Salvation or Madness?

Unlike finding the optimum setting for VTA, the Lumi's ease of changing things up might lead the more obsessive audiophile to insanity, just because it can. For the rest of us though...

After spending a year with the Lumi cables, I find not only that the sound is quite natural, but also that they're highly handy as a reviewing tool, as they give me the ability to move a system's sound ever so slightly.

The Lumi 3 uses banana plugs for termination on both ends of the speaker cable. The amplifier end features one pair and the speaker end three, working with the wooden box you see in the photo, which Graditech refers to as the "cable park." Per Graditech's suggestion, I let the wires burn in for about 100 hours with the additional ends plugged into the cable park, to be sure signal would be run through all possible conductors equally. Upon completing this, discerning listening began with the Audio Research GSPre and GS150 via the pair of GamuT RS5 loudspeakers which will be featured in issue 72 of *TONEAudio*.

I began my listening with the initial solid core conductors. Paired with the ARC gear and the lovely Gryphon Kalliope DAC, this proved to be slightly dark and slow compared to my reference Cardas Clear cable. Switching to the stranded connector becomes faster, increasing the size of the soundstage in width, where the silver stranded connection takes this even further, revealing more information on the extreme top end and tightening up the mid bass ever so slightly as well.

If that isn't enough, you can fine

tune further by using any or all of the three terminations together. Think of these variations as intermediate steps between the variation achieved by only using single terminations.

An adjustable wrench

It's important to emphasize that the variations in sound we are discussing are subtle yet noticeable; they will not hit you over the head with night-and-day changes to your system. Taking our initial argument even further, these cables come in handy when switching amplifiers in and out as well. While I've never swapped speaker cables with an amplifier, now that the ability to fine tune is there, why not go for it?

Swapping between the ARC GS 150, a Boulder 2160, a pair of Pass XS160.8 monoblocks and a few tube amplifiers at my disposal, I did find the Lumi 3s handy, especially with the tube amplifiers. The solid state amplifiers discussed really did not require a change in the cable, but when going from the Nagra 300i and ARC amplifiers (much more neutral in presentation) to the PrimaLuna and Dynaco amplifiers (decidedly more warm and tubey sounding), the change proved advantageous.

Here, the silver-coated connection which is the zippiest, most resolving combination of the three definitely mitigated the warmer, more loose bottom end of the PrimaLuna and Dynaco amps. Again, while this was welcome on the GamuT and Dali Epicon 8 speakers, the solid core conductor proved the best match with my vintage JBL and Altec speakers. As you can see, this can easily drive you crazy.



REVIEW

Whether the Graditech Lumi 3 speaker cables will make your audiophile journey better than it's ever been or drive you to madness will depend on you. But for those who have always longed for the ability to make a slight move and fine tune their system a bit further without having to sell the farm, these are an interesting solution. As a generally cable adverse guy, I was against this concept at the beginning, but the longer I spent listening to the Lumi 3s, the more I enjoyed them – now to the point that they are a tool I'd rather not be without.

Highly recommended to all but the most OCD in the audience. ●

The Graditech Lumi 3 speaker cables

\$4,399/2.5m pair

www.graditech.fi/lumi/lumi-3/

MANUFACTURER

Graditech Oy

CONTACT

www.graditech.fi

US: www.graditech.com

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Preamplifier ARC GSPre

Power Amplifier ARC GS 150

Speakers GamuT RS5



Where Have all the Good Stereos Gone?



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Naim Mu-so

\$1,499

www.naimaudio.com

While Naim's Mu-so might fool the unfamiliar that it's a sound bar, it's anything but. Other than kind of looking like a sound bar, albeit a very cool one with a gigantic volume control and moody underlighting, the rectangular shape is where all comparison ends - this is a full blown, mega, desktop audio system.

With 6 bespoke speakers and 450 watts of power on tap, the Mu-so builds on what Naim learned when developing the audio system for the Bentley, in terms of complexity and creating high performance digital audio in a compact space.

Working wired or wirelessly, there is nothing you can't connect to the Mu-so. And while you can control it all via your phone and the Naim app, you really want to walk up and interact with the Mu-so in person. It's main control is the best in the industry. ●



Cardas Audio, Bandon, Oregon

Audio by Van Alstine Vision Adjustable Phono Preamplifier



The AVA Vision Phono Preamplifier is a brand new direct-coupled, split passive EQ solid-state phono preamp with high-current buffered output circuits to handle long cables, complex tape loops, and other difficult loads.

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Audio by Van Alstine 2665 Brittany Lane Woodbury, MN 55125 (651) 330-9871 www.avahifi.com

FROM THE WEB



Simaudio MOON Evolution 760A Power Amplifier

\$8,000

www.simaudio.com

Simaudio manages to pack one of their top quality Evolution series amplifiers into a compact Evolution chassis (the same size as their phono preamplifiers and DACs), delivering 130 watts per channel into 8-ohms, doubling into a 4-ohm load.

As soon as you power it up, it's clear that no compromises whatsoever have been made here. Just consider the 760A the perfect power amplifier for the audiophile not needing the enormous reserves of the mammoth 880Ms. If 130wpc will serve your needs, the 760A is a lot of quality in a relatively compact enclosure. ●

FROM THE WEB



FROM THE WEB

Conrad-Johnson MF 2275

\$3,850

www.conradjohnson.com

Wrapped in the same champagne front panel that every CJ component has come since their inception, the MF 2275 is a compact, solid state amplifier. As company founder Lew Johnson assured me at this year's Consumer Electronics Show, "Yes, we make excellent solid-state amplifiers too."

Rated at 135 watts per channel into an 8-ohm load, the MF 2275 features a no frills approach to delivering great solid-state sound. Those familiar with their other solid-state designs will immediately notice a family resemblance. Newcomers to the world of CJ will immediately be impressed. ●

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B A R G A I N

SLUMMIN'

Harman/Kardon HK670 Receiver

By Jaime Lee Fritze



I have been a fan of vintage Harman/Kardon gear for several years now, so when I heard a local record store had an HK670 receiver for sale I was on the case, immediately. The typical going price for this model in "good working order" (which as most vintage audio buyers know can mean many things) is right around \$100-150. Though showing signs of neglect and crying out for some TLC, I was able to get it for \$50 due to some distortion in the phono section.

The HK670 twin powered integrated receiver was Harman/Kardon's top of the line model from about 1979 to 1981 and was its last with an analog tuner. The original retail price was \$550, the equivalent to around \$1700 today. It has a dual-mono design; however the single transformer makes the designation of twin powered misleading. The 670 is rated at 60 watts per channel and some sources say this rating is conservative. A fan of the aesthetics of older HK gear, this one isn't as pretty and is a beast in terms of size, yet it still has a certain vintage charm.

After some serious elbow grease and new fuses, it works beautifully. I didn't know what to expect as mixed reviews for this particular model complain about a flat and lifeless sound. Pairing it with a set of vintage JBLs and both a Rega Planar 3 and Project Debut Carbon turntables I auditioned a few quintessential audiophile releases along with *Deep Shadows and Brilliant Highlights* from the new HIM Vinyl Retrospective box set left me surprised for the better! ●

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.

Courtney Barnett
Sometimes I Sit and Think, and Sometimes I Just Sit
Purchase LP from Music Direct
<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-282616-courtney-barnett-sometimes-i-sit-and-think-and-sometimes-i-just-sit-vinyl-lp.aspx>

Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<http://listen.tidalhifi.com/album/40199125>

Buena Vista Social Club
Lost and Found
Purchase LP from Music Direct
<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-285566-buena-vista-social-club-lost-and-found-180g-vinyl-lp.aspx>

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<http://listen.tidalhifi.com/album/43447118>

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Calexico
Edge of the Sun
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<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-286018-calexico-edge-of-the-sun-vinyl-lp.aspx>

Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<http://listen.tidalhifi.com/album/44521297>

Django Django
Born Under Saturn
Purchase LP from Music Direct
<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-316383-django-django-born-under-saturn-vinyl-2lp.aspx>

Bill Fay
Who Is the Sender?
Purchase LP from Music Direct
<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-316423-bill-fay-who-is-the-sender-vinyl-2lp.aspx>

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Lightning Bolt
Fantasy Empire
Purchase LP from Music Direct
<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-315582-lightning-bolt-fantasy-empire-vinyl-2lp.aspx>

Mastodon
Blood Mountain
Purchase LP from Music Direct
<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-247508-mastodon-blood-mountain-vinyl-lp.aspx>

Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<http://listen.tidalhifi.com/album/353302>

METZ
METZ II
Purchase LP from Music Direct
<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-100871-metz-metz-vinyl-lp.aspx>

Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<http://listen.tidalhifi.com/album/17342704>

The Mountain Goats
Beat the Champ
Purchase LP from Music Direct
<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-287018-the-mountain-goats-beat-the-champ-45rpm-vinyl-2lp.aspx>

Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<http://listen.tidalhifi.com/album/44055248>

My Morning Jacket
The Waterfall
Purchase LP from Music Direct
<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-311316-my-morning-jacket-the-waterfall-45rpm-vinyl-2lp.aspx>

Torres
Sprinter
Purchase LP from Music Direct
<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-314510-torres-sprinter-vinyl-lp.aspx>

Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<http://listen.tidalhifi.com/album/43717264>

Wand
Golem
Purchase LP from Music Direct
<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-285638-wand-golem-vinyl-lp.aspx>

Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<http://listen.tidalhifi.com/album/42184389>

Waxahatchee
Ivy Tripp
Purchase LP from Music Direct
<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-286029-waxahatchee-ivy-tripp-vinyl-lp.aspx>

Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<http://listen.tidalhifi.com/album/44539241>

LINKS

Jazz

Chris Lightcap’s Bigmouth
Epicenter
Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<http://listen.tidalhifi.com/album/43824802>

Charles Lloyd
Wild Man Dance
Purchase LP from Music Direct
<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-313758-charles-lloyd-wild-man-dance-vinyl-2lp.aspx>

Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<http://listen.tidalhifi.com/album/44464899>

Joe Lovano & Dave Douglas
Live at Monterey Jazz Festival
Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<http://listen.tidalhifi.com/artist/6516482>

The Word
Soul Food
Purchase LP from Music Direct
<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-312637-the-word-soul-food-vinyl-2lp.aspx>

Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<http://listen.tidalhifi.com/album/44541887>

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- 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
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 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
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- Music Direct: www.musicdirect.com
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 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
 Soul Custom: www.soulcustom.com
 SoundStage Direct: www.soundstagedirect.com
 Tidal: www.tidalhifi.com
 Upscale Audio: www.upscaleaudio.com
 Wadia: www.wadia.com
 Wireworld: www.wireworldcable.com
 Vienna Acoustics: www.vanaltD.com
 Vandersteen: www.vandersteen.com
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