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No.72 June 2015



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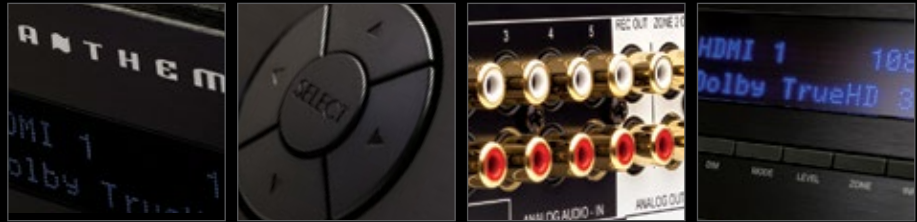
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PUBLISHER'S LETTER

With nearly ten years under our belt, it feels like a good time to restate our purpose. Those of you who have been with us since day one know we've expanded the scope a bit, or as the good doctor on *Star Trek: Voyager* likes to say, “We've exceeded our original programming.” And I think for the most part, that's a good thing – yet my vision of a magazine combining music and hifi in a meaningful yet fun way has never faltered. Prompted by a very crabby email from a longtime reader who has “finally lost their respect for us,” I feel it might be better to make it clear to all of our readers just what my priorities at *TONEAudio* are – for better or worse.

1. To help you find a great hifi system, regardless of budget.

I've always seen *TONEAudio* as more of a concierge service. When you stay at a luxury hotel, you don't ask the maitre d' for three lousy restaurants; you ask him for three good ones, or perhaps even his favorite – the one he frequents on his night off. This is why we haven't written any overly snarky reviews. We stick to the majors as much as we can because of goal number one. I want you to have a great hifi system, one that will really engage you and bring joy to your life as often as possible.

I know that sometimes, your music system will just be on in the background while you are making a salad, watching the paint dry or sorting workout clothes, but whether you are listening actively, passively, or somewhere in between, my hope is that the money you've spent on a music system is money well spent.

2. Equally important – to discover and explore as much new music as your wallet and patience allows.

I purchased – well, built actually – my first hifi system so that I could enjoy music more than by listening to Mom and Dad's table radio, and it started me on a lifelong quest to always try and squeeze a little bit more sound out of whatever system I happen to be listening to. But the journey has always been about music first, to spend as much time listening and to always discover new music.

This is why we devote so much of the magazine to reviews of *current* music, with a little bit of audiophile remastered discs thrown in to round out the picture.

And that's why I don't wax poetic about remastered discs – I feel that everything that can be said about the Beatles, Stones or Grateful Dead has pretty much been said, and by far better music critics than myself.

3. Most importantly, have a little fun.

We haven't produced a lot of cable reviews or mega-geeky tweak reviews because they are so controversial and, more often than not, counterproductive. I am not an OCD person, which does not always fit with the audiophile profile. I'm in favor of getting your system set up to the best of your abilities and enjoying music with it. I am not someone who spends a weekend auditioning ten different equipment feet. It's ok if that's your happy place, but it isn't mine.

4. Don't buy anything just because we say so.

I mean that from the bottom of my heart, and it has nothing to do with advertising. The people (our advertisers) who make these fine products want you to be happy with their gear and so do I, provided it's what turns you on. My hope is that a review in *TONEAudio* will pique your interest enough to investigate said component. I've tried to make clear what my biases are, and I encourage my writers to do the same.

Knowledge is power: the more you have, the more intelligent purchases you can make. If you read an informative review here, see what the other guys have to say. Between reading *Stereophile*, *TAS* and whatever other magazines you frequent, you'll be on the right track. But there's no substitute for seat time. Get to your favorite dealer, go to a few hifi shows, and *listen*.

In the end all paths lead back to point number one. I never set out to be the grand poohbah of high end audio. But I truly hope that we can either help you find a great system, discover some new music or at least have a few laughs, even if they are at my expense. While it's easy to laugh it off and say “It's only hifi,” I know how much this stuff means to you. That's why I started *TONE* in the first place.



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BONO

**Bono of U2 performs live in San Jose, California.
May 19, 2015**

Photo by Jerome Brunet

The iNNOCENCE + eXPERIENCE tour at the sold-out SAP Center, provided a wonderful interplay of technology, light, and sound interwoven with the band's personal musical journey. A psychedelic experience unlike anything i've ever seen, proving once again that they are truly the greatest live band in the world!

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A Dark Pair from Down Under

By Jeff Dorgay



OLD SCHOOL —Sponsored by HiFi Hawaii

In the mid '80s Perreux gear was all the rage in my local hifi salon, and it was pushed as being somewhere between Krell on a much higher level and Adcom on a lower level, with the obvious cache coming from its New Zealand heritage. The SM2 preamplifier was a full solid state, class A design, and the PMF1150 power amplifier a class AB design. These components had a look and feel not unlike early Mark Levinson, but in a silver motif, instead of the common black of the day.

Current research on the internet reveals a wide range of opinion – some swear by the vintage Kiwi amplification, claiming a warm sound, while others hate them, stating they are way too dark. As the PMF1150 was an early MOSFET design, there is no doubt that these amplifiers suffer somewhat from the “FET mist,” a murkiness that plagued many FET power amplifiers at this point in time. Amplifier designers turned to them as an answer to the vacuum tube, as the FET has always had a more tube-like distortion characteristic.

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It was worth taking the clean Perreux pair you see here home for a test drive. Inspection reveals decent parts and build quality for the day along with a high quality pot used for the volume control in the SM2 preamplifier, with the rear face adorned with gold plated RCA jacks. These two were right at the beginning of the detachable power cord trend and are both hard wired with relatively inexpensive power cables. The SM2 does have adjustable gain and loading for MM and MC phono cartridges, a definite plus, offering almost 70dB of gain in the highest gain setting – another plus.

While the PMF1150 and SM2 are both very quiet, they live up to the “dark” side of their reputation, with pronounced bass and a somewhat soft, rolled-off upper register. Driving my vintage Acoustat 2+2s is not even possible, with these classic ESLs sounding like a cone speaker with a blown tweeter. Yep, it's that bad. *(continued)*

FEATURE



A quick glance at the Audio Karma and DIY Audio websites reveals the same issue with the pair, and a number of spirited amateurs claim all that is necessary is a good recap and getting rid of those dreadful power cords, so it might just be time to get the soldering iron out and get to work. We will report back after these two have a little work done.

Buying vintage gear even in the best circumstances is always a crapshoot. Just like a vintage automobile or an old home, there can be things beneath the surface that can turn what seems like a value into a money pit. For now, even though these two components can typically be had for about \$200–\$300 each, there is no telling if a cap and wire upgrade will do the job. For now, I say pass on these two and consider something from Adcom instead; the GTP-500 preamplifier and GFA-555 power amplifier will set you back about the same price and are a decent value, with sonics that hold up even today. ●



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NEW RELEASES



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**Jason Isbell**

Something More Than Free
Southeastern, 2LP or CD

J

Jason Isbell appears to take a much-deserved deep breath on his follow-up to 2013's phenomenal *Southeastern*, a breakout record that poignantly chronicles the Alabama's native's journey to sobriety and remarriage. Yet just beneath its fairly relaxed country-oriented surface, *Something More Than Free* burrows into significant issues with the same sincerity, dignity, introspection, conviction, clarity, comprehensiveness, and empathy as its Americana Award-winning predecessor.

Diverse in scope and distinct from Isbell's prior efforts, the 11-track set finds the one-time Drive-By Truckers member exploring themes of where people go—and the hard decisions they face—after surviving busted romances, pondering histories, coping with family challenges, and spending too long running away from problems. In the process, from the start through the finish of *Something More Than Free*, Isbell cements his position as the best songwriter of his generation.



©Photo by David McClister

Capturing the essence of human emotions, experiences, and relationships in narratives packed with simple albeit powerful language and literate turns of phrase, he joins a rarified fraternity that includes the likes of Neil Young and Bruce Springsteen. Isbell's ability to distill complex matters in conversational verses that unspool with the innate ease of a back-porch chat with a best friend mirrors his knack for inclusive observation and recollective detail—and turning these perceptions into profound songs that glance deep into our souls, dare us to be better, force us to consider what really matters, remind us of place, and cultivate a kindred spirit.

In what's quickly become the era of the selfie and social media, Isbell endures as a selfless consciousness. He's an artist that realizes life's lasting rewards often involve mistakes and almost always include those closest to us—as well as

those we lost or must let go. "A man is the product of all the people that he ever loved/It don't make a difference how it ended up," he matter-of-factly sings on the jaunty "If It Takes a Lifetime." Playing the role of a working-class underling taking stock of his situation, Isbell relays the importance of keeping grounded, staying principled, and embracing basic pleasures in the pursuit of happiness. He also acknowledges the individualistic temptations triggered by self-consuming smartphones—and his will to avoid them. Just a few years removed from life-threatening addictions, it's only natural Isbell approach topics with such candor and deliberation.

While *Something More Than Free* extends far beyond autobiographical realms, the brilliant "24 Frames" can be viewed as Isbell's personal post-sobriety statement about struggling against chaotic circumstances without falling astray.

Akin to much of the material here, the song rests on an acoustic foundation adorned by his melodic electric-guitar fills and the violin playing of his wife, Amanda Shires. It also showcases the great strides he continues to make as a singer increasingly aware of phrasing, pacing, and timbre. A hook that combines a knockout lyrical declaration about expectations stamps the tune with an irresistible combination of fierce tenderness and unfeigned anxiety.

Many characters in Isbell's latest compositions feature a similar blend of hope and apprehensiveness. While most musicians and songwriters escort protagonists down paths that veer toward one extreme direction or the other, the 36-year-old remains more mindful of possibilities, intricacies, hurdles, and fact there are usually no easy answers. By skewing to grey areas rather than targeting clear-cut white or black conclusions, Isbell's tales are more pragmatic and far more resonant.

On the minimalist "Flagship," utilizing a formerly resplendent hotel and its scenery as metaphors, he relays the decay and digression that often

splinter long-term romances before he transforms the ballad into a pledge of dedication to his own love. In the spare "Speed Trap Town," a conflicted small-town native faces tough choices about moving on—and wondering if physical change can erase mental scars. Over the course of the gently trotting "The Life You Chose," on which Isbell paints visual images so vivid and accurate that they place listeners in the song's settings, an ex-lover wonders aloud to his former partner via disclosures streaked with pained restlessness and unfulfilled desires. Answers to his questions remain unresolved.

For all their struggles, Isbell's protagonists comprise a resilient sort possessing both blind faith and common knowledge in recognizing (and doing) what is right. Modesty, gratitude, and benevolence carry a broken-backed laborer through the title track. On the album's most amplified moment, the two-step dirty-blues-meets-funk boogie "Palmetto Rose" couches an everyman's free-will plea in a catchy chorus and Southern tradition so thick you can practically smell South Carolina sweetgrass. Equally

tenacious, a single mother at the center of the waltzing "Hudson Commodore" doesn't crave help, pity, or a husband to defeat her unfair lot of obstructions—she just yearns to ride in a classic automobile. A deft fingerpicking and lighthearted folksy delivery underline the song's worry-free aims.

Musically, the reverb-spiked "How to Forget" implies carefree sensations but Isbell's nervous mind is anything but settled. Bounding to a loose rhythm, the standout tune functions as a confession, incrimination, and impossible wish. "Teach me how to unlearn a lesson," Isbell implores, his vulnerability on his sleeve, knowing well that even as he moves ahead with his life he can't completely escape the past. Nobody can. The difference with Isbell is not only does he pick up on universal truths and suggestive conditions, he's one of the very few musicians that has managed to harness and translate them into such vital, beautiful sounds.

—**Bob Gendron**


Tame Impala
Currents

Interscope, 2LP or CD

T

ame Impala has new vistas in its sights on *Currents*, its first album in three years and first for Interscope. Now labelmates with the likes of Kendrick Lamar and Madonna, Tame Impala treats *Currents* not as a reinvention but a statement—a proclamation that this once-independent band can hang and dance with the big boys.

After being hailed as one of rock's great new hopes with 2012's *Lonerism*, an album of grandly shaped psychedelic rock built for headphones, Tame Impala dims the lights, hangs up the disco ball, turns down the guitars, and churns out one of 2015's great pop records.

"If I never come back, tell my mother I'm sorry," vocalist Kevin Parker slickly croons on the opening "Let It Happen." May he forever keep moving forward, as perhaps not since Wilco's *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* has a rock band begun a record with such a bold shift in direction. An eight-minute single—eight minutes!—the tune dances through eras, resulting in something that wouldn't be out of place on a Daft Punk album.

Indeed, the song is a long way from the wash of guitars and vocals of *Lonerism* and remains full of surprises even after dozens of listens. This manifesto starts with a timelessly vintage electronic hum—the sound, perhaps, of some technological device from the 70s powering up—and then segues into a neon-hued, handclap-enhanced, light-stepping groove, only to dissolve and come back stronger. It's a symphony of electronics with a disco-meets-rock groove that recalls the Clash's "Train in Vain," lest anyone think Tame Impala has completely given in to the dance.

As much as *Currents* finds Tame Impala getting cozy with

a more digital soul, the band's approach has never been clearer. Parker's vocals are more centered, and songs such as "Love Paranoia" and "Eventually" don't obscure their melancholic emotions. Break-ups figure heavily throughout the record. "Yes I'm Changing" is all twinkly keys and finger snaps as it tries to escape from the past. Squiggly guitars on "The Less I Know the Better" let Parker skip out the door. It makes *Currents* an album about moving on, in both sound and in tone.

Akin to many classic works—including *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*—the record is best experienced heard from start to finish. Everything here is of a piece, be it the unapologetic slow-dance of "Cause I'm A Man" or bouncy "Disciples," on which wiry guitars hop and jog through Technicolor imagery. One may have to forgive the band for the spoken-word-feel of "Past Life," but the song's underlying orchestral sway allows it to shimmy into place without destroying the overall vibe. And it's only one brief moment of awkwardness on an album that's one heck of a growth spurt.

Fittingly, on the closing "New Person, Same Old Mistakes," Parker sings that he feels "like a brand new person." Reinvention rarely sounds this good.

—**Todd Martens**

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TIDAL.COM

For all the pressure that comes with being a young band under the fickle gaze of the British music press, you have to hand it to Palma Violets for spectacularly not giving a damn.

“There’s no producer in the world who could make us sound professional,” singer-guitarist Sam Fryer opined during a recent interview with *DIY*. The London quartet’s 2013 debut *180* sneered in the face of the next-big-thing hype that trailed it since the group formed 2011, and as result, Palma Violets became just that. Till-the-end rallying cries, inside jokes, and faraway melodies made for a record that, if not terribly original, captured the recklessness of youth unfettered by cynicism. Drawing equally from garage, punk, and psych, the set felt familiar upon first listen, like rediscovering a favorite well-worn sweatshirt. What Palma Violets lacked in freshness, they made up for by having a good time.

While such abandon worked to their advantage on *180*, *Danger In the Club* feels more like an exercise in trying too hard not to try too hard. “A lot of bands want to over-complicate their second album. We know that we didn’t,” bassist and vocalist Chilli Jesson explained.

You can’t blame Palma Violets. By the members’ own admission, the band became worn down from a long stint of touring and had nothing in the can for the follow-up as late as the middle of last year. At the behest of a tour manager, off they went to an isolated studio on a Welsh farm to get to work. They teamed up with producer John Leckie, whose track record includes work with stylistic forebears like Magazine, Stone Roses, and Radiohead, the latter of which Leckie assisted on the sophomore turnaround *The Bends*.



Palma Violets

Danger In the Club

Rough Trade, LP or CD

Perhaps true to Fryer’s claim, even Leckie couldn’t shake the weariness that lingers on this new record. While *180* forces you to want to get in on the action, *Danger In the Club* just feels grumpy—more uninspired than uncomplicated.

“Hollywood (I Got It),” the first track after gag opener “Sweet Violets,” comes across as a fun Ramones-style start but ultimately plays like a caricature stitched together from the most obvious hooks and chord progressions in the garage-pop songbook. Its few nonsensical lyrics appear more rote than clever.

Throughout, the collective takes a conscious step back from meat-and-potatoes punk into the simpler times of pub rock, or what Jesson calls “pre-punk”—that fleeting moment in the wake of glam and prog that sought to bring things back down to earth and into the corner bar.

(continued)

MUSIC



©Photo by Tom Beard

While frontrunners like Dr. Feelgood, Eddie and the Hot Rods, and the Stranglers helped catalyze the rise of punk, the creative offerings of pub rock are limited.

Hence, it's not completely surprising that the clarity that makes *180* a standout record gets swapped for sloppiness here. "Girl, You Couldn't Do Better on the Beach" crams in lazy surf guitars and rushed vocals that unconvincingly extol the act of burning out over achieving "benign success." Others, like "Coming Over to My Place" and "Walking Home," lament being sore over girls, but with throwaway lines like "I don't even like it here, man," don't do much to garner any sympathy. Fryer's earnest croon—falling somewhere between that of Joe Strummer and Damon Albarn—is inexplicably muddled and under-mixed when it ought to be showcased as one of the band's strongest assets.

Palma Violets don't really get started until more than halfway through the record. "Peter and the Gun" and "No Money Honey" take time to play with tempos and let melodies breathe—if only in too-short spurts—and showcase a promising touch of Nick Cave-inspired gothic that at last advances where *180* left off. "English Tongue," meanwhile, returns to the swagger and infectiousness that turned heads in the first place.

The formulaic anthems that dominate *Danger In the Club* are good and well for an actual pub band, but Palma Violets are too strong for that. Even passing guitar flourishes and harmonies reveal an effortless talent and chemistry that reinforces why the album often feels like the sonic equivalent of the group playing with its food. And it's why Palma Violets' biggest sin isn't that they don't care, but that they settle for selling themselves short. —**Andrea Domanick**

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**Jim O'Rourke**

Simple Songs
 Drag City, LP or CD

Nice to see you once again," Jim O'Rourke sings on "Friends With Benefits," the opening track on *Simple Songs*, the rare O'Rourke work to emphasize orchestral pop song structures with vocals. But this very unconventional artist isn't about to get conventional. In seconds, he drops the dagger-enriched punch line: "Been a long time, my friend/ Since you crossed my mind at all."

Welcoming the tune isn't, although O'Rourke isn't all barbs. With a 33-minute running time, *Simple Songs* would seem to emphasize brevity. It doesn't. These slowly unfolding mini-symphonies are for the patient listeners, with jazz-like structures and softly-spoken, slightly unintelligible vocals—a combination that keeps the eight-song collection just out of the reach of approachability. A piano key isn't struck; it's tapped. Violin strings aren't brushed; they're fluttered.

Over the years, O'Rourke has cultivated a devoted following among those that like their pop with traces of the avant-garde. He's been a member of Sonic Youth, was one of many sonic architects of Wilco's breakthrough *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*, and witnessed his name and work affixed to the projects of myriad independent-minded film directors.



Simple Songs, then, is pop for listeners that prefer to call singer/songwriters by the "composers" moniker. All things considered, it's also O'Rourke's most direct work in nearly a decade and a half—since 2001's *Insignificance*.

Of course, that's sort of like saying this new Rubik's Cube is slightly easier to solve than the older one. Careful, intricate, and slightly stand-off-ish, O'Rourke makes listeners work for rewards. Arrangements get accentuated with saxophones, French horns, vintage organs, a string section, and an attention to detail that Steely Dan would respect. "Half-Life Crisis" starts well enough, with a stop-and-start keyboard. A tuba swings wildly, a guitar peels off, and keyboards become an orchestra unto themselves. The material here can become a fascinating study in songcraft, especially if one is willing to approach it from a near-academic perspective.

There are, however, moments of true grandeur. "Hotel Blue" transitions from a whisper of acoustic guitars and vocals into something that feels like an indie-rock take on the Band, as slide guitars swing the song toward a robust symphonic finale. "Last Year" doubles a rock n' roll take on a jazz combo, as melodies get lost in interlocking webs of strings and horns.

"If you're so inclined, you could keep yourself warm," O'Rourke sings, making it clear he doesn't much care who is or isn't board. Yes, he's prickly. "You might not really comprehend," he tells an ex-lover in the piano ballad "End of the Road," taking a studious approach that inspires admiration, if not appeal. —**Todd Martens**

©Photo by Nagasa Bonasu



Richard Thompson

Still

Fantasy, 2LP or CD

R

ichard Thompson concludes the latest in his ongoing run of remarkable late-career albums with an homage to predecessors that inspired him to pick up the guitar and not only play, but devote himself to the instrument at the expense of almost everything else in his life—family, girls, school, and friends included.

No ordinary tribute, the epic “Guitar Heroes” finds the English native citing Django Reinhardt, Les Paul, Chuck Berry, James Burton, and the Shadows and proceeding to duplicate their distinctive style after each respective mention of their name.

It’s an impressive gesture and equally spectacular feat, especially as Thompson waits until the song nearly finishes before delivering the knockout punch, admitting: “I still don’t know how my heroes did it.” At the age of 66, and revered by countless peers younger and older, the virtuoso still considers himself a pupil.

The modesty befits the former Fairport Convention member, whose underdog status seems absolutely inexplicable given his exemplary guitar-playing abilities and songwriting prowess. Covered by a wide spectrum of artists ranging from the Blind Boys of Alabama to Dinosaur Jr. and R.E.M., Thompson has always existed on the fringes of the mainstream largely due to his English folk roots and refusal to remain fixated on a single technique or approach. He prizes subtlety over flash, and while among the wittiest lyricists of his or any generation, Thompson writes narratives that often contain dark streaks and surprising twists that demand the sort of attention more common in the jazz world. In short, his work is too smart and detailed for commercial interests.

Not that *Still* doesn’t make itself accommodating to anyone willing to listen. A type of record that offers more rewards the more frequently it is played, the 11-track effort turns down the electricity of Thompson’s two prior studio affairs in favor of shading, suggestion, and concision. Produced by Wilco leader Jeff Tweedy, it features a wide-open sound that invites the strategic placement of harmony vocals, acoustic accents, and a crack band comprised of people from Tweedy and Thompson’s groups. *(continued)*



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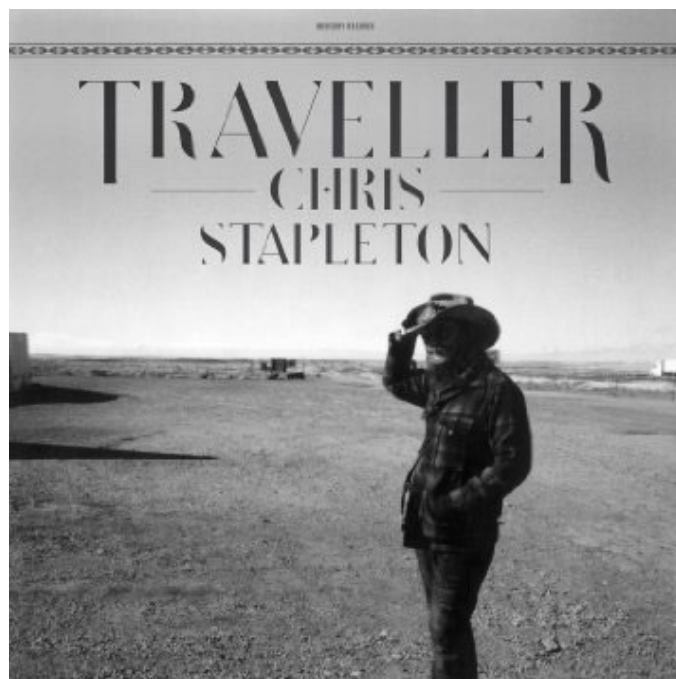
empathy blend on the serpentine “She Never Could Resist a Winding Road,” around which Thompson’s elastic notes and sincere vocals coil like vines around a wooden fence post. A similar airiness informs the tumble-down-the-hill pace of “No Peace, No End,” which reflects the artist’s signature bent to disguise bleak themes with upbeat progressions. On the gently bounding “All Buttoned Up,” he again relishes the role of trickster, drawing on clever humor as he relays an account of a girl perfect in every way save for her prudery. Pent-up desires and implied frustrations emerge via his slippery guitar lines.

Such finite expressiveness—combined with Thompson’s purity, control, restraint, and uncanny knack for knowing when to strike and when to lie back in the weeds—repeatedly surfaces. Interweaving acoustic patterns on the delicate ballad “Josephine,” dipping into wavy blues reverb on the poisonous “Where’s Your Heart,” or mixing waxy textures on the admonishing “Patty Don’t Put Me Down,” Thompson demonstrates that even after its ubiquitous presence on tens of thousands of recordings made during past eight decades, the guitar still offers the potential to speak many new languages. His facility to make it happen owes to a lifelong commitment and uncompromising discipline that not only should be respected, but imitated. —**Bob Gendron**

While Thompson’s adroit guitar skills and acute lyrics leave their mark at each turn, *Still* stands out just as much for its laser-precision focus. Everyone involved puts on a clinic in how memorable songs can be created with a minimum of fuss and fancy. Aside from “Guitar Heroes,” the longest tune clocks in at four-and-a-half minutes. Throughout, Thompson seemingly abides by an old adage popularly attributed to Mark Twain: “I didn’t have time to

write a short letter, so I wrote a long one instead.” Here, however, the singer-songwriter finds the time to cut away the excess and leaves only the crucial parts—including pivotal phrasings, deft chords, and savory tones.

Rather than using six-string firepower to blow by his supporting cast, Thompson complements them. He tucks brief fills into pockets between verses and choruses, and utilizes finger-picked motifs as counterpoints or foundations. Pathos and


Chris Stapleton
Traveller

Mercury, 2LP or CD

In 1990, Travis Tritt released “Put Some Drive In Your Country,” a song that explores the musical mindset of a modern country boy that stood at the crossroads of old-school hillbilly music, blues-drenched southern rock, and progressive outlaw country. While he loved legends like Roy Acuff and George Jones, Tritt had his mind blown by some of the new sheriffs in town: “I really got excited/’Bout the time I turned 15/That’s the first time I heard Waylon and old Bocephus sing.”

As Tritt did a quarter century ago, Chris Stapleton flashes an outlaw fixation that measures about a mile wide. On his debut solo album *Traveller*, the Nashville-based artist draws inspiration from the classic work of Waylon Jennings and Hank Williams Jr., and nods to original Lynyrd Skynyrd front-man Ronnie Van Zant for good measure. Despite the strength of such influences, Tritt is Stapleton's closest antecedent, a country star cum soul man with a whiskey-and-tobacco-scorched delivery. Tritt—at least for a time—possessed a sharp knack for recording meaty,

attitude-ridden country-rockers and granular ballads filled with yearning. Stapleton shares this trait. *Traveller* is a wildly accessible package filled with striking and taut songs.

Dave Cobb (Jason Isbell, Sturgill Simpson), a man of prodigious gifts, is at the helm. He places Stapleton and band in a muscular country-rock context. And while the record serves as Stapleton's debut as a solo artist, he's no neophyte. The singer-songwriter logged time in progressive bluegrass outfit the SteelDrivers and penned material for mainstream

hit-makers Kenny Chesney and George Strait. Stapleton wrote or co-wrote a dozen of the 14 cuts on *Traveller*.

The wistful title track is breezy and brilliant, a swirl of steel guitar and entrancing vocal interplay between Stapleton and his wife and collaborator Morgane. “Whiskey and You” feels so intimate it sounds as if it were recorded at the kitchen table. With nothing but his voice and a single acoustic guitar, the singer unpacks a broken man's soliloquy: “I've got a problem /But it ain't like what you think/I drink 'cause I'm lone-

some/And I'm lonesome 'cause I drink.” He also injects fresh vitality into potentially stale subject matter, covering the difficulties of life on the road (“The Devil Named Music”), the cost of partying hard (a cover of the Charlie Daniels Band's “Was It 26”), and badass chest-beating (“Outlaw State of Mind”).

Stapleton lives up to the hype now surrounding him. If you believe that country music can be both artful and commercial—and that being commercial isn't inherently a cardinal sin—this is the real stuff. —**Chrissie Dickinson**



©Photo by Becky Fluke


Kacey Musgraves

Pageant Material
Mercury Nashville, LP or CD

Kacey Musgraves continually reminds everyone on *Pageant Material* she's still the same down-to-earth girl that made 2013's *Same Trailer Different Park*, her breakout major-label debut that won two Grammy awards and the ACM Album of the Year. The country singer goes as far to confess flirting with celebrity pleasures on "Dimestore Cowgirl," a warm-and-fuzzy autobiographical narrative on which practicality eventually wins out. "I still call my hometown home," she declares. Take that, Nashville and LA. Score another win for Modesta, population 4,500.

For Musgraves, clinging to her established small-town persona and aw-shucks demeanor—and all the charms such an identity suggests—makes perfect sense. In a genre littered with formula and fakeness, the 26-year-old offers a refreshing alternative. She also knows her way around a phrase, mixing deceptive innocence with cutthroat cleverness to deliver disarming lines about topics often ignored in modern country. And yet Musgraves also realizes that keeping her sound as low-key and innocuous as her placid singing diffuses any potential hang-ups with her lyrics. While the strategy is likely to pay commercial dividends, the lack of grit and depth shortchange both the material and Musgraves' potential as a serious artist.

On *Pageant Material*, innocuous arrangements and facile statements give the impression the playful vocalist settles for less when she could do more. Primarily recorded live in the studio, it's an album that's easy to listen to—and one that occasionally skews too far towards easy-listening territory. Nearly everything feels pleasant, sunny, and easygoing. Stripped-down acoustic guitars and spare drumbeats are framed by tasteful pedal-steel and banjo accents as well as the periodic picking of an electric guitar. Perhaps this is what Musgraves believes the one-sheriff community she describes in "This Town" sounds like on every day of the year.

Despite its country-pop style,

the record thankfully forgoes the typical country-pop sheen. When orchestral strings enter, the vibe is more akin to a classic Bobby Gentry or Lee Hazlewood effort than a contemporary Nashville release. Indeed, throughout *Pageant Material*, Musgraves appears to aim for anything but modern in terms of pace, recreation, production, and lifestyle. She's most convincing when dishing simple advice and tossing out basic truisms as if they were candy.

Musgraves criticizes the notion of beauty contests and dispenses with female trappings such as high heels and swimsuits. In the process, she subtly expresses a fondness for pot and a distaste for phoniness. Such honesty remains Musgraves' strongest asset and key to her appeal.

"Biscuits," the first single, thrives on an irresistible hook, gang-sung chorus, and unifying premise. It's tailored for whistling on a hot summer day while hanging with friends on the river or gathering around a swimming hole. On the sashaying title track, Musgraves criticizes the notion of beauty contests and dispenses with female trappings such as high heels and swimsuits. In the process, she subtly expresses a fondness for pot and a distaste for phoniness. Such honesty—in combination with her self-confidence, good-natured humor, and relaxing

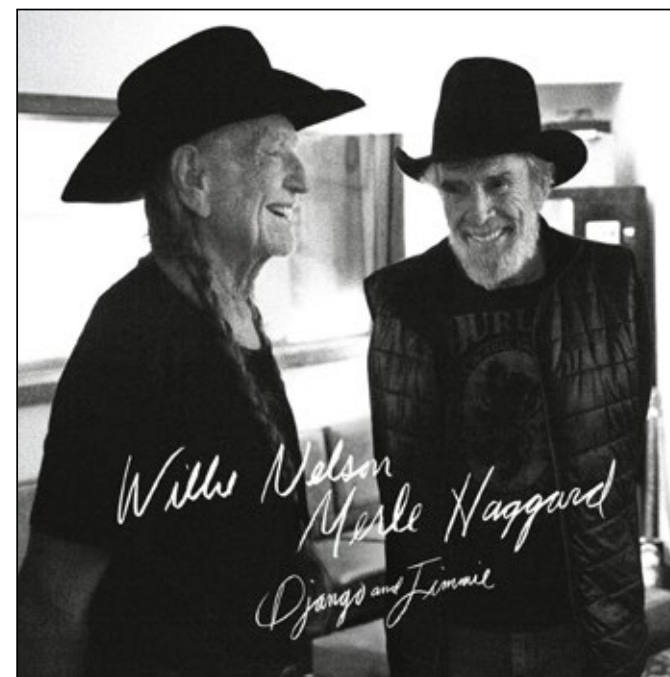
voice—remains Musgraves' strongest asset and key to her appeal.

Unfortunately, these traits, prevalent on *Same Trailer Different Park*, aren't as ubiquitous here. They're also dimmed by musical blandness. "Somebody To Love" and "Late to the Party" come across as both impersonal and reductive. And while Musgraves reaches back for some Southern twang, falsetto ache, and I-don't-want-to-grow-up stubbornness on "Die Fun," the song feels forced and cries out for the carefree spirit supposedly at its foundation. Instead of rebelling, she musters all the excitement of a shut-in, singing, "Let me grab my poncho/I don't care where we go." In the same tune, Musgraves rails against repeating the past. But that's what she does on "Family Is Family," a happy-go-lucky ditty that plays the same truism card slapped down on several of her superior (and more credible) compositions. Ditto the cutesy "Cup of Tea," whose clichéd lyrics could be printed on a motivational self-help poster displayed in a high-school principal's office.

Musgraves, of course, is under no obligation to step outside of any comfort zone. When viewed in the context of her peers, she already looks like an outsider. Having already decided to embrace a modest guise and mellow manner tied to her small-town roots, what she must choose now is whether to become a country standout or settle for the easy route that ultimately leads to conformity and generality.

—**Bob Gendron**

ALL YOU NEED TO DO IS LISTEN



Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard

Django and Jimmie
Legacy, 2LP or CD

W

illie Nelson and Merle

Haggard are not only titans of country music, they stand as two of our greatest living songwriters. But when these two masterful songsmiths recorded their most enduring duet for their 1983 album collaboration *Pancho & Lefty*, they turned to a legendary left-of-center cult artist for the title track, making a classic hit of Townes Van Zandt's desperado elegy.

Although Nelson and Haggard's new studio collaboration *Django and Jimmie* features a few good moments, nothing reaches the benchmark set by *Pancho & Lefty*. This is a hodgepodge effort lacking cohesion—a mixture of older material revisited (Haggard's "Somewhere Between" and Bob Dylan's "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right"), novelty, and new songs of variable quality.



©Photo by Danny Clinch

The title track counts itself among the winners. It's a tender waltz-time tribute to two musical monsters—the influential guitarist Django Reinhardt and the father of country music, Jimmie Rodgers. Although felled by tuberculosis at the age of 35 in 1933, the charismatic Rodgers helped define what country would become. It's impossible to overstate his impact.

Nelson and Haggard sound sincere in the misty-eyed salute, written by Jimmy Melton and Jeff Prince. It's especially fitting since Nelson, 82, and Haggard, 78, each grew up in the wake of Rodgers' death.

As a singer, Nelson is still largely in fine voice. Haggard's distinctive croon is shaky in spots. The rough feel works well in the intimate outing "Unfair Weather Friend." Drenched in ghostly pedal steel guitar, it's a touching paean to old friendship. Less

successful is "Live This Long." Although the subdued arrangement is a good musical fit for both men, the sentiment comes across as overly generic. "Time flies by in the blink of an eye/When you get paid for having too much fun," Nelson sings in the ode to wild times gone by, written by Shawn Camp and Marv Green. Haggard contributes an old-school recitation. Although his weary reading brings gravitas to the lyrics, it's hard to elevate such tired wordplay.

Then there's the goofy stuff. To wit: "It's All Going To Pot," a weed anthem set to a rote barroom melody. In concert, this would be a giddy, stoned sing-along. On disc, it's unlikely to warrant repeated listens.

Nelson and Haggard are genuine lions in winter. Here's hoping they make an album worthy of their reputations next time out.

—**Chrissie Dickinson**

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**Soak**

Before We Forget How to Dream
Rough Trade, LP or CD

When Soak came to the U.S. for a string of label showcases this spring, the odds were stacked against her. With her fragile voice and acoustic guitar, Soak rewards after multiple listens—not first impressions. Hers is music built for late nights with the lights turned low. Orchestral undercurrents inform the singer's arrangements, but their lushness is built like a soft hymn burning beneath her voice.

So when Soak walked into a bar in Austin, Texas—performing for a bunch of drunk music-industry types with expense accounts to spare at the South by Southwest festival in March—chances were she'd be drowned out. After all, when it comes to Soak versus chatter, it doesn't take much of the latter to overtake the former. One conversation will do it.

Yet a funny thing happened when she started strumming. Her languid brush strokes arrived like a hypnotic spell and her high voice—bright and slightly scratched, but scratched in a fuzzy, welcoming way—cut through the small talk. One by one, people started taking one or two steps closer, encircling the teenage artist born Bridie Monds-Watson. The room fell silent, except, of course, for when Soak inspired a laugh. "I pray for you," she sang on "Sea Creatures," "and you know I don't like Jesus."

On her debut, *Before We Forget How to Dream*, "Sea Creatures" serves as a centerpiece—a stunner of a song that slowly paddles its way upstream. Boasting a vintage Phil Spector-inspired beat, a shadowing guitar, lilting strings, and synths that curiously react to Soak's words, the tune is alternately melancholic and optimistic. Which isn't as much as a contradiction as it sounds, given that Soak brings a youthful hopefulness—even stubbornness, at times—to her low-key fare. She takes a skeptical view of the world, but it's a world she hasn't yet given up on. "I'll bring her heaven, even if I'm stuck in hell," she sings on "A Dream to Fly," which remains an acoustic-strummed lament until powerful tom-tom drums turn it into something else.

Signed to famed indie imprint Rough Trade at the age of 18, Soak looks ahead with the belief that adulthood will be better than the drama



that plagued teenage life. She does it with the calm of Cat Power, but she's an acoustic balladeer with an understanding of modern production. There's a reason she toured with synth-rockers Chvrches. While she doesn't lace her songs with electronics, hints of other-worldliness—like a soft moon glow beneath her melodies—propel songs along and keep the listener guessing. Such flourishes take on different shapes throughout the album—the gentle background choir of "Blud," the chugging rhythms and stop-and-start keys of "Garden," the empty church-like echoes of "Oh Brother," and the lumbering bass of "24 Windowed House."

Additionally, nearly every track brings some sort of vocal alteration to Soak's approach. It's in the distant mourn of "Wait," in which her voice reaches falsetto heights and disintegrates, and the confident, we're-all-losers swoon of "B a noBody." As pianos and strings twinkle around her, the song becomes an uplifting ode to being a misfit. Tonally, it's the sound of a dreamer, and on "Reckless Behavior" she's looking forward to being 40 and doing what she wants. Still, she makes it clear that she won't "waste" her youth. By this point on the record, however, Soak has already proven herself. Nothing gets wasted on this impressive debut.

—**Todd Martens**

©Photo by Joshua Halling



©Photo by Pat Graham

N

othing introduces a band quite like a good origin story. When Welsh noise-pop outfit Joanna Gruesome arrived with its 2013 debut *Weird Sister*, the group's tale alone was enough to garner some buzz. Supposedly, the five young ruffians met in an anger-management class in Cardiff and, at the behest of their counselor, formed a band as a means of therapy. The yelps and kiss-offs of *Weird Sister* made for a fitting extension of that storyline, even if the sunny melodies and precocious snark suggested the account was more of a wink than fact.



Joanna Gruesome

Peanut Butter
Slumberland, LP or CD

But on *Peanut Butter*, the story sells itself. These ten songs discard much of the earlier, bloated pop meanderings in favor of distilling the sound down to hooks and screams. The resulting lean opus of aggression and uncertainty clocks in at just 22 minutes. It isn't a departure so much as an improvement. While *Weird Sister* offers memorable individual tracks, the new record's strength lies in its cohesiveness. No song grabs quite like *Weird Sister*'s triumphant "Sugarcrush" or demands playlist placement like "Anti-Parent Cowboy Killers." Instead, the album tightens the sugar-and-acid dichotomy that previously felt wearisome, creating a momentum and urgency that are greater than the sum of their parts.

The opening "Last Year" picks up from the pummeling tunes like "Graveyard" featured on *Weird Sister*. Right from go, frontwoman Alanna McArdle is already gasping for breath

as she shouts over lead songwriter Owen Williams' chugging guitars. You can practically feel the flecks of spit on your face as McArdle accosts her subject, threatening to "crush your tiny skull." She holds it together long enough for a brief sing-song chorus and confessions of "crying in the pizza restaurant" before the band collapses into dissonance.

That isn't to say Joanna Gruesome's earnestness and melodies have disappeared. "Jamie (Luvver)" and "Crayon" fall squarely on the pop spectrum, bouncing and chiming through the distortion. But the overall production, guided by Hookworms frontman MJ, gives the fare a lo-fi sheen that demands closer listening. "Honestly Do Yr Worst" dials back the noise and offers pauses that showcase McArdle and Williams' vocals. In particular, the former shows significantly more command of her voice on *Peanut Butter*, often opting for a menacing post-punk shout instead of quiet Kim Deal harmonies. Too bad she recently elected to leave the quintet, which is continuing on without her. "Psykick Espionage," meanwhile, sees drummer Dave Sanford galvanizing his bandmates with his best Sonic Youth impression.

Only at album's end does the group bother to take a breather, layering creaking reverb and rhythms into a crescendo of feedback on "Hey! I Wanna Be Yr Best Friend." The track peters out just as quickly as it comes together, teasing what the potential might be if the group ever opted to go in a shoegaze direction. If the abruptness is frustrating, it's only because Joanna Gruesome nails the art of leaving you wanting more. —**Andrea Domanick**

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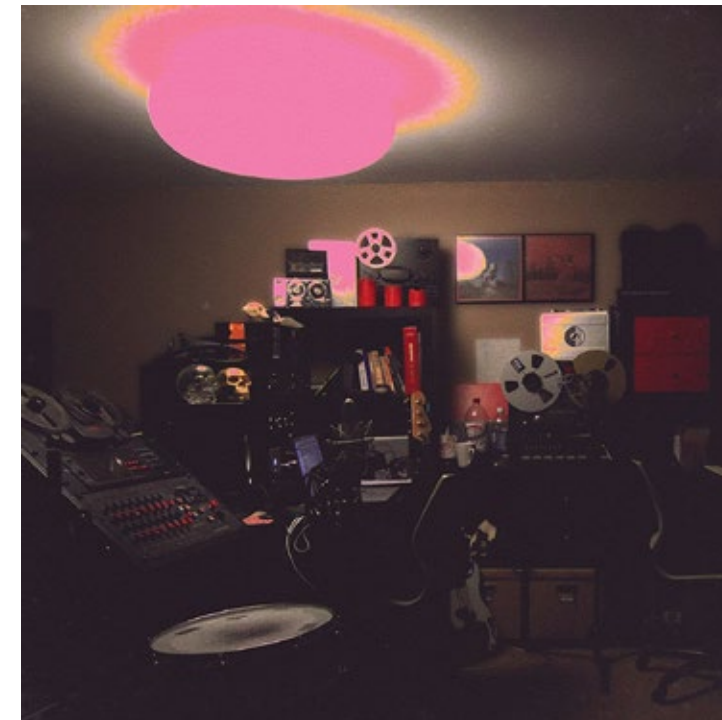
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MUSIC



Unknown Mortal Orchestra

Multi-Love
Jagjaguwar, LP or CD



ay this about the recent popularity of dance music: Indie pop has certainly gotten more swinging. A genre-hopping forerunner like Beck today looks like a genius; bands like Spoon found a little soul; arena groups such as the Silversun Pickups have gone electronic. And everywhere, everywhere is a keyboard, be it the lushly layered sounds of Passion Pit or more bouncy-ball spring of Tanlines.

Even Unknown Mortal Orchestra, a folk-rock act previously indebted to the sounds of 60s psychedelics, suddenly has a spritely spring in its step on *Multi-Love*, its third album and first to prominently feature synths and keys on every track. To dance isn't Priority No. 1, however. *Multi-Love* balances a dash of vintage 70s soul—when Unknown Mortal Orchestra gets futuristic, it does so with the zest of vinyl crate diggers—with heart-wrenching finger-pointing.

"It's not that this song's about her," vocalist and primary sonic architect Ruban Nielson sings on the album-opening title track. His voice comes on as a muffled falsetto, the keyboard dips and bops like a wind-up toy, and the rhythm seems obscured by a disco smoke screen. "All songs are about her." The tone is set. Nielson has been frank in discussing the album's inspiration—an experiment on the part of he and his wife to take in another female lover into the household. Well, how do you think that went? "You and I are doomed to burn," Nielson sings on "Like Acid Rain," a brief ditty that dresses up its tears with a funky shimmy.

Unknown Mortal Orchestra's metaphors get colorful. A vision of a dismal future finds Nielson eating crickets, and an alternate-reality version of the relationship sees the woman exploding his brain—and not in elation. He becomes a little lazy with "Stage or Screen," what with its acting comparisons, and "Ur Life One Night" serves as a cynic's dissertation on a one-night stand that moves akin to an electromagnetic slinky. For all the dance-inviting good-time vibes surrounding the songs, none of them ever cut loose. *Multi-Love* wants to shake, but it yearns to mope even more. *(continued)*



©Photo by Dusdin Condren

At times, the music turns pretty. “Can’t Keep Checking My Phone” features a rhythm that feels smashed together by tree limbs, while “The World is Crowded” emerges as a slow dance with soulful harmonies. Yet for the bulk of the album, the tension isn’t in the heartache and itchiness to get a move on. With *Multi-Love*, one is left wondering if the world really needs another Jamiroquai.

Too often, the arrangements prove to be an odd fit, whether it’s Nielson’s raspy, cartoonish falsetto slowing down the movement (see the disco-light vibe of “Necessary Evil,” which feels out of sync with the frontman’s more measured approach) or misplaced shifts in direction (see “Extreme Wealth and Casual Cruelty,” which finally shows grit near the end, but this after four minutes of hammock-swaying). The band deserves credit for the keyboard parts, which are all rather era-indefinable, but when Nielson closes the album with feedback-drenched guitars and the declaration that he doesn’t “want to solve your puzzles anymore,” you’re right there with him.

—**Todd Martens**

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The Partridge Family once sang, “It really came together when mom sang along.” And so it goes with Madisen Ward and the Mama Bear. This low-key mother-and-son roots duo recently turned heads with critically acclaimed appearances at SXSW and on the “Late Show with David Letterman.” They are worthy of the attention that increasingly surrounds them.

Twenty-something Madisen Ward grew up listening to his mother Ruth playing cover songs in the coffeehouses of their Kansas City hometown. In time, the son began writing songs and joined his mother onstage, where they performed original material. Slowly and steadily, they attracted a larger audience drawn to their solid, stripped-down charms. While augmented by session musicians, Ward and Mama Bear’s voices and dual guitar playing take center stage on their full-length debut. *Skeleton Crew* is a warm and winning collection of acoustic country-folk and blues delivered with sincere and unpretentious spirit.

“Silent Movies” jumps out of the speakers, an irresistible blend of sprightly beaten and banged rhythm chords. “How ‘bout we just sing forever?,” Madisen cries in his biting, growled baritone. The invitation proves hard to resist. He is a distinctive singer, alternately bending, caressing, and barking out words. Mama Bear matches him at strategic points with sweet high harmonies, and accents her son’s lead vocals with subtle restraint. She joins him for a call-and-response session on “Whole Lotta Problems” and takes a solo turn on “Fight On,” her voice sweet, sad, and blue.

Madisen Ward and the Mama Bear’s folk music honors—but never belabors—its roots. “Daisy Jane” opens with a train-chugging beat and guitar leads that recall Johnny Cash’s early work. Spare percussion and subdued guitars create a sturdy but simple foundation for the melancholy “Modern Day Mystery.” “Down in Mississippi” doubles as a showstopper, the sorrowful song redolent of an earlier time. Mournful strings, gently strummed guitars, and the chirp of crickets tremble in the background as mother and son trade verses.

American roots music has long been shaped by the unique sound of blood relatives, including country pioneers the Stoneman Family, gospel greats the Staple Singers, and the latter-day mother-daughter duo the Judds. Madisen Ward and the Mama Bear emerge as an impressive addition to that list.—**Chrissie Dickinson**



Madisen Ward and the Mama Bear

Skeleton Crew

Glassnote Records, LP or CD



**Van
Hunt**

The Fun Rises, The Fun Sets.

Van Hunt

The Fun Rises, The Fun Sets
Godless Hotspot, 2LP or CD

Just like there's no one or right formula to romanticizing, there's no one or right sonic blueprint when it comes to the work of Van Hunt. *The Fun Rises, The Fun Sets* further chronicles the reinvention of a restless artist—the focus here on the ecstasy and existential headaches that surround the bedroom. It's all accompanied by music that wants to speak its own language rather than just follow a groove. A guitar can roll like a slow-moving locomotive and strings and keyboards flutter over the orchestrations like birdsongs. Throughout, there's a confident sort of vulnerability, as if the songs can fly in a new direction at a moment's notice.

Once a soul man with a dapper voice and modern flair for production, Hunt today is a far removed from his 2004 self-titled debut for Capitol Records. Early in his career, Hunt contracted Randy Jackson of "American Idol" fame to be his manager and seemed destined for an easy major-label life. He even won a Grammy in the mid-2000s for a collaboration with John Legend and Joss Stone. A succession of increasingly weird albums, however, soon meant Hunt was working independently.

The Grammy nominations stopped rolling in, but Hunt's music has only gotten more challenging while managing to hold onto his inviting, everyday man-of-the-people approach. As a whole, *The Fun Rises, The Fun Sets* isn't as "out there" as Hunt's last effort, 2011's *What Were You Hoping For?* The latter is a psychedelic-rock whirlwind that chronicles the struggling-to-get-by working-class lives in Hunt's adopted hometown of North Hollywood.

The Fun Rises noticeably lacks some of the former set's social-conscious bite—as well as those rough-around-the-edges guitars. While the topicality is missed, Hunt keeps these songs

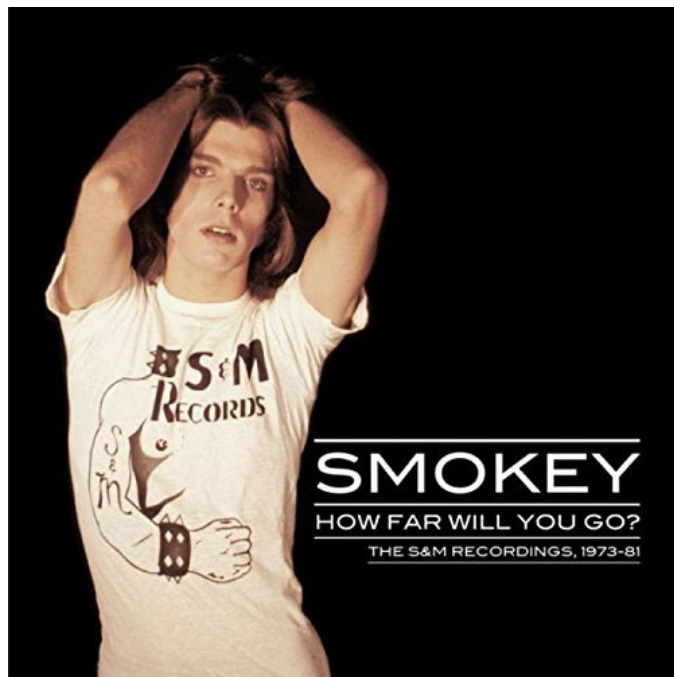
experimental, elaborate, and imminently listenable. The latter is largely due to his personality. These songs are sensual without being erotic. Hunt comes off as the family man with a killer music collection—as well as someone that understands the power of candlelight.

Ultimately, this is an album about reflection. "She Stays With Me" uses alien keyboard sounds to let one's imagination wander while Hunt muses over the one who got away. "If I Wanna Dance With You" dials it down—a somber piano ballad about the ways in which always-connected technology toys with relationships. "Rub My Feet" uses chirpy childish voices and a magical harpsichord to convey the need to keep things playful in a committed relationship. Only the opening "Vega (Stripes On)" and "...Puddin'" feel metaphorically obvious. But both are delicately funky. The former dances around an optimistically slinky guitar and uses hand percussion to massage an overly eager bass. Meanwhile, "...Puddin'" comes to dance, with tip-tapping beats and elastics riffs. "Old Hat" even has fun with Hunt's

lived-in age, getting deep, deep down in mood and contrasting the cool tone of the bass. Picture a stray-cat, out on the town with his tail wagging high against friendly, back-porch handclaps.

Sonic adventures abound. Van Hunt, like, say, D'Angelo or even the younger Frank Ocean and the Weekend, views R&B and soul as jumping off points for manipulation. "Emotional Criminal" is at least two songs in one, shifting from a guitar ballad to an explosive breakdown of cymbals and beats. "A Woman Never Changes" sees Hunt stretching his smooth vocals to the max, from a falsetto to an impassioned croon while little aural trinkets and polite strings make requests to steer to the left or right.

"Teach me a new language," Hunt sings early in the album to a lover, and while he has more R-rated thoughts on his mind, it's clear the vocalist has plenty of ideas about how one can communicate.
—**Todd Martens**



Smokey

How Far Will You Go: The S&M Recordings 1973-81
Chapter Music, CD

Most know the definition of the phrase “NSFW.” A number of song on the first-ever reissue compilation collecting the little-known works of the near-forgotten Los Angeles act Smokey most definitely fit this category. Depending on the thinness of your walls, some of the material here may not be safe for home, either—unless you’re maybe planning the sex party of the century.

Smokey intentionally set out to push boundaries. You don’t sing a phrase like “I wanna be your toilet” over vivid disco synths without wanting to raise a few eyebrows. Likewise, the band’s decision to name its independent label the not-so-subtle S&M Records. But while Smokey’s boogie nights may be an acquired taste, this isn’t music designed to confront. These are songs of ecstasy, liberation, and the joy of celebrating the gay underground counter-culture that the 70s mainstream ignored.

Smokey has fun with subversion, even when it gets a little seedy. “How Far Will You Go...?” snakes in and out of back alleyways and the sort of Hollywood clubs the so-called respectable folk avoided. There’s danger in this imagery, but it also documents the ends to which some had to go to get their freak on. “Leather” is a far more lighthearted party romp, built with soulful backing vocals, bluesy piano licks, and candy-coated funk keyboards.

All of it comes across as the missing link between dance, punk, and porn that no record label wanted to connect. Smokey was nominally the project of John “Smokey” Condon, an L.A. via Baltimore transplant that partied with eccentric filmmaker John Waters back east. Working with a producer by the name of EJ Emmons, who happened to have a number of connections within the L.A. party scene, Smokey took shape, and was wild and crazy from the start.

Openly and unabashedly gay, Smokey isn’t interested in holding back. “DTNA” – it stands for “dance the night away,” get your minds out of the gutter – is silly, funky, and laced with spicy flavoring courtesy of the background voices of cha-cha dancers, whose minds, for the record, are most definitely in the gutter. “Fire” isn’t too far removed from early 70s punk rock such as the Stooges—one-time Stooges guitarist James Williamson was a Smokey collaborator—while “I’ll Always Love You” doubles as Donna Summer bliss. “Puttin’ On the Ritz” emerges as lounge shtick, and “Topanga” serves as a saloon-like reverie to L.A.’s weirdo-hippy mountain town.

To Smokey, genres were simply taboos meant to be broken. The 16-track record works best as an historical piece. “Miss Ray,” for instance, gets a little close to Blues Brothers territory, and the “Ballad of Butchie & Claudine” is all finger-snapping theatrics—an outtake from a more twisted version of *Grease*, if you will.

This is a party band, first and foremost, and the live group boasted a young Randy Rhoads and Kelly Garni, who would later find fame in Quiet Riot. It’s not too far of a stretch to imagine a song like “Hot Hard and Ready” becoming a pool-hall staple—provided anyone had heard it. Consider, then, Smokey a documentation of the greatest revelry you were never invited to attend. —**Todd Martens**

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Sly & the Family Stone
Live at the Fillmore East

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ly & the Family Stone's fate was far from certain during the fall of 1968. The band's joyous message and Sly Stone's brilliant ideas made the group shining stars during the Summer of Love, but that was already more than a year past. While "Dance to the Music" became an international smash, some misfortunes followed. Solid follow-up records met with scant sales. A tour of Europe got cut short in September due to a cannabis bust and lackluster promoters.



©Photo by Amalie Rothschild

So when the group played four concerts over the course of two nights at New York's Fillmore East in October, it had a lot to prove. But even faced with such a sense of urgency, the band still performed on entirely its own terms. The four-disc *Live at the Fillmore East* shows how triumphant it sounded in defying expectations. Rather than sticking to a rigid set list and its established approach, Sly & the Family Stone loosened up and pulled out surprising bits of musical history while also using the stage to plan its own future.

At the first concert, the group

did not perform its big hit, although it did reach into 1967's *Dance to the Music* album for a couple of other tracks it would repeat throughout its Fillmore stand—namely, the inviting "Are You Ready" and generational non-conformist stance, "Color Me True." But the collective also used this first show to take some chances, including "We Love All (Freedom)," which it only played once during its New York run. The chord changes reach back to Sly Stone's roots in gospel, but feature a stinging fuzz-tone guitar lead from his brother Freddie. "Turn Me Loose," from the

band's underrated debut, *A Whole New Thing*, gets turned into a medley with Otis Redding's "I Can't Turn You Loose."

More surprising is a cover of the lesser-known blues, "Won't Be Long," which Aretha Franklin sang eight years earlier. Rose Stone's rendition makes for a worthy comparison. Another song the group rarely performed, "Chicken," could have been a novelty—it quotes from "Old McDonald" and "Pomp and Circumstance"—but the tune also might have offered a chance for Sly & the Family Stone to show off their dance moves. *(continued)*



©Photo by Amalie Rothschild

In the liner notes, drummer Greg Errico says the routine included Sly and Freddie Stone along with bassist Larry Graham jumping off the stage and doing the ham-bone in the aisles. Either way, it's hard to imagine that all of this was what the New York audience anticipated.

While the sets tightened up for the next three shows, the repertoire still pulls from unexpected sources. The second concert includes a version of the early jazz standard "St. James Infirmary," with Cynthia Robinson's trumpet smears and Sly Stone's organ lines making it sound like a mash-up of Bubba Miley and Big John Patton. The group also extends on ideas taken from their records, such as lengthy a cappella singing on "Don't Burn Baby" and "Music Lover." When they perform "Dance to the Music," Graham's early forays into funk become clearer. Toward the end of the

stand, everything comes together in the glorious "Love City"—from Freddie Stone's guitar leads to the church refrains into one emphatically optimistic shout that the group seldom captured again.

Initially, these concerts were taped for a planned live album. While there remains no clear reason why this performance was not released until now, Edwin & Arno Konings imply in the liner notes that Sly & the Family Stone's next single, "Everyday People," became such a hit in December, the group and its record label did not want to look back. Then, in the years that followed, came Woodstock, the dark masterpiece *There's a Riot Goin' On*, and decades of isolation, struggles, and ongoing weirdness. No matter. On these two nights 47 years ago, this family sounded on top of the world and seemed to be having more fun than anyone. —**Aaron Cohen**

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FEATURE

FEATURE

A Tremendous Anchor The MOON by Simaudio Neo 430HA

By Jeff Dorgay

Switching from the subtle harmonies embedded in Van Halen's "Jamie's Cryin'," to John Bonham's massive drum sound via the recent HD remasters of the first two Led Zeppelin albums, I am stunned by how much musical depth, detail and sheer dynamic energy the MOON by Simaudio Neo 430HA reveals, especially in light of its \$4,300 price tag. To some, this will come across as steep for a headphone amplifier, but the 430HA is way more than a headphone amplifier. \$4,300 gets you a DSD/high res DAC, and a superb lineage, too. Not to mention all the cables (and rack space) you *don't* need to connect these three components. Unless you have an amazing DAC, spend the extra \$800 and get the 430HA with DAC board installed. Those not needing the DAC can put the 430HA on their favorite shelf without DAC for \$3,500.



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Having spent a lot of time with Simaudio's 650D and 750D digital players, as well as with their top-of-the-line 800 series preamplifier, I'm truly floored by just how much of that performance exists inside the case of the 430HA for a fraction of the cost. Only a small group of companies could actually produce a product like the 430HA, and to Simaudio's credit, this component is designed and built in their Montreal facility from top to bottom, including the metalwork. For those who don't know, Simaudio has a full metal-working shop in house with their own 5-axis CNC mill.

A quick test drive of some of the world's finest headphones

quickly establishes the 430HA as a top shelf headphone amplifier. Delivering 667mw of power into 600 ohms and 8 watts into 50 ohms, there is nothing it won't drive, even the notoriously tough to drive HiFi-Man HE-6. Headphone enthusiasts with a diverse collection of phones will appreciate the 430HA's range of connectivity, with 3- and 4-pin XLR jacks along with the standard 1/4" jack. There's even a 1/8" input jack on the front panel for the line level input of your favorite portable music player. Hiding the headphone outputs behind a sliding door on the front panel is particularly cool. *(continued)*



With one set of variable RCA outputs to drive a power amplifier and a fixed pair of outputs (to drive a tape deck!!) the main difference between the 430HA and the big guns in the Simaudio arsenal is the lack of fully balanced XLR outputs. Keeping with the concept of using the 430HA as a preamplifier and DAC, it can easily be placed near your laptop or other digital source, with long interconnects to a more conveniently placed power amplifier elsewhere. The robust output stage of the 430HA drives 30-foot interconnects with ease.

The biggest difference

Those choosing the DAC option will be equally pleased with the digital input options: a pair of standard SPDIF inputs, Toslink and USB, supporting PCM 16/44.1kHz to 24/192 with the USB input going up to PCM 32/384kHz. The USB input also supports DSD 64, 128 and 256. An analog crossfeed circuit works for those wanting less of a ping-pong effect in their heads and can be engaged or disengaged to your preference.

This came in handy with the latest Florence + the Machine album, which has an overly spacey feel.

Yet there are times that this expansive soundstage is a blast. Sun Kil Moon's "Little Rascals" through the Audeze phones was completely psychedelic. Mark Kozelec's voice sounds almost as if he's being water boarded while singing – a textural effect not always conveyed with lesser headphone amplifiers. And of course, early Pink Floyd is fantastic.

However, should you be looking for an all-in-one component to anchor your audio system that happens to have a power amplifier and a pair of speakers, the 430HA is one of the best buys in high-end audio today. Certainly the best I've ever experienced, and long-term *TONEAudio* readers know I do not throw the B-word around loosely.

An honest confession

As much fun as I've had with the 430HA over the last nine months,

I must confess it's become the reference preamplifier in my home system, now consisting of a Conrad-Johnson LP-120sa+ power amplifier and a pair of GamuT RS5 speakers. Thanks to the balanced input, I've just recently added the Simaudio MOON Evolution LP610 phonostage and an AVID Volvere SP turntable to the mix. To put this in perspective, the \$4,300 Simaudio 430HA is the cornerstone of a \$70,000 system and I couldn't be happier. *(continued)*

FEATURE



The 430HA is a rare component offering performance well beyond the asking price. Simaudio has only cut corners in the sense that the casework is of a more spartan design than their legendary Evolution series and the remote less elaborate than the one supplied with their flagship components. But not on the inside. Simaudio's Lionel Goodfield is quick to point out, "The internal circuitry of the 430HA shares the same level of components as the Evolution series in critical locations, and the M-eVOL2 volume control is the same as the one we use in our much costlier 600i and 700i integrated amplifiers."

The rest of the technical innovations lurking inside the 430HA are best explained here: <http://www.simaudio.com/en/product/37-headphone-amplifier.html> But suffice it to say it all works brilliantly, and the minute you give the volume control a hefty clockwise twist you won't care about any of it – that's the mark of a great component in my book. *(continued)*

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FEATURE

Great components and stellar build quality always count for a lot and it's tough, if not impossible, to get an amazing performance if these boxes aren't checked. But after months of extensive listening and comparison, the 430HA is indeed special, musical and effortlessly real. This component lives in a zone, price-wise, that isn't mega high end, but is still a substantial investment. However, it offers mega performance – it offers refinement rarely available at this price. As much fun as the 430HA is with first class headphones, you don't really notice what a phenomenal performer it is until you drop it in a room with great speakers and experience the bass control and upper register separation and cleanliness it delivers.

Like every other Simaudio component I've used, it takes a few days of operation, fully powered to sound its best. Eco-minded, take note; the 430HA only draws half a watt when in standby mode, so your carbon footprint will not expand.

Regardless of whether you use it primarily as a headphone amplifier or a 2-channel control center, with power amplifier and speakers, this is a component that you won't want to move on from – unless you make a five-figure investment. Goodfield sums it up when he says, "It's not only the ultimate solid-state headphone amplifier, but most likely the ultimate one box solution for computer based audio. That's what we were trying to accomplish." I couldn't agree more.

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Goodfield sums it up when he says, "It's not only the ultimate solid-state headphone amplifier, but most likely the ultimate one box solution for computer based audio. That's what we were trying to accomplish."

FEATURE



Aggression,
Abrasiveness, Loudness, and Honesty

A Conversation With METZ Frontman Alex Edkins

By Andy Downing

METZ has never prided itself on its subtlety.

Over the course of two albums, 2012's *METZ*, and this year's *METZ II* (both on Sub Pop), the Toronto hardcore trio continues to function as a sonic wrecking crew of sorts, building cathartic songs on tangles of pile-driving drums, tightly wound guitars, and frontman Alex Edkins' corrosive howl that frequently mimics the screams of an earthquake survivor buried beneath a mountain of rubble.

Rather than mellowing with age, Edkins and his mates—bassist Chris Slorach and drummer Hayden Menzies—have only grown more unhinged on *II*, a raw, dissonant effort that's both nastier and less forgiving than its predecessor.

"I think we just wanted to evolve, and at least feel as though we were improving as a band and songwriters and producers and everything," says Edkins, 34, reached by phone en route to his brother's April wedding in Montreal. "We wanted to focus on what we're about as a band, and try not to think about...what anyone else might expect from us. We did a pretty good job of making the record we were supposed to make."

Was it a challenge going into recording *METZ II* knowing there was an audience out there this time around?

I think we tried really hard not to think about that. Most of the pressure we feel is internal amongst the three of us. I think we put a lot of pressure on ourselves on the first one, too, even though we thought only our friends would be hearing it.

Considering your low expectations for the first album, were you surprised how strongly people connected with the music?

Yeah, definitely. It was never something we could have anticipated, and we definitely didn't imagine that kind of response at all. Doing the kind of music we're doing, we don't have any delusions of grandeur. The only people we were trying to satisfy at the time, and on this one as well, was us. I think we also have kind of a weird inability to know where we stand as far as other people are concerned. So we try to worry about the things that matter: The music and playing good shows.

With some time and perspective, do you now have a better sense about what people connected to on the first record?

At the shows, we were able to talk to people, and we could see what parts they were responding to physically, for sure. We toured that record for about two years, and it's safe to say when you do that...you're going to get more of the inside scoop as far as what's making people tick and what's making them gravitate to what you're doing. We didn't want to do a complete 180-degree turn [on *II*], but we definitely wanted to change and evolve and improve, while not leaving behind our roots.

You actually returned to the barn where you recorded the first album for some sessions. Did that setting serve as a reminder of those roots?

I think so. The choices we made as far as where to record and who to record with were certainly influenced by the experience with the first album. That's not to say it was all gravy. *(continued)*

"We wanted to focus on what we're about as a band, and try not to think about... what anyone else might expect from us."

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I think there were really trying times making this one where we were frustrated. Then there were times where all the pieces fit and it was really easy. In the beginning, we decided to go back to the barn because we wanted to stick with what felt good and what felt familiar. I don't think we were ready in a lot of ways to jump out of our comfort zone quite yet.

When I interviewed you about the last record, you talked about how the barn setting was so idyllic and remote and serene, and then you're there crafting this loud, aggressive music. Do you enjoy that contrast?

[Laughs] It certainly doesn't hurt. To be able to do a take and then walk out the door and be in a farmer's field is a nice juxtaposition. We had the same experience mixing the record, which I think really helped us. We're usually running pretty hot. The three of us are pretty amped up, and we can be pretty uptight at times when we're working on stuff. We mixed the album in the basement of Graham Walsh's house, and our grounding would come when we'd stop for lunch or something and we'd go upstairs and his little daughter, Francis, was watching the Muppets or reading a book or something. We'd have a laugh, sit back, and be able to put everything in perspective. We could basically just chill out and realize, OK, we're down in this basement with the lights turned down and we're focused on this raging song, and then we'd come upstairs and it's the Muppets. It was kind of awesome because you can't live in that headspace all the time. We're certainly not the kind of guys who want to be in a negative place all the time. That's not us.

I recently interviewed Brian Gibson from Lightning Bolt, which, like

METZ, really built a reputation as a live act. He talked about the difficulty of recreating that live energy in the studio. Is that something you struggled with?

I don't know if it's a struggle, but it's something in the back of your mind. Our litmus test for what stays and what goes is how it translates when we play it with just the three of us. We certainly don't try to layer tons and tons of things in the studio because we know that there are certain limitations to what we can pull off live and what feels good and what resonates with people. We play a song into the ground...and if we're not sick of it, and if it still has that punch and that special kind of energy, then we know it's one of ours.

I think as far as getting it on tape, it's just about capturing that feel and getting the right take. This time around I think we were far less interested in getting a perfect take and way more interested in getting the take that felt right. There's a way more human feel on this one. It's a bit darker. It's a bit heavier. But it's way more human, whereas the other record was a little bit clinical in that it was bang-on as far as tempo and things like that. Basically, that just didn't turn us on this time. We wanted to leave the mistakes in, and I think we're all glad we did.

Your live shows are really known for that kind of intensity. Are you still approachable in those minutes before you go onstage or do you need to get yourself in that destroy-all-comers headspace?

Yeah, I kind of pace around pretty heavily. People who really know me know not to talk to me before the shows [laughs]. *(continued)*

INTERVIEW

This time around I think we were far less interested in getting a perfect take and way more interested in getting the take that felt right. There's a way more human feel on this one. It's a bit darker. It's a bit heavier. But it's way more human...

Ten to 15 minutes before the show is not a good time to ask me if I want a beer or anything like that because I'm a little bit standoffish. It's a combination of nerves and just getting excited. That being said, it's certainly not any kind of ritual or routine. I'd say the three of us just kind of snap to it in that moment we hit the first note. It's

up what we do. We're into all types of music, and we love avant-garde noise and wall-of-sound stuff, but at the end of the day, for us, we really like the limitation of having those three instruments. We like having guitar, bass, and drums and really trying to stretch out what we do—and not in terms of effects, but just with how we

[Laughs.] Yeah, I think so. It's funny, we did a tour with Death From Above 1979 recently and Jesse [Keeler], who plays bass for the band, said, "You guys are all drummers." That's the way he sees our band, like we all play our instruments in a very percussive and rhythmic way, which is different maybe from how he sees other



kind of an automatic thing we always have ever since we started playing together. There was always that aggression and abrasiveness and loudness. That's always been the thing that clicked with us. It's never something we had to try to do. It just always came to us honestly, I think.

You talked about experimenting more, and you incorporated some different instruments, like piano and found sounds into METZ II. Were you wary of how far you could stretch things without losing the essence of the band?

Well, I think we've always wanted to experiment as much as possible without overwhelming or clouding

play the instruments. That's what gets us excited. We do like adding flourishes because it's a record, and we love listening to really well-produced, cool records. We certainly attempt to make those, and moving forward I think it's going to continue on and to expand. But there is a fine line where you can go overboard. I think if you put headphones on, you can hear some cool little details that you won't hear in the live show, but we're trying to keep it in check.

You seem to enjoy pushing the guitar to its extremes to see what kinds of sounds you can create. Do you like challenging yourself to see what new things you can pull from an instrument that's been around decades?

guitar players. I had never thought about that, but I thought it was an interesting sort of perspective. But I don't know. There are certain limitations to my ability, and I try to have something I can at least call my own and that I feel truly comfortable doing.

Did you find that the gnarlier instrumental backdrops on the new album pushed your songwriting places you didn't expect?

I think we just took a gut-feeling kind of approach, and I definitely think there's a lot more of a dark side to it lyrically and musically. The vocals and the melody were a much bigger part of the writing process this time around.

I did a large part of the writing and arranging at home, and then brought it in and fleshed it out with the guys. So it was a slightly different approach this time around, but it allowed for some slightly more melodic moments and a little bit more of a highlight on some of the vocals. I do put that on the other two guys, because they were the ones during the mixing who were going, "Eh, I think we can push that vocal up a bit." I think as we progress our confidence level is increasing, so we're starting to feel comfortable doing new things.

That leads right into my next question: Do you think the increased focus on the vocals reflects your growing confidence as a frontman?

It's the only way to look at it. It's a comfort thing and it's a confidence thing. Also, like I said, it's now a pretty important part of the songwriting process. On a lot of the songs, the vocals were leading the arrangements and the chord progressions, whereas before, the chord progressions were written and then the vocals were worked out on top of them. I don't think I ever had an aspiration to be a frontman. I always wanted to play music, but I never wanted to be the guy in front of the microphone. It just kind of happened, and now I'm starting to get a little more comfortable.

Growing up, you weren't the kind of kid that reveled in the spotlight?

My parents might disagree, but I think I was just the kid who wanted to play music with a bunch of guys or girls and just jam. I'd be very happy to hang back and just make music. It's certainly not about being in the limelight for me. It's part of the reason that with press photos, we always try to obscure them. It's really not what we're doing this for.

You described the last record as a micro-look at modern life. Do you find yourself casting a wider glance with this one?

I think lyrically it's still the same type of approach. We're attempting to paint scenes from a movie as opposed to an entire story. But I think some of the content is a little wider. It's a bit more of an outward look. I was really getting into Raymond Carver's stuff recently, and I kind of love how with his short stories he shows you a small part of someone's life and then leaves you hanging. He'll build something up to where you're sure something monumental is about to happen, and then it cuts you off. I love that approach, and I try to do something along those same lines. Honestly, it's mostly the things that irk me these days that cause me to write something down. It's rare for me to get that urge to make music when I'm really happy. You'll read about something in the paper, or you'll see something in downtown Toronto, or something will happen close to you, and it will just rock you. It's usually not something positive that comes out in the songs.

Has music always served as a pressure-release valve for you?

I think so. I didn't even know I needed one until I found out about punk rock and hardcore when I was younger. It was this new world I found that I had no idea existed, and from that moment I took a turn in my way of thinking about things. I don't know if I've looked back sense. I wouldn't be as dramatic to say it saved my life or anything, but it's been a massive influence, and it's changed my life for the better. *(continued)*

I don't think I ever had an aspiration to be a frontman. I always wanted to play music, but I never wanted to be the guy in front of the microphone. It just kind of happened, and now I'm starting to get a little more comfortable.

Climbing the Ladder

Climbing the ladder of AudioQuest interconnect cables leads to better and better performance, thanks to less and less interference from the cable.

This is made possible by the use of superior materials and the implementation of increasingly more sophisticated construction techniques, such as: the progression from Long-Grain Copper to solid Perfect-Surface Silver, from Foamed-PE insulation to FEP Air-Tubes, from Metal-Layer Noise-Dissipation System to multi-layer Carbon-Based NDS, from low-distortion Gold-Plated terminations to extreme-purity Red Copper plugs with Hanging-Silver plating, and more.

Despite their differences, our Bridges & Falls, Rivers, and Elements audio interconnects are all closely related. **Follow the color code:** Chicago is a bigger, better version of Evergreen, but PSC copper-based Golden Gate is clearly better. Red River is a Triple-Balanced bigger, better version of Golden Gate, but doesn't offer the further advantages of Big Sur—and so it goes, on up to Wind.

The reason for the two sides of the ladder is simple: The Double-Balanced **Bridges & Falls cables can be fitted with a choice of RCA plugs, 3.5mm mini-plug, 3.5mm female, or DIN plugs** (usually for Naim electronics). The Triple-Balanced (except Chicago) **Rivers & Elements cables can be fitted with RCA or balanced XLR plugs.**

The Triple-Balanced progression continues upward through top Element Series cable **Fire**—a remarkable cable **fully deserving its nickname “WEL Jr.”** as it uses all the same materials and construction techniques as the Wild and WEL models, at a smaller scale.

Start at the bottom, where the AQ value system is already 100% evident, or climb as high as you like. Keep climbing until the incremental cost of the higher model is no longer the **least expensive way to make the most improvement**—but beware, you might find yourself at the top of the ladder or beyond before reaching that point.

Sincerely,



William E. Low



audioquest®

What was it about the music in the Ottawa punk scene in which you came up that really spoke to you?

Just to see people doing something for the pure love of it, with no dollar signs in their eyes. It was like, “I’m going to do this and I’m going to put my heart and soul into this and I’m going to invest my time into this thing because I think it has value.” To see people doing that and putting on shows and publishing zines and doing radio shows and starting labels, it was really inspiring, and I wanted to be a part of it. Not to mention the sheer volume and physicality of punk rock. That was pretty intoxicating, too.

Coming into music with that mindset, I’m curious if a couple albums in you feel like your motivations for making music have changed in any way?

Well, I think the three of us have that background in common. That’s how we all came up, and that’s how we found music and were never quite the same about it. As I was talking about earlier, part of trying to keep everything out during the making of the record was trying to maintain that naïve kind of love for it, like, “Let’s remember why we started doing this.” I think the three of us are usually pretty good at maintaining that outlook on what we’re doing. That’s why we try to keep complete control over it, really. We’re self-managed. We write and produce

everything. We do the artwork. And it’s because we want to own it. We’re lucky to have help with manufacturing and distribution from a great label, but the rest of it, we can call that ours. We take a lot of pride in it and try to think only about the music, though that can sometimes be pretty hard because the industry these days is a totally different beast. The band is always changing and growing, and we’re trying to adapt to what’s going on around us.

You wrote “Can’t Understand” about someone close to you that was diagnosed with a terminal illness, and the press-release notes this album stemmed in part from you contemplating your relationship with death. Was this the first time you really wrestled with the idea of mortality?

I don’t know if it was the first time, but before the last few years I feel like I’d been sheltered from that. I’d been lucky to not lose important people up until recently, and I think it does kind of hit home when you’re faced with that. It’s there. It’s in some of the songs and in some of the outlook on the album. I think it was a bit of a wakeup call, and a different way of looking at your everyday relationships. Death puts everything in a different light.

Did focusing on some darker aspects of life take a mental toll on you?

It’s a positive thing. It never takes a toll in a negative way. Sometimes I think about it and wonder, “What is the motivation?

Why is it we go up onstage and we do that?” And now I think maybe deep down it’s what I need, and I didn’t know it until recently. Maybe everyone needs that one outlet where they can turn off their mind a little bit. And for me, it’s certainly music and performing with this band. After we’re done playing or after we finish recording a song, it’s the best feeling I can think of. It’s what I’m addicted to.

Did you appreciate the humor in the fact that one of your darkest songs (“Can’t Understand”) first surfaced on an Adult Swim compilation?

[Laughs.] Yeah, well, I actually hadn’t thought about that, but now that you mention it. There are moments on this record, too. I think the three of us are generally pretty happy-go-lucky guys, but when we do this band it’s 100 percent and it’s a serious thing for us. But I don’t want to stress that point, or have it misunderstood that it’s this deadly serious thing. It’s certainly honest, but there are moments in some of the songs where I find the lines to be somewhat humorous, in sort of taking the piss out of a situation. It definitely comes out as an honest thing, but it’s not always deadly serious. Most of the time it is. But not all the time. ●

Woo Woo!

The Woo Audio 234 SET Monoblocks

By Jeff Dorgay

Y ou can look at the Woo Audio SET monoblocks one of two ways: a dreadfully overpriced \$16,000 headphone amplifier, or a \$16,000 pair of SET monoblocks that give you output tube flexibility (45, 2A3 or 300B output tubes are accommodated) that eclipse a pair of \$125,000 Wavac SET amps with a free headphone amp thrown in. I'm not a big headphone guy, so I choose the latter option.

WOO AUDIO



The Woo 234s are by far the most engaging, most musically revealing headphone amplification system I've ever experienced. Nothing makes headphones sing like these monoblocks! As I listen to Brand X's *Livestock*, the Audeze LCD-3 phones on my head (or whatever phones I am using) disappear, coming closer to the sound of speakers in a room than anything before or after its time here. Mike Liang from Woo was kind enough to send a pair of the \$5,500 Abyss AB-1266 phones with the monos, so I could have the ultimate headphone experience. Who knows? If I had a pair of these, I'd probably listen to headphones more often.

The only time I'm not as convinced I'm listening to speakers is with heavy-duty house/dub/electronica – there's just no headphone on Earth that really delivers the slam that this kind of music deserves. However, sitting on one of my REL G-2 subwoofers *while* I'm cranking the 234s comes pretty close.

Dare I say, the 234 MONOs are even more beautiful to look at than they are to listen to, and they were a ton of fun to photograph. The finely machined aluminum chassis, combining black and clear anodizing over its subtle curves, is a work of visual as well as audible fine art. These tubed beauties deserve a place of honor and high visibility in your listening room.

Many personalities

Going beyond what any other headphone amplifier has done in terms of output tube choices, the 234 MONOs feature a Tube Switching Key (TSK) that repurposes the amplifier to use tubes from three different groups: the 2A3 tube, 300B and the 45 tube – hence the name 234 MONO. *(continued)*

NEW



M O O N

Nēo 430HA

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

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



M O O N
simaudio.com



MUSICAL ECSTASY

FEATURE

Each one of these tubes has a distinct sonic signature, along with the variations on the theme with different models from different manufacturers. Try that with your hundred thousand dollar Wavac.

If that weren't enough, Woo also provides Output Switching Keys (OSK) to configure and optimize the monoblocks for speakers or headphones, with yet another OSK for plate or cathode mode, accommodating high- and low-impedance headphones with ease.

If you have a huge headphone collection – and you should if you're going to spend this much money on a headphone amplifier – rest assured the 234 MONOs would work well with everything.

Under the hood is a full class-A, SET design with a 274B rectifier, and a 6SN7 driving your choice of output tubes. In addition to the output tube choices the 234 MONOs offer, tube rollers will be swapping tubes from here to eternity. Those with prodigious tube

collections will be amazed at the gradations of performance that will be able to be coaxed from these amplifiers. A good friend bringing over a few vintage Western Electric 300B and RCA 2A3 tubes opened a universe of sonic possibilities. The rest of us will easily enjoy the 234 MONOs with the tubes they ship with, but those willing to spend a few thousand more dollars on vintage NOS tubes await even more joy. *(continued)*



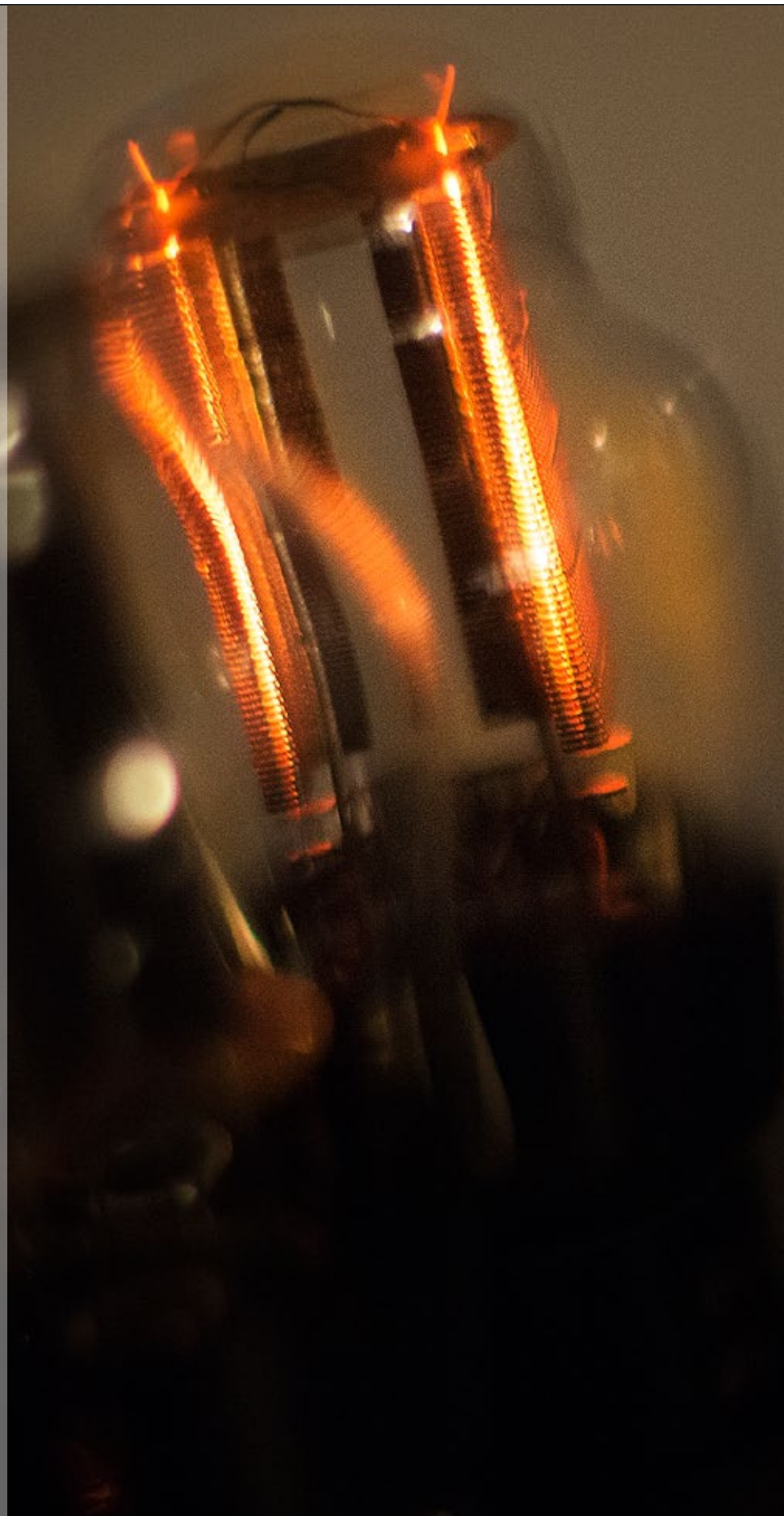
FEATURE

Again, Liang is quick to point out that they suggest the Sophia Royal 300B and Takatuski 300B for use with lower sensitivity speakers, claiming a higher load capacity and faster recovery. Best of all, these tubes are readily available, but they will not provide a higher power output.

Extended use of the 234 MONOs convinces me that the headphone amplifier is the critical component in the chain. Much like the way a budget phono cartridge on a fantastic turntable always sounds better than a big dollar cartridge on a mediocre turntable, this headphone amplifier will make *all* of your headphones sound better – much better. The Woo 234 MONOs have so much drive and control, they eliminate a lot of the anomalies that you’ve probably been mistaking for frequency response problems in the past. Think of the 234 MONOs as the anchor to your headphone experience.

After going through my collection of phones from Audeze, Oppo, AKG, Grado and Koss I was shocked at how much better, how much smoother and how much more dynamic every one of these phones that I thought I knew well now sounded. The change was not subtle, with even the \$99 Grado SR-60is sounding much more authoritative and much more expensive. It reminds me of running the \$95 Shure M97 cartridge on the \$30,000 VPI Classic Direct turntable – I’ve never heard that cartridge reveal that much music, but on the VPI it shines. Even the notoriously edgy Grado GS-1000s and Sennheiser SR800s were smooth, extended and much more natural in their tonal perspective when driven with the Woo 234 MONOs.

Just as you would with the output taps on a tube power amplifier, regardless of what your speakers are rated, I suggest experimenting with the OSKs as well. You might just find a combination you prefer to what your intuition tells you. It’s wonderful that Woo provides so many options.

**Beguiling with speakers too**

The 234 MONOs are a mega headphone amplification system; anyone possessing a high efficiency pair of speakers will be absolutely smitten with these amplifiers used thusly. As amazing as these amplifiers perform with headphones, they provide an otherworldly experience with the right speakers. To clarify, the “right” speakers for a low power SET amplifier means either a single driver system, a high sensitivity horn system, or high sensitivity multiple driver system. It’s worth noting that not all multi driver speaker systems work the same way, even though one may have a higher rated sensitivity than the other. The typically higher output impedance of an SET makes it a little tougher to match perfectly with a speaker system, and the complexity of said speaker system’s crossover network can be problematic for the SET to drive because of the associated impedance swings.

However, if you find a speaker that does not have this issue, you will find yourself in heaven on playback because the SET design accomplishes two things. First, the simple circuit topology means fewer components in the signal path, leading to a purer transfer of information. Secondly, by nature, the signal passes through a single output device, which is on continuously, eliminating the crossover distortion present in a push-pull amplifier. SET amplifiers possess a magic, much like pure class-A amplifiers do, and perhaps even a little more. The 234 MONOs are among the finest SETs I’ve ever heard at *any* price.

FEATURE

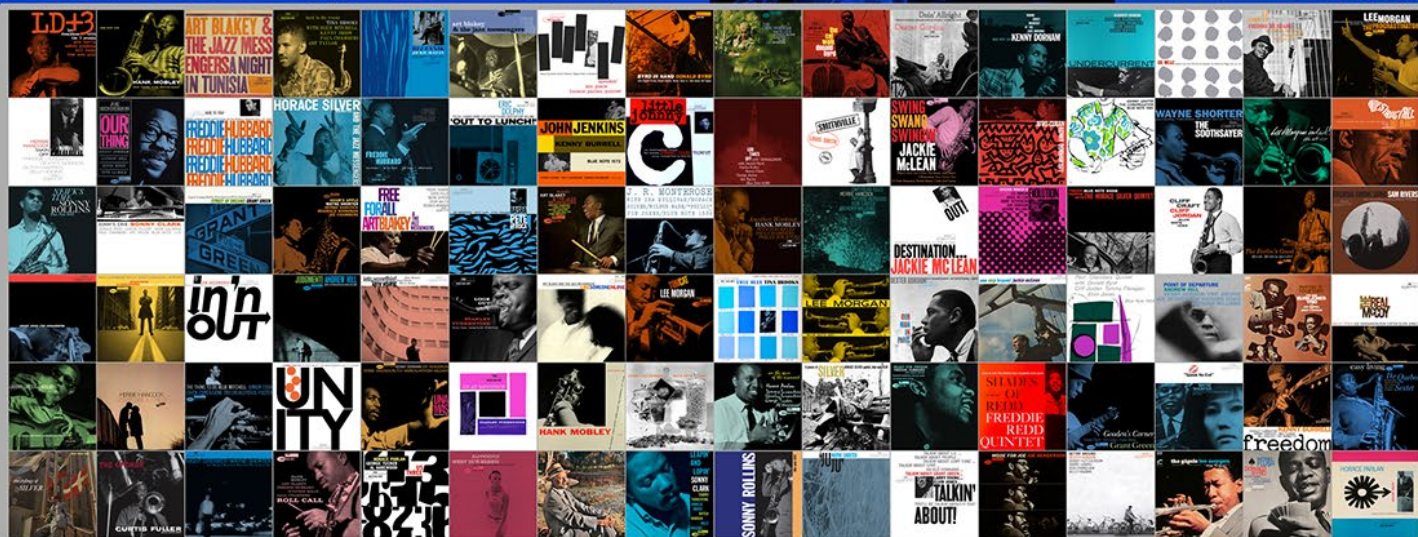
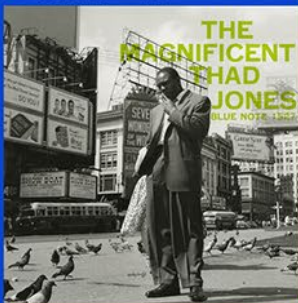
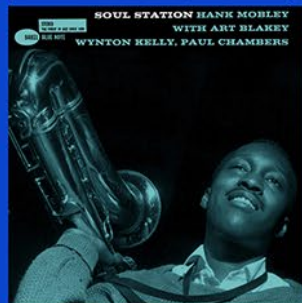
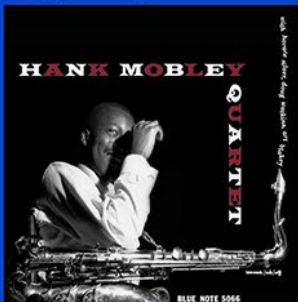
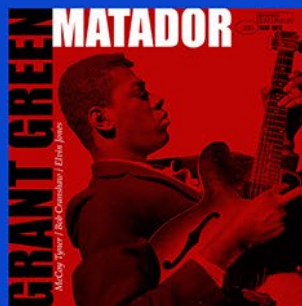
Lining up a few great highly efficient speakers produced fantastic results all around. Whether I was listening to the tiny Blumenstein Audio Orcas, or the Avant Garde Duos, the 234 MONOs are absolutely thrilling to listen to. No matter what my musical choices, there is always an epic amount of inner detail on tap. The acoustic guitar intro on Graham Parker’s “Tough on Clothes” hangs in the air as Parker’s signature gravely voice enters the mix. On a lesser resolving system, Parker can sometimes sound like John Hiatt, but not here.

Again, that SET magic that I keep telling you about comes through in spades when you listen to Crosby, Stills and Nash, Crowded House, Little Village or Todd Rundgren’s Utopia. All four of these groups have multi-part harmonies with vocalists who blend well together. Yet through the Woo amplifiers (headphones or speakers) each of these vocalists maintain a distinct space, sound and presence. I’m sure you have a few records in your collection where you often thought there was only a layer or two of vocals, yet laid bare with these SET amplifiers is a true revelation.

The same can be said for small ensemble classical music. And of course, those who love vocal recordings will freak out, and if the 234 MONOs are your first experience with an SET and high efficiency speakers, you may just be hooked for life. They reveal musical nuance like few others, and the only large amplifiers I’ve ever heard that could accomplish this level of fine detail are from Boulder and Pass Labs, my current large amplifier references. (Both of which cost 4–5 times the sticker price of the Woo.) *(continued)*

grive thyself

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FEATURE

It's almost as if these amplifiers live and breathe with the music, presenting sound in such an organic fashion, they will fool you into thinking it's the real thing with the right recording. Like every SET, the Woo does have its limitations, and large scale, overly complex classical or rock music at high volume is where the 234 MONOs fall a little short unless you have super efficient speakers like the Avant Gardes. When you run out of the available power, you feel it instantly with a complete collapse of the soundstage. Keep the 234 MONOs in their comfort zone though, and you will be rewarded with musical nirvana. With the right speakers, you may never want to leave

For those not completely familiar with the three tube types at your disposal, the 45 tube can produce about a watt or two, while the 2A3s generate 2-3 watts and the 300Bs crank out about 8 watts per channel. Woo provides a chart listing the output power for every possible combination right here: <http://234mono.com/download/234-output-ratings.pdf>

Thanks to a pair of single-ended RCA inputs and an XLR, you can easily skip the pre-amplifier, making the Woo an even better value. With top shelf preamplifiers from Pass, ARC, Simaudio and Koda, I felt no need to use them. Pairing the 234 MONOs with the \$110k dCS Vivaldi digital playback system proved stunning, regardless of output configuration. *(continued)*



Music Matters, Ltd.

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

FEATURE

A world-class headphone amp, or ?

I'm hoping by now you know I'm completely smitten with the Woo Audio 234 MONOs. But the question still remains: are they the world's best headphone amplifier? Until I hear something more amazing, they certainly are to me. \$16,000 is absolutely crazy money for a headphone amplifier, but it's all relative. If you love headphones, have multiple pairs that you cherish and a world-class source or two to provide music, there's no other way to play the game.

Those living in the high efficiency speaker world who don't need to have the prestige of a six-figure amplifier and

preamplifier will find the Woos to exceed any expectation they might have, and the \$16,000 price tag a stellar bargain, with an amazing headphone amplifier thrown in.

So whether you want the world's finest headphone amplifier, or the world's best value in a pair of high performance SET monoblocks, the Woo Audio 234 monoblocks should be at the top of your list. Buy a pair now before Jack Woo wises up and starts charging \$50k for a pair of these! ●

The Woo Audio 234 Monoblocks
MSRP: \$15,900/pair
www.woaudio.com



Product: 122 Integrated Amplifier

P R I M A R E

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

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Let's Play!

Using AudioQuest's NightHawk Headphones for Gaming

By Jeff Dorgay



Staring at all the crappy headphones lined up next to the PlayStation games, I knew I had something cool waiting at home. The AudioQuest NightHawk headphones just arrived and yeah, I could listen to *Kind of Blue* and tell you how well they capture the texture of Miles Davis's horn, or to *Dark Side of the Moon* and tell you that the stereo image they throw is psychedelic. I could just wax poetic about their industrial design and finish, worthy of headphones costing three times as much, but you can read about that in pretty much every other review of the NightHawk because they are not only awesome but an incredible value as far as \$599 headphones go. Certainly awesome enough to get one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2015.

But do you know how much fun they are to play *Grand Theft Auto* with? Regular readers of *TONE* know I love to drive fast, but you may not have known I am a closet gamer. I don't do it often and am not a big fan of blowing people up, but put me in front of *GTA* and it's hypnotizing. I can play for hours. Which is not necessarily fun for everyone else in the house. *(continued)*

TONE STYLE

Fortunately, everything that makes the NightHawk phones rocking for everyday use makes them a blast to play games on. And everything you probably enjoy about listening to phones in the first place (increased resolution, ease of hearing low level details, bigger stereo image) makes for a highly immersive gaming experience. Those of you who aren't gamers might not be aware of the mega budgets allotted to most video games – millions were spent on GTA, which achieved a *billion* dollars in sales after three days. That's a little more than one-fifth of total music sales for the entire year of 2014. Hmmm.



When you're zooming down a back alley, it's much easier to tell the differences between the cars used and you can hear the actual soundtrack of the game, with a defined space of its own, ethereally floating around your head as you shift gears and shoot at things – yes! The solid transient attack of the NightHawk makes all gangster activity that much more realistic as well. Listening on a sound bar or a mediocre HT system just doesn't show off what's really going on in your favorite games, but the NightHawk opens up a new world.

Those even partially addicted to gaming have yet another reason not to go to the gym.

You can raise this ruckus with your significant other snoozing away peacefully, or for the ultimate cocoon experience, get two pairs of NightHawk phones so you can both immerse yourselves in larger-than-life sound, regardless of the world you want to navigate. Friends that were able to pry the NightHawks off of my head while I was romping through *Lego Jurassic World* were thrilled by the guttural sounds of the dinosaurs and other assorted monsters in the game. Best of all, the attention paid to the ergonomics of the NightHawk phones makes for a comfortable game-a-thon. After you shoot about eight thugs, you won't even remember you have headphones on!

The same precision that allows the NightHawk to recreate a three dimensional musical space in and around your head significantly enhances the gaming experience, allowing specific placement and movement to cars and critters. If you're not careful, you might even freak yourself out when using these phones to play games, but it's so much fun. As I have a modest home theater system, the AudioQuest NightHawk headphones are my environment of choice for gaming going forward. Watch for a full review and all the techie bits in an upcoming issue of *TONEAudio*, but for now I've got some raptors chasing me! Gotta go.

HAUTONGA

BY PLINIUS AUDIO



The Hautonga 200wpc integrated amplifier is a perfectly equipped and well balanced piece.

Featuring five line level RCA inputs, Phono RCA and a balanced XLR pair, Pre Out and a Line Out connection for archiving or other ancillary equipment. The addition of trigger in and out connectors provide for multi-room or home theatre simplicity.

Effortlessly scroll through inputs, CD player functions or access HT Bypass using the full function remote.

Taking integrated refinement to a new level, the Hautonga is an amplifier that has set new standards for performance, ease of use and reliability.

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TONE STYLE



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Easy to use and easy to wear, the Endeavor Belt keeps you ready for the perfect shot and keeps track of your car keys too. No small feat in our information overloaded days. Available at Amazon or your favorite camera store now.



WAX STACKS CUBES

\$65

www.waxstacks.com

In this issue we present a bit more old school, more organic, less expensive and more scalable way to store your LPs. The crates you see here from Wax Stacks are made from birch ply (a totally green, renewable wood source) and can be stacked to infinity.

We like the finish and the fact that no tools are required. Take that, IKEA. Made here in the US, Wax Stacks is currently running a Kickstarter campaign, so there are still some early bird deals to be had. If you're the lucky one that pledges \$5,000, they will even come to you, assemble everything and help migrate your record collection to your newly purchased storage. But even at the \$65 price, these babies are built to last and expand for a lifetime.

“The Truth, nothing more,
nothing less...”



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Jeff Dorgay, Tone Audio Magazine, January 2013



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Paul Rigby, Hi Fi World, March 2013



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TONE STYLE

PET CHATZ

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If you're missing Fido during the day and you don't want him to wreak havoc on your home and audio system while you are away, consider one of these gizmos. Easily attached to the wall at nose height, the video monitor makes it easy for you to interact with your pet from anywhere, via laptop or smart phone.

And that's not all. You can even dispense treats and scents – how cool is that? It's easy to train your pet to walk up, have a short dialog with you and eat a yummy snack treat dispensed remotely.

Those not having a pet that has turntable anxiety could easily put a Pet Chatz right by their turntable, so they can keep an eye on it while gone. Or if you have meddling teenagers, one of these might make for good espionage.

TONE STYLE

HIFI RACKS LIMITED -GRAND STAND XL

\$700/tier
www.hifiracks.co.uk



While many argue about the sonic effects of a good hifi rack, you can count us in the plus category. With so many different configurations to choose from, and some having more benefit than others, the Grand Stand XL you see here is a winner for many reasons.

First, they are handmade in the UK with care and pride. Second, they feature hardwood construction, so they will stand the test of time, thanks to no veneers to separate or incur damage. Small nicks and scratches should be easily smoothed over without worry. HiFi Racks Limited offers a number of standard configurations, which should cover most gear, but should you need something special, they also build bespoke racks to your specification. A wonderful thing for those with oddly shaped gear, large or small.

Seven standard finishes are available, with color options here:

www.hifiracks.co.uk/wood-choices.php

(continued)



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WADIA 121 DAC

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Again, if these are not to your liking, custom options are available; you merely need to discuss with the friendly people at HiFi Racks Limited.

They arrive straight from the UK to your door via UPS, and the packaging is superb. Inside the padded box is everything you need to assemble a first-rate audio rack, which should take you about 10–15 minutes if you're taking your time. As you can see, the shelves are decoupled with spikes, making for an easy move in the listening room should you decide to rearrange.

Once set up and in place, the Grand Stand XL makes for an attractive, yet understated, addition to your listening room. While we could not notice a mind-bending change to the sound after moving reference components from our SRA Scuttle rack, the Grand Stand XL does not muddy, blur or otherwise degrade the sound. Its solid wood shelves also do not ring or vibrate like many we've heard made from glass or MDF.

If you like the aesthetic, we highly suggest the Grand Stand XL, especially considering how easy it is to assemble and the company's willingness to custom build. There is nothing worse than great components that don't quite fit on a rack. Like a bespoke tailor, HiFi Racks Limited makes for a perfect fit with your system. And like the perfect frame for a piece of art, there's nothing like that extra bit of presentation to go along with great performance.

TONE STYLE



CLASSIC VU METER

\$75
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Considering analog's past, there's just something incredibly cool about VU meters, and like the RCA dog statues, we think every serious audiophile should have one. Scouring eBay and other online sources reveals many shapes and sizes, but this one in particular struck our fancy. There are plenty more available, and it might even be worth wiring a pair up to your desktop system (even cooler if they are backlit) to add some analog feel to your listening day.

CAMBRIDGE

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Cambridge Audio's totally new CX series is set to revolutionise entertainment in the digital age. The CX series is a range of high-performance hi-fi and home theatre components offering a unique combination of class-leading sound, advanced networking capabilities, large color displays and exceptional build quality and design.



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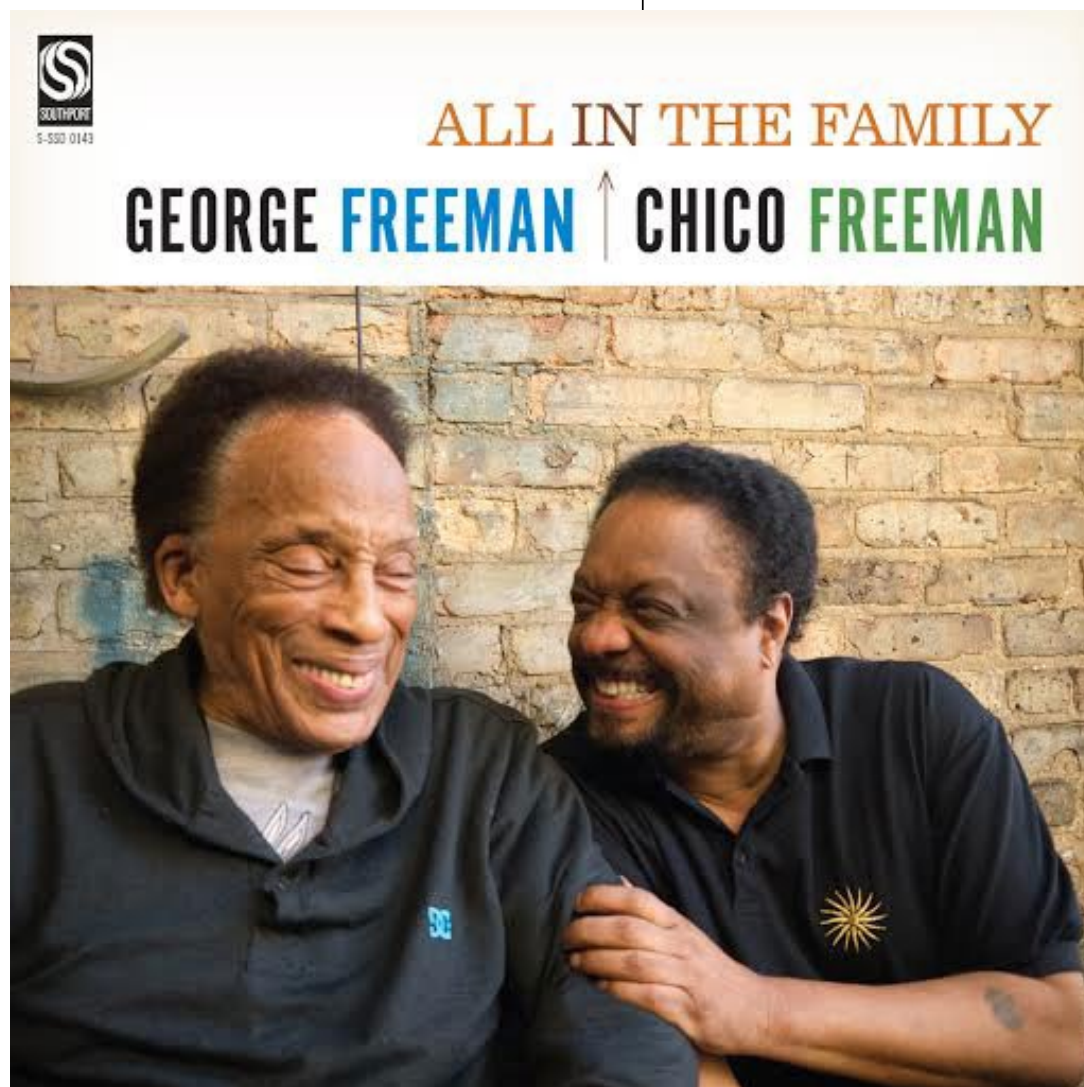
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JAZZ & BLUES

**George Freeman/Chico Freeman***All In the Family*

Southport Records, CD

f Chicago had a royal jazz family, Freeman would be its name. Saxophonist Von Freeman—who became a National Endowment for the Arts Jazz Master shortly before his death in 2012—combined a warm and muscular tone with an easygoing embrace of new ideas and young musicians. His son Chico took the instrument in a different direction during the 70s and 80s, and Von’s brother George remains a local hero, especially from his time working in organ combos (such as those of Jimmy McGriff).

Had *All In the Family* merely functioned as George and Chico’s tribute to their departed brother and father, respectively, it would still stand as a worthy recording.

But the family members go a step further by honoring Von’s spirit through creating striking original material and playing it in voices that are unmistakably their own—the kind of thing Von always advocated. They also recruit an ace group of Chicago-based musicians, most notably bassist Harrison Bankhead, percussionist Hamid Drake, and guitarist Mike Allemana. (The latter played with Von for years and is currently writing a doctoral dissertation about the saxophonist at the University Of Chicago.)

All In the Family is divided between composed pieces (primarily written by Chico or George) and brief, spontaneous statements designated as interludes. Throughout, the disc’s most compelling moments highlight the nephew and uncle’s call-and-response dialog, especially when their approaches initially seem to contrast. On George’s “My Scenery,” Chico’s soprano intonations answer the guitarist’s fragmented single-note lines. On another George composition, “Vonski,” it’s just the two of them, and Chico’s tenor

hesitations and hearty tone emulate what was best about his father. During “V-5,” Chico flutters on the saxophone pads in a way that will be familiar to his father’s admirers. But Chico’s “Essence Of Silence” emphasizes his own mournful cries, to which George responds with trills until the tandem takes the piece in constantly changing directions.

A lighthearted spirit infuses the affair, and is evident on pianist Kirk Brown’s clave rhythm during “Latina Bonita.” Brown also offsets the brooding version of *All In the Family*’s lone standard, “Angel Eyes.” Drake, along with drummers Reto Weber and Joe Jenkins, contribute their own shifting percussive exchanges that sound inspired from West African and Middle Eastern patterns. The closing “Mark” brings all the distinctive passages together. After George’s joyfully messy intro, the tune turns into a kind of jumping New Orleans second-line romp. It’s the proper way to send off a musical legend. —**Aaron Cohen**



The Bad Plus & Joshua Redman

The Bad Plus Joshua Redman
Nonesuch, CD

Part of the fun of following the Bad Plus is watching the group shift from project to project.

The provocative trio, now 15 years old, gained initial notice by blending classic-rock hits into its book of rigorous originals. Then it focused on said originals, which quickly became more idiosyncratic and alluring. Then the band invited vocalist Wendy Lewis to put an art-song spin on nuggets penned by Heart, Roger Miller, and Yes. The Bad Plus then polished those compositional skills a bit more, honing sideways strategies regarding time signatures and melodies.

Then the collective broadened that signature repertory gambit, burrowing into Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* and refracting its favorite Ornette Coleman album, *Science Fiction*. Now, for *The Bad Plus Joshua Redman*, the ensemble becomes a quartet, making an angst-ridden record with one of jazz's most celebrated saxophonists. The transition is as refreshing (and revealing) as each of the aforementioned, furthering the breadth of the band's bedrock POV.

Redman first connected with bassist Reid Anderson, drummer Dave King, and pianist Ethan Iverson in 2011. The camaraderie found on this new album developed during intermittent live shows. Of course, rapport is paramount for any group playing tunes this elaborate. Making what Iverson has called "odd-meters" glide with a steady flow ain't easy. One of the Bad Plus' ongoing victories is gracefully delivering such rigorous pieces. From "Beauty Has It Hard" to "Friend or Foe," Redman negotiates these cagey themes with the kind of power a method actor displays. They're sometimes fitful, but his horn cuts through the twists and turns, making it seem like the performances couldn't exist without it. *(continued)*

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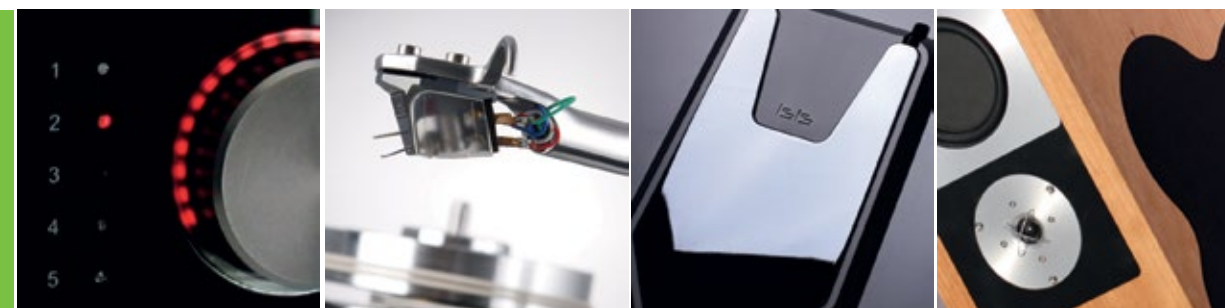
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MUSIC



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Grandeur has long been part of the band's personality, and while I sometimes think its execution is too florid by half, the ensemble's musicianship usually speaks for itself. Redman helps the refinement in this realm, too. The exhilarating arc of "Silence Is the Question" could be deemed bombastic if his *cri de coeur* wasn't so deep. As the group calibrates the ballad's explosions, King and Iverson unite to squeeze every drop of emotion from the mournful fanfare.

Balladry also gets a unique spin in the Bad Plus world. The somber stuff, often penned by Anderson and ably represented here by "Lack the Faith But Not the Wine," grows more and more heart-rending as the band matures. By the time "Silence" subsides, you

just might believe the musicians have found their "Free Bird."

Most convincing of all is "County Seat," a dizzy bounce with jazz-matazz feel that harks to the Bad Plus' early classic "Layin' a Strip For the Higher-Self State Line." Giddy and joyous, it comes on like Dexter Gordon barreling through a Raymond Scott sketch. Like the liquid swirl of "Faith Through Error," its forward motion touts an inner verve—not exactly swing, but counting enough expressionistic momentum to suck up everything in its path.

Whether waxing forlorn or ecstatic, this band doesn't stop until you accept its invitation to feel the exact same way it does. —**Jim Macnie**



Pianist David Berkman's new disc conveys an optimistic spirit within the title itself. The story behind the name is equally sunny. About 15 years ago, he worked frequently with brilliant drummer Brian Blade, and partnered with saxophonists Billy Drewes and Adam Kolker even earlier than that. Berkman also recorded for the especially sensitive producer Matt Balitsaris' Palmetto label. During the ensuing years, Berkman's compositions earned considerable acclaim. His former partners also made their own marks.

On *Old Friends And New Friends*, Berkman gets reacquainted with them all while adding two ace musicians from his current quartet, saxophonist Dayna Stephens and bassist Linda Oh. While past and present blend as harmoniously as the record's title indicates, the pianist's pieces and the group's interplay feature the kinds of surprises that makes the session more than just a relaxed commingling.

As a writer and bandleader, Berkman provides the ideal framework for the sextet's inventive multi-leveled dialog—especially with the three saxophonists' command of different reeds (Kolker plays five, including clarinet and bass clarinet). The opening "Tribute" serves as an homage to trumpeter Tom Harrell, and the interwoven lines highlighting Kolker's soprano and Stephens' tenor sound like a commentary on Harrell's unusual way of presenting a melody. Stephens even takes off with an especially strong solo on "Up Jumped Ming."

Throughout the set, the entire front line demonstrates a stunning way of delivering cascading and diminishing harmonies, especially on "Strange Attractions Then Birds." Slightly off-kilter phrases also add an oblique lyricism to the more succinct "No Blues No Really No Blues," which Blade fuels with a sense of quiet insistency. Although Berkman seems to direct the piece from the background, his serene solo introduction to "Past Progressive" sets up the nine-minute track that fuses together several different movements.



David Berkman

Old Friends and New Friends
Palmetto, CD

Oh's single-note lines reveal an understated strength in discreetly tying everything together. She anchors disjointed chord changes on the upbeat "Deep High Wide Sky," which is based on the chord changes to Irving Berlin's "How Deep Is The Ocean."

While the closing "Psalm" sounds as meditative as it suggests, Berkman's upper-register chords and Blade's vibrant colors (mostly on brushes and cymbals) make it more than just an ethereal ending. It all hints that another Berkman-led reunion should happen soon.

—**Aaron Cohen**

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Gary Peacock

Now This
 ECM, CD

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Such agility is one of the reasons he sounds just as compelling on this oft-genteel trio album as he did in 1964 helping Albert Ayler concoct the fervent eruptions of *Ghosts*. Playing to the situation is a Peacock forte. From hyperactive moments thick with notes to reflective passages that revel in silence, his work couldn't be more authoritative.

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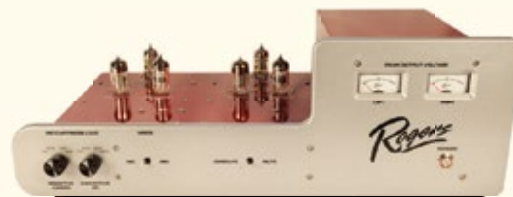


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MUSIC



Gary Peacock, Joey Baron, Marc Copland

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On *Now This*, pianist Marc Copland and drummer Joey Baron make plenty of room for their boss to steer tunes by simply floating them on a soft breeze of notes. The tack helps define the designs of the pieces, and bolsters the idea that interplay is born of genuine immediacy. “Shadows” feels just as eerie as it is pretty. While stark, it remains rich in nuance. “Gaia” dances, and finds Copland creating some truly alluring moments. “Esprit de Muse” brings agitation to the table but always yields to grace. Something similar happens during “This.”

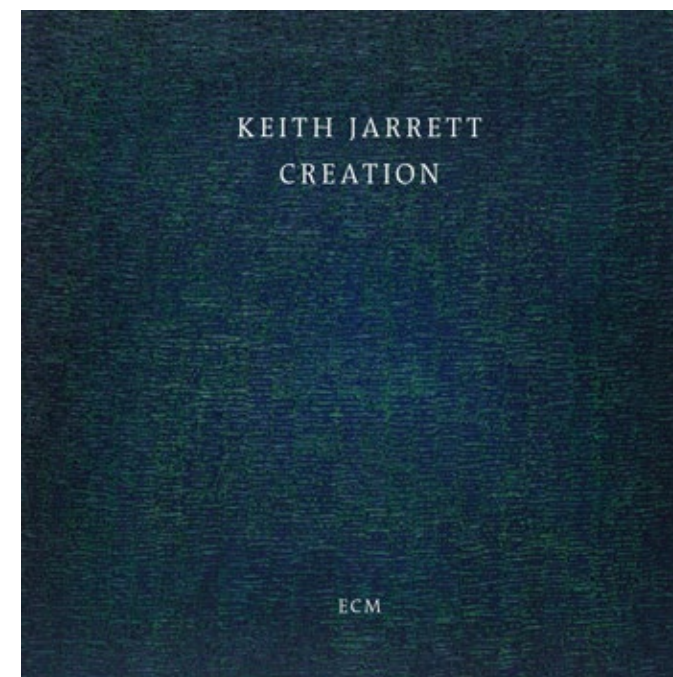
While the chemistry between Copland and Peacock has been honed for years (spin the spectral “Blue In Green” from 2009’s *Insight* for a glimpse at their communion skills), it reaches a peak on *Now This*. Enhanced by Baron’s mercurial notions, the music is deliciously fluid. Counterpoint sections amp up the frenzy. A stormy vibe might come out of nowhere only to be quelled by the swish of a cymbal. The trio’s untethered approach oozes charm. For players like these, ample elbowroom transforms into a playground full of options.

Though he’s not a shy improviser, understatement has long been a Peacock ploy. Here, a deep lyricism guides him through places where a mere phrase or two directs the band towards the light. Peacock’s revered work with Bill Evans, the poise he’s brought to Keith Jarrett’s Standards trio—such poetry is key to the bassist’s approach. In essence, it makes *Now This* a soft barrage of beauty. —**Jim Macnie**



Keith Jarrett turned 70 this year, and since his touring and recording output has always been prolific, any albums released to mark this occasion would have to really stand out in a crowded discography to make an impression. Two new concert recordings, *Creation* and *Samuel Barber/Béla Bartók/Keith Jarrett*, which focus on his jazz and classical finesse, fit the bill. While his embrace of both idioms has been as celebrated as his ambidextrous performances, the pair makes for a striking birthday combination.

Creation consists of a series of nine improvised pieces that Jarrett performed solo during a 2014 world tour. The other disc combines two previously unreleased Barber and Bartók concertos captured in the mid-80s (with a short original composition as the conclusion). Although the completely different material recorded two decades apart shows off the pianist's diverse interests, it's more interesting to hear how Jarrett maintains his own distinctive personality that connects such disparate contexts.



Keith Jarrett

Creation
ECM, CD



Samuel Barber/Béla Bartók/Keith Jarrett
ECM, CD

Forty years ago, Jarrett recorded the landmark *Köln Concert* set. In some ways, the interlocking spontaneous pieces that form *Creation* can be considered a response. A key difference is that the disc is culled from four different performances (Tokyo, Toronto, Paris, and Rome). While the urgencies and obstacles inherent at Köln shaped the end result, combining gigs from three continents and making it all flow as a unified work presents its own kind of challenge. Throughout, but especially on "Part I" and "Part II," Jarrett uses quietly insistent repeated phrases to craft thematically linked melodies. The approach also makes his subtle turns of phrases speak volumes. Other times, single notes in one hand sound like they're igniting cascades of arpeggios in the other ("Part V").

These are techniques that Jarrett's audiences have been hearing for years, just like his vocal moans, which add different harmonic textures. Here, all of them seemingly take on a deeper, perhaps more introspective, resonance. He also creates an ominous sense of tension using a minimal amount of movement ("Part VIII"). Ultimately, he concludes with musically pastoral imagery along with a few flourishes that reflect his training in the Baroque.

The performances on *Barber/Bartók/Jarrett* have their own interesting side story, which the pianist relates in the liner notes. After he recorded Barber's difficult *Piano Concerto op. 38* in Saarbrücken, Germany in 1984 and Bartók's *Piano Concerto No. 3* in Tokyo six months later, a fall on Vermont ski slopes left him with sprained hands. Consequently, Jarrett says he was no longer able to perform the Barber work, and only after a healing process was he well enough to play the Bartók composition. This is the only recording documenting his performances of those pieces. (*continued*)



©Photo by Henry Leutwyler/ECM

But it's not just rarity that makes the album so striking. As Paul Griffiths notes in his liner-note essay, Barber and Bartók took ideas from the same 20th-century sources as Jarrett—especially jazz. Their work also featured ways of repeating and changing up melodic motifs, which becomes especially pronounced when listening to *Barber/Bartók/Jarrett* in the same afternoon as *Creation*. Bright treble notes and big rumbling bass tones pervade the discs.

The three parts of Barber's concerto feature Dennis Russell Davies conducting the large string section in response to Jarrett's solo movements. His presence is stately, but never comes across as rigid. And

like the ominous tone of "Part VIII" on *Creation*, Jarrett's distinctive touch in the higher register proves an ideal contrast to the symphonic background. He uses a similar tactic on Kazuyoshi Akiyama's New Japan Philharmonic, especially when cutting through the epic sweep and dissonant tones of the Bartók composition. While easy to get caught in the work's drama, Jarrett features the temperament to resist the obvious.

Jarrett ends his Tokyo concert with his own warm ballad, "Nothing But a Dream," a personable statement made after the big orchestral performance. Looking back, it's interesting to hear it as his way of saying that at that point, his career was just warming up. —**Aaron Cohen**

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VPI Nomad Turntable

When Is a Headphone Amp Not a Headphone Amp?

By Rob Johnson

In a world of mega-buck turntables and cartridges, it is always refreshing to see a ready-to-spin package that puts a great turntable within financial grasp of many who value music in their lives. At under \$1,000, VPI's Nomad entry-level turntable proves itself a worthy contender.

FEATURE

In a single compact package and price point, the Nomad offers its owner the flexibility of several usage scenarios. Those wishing to connect it as a source for external audio equipment will appreciate the built-in MM phono-stage. Because it also has a built-in headphone amplifier and a 1/8" output jack, the owner can enjoy records without *any* external stereo components at all.

Quickest analog setup ever

VPI does all possible to make setup a snap with a pre-mounted Ortofon 2M red cartridge – a boon for newcomers to the world of vinyl. The only user intervention required is attachment of the tonearm counterweight. An included allen wrench and measuring tool help the owner slide the weight to proper location, imparting the 1.8g of tracking force. Freeing the turntable from its cardboard packaging, you notice several things immediately. First, the plinth and platter have a solid feeling, and the matte black finish and rounded corners visually complement the quality of the overall build. An aluminum tonearm, built specifically for the Nomad, comes as standard equipment. It, too, generates a perception of a high-quality construction both visually and experientially.

The point where the tonearm and vinyl meet is bridged by an Ortofon 2M Red cartridge. Sold by most audio retailers for \$100 separately, it's a capable and forgiving performer – again, perfect for the analog newcomer. Those wishing to step up the performance of their turntable may choose to upgrade a later point. VPI suggests other cartridges in Ortofon's 2M series: The Blue, Bronze or Black. *(continued)*



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FEATURE



All that remains is stretching the drive belt around the motor pulley and the turntable platter. Users need only choose between 33 or 45 rpm speeds, depending on pulley. If Leonard Cohen sounds like Mickey Mouse, you've picked the wrong pulley. Remove the stylus guard and you are ready to rock.

VPI embeds an MM phono-stage neatly inside the plinth. The only visible signs of its presence are the RCA outputs on the back. A set of interconnects ties the VPI to *line-level* inputs on a preamp, integrated amplifier, or set of powered speakers. If there's no hum in your

system with that connection in place, there's no need to use the Nomad's grounding post. However, if a mild hum persists, this ground connection serves as a secondary line of defense. Unfortunately, the Nomad does not give you the opportunity to bypass the internal phonostage, should you decide to update to a 2M Black at some point and use a higher quality phonostage.

Listening

Testing using only the Nomad's factory setup and cartridge, the VPI offers a pleasant, neutral tonal balance. It is neither overly romanticized nor stark.

It is, however, to the forgiving side, as if stepping back a few rows in the auditorium. Even if combined with other components that have a tendency toward stridency, the Nomad offers enough sonic buffer to even out the presentation a bit.

The other immediate element standing out as exceptional is the Nomad's sense of pace and rhythm. While listening, I find myself fully engaged with the VPI's efforts on my behalf and a constant desire to put on more records!

Listening to Pink Martini's album *Hey Eugene*, I notice that vocals from China Forbes may

not have all the fine, ambient detail and lushness rendered by more expensive equipment or better cartridges, but the music is presented in such a way as to retain the emotion and dynamic nature of the performance. Harp plucks and horns are easily discernible with a good degree of realism. While the factory Nomad setup reduces the amount of fine detail I know can be retrieved from the recording by more revealing components, I'm consistently impressed with VPI's overall portrayal. Jean-Michel Jarre's album *Rendezvous* opens with a powerful and deep bass growl. The major difference between the Nomad and VPI's Classic One turntable that I notice immediately is a bit less energy and definition in the lowest register – but keep in mind that the Classic One has three times the Nomad's price tag (and does not include a phono preamp or cartridge).

The Nomad does a good job spreading instruments and voices across the soundstage, giving each a defined space. Front-to-back layering – the illusion of musical elements being projected into a perceived depth beyond the wall behind the speakers – is somewhat compressed compared with higher-end gear. But I also need to keep reminding myself that the Nomad is a \$1,000 all-inclusive setup. For the money,

its individual elements combine brilliantly.

Testing the headphone amplifier with Ultimate Ears UE18 and JH Audio JH16 IEMS, plus Audeze LCD-X, Sennheiser HD650, and Sony MDR-2705 cans, the headphone amplifier reveals plenty of power to drive adequately anything plugged into it. The headphone experience proves equally engaging. It's clear that VPI made the effort to put in a good quality amplifier rather than bolting on a mediocre one as an afterthought. There's a touch of hiss in the amplifier that increases with volume, but once music starts playing it never interferes with the listening experience.

Additional Listening

The VPI Nomad provides the perfect example of a company where the next generation imparts its own cultural experience, while building upon the strengths of the company's greatness. Current captain of VPI, Mat Weisfeld, capitalized on VPI's manufacturing prowess and raided the parts bin to create a table that should be in every college dorm on Earth. It's a high-end audio kids' meal. Add a pair of your favorite headphones and a crate of records, and you're in hifi heaven with a minimal footprint – always an issue for college and first-time apartment dwellers. Now you have no excuse for not having high quality sound. *(continued)*

FEATURE

PASS

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FEATURE



Having lived with the Nomad for a year after Rob's review, I've dragged the Nomad to a lot of places. A fresh foam insert in a left-over Pelican case – along with 20 favorite albums in a briefcase – has made the Nomad a party in a box at the homes of many friends.

As I currently use a VPI Classic One and Classic Two in my own systems, the family sonic signature is easily recognizable. Following Rob's suggestion, I mounted an Ortofon 2M Black and managed to coax a lot more sound out of the Nomad, but would probably only go up from a Red one or two clicks, because of the price, especially with no way to bypass the internal phono stage.

The Nomad delivers excellent performance with all of the dynamic

and planar phones in my collection. I particularly like the combination of the Nomad and the OPPO HA-2 phones at \$399.

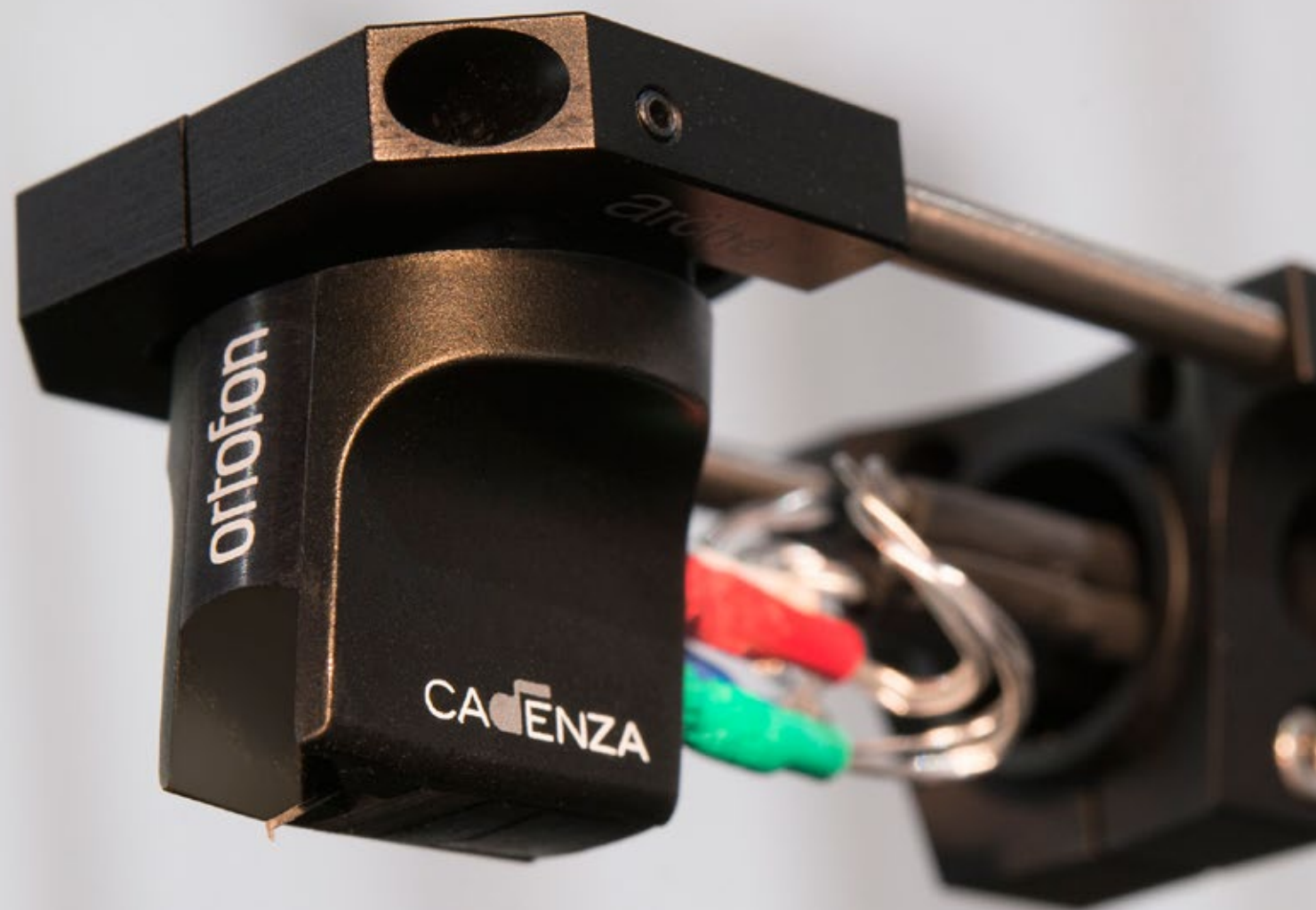
My advice: Don't mess with the Nomad. Just buy it and love it. While VPI is known for providing an upgrade path for most of their turntables, the Nomad is so well balanced it reminds me of my old Porsche 944 Turbo. Yes, you can make it faster, but then you need bigger brakes, and then you need to update the suspension, and before you know it, you've spent \$30k on a ten thousand dollar car. If you want to spend more money, buy a VPI Classic.

But if you just want to play your records, and usually can't wake the neighbors, the VPI

Nomad is the only game in town combining ease of use, great quality and a modest footprint. Needless to say, Mat has not stood still. There is a new Nomad out shortly, and we will soon compare it to the original. I suspect, like the other tables in VPI's history, this will be an evolutionary upgrade, but better in every way.

As Rob likes to say, "Make yourself a Nomad and trek down to your local VPI dealer to investigate." Highly recommended *and* a recipient of one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2015. —**Jeff Dorgay**

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The Black also exhibits a high tracking ability, and has become a reference cartridge here in the TONEAudio studio. We have used it on a wide range of tonearms along with numerous phonostages as well – it is a stellar performer. Watch for the review in our all analog issue 74.

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PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

It will be an interesting comparison, listening for the differences between BATs VK-P6 and the upgraded SE model, featuring a different tube compliment and more of BATs Super Pak capacitors. BAT claims that the P6SE is a replacement for the VK-P10, which was an incredible phonostage, so we'll let you know. Our past experiences with the VK-P5 and P10 have been fantastic, so this will be a fun shootout.

Both the P6 and P6SE feature fully balanced designs from input to output and massive, dual mono construction, with toroidal power transformers that look like they should be in power amplifiers. At almost 40 pounds, these phonostages weigh more than a lot of power amplifiers.

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AudioQuest SLiP 14/2 Speaker Cable

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There are precious few more inflammatory subjects in the world of audio than cables. Reviewing the expensive stuff is the quickest way to a fiery death, at least figuratively and the biggest dilemma is that some of the premium cable is brilliant, while some of it is truly snake oil. Even the best cable won't transform a component into something it's not, but it will let more of what it's capable through. What's an audiophile to do?

However, the handful of real cable manufacturers make great stuff at all price points and AudioQuest is a perfect example of applying what they know at a price everyone can afford. AudioQuest's Stephen Mejias tells us that their SLiP 14/2 cable uses their Semi-Solid Concentric Packed long grain copper conductors in PVC jackets, and while AQ is known for their solid conductor cable, this provides a high performance, cost effective and flexible alternative to typical stranded cable.

Bottom line, it's a great speaker cable for those new to the audiophile world, or anyone wanting to wring a little more performance out of that vintage amplifier without breaking the bank. We'll have a full review soon.



Naim's Affordable Statement

The Mu-so Tabletop System

By Rob Johnson

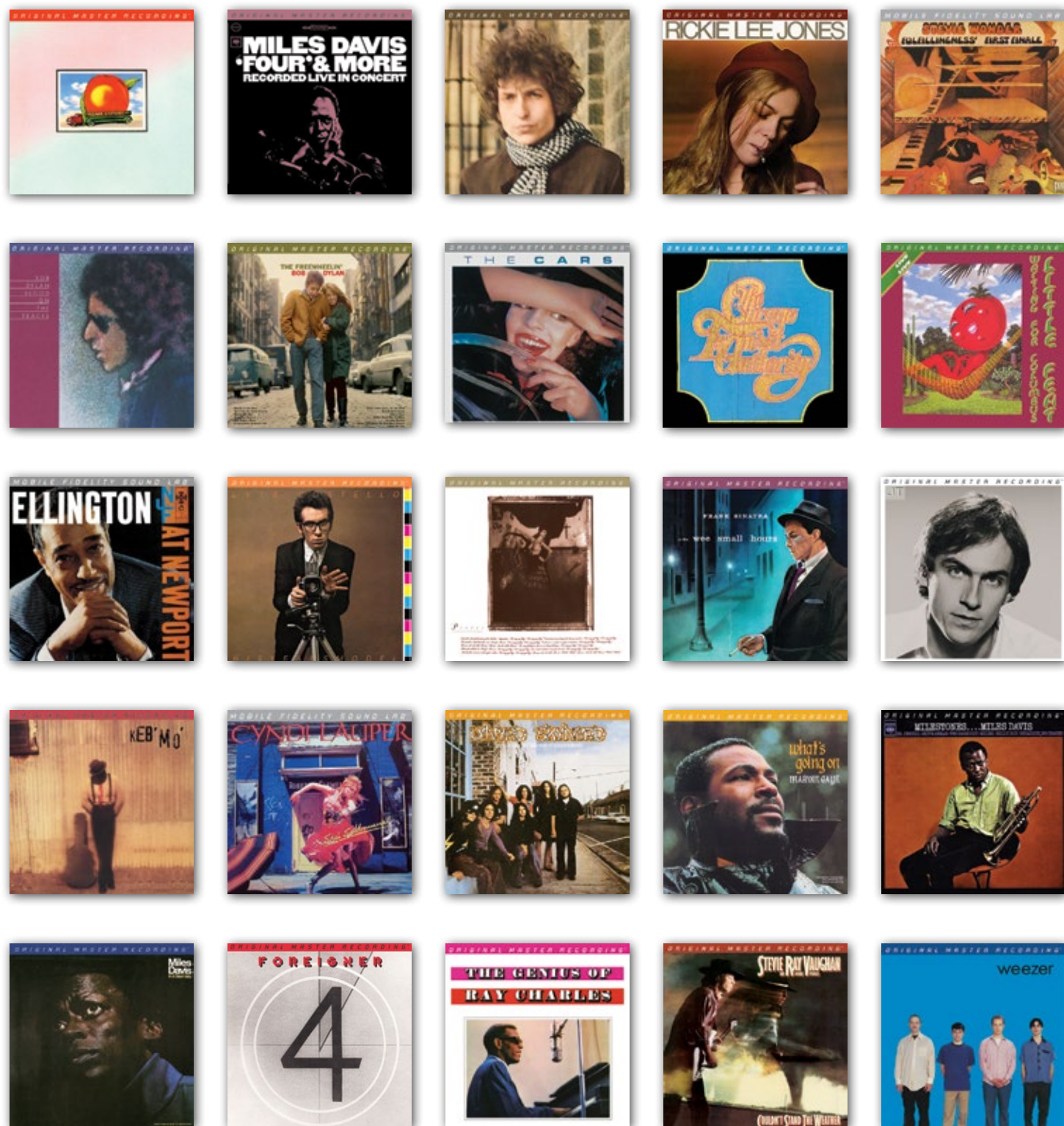
The hifi press was abuzz last year over Naim Audio's massive Statement stack: an amplifier and preamplifier capable of over 700 watts per channel with an equally huge price tag that is in Aston Martin territory. However, being the clever engineers that they are, the folks from Salisbury had something equally compelling and more approachable at the Munich High End show – the Mu-so. Standing alone in the Naim room, the Mu-so was introduced rather quietly, but every time we checked it was mobbed with onlookers.



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REVIEW

This elegant tabletop system features a plethora of style cues, with the polished case, clad in sculptured black grille material, a clear acrylic base and a single multifunction control on top. Sure, you can use the app or the remote control, but this begs to be touched and interacted with. The Brits have outdone style leaders Bang & Olufsen this time – the Mu-so is as understatedly elegant as the Bentley Continental that Naim also happens to supply the hifi system for.

Queuing up Florence + the Machine's latest disc hints at the Mu-so's capabilities, filling the living room with her sultry, luscious voice in a way that suggests a pair of Quad 57s. Airy and much bigger than the small enclosure suggests. Moving to more rocking fare, a quick playlist of classic Little Feat proves that the Mu-so can rock with the best of them, its 450 watts of power and six bespoke drivers handling the low bass line in "Long Distance Love" with ease. The only remaining question is how you will interface with Mu-so. And perhaps whether to stick with the standard black grille, or swap for the optional Burnt Orange or Deep Blue.

(continued)

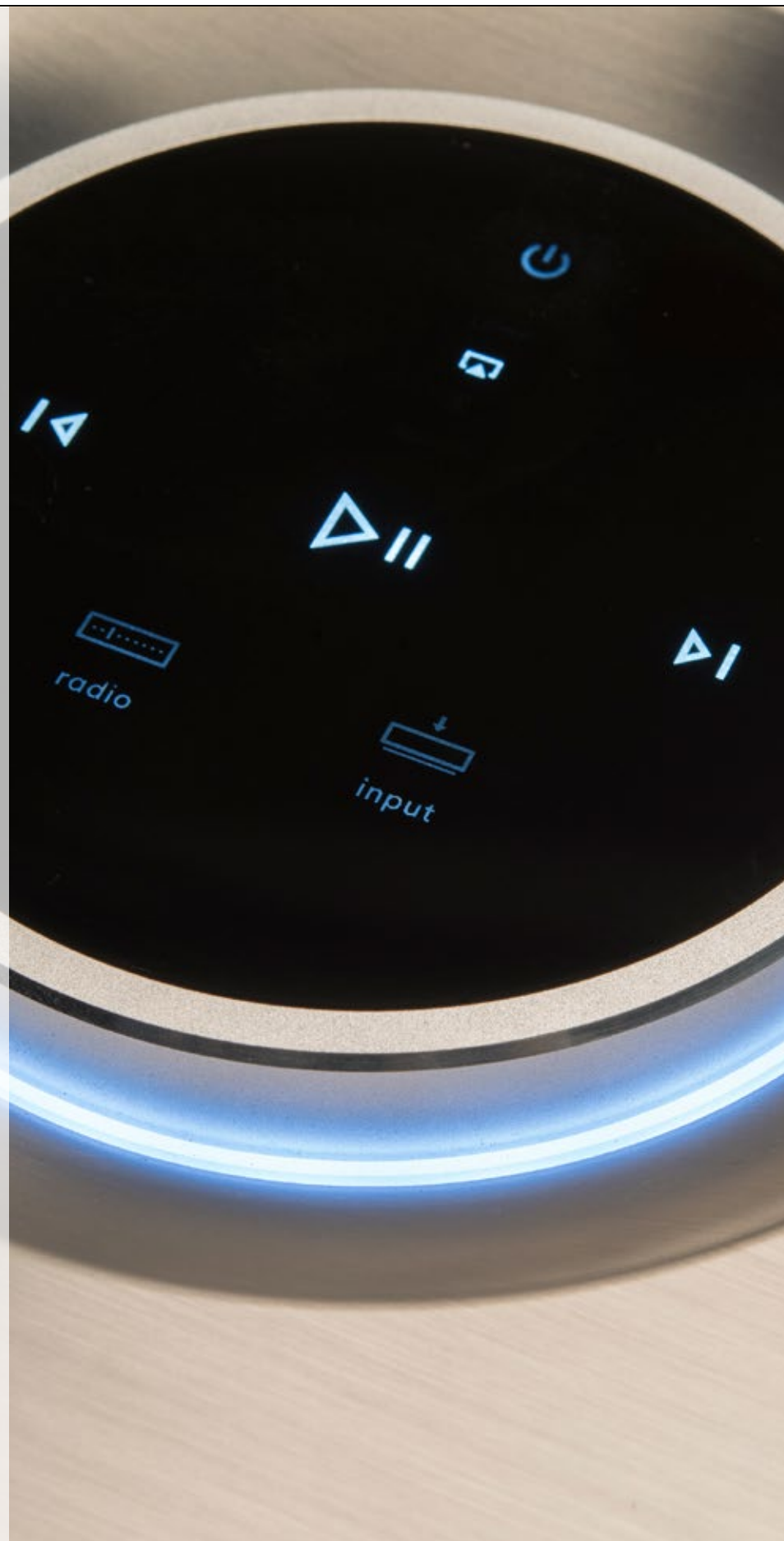
REVIEW

Controls

The user has several interface options. The four-inch recessed disc on the top left of the unit enables several functions. The outer edge of the wheel is silver in color. The center is an obsidian black touch-screen from which simple, white, lighted controls emerge from the dark. When plugged in, the default view is a simple, lighted power symbol. Once touched, lights around the edge of the circle cycle indicate the status of the power-up process.

Additional controls surface from the darkness when Mu-so is ready to play, giving a user the option of selecting Naim iRadio or an external input. Pushing on either option activates that functionality. When pressing the input button to choose an external source, repeated presses select UPnP, USB/iPod, or Bluetooth inputs. Three lighted sections of light at the top of the wheel activate in turn as the touch screen cycles among the choices.

Depending on the input source, the Mu-so also makes available other touch controls to advance tracks, play, pause and more. It's nice to see only what's useable, and not a lot of other control options that have no impact in a given mode. The disc acts like a volume control when twisted to the right or left, and lights around the circumference of the wheel light up corresponding to changes in volume, temporarily commandeering the input lights and others around the edge to indicate the full volume range. All of this is easy to do up close and personal or via the included remote or free iOS and Android apps from Naim. (continued)



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



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

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REVIEW

Setup

Naim offers detailed instructions on every aspect of Mu-so setup in the included manual; for the sake of brevity, this review will hit only the highlights of the process. Even without touching the manual, though, I find it highly intuitive to get the Mu-so up and running. Naim has produced an excellent installation video that you can watch here: www.naimaudio.com/mu-so-support-simulator.

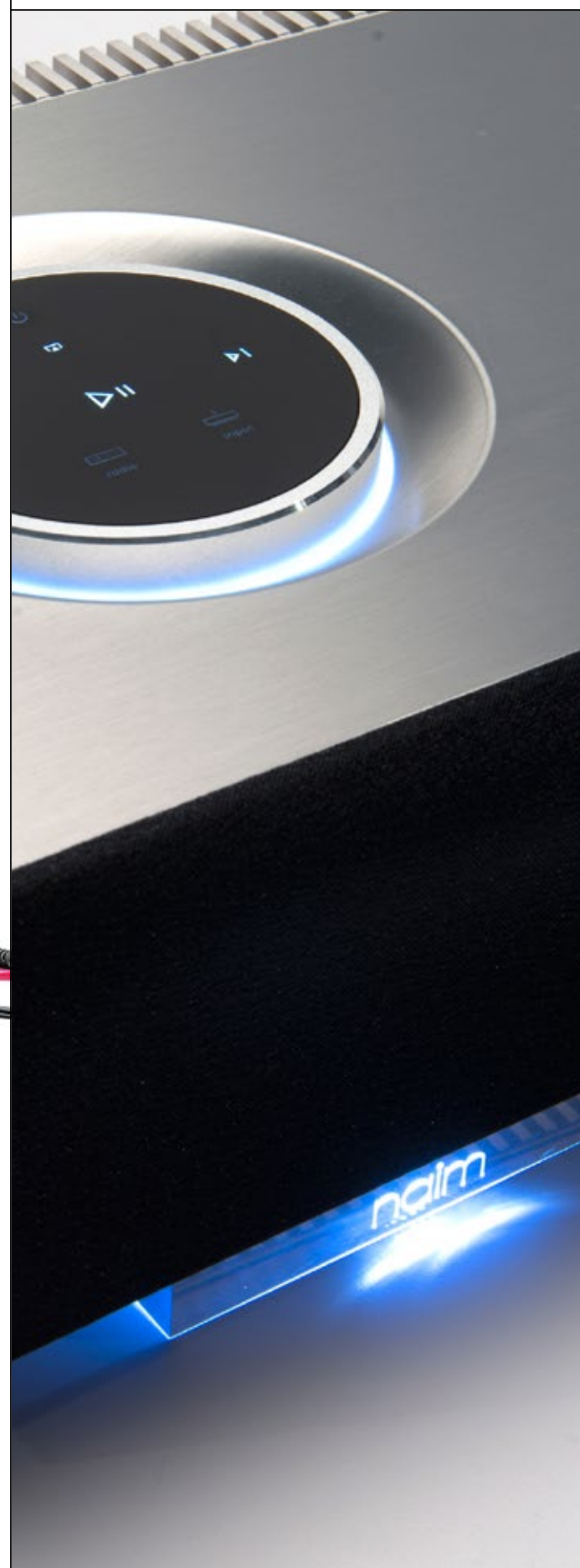
As a first step, when a location for Mu-so is decided, be sure to head into the iOS or Android app and select whether Mu-so is within 25cm of a rear wall or not. The selection allows the Mu-so to self-optimize sonically for its location and avoid bass loading when too close to a rear wall. After selecting the appropriate toggle, it's still worth moving the Naim backwards and forwards a bit and do some tuning with your own ears.

With that done, a recessed area on the underside of the unit has three physical connections to make. First, Mu-so's included power cord must be connected. Secondly an Ethernet socket enables a direct connection to an internet connection, although a wireless connection serves equally well. Finally, an optical input offers a hard-wired connection to complement other wireless streaming options.

The side of the Mu-so enables a few other input options. There's a standard USB cable connection and a 1/8-inch analog input. Finally, a small, multi-color capable, LED status indicator delivers a dizzying array of information about the unit status and setup process. Depending on the color, and referring to the Mu-so manual, the LED informs the owner about status of internet connection, firmware updates, and other items. Simplicity is a good thing.

When attempting to pair an iPhone with the Mu-so, the first question asked on the iOS app setup screen is the color of the status LED. Clicking on the corresponding toggle, and with only a few additional touches on the iPhone screen, Mu-so and iPhone are fully paired. The process takes only a few seconds, and works seamlessly.

With the needed connections made, Mu-so offers playback via Bluetooth, Spotify, Airplay, internet radio and others. While all the wired and wireless playback options work very well through the Mu-so, much of my testing, a Mac Mini delivered the bits via Airplay. Whether exporting music to the Mu-so using iTunes, jRiver, or Tidal, each came through with ease. *(continued)*





Sound

As it turns out, this little box packs a lot of surprises. From the get-go, the sonic balance of the Mu-so proves enjoyable. As with other Naim products I've heard over the years, the sound is plenty detailed, and a bit to the warmer side making long-term listening sessions fatigue free. Regardless of input choice, the Naim makes the best use of the digital signal.

While soundstaging prowess is inherently limited by a single-box design, the height and width of the sonic wall portrayed by the Mu-so

remains surprisingly huge. Because of the perceived size, some guests visiting my home while the Mu-so played between my larger reference speakers made the assumption that the bigger boxes were responsible for playback.

Vocal reproduction is very good as with the rest of the midrange. On tracks like k.d. Lang's "Tears of Love's Recall" vocal crescendos lack grain or sting, while portraying the power of the performance.

Strengths and weaknesses

The Mu-so is a really slick system that is fun to use. At \$1,500 there's

a lot of capability and a lot of value packed into a small enclosure. After living with it in my home for some time, and trying it in different rooms which don't have a quality sound system of their own, the Mu-so proves an addictive piece of kit.

A potential buyer should be aware of some caveats, however. Music fans desiring to approximate the left-to-right, and back-to-front soundstage of a realistic performance will be better served with a full Naim system and speakers.

Mu-so is certainly no slouch in the sound department. I find the sonic balance very enjoyable for long listening sessions. Naim did a great job creating the versatile Mu-so, but there are a few sonic compromises that should be expected from a one-box unit.

Mu-so is designed to fill a room with high quality sound, and equally importantly, offer a plethora of input and digital playback options. If one member of the house prefers streaming music via Bluetooth from an iPhone, another prefers to stream radio over the internet, and another

prefers to connect directly via USB from a computer, each person gets exactly what they want given the Mu-so's extreme flexibility. Also, the Mu-so's elegant and modern look will fit well into any room without drawing a lot of attention to itself.

If the Mu-so's strengths appeal to you, do yourself a favor and head to your local Naim dealer to check it out. As a one-box solution from a company with a long-standing history of great gear, that Mu-so does amazing things as expected.

Additional Listening

Much like the iPod, one-box hifi is a rapidly developing area of the hifi world. About six years ago, we were blown away by the Bowers and Wilkins Zepelin, and there have been a number of challengers, both more and less costly. Naim has chosen to take the high road, going after the stratosphere of the market – with excellent success. My personal favorite has been the now discontinued Meridian F80, which sported a \$3,000 price tag.

The Mu-so eclipses my former one-box reference in every way, albeit with a larger footprint. The extra speakers and power really come in handy, and I can't stress strongly enough that placement with this device is critical to get it to really rock. The wrong EQ settings and casual placement will leave you cold, but set it up properly and spend ten minutes placing it in just the right spot to get enough bass reinforcement, and you will be highly impressed.

I spent a lot of time using the Mu-so as the home theater system in my bedroom, using it to both stream music from Tidal via an iPad and provide movie sound, hardwired, via an Apple TV. In this situation, the Mu-so proved highly impressive, offering up room-filling sound in a 12 x 14 foot room, placed on a dresser, just below a 65-inch TV set.

I must confess a bias in favor of Naim's timeless design, so I can't really be objective here. I love the look of the Mu-so and feel that they've even outdone Devialet in the control elegance department. That part will be up to you. But for the music and movie lover who doesn't want a rack of gear, yet still wants high quality sound, Naim's Mu-so is pretty awesome and worth a trip to your Naim dealer for an audition. —**Jeff Dorgay**

Naim Mu-so
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LONG TERM DOUBLE TAKE

The Nagra Jazz Preamplifier

By Jeff Zaret

Listening to Nagra's *Solo Piano Competition, 2009*, and noticing the ease at which this preamplifier renders the most delicate and the most forceful piano strokes with ease and accuracy, it's easy to see where the Jazz gets its name. And if you've had the good fortune to experience the Montreux Jazz Festival, where Nagra digital recorders grace every sound board, you know they've earned it.

Like a Swiss watch. For as many times as this has been said, referencing an item of endurance and reliability, it really does apply to the Nagra Jazz preamplifier. Any Nagra component, actually. Anyone who has spent time with the marque quickly realizes that it has precious little "sound" of its own, a direct result of their years of experience building gear for the pro recording chain, where any kind of added coloration is not true to the music recorded.

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REVIEW



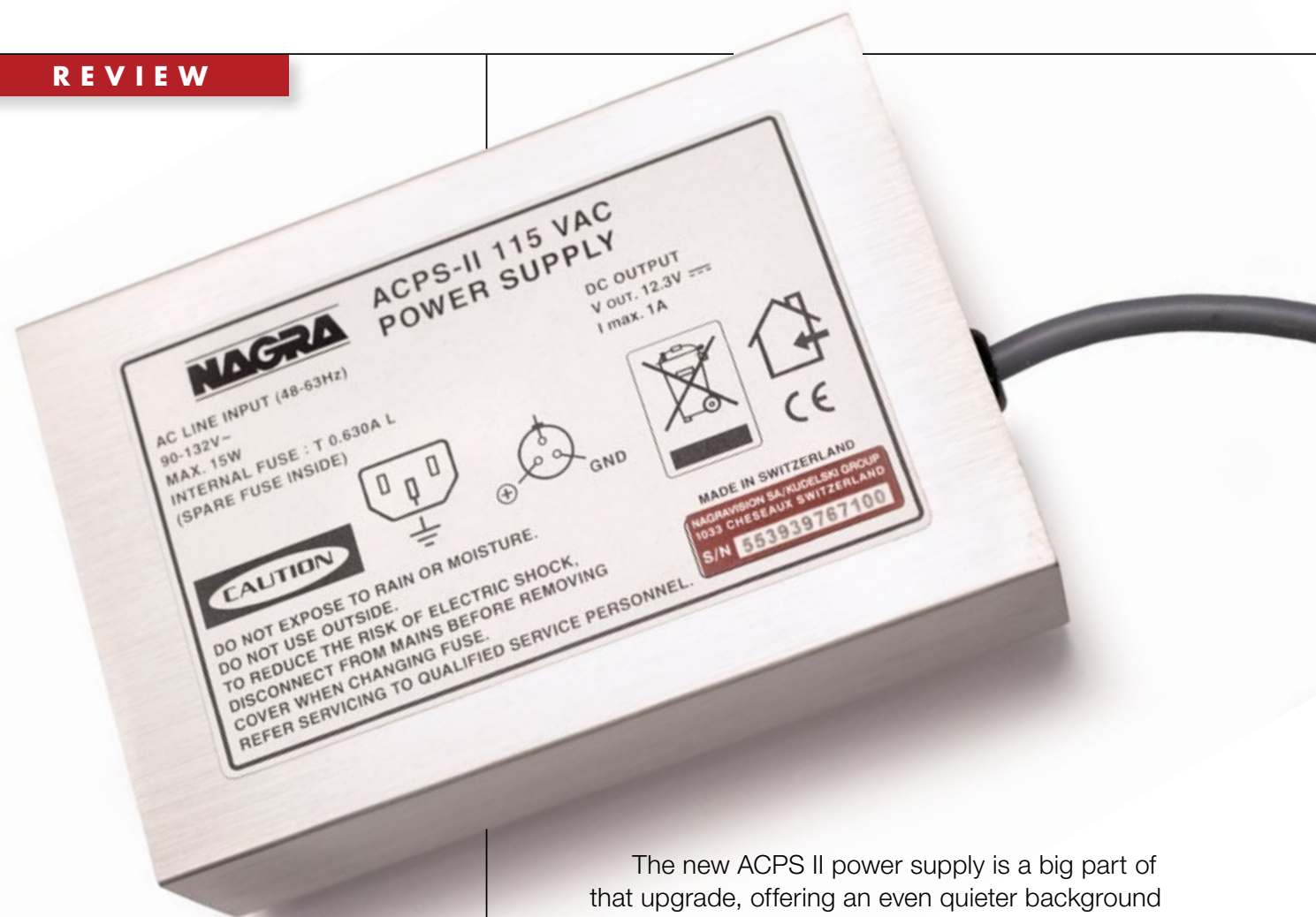
The only changes occur during the first 50 hours or so of playback. There is an opening, an expansion and delineation of fine detail, which is a definite change for the better. Once a few hours are racked up on the clock, the Jazz sounds even more natural, getting out of the way and letting the music flow without compromise. Living with the Jazz for over a year now, our publisher and I – both confessed Nagra enthusiasts – have found major delight with this preamplifier, which carries a retail price of \$12,750.

A new yet familiar look

Gone are the side-mounted inputs and outputs of the previous generation PL-L and PL-P, that functionality again from the recording world. The Jazz now has all of its inputs located on the rear panel like most other consumer audio components. You will either love or

hate this, but hopefully it is not a deal-breaker. The remote has also changed from the last model. No longer a standard remote, the Jazz remote is literally a small handheld device – wider on the bottom than the top, conforming to the palm of your hand. You can either set it with the rest of the remotes in your collection, or let it stand upright.

The Jazz has the same compact, 12.2 x 10 inch (310 x 254mm) footprint distinguishing many Nagra components, and even though the familiar Modulometer graces the front panel, closer inspection reveals it is now from a different supplier and of a slightly different form factor. Lifting the aluminum cover reveals a similar look and tube complement to the PL-L it replaces (2 – 12AX7 and 1 12AT7) yet everything is redesigned and updated for higher fidelity and greater dynamic range. *(continued)*



The new ACPS II power supply is a big part of that upgrade, offering an even quieter background than before. If you read our review of the PL-L in issue 29, you know that we made our own update and retrofitted a Red Wine Audio Black Lightning power supply with excellent results. While the ACPS II is a major improvement, Nagra now offers their own battery supply – highly suggested for the perfectionist listener.

With four RCA inputs and one asymmetric XLR input, the Jazz is versatile enough for any needs. Via handcrafted Nagra transformers, it does feature a symmetrical XLR output and pair of RCA outputs for those requiring it. Currently my system is anchored by a Conrad Johnson Premier 350, which is single ended, though our publisher did use the Jazz with a number of balanced power amplifiers. Needless to say, the Jazz is a perfect partner for my Nagra VPS phonostage. An optional pair of input transformers brings the Jazz price to \$14,500. These are precision, custom wound transformers, hand made in the Nagra factory specifically for this preamplifier – not an off the shelf solution. *(continued)*



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Three decades later, Dali are one of the world's leading loudspeaker manufacturers, with a list of international awards the envy of their industry, including several from EISA (The European Imaging and Sound Association), voted for by expert journalists from over 20 countries.

More importantly, European music lovers are huge fans too, which explains why Dali has sold over a million pairs of loudspeakers to date.

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REVIEW

Matthieu Latour from Nagra is quick to point out the changes in the circuit topology, mentioning that "the Jazz is all new inside," and there has been a major change from the former PL-L in regards to the gain operations. "The Jazz is all tube. The 0dB/+12dB option on the front panel changes the internal settings and the Jazz acts more like a passive preamp in 0dB mode, for those not requiring much gain."

Epitomizing neutrality

When first listening to the Jazz it's easy to think that something is missing because nothing is accentuated, but after becoming acclimated to the "lack of a sound," the music is merely presented as it is recorded, with a natural presence and spatiality. The musicians appear where they lie in the mix, when recorded thusly. On the right recordings, it's easy to see where the musicians are sitting and interacting with each other on small rock and jazz ensembles.

Orchestral pieces spread the players out generously between the speakers, and the listener feels about 20 rows back in the audience.

Again, the balance is just right, neither peering over the stage nor at the back of the hall. You can easily delineate the brass section from the woodwinds and the various "flavors" of the string section. The percussion section of an orchestra, typically in the back of the orchestral seating arrangement, makes you stand up and take notice when it presents crescendos or punctuates a section of musical thought.

As good as the Jazz is with acoustic instruments, it performs equally well with whatever you present it with. Both for old times' sake and our last visit to the Nagra factory, it is a must to play Deep Purple's "Smoke on the Water" and make the meters bounce with abandon. From the opening, all-too-familiar guitar riff, there is no mistake that the Jazz can, in fact, rock with the best of them.

The dynamic range of the Jazz is wide and the noise floor low; running the gamut of familiar tracks, the Nagra speaks balance. There is no weakness in the presentation and for someone with a wide musical appetite, the Jazz is a perfect conduit of music, never drawing attention to itself.



Additional Listening

As Mr. Zaret is quick to point out, we are both big fans of the Nagra marque and for good reason: their gear presents music in an untarnished way without embellishing the sound or being overly sterile either. I must confess in the land of America where too often bigger is considered better, I love the understated, compact elegance of Nagra designs. Much like Naim or Audio Research, you know a Nagra component instantly, and because the design aesthetic has been subtly refined over the years, brand new and thirty-year-old Nagra gear all look at home together in the same system. And every time I speak these words out loud, I think about purchasing a vintage Nagra open-reel tape deck!

I'm guessing the biggest question on the mind of every Nagraphile is the difference between the outgoing PL-L and the new Jazz. The PL-P is a different story, with its integral phonostage. At this point, Nagra has made no mention of building a Jazz with built-in phono capability. Though both preamplifiers use a pair of 12AX7s and a 12AT7, the Jazz is a different machine. Borrowing a friend's PL-P for comparison makes it easy to compare and contrast these changes.

Extended listening reveals both preamplifiers to have an equal level of tonal neutrality, yet the Jazz reveals more music across the board, allowing you to peer even further into the music. The PL-P is exceptional, but it has a bit of cloudiness in the lowest level musical details that you only realize when you have the Jazz for comparison. Just like the way your BMW 550i feels just fine until you get behind the wheel of an M5. Once you go back, the difference between the two is more apparent.

If you were just listening casually, it might be tough to tell the difference. Once you sit down and play close attention, going back and forth between highly familiar tracks, the brilliance of the Jazz comes though, rewarding you with more musical treasure. Violins sound that much more realistic; it becomes easier to discern the type of piano (or electric guitar amplifier) being used.

Two important details that are worth mentioning for those new to Nagra: First, do not waste your time "tube rolling" this preamplifier. While you might think that NOS pair of Telefunken 12AX7s will add romance to your Jazz, they only muddy the sound and slow the transient attack. Nagra's engineers have carefully voiced the Jazz to modern tubes, and every attempt I've made at substituting vintage tubes has always killed the resolution in the process.

Second, thanks to their experience in building pro gear, where long cable runs are commonplace, the output stage of the Jazz, like the PL-L before, is very robust. The Jazz drives 20-foot runs of your favorite interconnects with ease, making it easy to have the Jazz up on a shelf, away from the rest of your gear if that works well with your room aesthetic. I highly suggest pairing the Jazz with Nagra's VFS isolation platform, shown here. It is machined from an identical aluminum alloy, with gel inserts between the sheets, taking the Jazz to another level of quietness.

The only thing left to do now is to find a friend who wants to begin his Nagra journey and will give your PL-P a good home. And if this is the beginning of your experience with this fine Swiss brand, you will find it a welcome companion for years to come. — **Jeff Dorgay**



Nagra Jazz Preamplifier
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BRYSTON MINI T LOUDSPEAKER

by Andre Marc

Bryston, the long-standing Canadian audio manufacturer, is highly respected on a number of fronts. Their gear is superbly built, rugged, and reliable. They also offer virtually unmatched support with multi-year warranties on most components. Their amplification is used worldwide in both professional and domestic audio environments. Their digital source components have been well received by the world press and remain in residence in my current reference system.

As comprehensive as Bryston's product line is, with power amps, preamps, integrated amplifiers, digital file players, and power products, there was until recently one omission: loudspeakers. This gap in their product line has been filled with an extensive lineup of speakers ranging from the Mini A "bookshelf" model all the way up to big and bold room-filling floorstanders.



Why speakers?

The impetus behind Bryston's drive to produce loudspeakers in an already crowded and competitive area is their VP of Product Marketing, James Tanner. Tanner, in his quest for a speaker that would satisfy him personally, came up short in his search, and thus decided to pursue an original design that would achieve certain goals. His efforts translated into results that were satisfying enough that Bryston decided to distribute these designs commercially.

Bryston put a lot of resources into R&D, doing extensive testing, listening, and measuring with the help of fellow Canadian manufacturer Axiom, whose facilities are state of the art. The speaker lines are all manufactured in Canada – no outsourcing here – and there is an accompanying unheard of twenty-year warranty.

The Mini T monitor loudspeaker in this review sells for \$3,200. The Mini T is flanked by the Mini A, its smaller brother, and at the top of the line, the mighty Model T Signature flagship multi-way tower. There is nothing actually “mini” about the Mini T, as it stands 22.5" high and weighs in at 42 lbs. The speaker is a three-way, with a 1" dome tweeter, a 5.25" midrange driver, and an 8" woofer. The frequency response is stated as 33Hz to 20kHz, impressive at this price point. Efficiency is average, at 86 dB, 4 ohms, nominal.

The Mini T is available in Black Ash, Boston Cherry,

Natural Cherry, and in custom veneers at an additional charge. There are custom stands available to which the Mini T can be bolted. Out of the box, the Mini T exudes quality. The finish, construction, and binding posts are first class – what many have come to expect from Bryston.

The Mini T takes residence in good company. The speakers are driven by an Audio Research VS55 tube amp, the Simaudio 760A solid-state powerhouse and a [Coffman Labs G1-A](#) tube preamp. Sources are Simaudio's NEO 380D DAC, Bryston's own BDA-1 DAC, and a Revox A77



tape deck. Cabling is Stager, Transparent, and DH Labs with the Mini Ts sitting comfortably on custom Sound Anchor stands.

Getting down to business

After a relatively short 25-hour break-in period, the listener is treated to a wonderfully coherent, integrated, and live sound. The Mini Ts are not slow, mid-range heavy classic British style monitors of yesteryear. They are very much a modern product, with amazingly low distortion levels, deep, very satisfying bass, and an open, transparent mid-range. *(continued)*



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REVIEW

Listening reveals the Mini Ts' opposing strengths. They are incredibly nimble and quick, yet buttery smooth and relaxed at the same time, projecting an unusually deep sound-stage to boot. The reverb feels wetter, note decays are longer, and timing is better than any other speaker at this price point that I've experienced.

The Cars studio albums, remastered at 24/192, sound fresh, vibrant, and not the least bit dated via the Mini T. It is a real treat to hear such classics as "Good Times Roll," "Got a Lot on My Head," "Candy O," and others with crunchy guitars, articulated bass lines, and the classic vocals of Ric Ocasek and Ben Orr floating holographically in the center of the mix.

The latest album from immensely gifted jazz singer Gregory Porter, *Liquid Spirit*, 96 kHz download, plays to many of the Mini T's strengths: accurate tonality, correct instrumental timbres, and musical pacing. Porter sings like a human cello, with a bit of the finesse of Nina Simone, and the conversational style of Bill Withers, and the Brystons render his voice in a most astonishingly present way.

The Mini Ts do the versatility thing without breaking a sweat. Orchestral pieces, classic Blue Note jazz ensemble recordings, and classic rock are just different channels on the dial for the Bryston. No matter the source – analog or digital – the Mini Ts easily draw you in. Listening to Steppenwolf's *Gold: Their Greatest Hits* on reel-to-reel is one of the highlights of the review period. The fuzzed-out guitars, psychedelic arrangements, and the ominous vocals of John Kay have the house rocking. *(continued)*

The Pentangle's sublime *Basket of Light*, on SHM-CD, a longtime reference for evaluating speakers, is presented in a way suggesting electrostatic-like transparency and dynamics, especially on the track "The Cuckoo," with the late, great, John Renbourn and Bert Jancsh's acoustic guitars, the wonder that is Jacqui McShee's voice, and Danny Thompson's otherworldly acoustic bass. I've had very few true jaw-dropping moments in hifi, but this was one of them. The Mini Ts could have passed for floorstanders, given the earthy, deep-rooted foundation of the music.

The Mini Ts are also a breeze to set up. They are not super fussy about room placement, but of course a bit of experimentation is advised. Being relatively close to boundaries does not cramp their style, like so many high end speakers. This is due to the controlled way the Mini Ts' drivers disperse energy into the room. Despite the cabinet not being designed to to "tame" resonances into oblivion, which can cause other problems, there is no apparent transient smearing or non-mechanical distortion present.

A Solid performer indeed

Bryston, with the Mini T stand-mounted monitors, eschews the "flavor of the month" design and concentrates on maximizing the potential of a three-way dynamic loudspeaker. The results are a smashing success. The Mini Ts will remain in my system as a reference in this price point. My only complaint is the stamped metal jumpers, but that is a small problem easily solved.

It must be noted the Bryston Mini T will rise to occasion with high-quality partnered equipment. Great cables, amplification, and sources will pay huge dividends due to the speaker's low distortion. Focusing on amplifier quality rather than overall power rating will pay dividends, and the Bryston dedicated stands are definitely worth a look. The Bryston Mini T monitors are among the best deals going. An audition is highly recommended. Bring your favorite recordings and prepare to be impressed.

Additional Listening

I've heard the Bryston speakers a few times at various shows and have always come away impressed, but it's always nice to set them up in a familiar environment and make a few brief comparisons. On the heels of the impressive \$4,000 Eggleston Emmas that are my budget reference, the Bryston Mini T delivers excellent performance.

The size is a bit odd, as they are not really big enough to be floorstanders, but hardly small enough to be considered small monitors. For most this should not be an issue, but small kids and tail-happy dogs might be problematic.

I agree with Andre: the Mini Ts are incredibly easy to set up and get great sound with minimal fuss. After the photographs were taken, I took the liberty of trying them in three separate rooms: a small but modestly treated room (10 x 13 feet), my large listening room (16 x 25 feet) and the living room in my house, which has to be the worst sounding room I've ever heard, yet it makes for a great "real world" listening environment. The Mini Ts shined in all three.

Having heard Bryston amplification in a number of the world's finest recording studios, matched with PMC loudspeakers, I'd make this comparison. The Mini T is very linear, with wide dispersion and sounds great whether you are sitting on the couch or hanging out, listening on the floor in the corner of the room – a plus for a speaker that you want to share with friends. It should come as no surprise that the Mini Ts sound fantastic with Bryston amplification, but their

chameleon-like character makes them a good match for anything else on the shelf, from a vintage Marantz receiver to the Boulder 2160 I have here for review. But beware that these speakers reveal what they are fed, so if you aren't happy with the end result, it's probably due to something not quite right in your system. As I tend to prefer sound tipped a bit more to the warm romantic side, I preferred the Mini Ts with tube gear, to inject a little extra midrange magic into the presentation, and again, because these speakers are so natural, you can easily fine tune them to your taste.

Lastly, don't let the 86db sensitivity rating fool you. The Mini-Ts are incredibly easy to drive and will provide more than satisfying sound pressure levels in a modest room with 20 watts of tube power. I found the Retro i-50 integrated we reviewed last issue to be more than enough in my 10 x 13 foot room. Of course, more power will provide more dynamics, especially in a larger room and on the opposite end of the spectrum, the Mini-Ts delivered an equally impressive performance in my large room with the Pass Labs Xs 300 monoblocks. These are definitely speakers you can grow with!

For just over three grand, this company, well known for their electronics, has produced a winning loudspeaker. We are very happy to give them one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2015. If you're speaker shopping, stop by your nearest Bryston dealer with a few of your favorite tracks. – **Jeff Dorgay**

Bryston Mini T Loudspeaker
MSRP: \$3,200

MANUFACTURER

Bryston Limited

CONTACT

www.bryston.com

PERIPHERALS

Amplifier

Simaudio 760A,
Audio Research VS55

Preamplifier

Coffman Labs G1-A

DAC

Simaudio Neo 380D,
Bryston BDA-1

Server

Simaudio MiND,
SOtM sMS-100

Tape Deck

Revox A77

Cables

Transparent, DH Labs,
Stager, Acoustic Zen

Accessories

Symposium, Audience,
Sound Anchor

Delivering Delightful Digital

Benchmark DAC2 DX

By Rob Johnson

Building upon the successes of their DAC1, Benchmark is not resting on their laurels. The release of the DAC2 series of products extends the capability and sonic performance of the product line with several different versions, offering a wide range of functionality to suit different owners' needs.

While it might be easy to get confused by so many variations on the DAC2 theme, it's important to note that all contain an improved digital engine. The primary differences are inputs and outputs, headphone capability and home theater pass-through. Two versions of the DAC2 come equipped with headphone outputs: DAC2 HGC and the DAC2 DX. DAC L and DAC HGC incorporate single-ended analog inputs for use as a preamplifier. The DX model we tested for this review includes an AES/EBU digital input, but no analog inputs. Now that that's settled, let's move on. Those wanting a more in-depth feature list, click here, on Benchmark's product page.

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REVIEW



Like its Benchmark ABH2 Amplifier we just reviewed, the DAC2 comes in a small enclosure with a lot packed inside. Measuring a scant 9.5 inches (249mm) wide, 9.33 inches (237mm) depth and a 1.725 inches (44.5mm) in height, the DAC2 is small enough to place anywhere easily, even on the most crowded audio racks. Plus, at a mere 3 pounds in weight, it's easy to lift with one hand when placing it – a real joy after helping our publisher crate up the 274-pound Boulder 2160 the other day!

Internal Innovations

Under the hood, digital processing

prowess is provided by SABRE DAC chips to decode 32-bit PCM and DSD files. Feeding these converters the best possible signal, Benchmark utilizes its new jitter-reduction technology via their UltraLock2™ system – a dramatic improvement over the original version in the DAC1. Focusing on lowering the noise floor and distortion level, the latest changes prove highly effective. The variable output makes the DAC2 more versatile than a DAC without, and makes it easy to become the cornerstone of a compact, yet high performance system, eliminating the need for a standalone linestage. *(continued)*



The back panel of the DAC2 reveals a plethora of connections fit to this tight space. Inputs include USB, two coaxial digital, and two optical connections. For analog output, the options depend on the DAC2 model chosen. All models have two pairs of single-ended outputs, and one pair of XLR balanced outputs. With the analog input equipped HGC and L models, the DAC2 features a HT pass through too.

You might not earn carbon offset points with your stereo system, but as a tree-hugging Oregonian, I appreciate that the DAC2 only draws half a watt at idle.

Snappy Setup

The DAC2 is extremely easy to set up. My Mac Mini instantly recognizes it, only requiring a few quick tweaks in the Mac OS sound settings to be ready to play

music. Benchmark promises the same ease on the Windows side. While we did not have a Windows-based system on hand for testing, Benchmark has worked to make that experience just as seamless. For high resolution playback on Windows, an easily downloadable driver is needed.

Tight real estate on the rear panel is the only issue that has always plagued Benchmark DACs. As such a small unit, with so many input and output choices, the DAC2 rear panel is a bit crowded. If you have thick audio cables be aware that you may find it a bit of a stretch to get them connected. Lastly, those utilizing 24/192 or DSD files via USB will need to hold down the USB button on the remote for three seconds (a one time setup operation) to engage USB 2.0 mode for the best performance. *(continued)*



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- JEFF DORGAY, TONE AUDIO

"RARELY HAVE I HEARD SUCH PRECISE, DYNAMIC, COHERENT SOUNDS FROM A MONITOR SPEAKER."

- ANTHONY KERSHAW, AUDIOPHILIA



REVIEW

Locked-in listening

When I'm anchored into my listening seat, the beefy aluminum Benchmark remote proves a couch potato's dream come true. The ability to change inputs, volume, and mute leaves little need to get up.

After several days of burn-in, it's exciting to give this DAC a chance to sing. From the first listen, DAC2 provides a treat for the senses with a highly resolving, yet forgiving nature. Regardless of music type, DAC2 performs as a sonic chameleon rocking and rolling when it needs to, but is equally at home with the delicate nuances of jazz and classical recordings.

Cat Power's *Jukebox* illustrates how the DAC2 picks up every pluck of the guitar, keeping them appropriately separated from the vocals, which reside in a different vertical plane parallel to the first. The resonance and decay of acoustic guitar notes are easily discernible across several other recordings too, like Elliott Smith's *XO* – his vocals retaining a smooth, organic quality. While DAC2 may not recreate quite the level of transparency reproduced by more expensive DACs I've heard, I really like the voice Benchmark engineered into the DAC2. Overly transparent and revealing equipment can tend toward stridency, sibilance and a wince-factor that takes away from the musical experience.

The DAC2, on the other hand, allows a listener to dissolve into the music and enjoy big, beautiful sound rather than getting bogged down in the minutia. *(continued)*





For example, several songs on Portishead's album *Dummy* have a glare that draws attention to those sharp edges rather than the rounded musical picture. With the DAC2, those sonic artifacts are not removed, but the entire album is much more listenable.

DAC2 also throws a huge soundstage and mines a lot of ambient detail from high-resolution recordings. The perceived stage width and depth easily exceeds the speaker boundaries in all directions. Also, DAC2 projects a sonic image that reaches from floor to ceiling. Many DACs I've heard do a good job of this, but so far, I have not heard one under \$2,000 that does it so well.

Hearing Headphones

Rather than tossing a headphone amplifier into the unit as an afterthought, Benchmark took great care in delivering a high quality headphone amplifier in the DAC2. Those considering a Benchmark DAC for headphone listening should consider taking advantage of the company's special pricing offer which bundles a reduced-cost set of Sennheiser HD-650 headphones with some versions of the DAC2. Those headphones are among my own favorites, and a reduced-cost package through Benchmark is an added bonus for a DAC2 owner, not to mention

a great place to start your headphone journey.

With a set of HD650s on hand, listening begins with the Benchmark-recommended cans. While very resolving, the Sennheisers are a bit to the warm side of neutral. As expected, the quality of the DAC2's sound proves revelatory with any music being piped out. Especially enjoyable are the ease and naturalness of the sound. Electronica like Phantogram's "Black Out Days" has plenty of punch and detail, but not at the expense of the bigger sonic picture. As an older recording, guitar on Albert King's

Born Under a Bad Sign can have some sting, but the DAC2 pulls the best from it.

When I switch to a set of Audeze LCD-X headphones, the DAC2 demonstrates plenty of power to drive them, delivering the bass punch these headphones are capable of producing with the right setup. Sonically, these headphones are like stepping forward several rows in an auditorium, getting up close and personal with every bit of the performance. For me, this action-packed delivery was perhaps too close and personal, and I found myself preferring the Sennheisers

for the bulk of my listening. The HD-650s indeed seem a perfect match for this setup, and I can see why Benchmark recommends them.

In the end, excellent

\$1,895 is not a small price tag, but in a hobby offering megabuck DACs, it's a modest sum for a component of this caliber. The DAC2 is a very easy component to live with sonically and aesthetically. Its versatility takes the value to another level, making me nominate this one for an Exceptional Value Award and give it an enthusiastic recommendation.

Additional Listening

You have to go back almost seventy issues of *TONE* to our third issue for our first encounter with Benchmark. The original DAC1 was \$995 and garnered our first Exceptional Value Award. It was a class leader then and it remains so today.

Staff member Jerold O'Brien still has his DAC1, so it was enlightening to compare it with the DAC2 alongside. Much like what we found comparing the Nagra PL-P to the current Jazz, the compact exteriors, as well as the overall sound, are very similar. Benchmark gear has always been very neutral, and like Nagra, because they supply so much equipment to the studio world, has little room for embellishment.

The trademark lack of sound that is Benchmark comes through instantly, but stepping up to the DAC2 immediately reveals more music and a deeper insight into re-recorded material, standard or high resolution. Remember, ten years ago we weren't even talking about high resolution files, let alone DSD, so moving on to that realm is even more enlightening.

I've always loved using Benchmark DACs as a linestage and again, the DAC2 does not disappoint. Auditioning it with everything from a 35 watt per channel PrimaLuna ProLogue 4 up to the mighty Boulder 2160 reveals just how good this component truly is. The DAC2 is perfect for a primarily digital user who wants to put the preamp up on the shelf and run some interconnects to a power amplifier elsewhere in the room – the DAC2 drives long interconnects with ease.

So, ten years later, Benchmark continues to create an awesome DAC in a compact case. I'm guessing I'll have to arm wrestle Mr. O'Brien for it again. —**Jeff Dorgay**

Benchmark DAC2 DX
MSRP: \$1,895

MANUFACTURER
Benchmark Media Systems, Inc.

CONTACT
www.benchmarkmedia.com

PERIPHERALS

Sources
Mac Mini with jRiver and Tidal playback, dCS Debussy

Amplification
Burmester 911 mk3

Preamplification
Coffman Labs G1-A

Speakers
Sonus faber Olympica III

Cables
Jena Labs

Power
Running Springs Audio Haley, and RSA Mongoose power cords

Accessories
ASC tube traps, Mapleshade Samson audio racks, Coffman Labs Equipment Footers

Ryan R610 Loudspeakers

A NEW BENCHMARK FOR VALUE AND PERFORMANCE

By Rob Johnson

Ryan Speakers may be a new name to many; however, brothers Trevor and Todd started building speakers in the 1980s under the moniker Ryan Acoustics. Their designs, and the tools to optimize and improve them, have advanced in the new century, but the goal of the company remains the same: to make exceptional speakers at a down-to-earth price – and do it all in the United States from their factory in Riverside, California. They have succeeded brilliantly.

There are three different R-Series speakers with common driver designs optimized for each enclosure. The R610 reviewed here is priced at \$2,000 and is a two-way bookshelf model. The R620 and R630 are 2.5- and 3-way floorstanding models, priced at \$3,500 and \$5,000. Multiple veneer choices are available, including walnut, oak and the clear cherry you see here, as well as custom staining options to fit a wider range of décor. I'd expect this flexibility with a much more bespoke (and expensive) product, so kudos to Ryan for being interior friendly.

REVIEW

These speakers instantly impress with their portrayal of Poe's voice on "Fly Away" easily rendering reverberation heard in the recording, and simultaneously reveals the highly engaging and delicate quality to her voice. As a minimalist song, an accompanying flute remains layered in the distance behind the singer, and a piano locks in position to one side of the stage. The Ryans place all the elements of the performance slightly behind the plane of the speakers, and together this places the performers several rows down from my imaginary concert seat. Focusing

on the forest rather than each individual tree, the overall musical picture is a wonderful one. Through the Ryans, a seat in row "J" is just fine with me.

It's what's inside that counts

The team at Ryan believes strongly in the structural rigidity that comes with the traditional box shape, reinforced with internal bracing, damping as they see fit. The cabinets are straightforward and understated (helping to keep the cost down), with the goodies on the inside – reminiscent of another highly successful West Coast

speaker manufacturer. Even the felt ring around the tweeter is chosen with care, an attitude permeating this speaker's design ethos.

Described in the product literature as a "bookshelf" design, the R610 leans towards the larger side of that moniker, measuring 16.73 inches (425mm) in height, 8.86 inches (225mm) in width, and with a depth of 12 inches (305mm) including the grille. They are mighty hefty, too, at 33 pounds (15kg) each. Inside is a 6.5 inch (165mm) Nomex cone woofer and a 1-inch (25mm) cloth dome tweeter. *(continued)*



REVIEW

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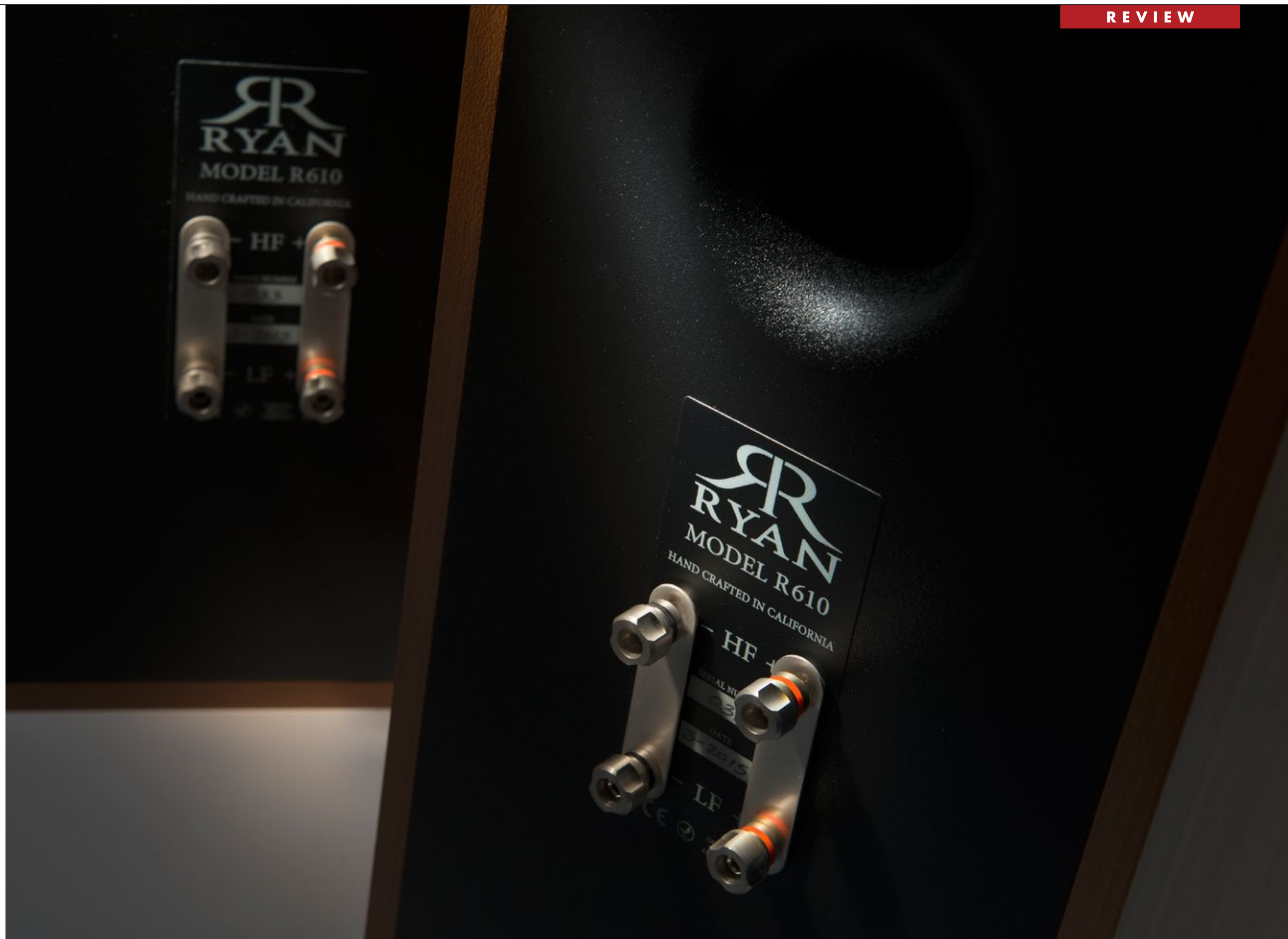
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These tweeters are placed to the inside of the enclosure and are intended to be used that way as a mirrored pair. Placing the tweeters to the outside of the stereo pair will diffuse the soundstaging, so be sure to observe the manufacturer's suggestion when placing the R610s. And plan on investing in a good pair of speaker stands to get the most out of the R610, as this is crucial to getting maximum bass extension. According to the team at Ryan, all their drivers are designed in-house at the facility in Riverside, California.

Up and running

The R610s are easy to set up; however the best integration in my room is with 26-inch speaker stands, keeping the tweeters close to ear level, so keep that in mind in relation to the height of your listening chair or couch. The manual included with the R610s provides excellent insight to new or experienced audio enthusiasts, so it is worth perusing as you are putting yours into service. They suggest placing the speakers 6–10 feet (1.8–3.0m) apart, at least 1.6 feet (0.5m) from the rear wall, and at least 2.0 feet (0.6m) from the side walls. This proved an excellent starting point, as did the ten degrees of toe-in, though I ultimately found nirvana with slightly more in my room. Again, this will depend on the exact tonal balance you prefer.

While the R610s serve up bass that is tight and tuneful, extreme low bass is lacking. In my larger listening room, roll-off becomes noticeable at about 80Hz. With test tones descending below that frequency, the drop-off becomes even more pronounced. *(continued)*



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REVIEW

Those who crave deeper, thunderous bass should consider supplementing the R610s with a high quality subwoofer. Or better yet – if budget allows – try one of the larger Ryan speakers which is designed to integrate all the audible frequencies optimally.

Other than inability to create deep bass, the frequency spectrum doesn't overemphasize any region that creates an obvious imbalance. With a very neutral profile, these speakers work very well with every genre we throw at them. Experimenting with rock, electronica, classical, jazz, blues, and vocal-centric music, all prove enjoyable. It's easy to get engrossed in the music rather than analyzing it.

Left to right imaging exceeds the speaker boundaries creating a huge soundstage, never drawing attention to the sound broadcast point, but to the music around them. The Afro Cuban All-Stars "A Toda Cuba le Gusta" illustrates this perfectly, defining and separating the musical elements contained with only a slight dithering of the big picture.

Epitomizing high performance for the price

The Ryan R610s peg the price-o-meter. \$2,000 is still an investment for most seeking great sound, but well within the reach of those making a great music system a priority. Their modest form factor makes them easy to integrate into any environment and underlines Ryan's commitment to research and development. Living with the Ryans for some time, they continue to impress. For all they offer at their modest price point, the R610 speakers certainly earn a 2015 TONEAudio Exceptional Value Award.

Additional Listening

There's something awesome about a well-executed pair of 2-way speakers. Much like a first generation Miata on a curvy road, you don't always need 500 horsepower to have a great time. Going straight to my small (10 x 13 foot) listening room after photos, the R610s are perfection: powered by the Nagra 300i tube amplifier with 20 watts per channel of 300B power, the Ryan speakers are well-served by the delicacy of the Nagra.

Even with something as cloudy and compressed as Todd Rundgren's classic, *Something/Anything*, the R610s do an excellent job unraveling the music presented on a large canvas, beautifully disappearing in the room. Yet with an excellent recording, they take the presentation further, throwing a stereo image that extends way beyond the speaker boundaries, with a tonal purity that rivals much more expensive speakers.

Where the KEF LS-50 is more precise in terms of imaging performance, the R610 is more homogenous with additional weight in the lower register. Taking advantage of room gain in my small listening room was a

bonus, and I wouldn't suggest using these speakers in a room much bigger than 11 x 14 feet if you want solid bass response. I must confess a bias towards a well-executed soft dome tweeter, so if you share this preference, the R610 will thrill you. Should you be more in the ribbon or metal tweeter camp, you may find these speakers a little dull. Choices, choices.

Again, these speakers strike a natural chord, and the only thing they lack that the big bucks speakers have more of is ultimate resolution of minute musical details. Unless you are playing them side by side next to a great pair of \$30,000 speakers at high volume, you won't really notice. While most of my listening was done with the 20 watt per channel Nagra amplifier, substituting higher powered amplifiers of the tube and solid state variety worked well – bottom line, the better your components, the more music the Ryans will reveal.

For all of our readers that freak out when we review mega components, the Ryan Audio R610 speakers are as real as it gets. Buy a pair. I'm going to. – **Jeff Dorgay**



Ryan R610 Loudspeakers
MSRP: \$1,999
www.RyanSpeakers.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source

SME Model 10 with Model 10 tonearm, Dynavector 17D3 cartridge

Digital Sources

Mac Mini with jRiver and Tidal playback, dCS Debussy

Amplification

Burmester 911 mk3

Preamplification

Coffman Labs G1-A

Speakers

Sonus faber Olympica III

Cables

Jena Labs

Power

Running Springs Audio Haley, and RSA Mongoose power cords

Accessories

ASC tube traps, Mapleshade Samson audio racks, Coffman Labs Equipment Footers, AudioQuest Jitterbug

Precision Personified

The Feickert Blackbird Turntable

By Jeff Dorgay

DR. FEICKERT ANALOGUE
Blackbird

Every time VANA's Kevin Wolff visits to set up a turntable, it's like getting a drive with one of Porsche's Le Mans drivers and I realize how much I don't know about turntable setup. There I am, left to my own devices, zooming down the back straight, thinking I'm going really fast until the real guy gets behind the wheel and he takes the same corner – the one that was making my undies bunch up at about 40 mph – faster and effortlessly.

Just as fine-tuning the suspension on a racecar makes for faster, more effortless lap times, precise tuning of your turntable, tonearm, and phono cartridge makes for an analog setup that reveals more music. Once you've had the experience there's no going back.

Having had this experience both behind the wheel and in the studio a few times now, I've learned three things: first, when analog is set up with great care it is amazing. Second, if you can't do it yourself, get your dealer (one of the reasons you should be patronizing a good dealer) to do it, or hire a specialist to make your table sing. And third, you can always learn more about analog – it's a never-ending story that will either bring you ultimate pleasure or ultimate madness. I vote for the fun part of the equation. Even if you aren't in the market for a new turntable, the chances are high that careful setup will reveal more performance in your existing setup, and Wolff brings this message home every time we get together.

I pull out an original pressing of Lloyd Cole's *Don't Get Weird on Me Babe*, and Cole's trademark melancholy voice pours out of my Dynaudio Evidence Platinum speakers, filling the room, full of width and depth in a way it just doesn't quite do with the digital front end. *And this is via an analog rig that costs one-tenth the price of my current digital front end.* Damn, it's that good. Of course, credit also has to be given to the Simaudio MOON 810LP phonostage, but that still makes the complete cost of my analog front end one-fifth of the cost of what I'm listening to on the digital side.

Partnered with an Ortofon Cadenza Black cartridge, this VANA Ltd. Blackbird package includes Acoustical Systems Arché headshell and Jelco's SA-750LB 12" tonearm. The combination paints an aural canvas that is expansive in all directions, while remaining tonally natural – neither embellishing nor diminishing anything. Part of this magic comes from the Arché's addition that allows for fine SRA adjustments to be done at the cartridge with VTA being adjusted at the base of the tonearm. According to Wolff, this allows the Jelco to be used in its most mechanically linear position with the armtube traversing the record in a perfect parallel position. The combination makes setup incredibly easy to fine tune SRA and all other cartridge alignment parameters to the nth degree... UNI-DIN (Universal – DIN (Deutsch Industrial Norm)). -And of course, all is set up with the Acoustical Systems Smart



Tractor that we reviewed back in issue 67. It only takes five minutes to again convince me that the Uni-Den alignment geometry is the way to go.

The result is breathtaking, and like a top F1 driver romping out of the tunnel at Monaco, Wolff has the setup singing in no time, with a few pit stops to explain to me exactly how this system works and why. Each minute adjustment expands the soundstage and dynamics; just when I think it can't get better, it does. Everything is cleaner throughout the frequency range, as if murkiness has dissipated. To make sure things are really grooving, we play the MoFi remaster of Marvin Gaye's *Let's Get It On*, and when I see Wolff smiling, I know we're good. I can't stress enough how critical this last bit of fine tuning is. I've heard a lot of mediocre analog setups over the years and I'll bet the deed to my house that it always comes down to setup. This is where the analog magic lies. And magic this combination is.

Wolff heads back to Seattle around 4pm, and ten hours later I'm still glued to the couch listening to records. I end the morning as the sun comes up with Peter Gabriel's "Lay Your Hands on Me" at 45 rpm from the Classic Records Clarity Vinyl pressing – LOUD. Even after 12-plus hours of listening, this table, tonearm and cartridge provide engaging, dynamic, fatigue-free listening. Did I say dynamic? *(continued)*



Though different phono cartridges all have their own sonic signature, the underlying character of the Blackbird comes through every time. It exhibits impeccable timing and pace, a large sonic footprint and a solid, yet powerful lower register – the precise area in which most \$10k tables fall short. While I have not spent as much time with the mega \$100k tables as have a few of my contemporaries, I have spent a lot of time with tables in the \$10k–\$40k range. And the Blackbird is damn good.

Considering where analog was ten or fifteen years ago, it's very exciting to see so many brilliant minds concentrating on how to extract more information from the grooves of our records. Dr. Feickert has certainly raised the bar with the Blackbird. Five years ago, this level of performance would have easily cost twice as much.

What makes it so good?

Dr. Feickert builds upon the technology featured in the Woodpecker, producing “an affordable dual arm package.” Its massive

three-inch thick plinth houses two motors, set 180 degrees apart from each other, canceling out any lateral vibration that might make its way to the platter. A dual material platter machined from Delrin, with bronze inserts, rounds out the package. Wolff makes it a point to explain how these inserts, made of a different material, help to damp the platter from unwanted vibrations more effectively than a solid Delrin platter would. This translates into more of the sensitive low-level musical detail recovered by your cartridge being preserved. Those wanting to take the Blackbird even further can upgrade the AC power supply to Feickert's latest creation – an all-battery supply. Watch for a follow-up review of the Blackbird with this new supply in place.

Even with the stock supply the Blackbird is incredibly silent; those enjoying sparsely produced music will appreciate this foundation for their music. The majesty of a solo guitar or violin just hangs in the air, awash in texture, with a three dimensional feel that I've only previously been able to achieve with much costlier turntables. *(continued)*

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This also makes it easy for the Blackbird to be mated with analog's finest tonearms and cartridges to great result. Tracking through Brian Eno's *Music for Airports* is full of quiet bits that gently fade into nothing, and the Blackbird's rendition is astonishing.

All of these technological achievements allow the Feickert Blackbird to perform at an extraordinary level, but what makes this table really fun is its two tonearm capability. The deeper you get involved with analog, the tougher it is to get by with just one phono cartridge. For some, this may mean adding a mono cartridge to the mix, while for others having cartridges with either different tonality or different levels of performance makes it easier to enjoy a wider range of records. Even if you have one of the \$10,000 mega cartridges, they aren't awesome on every pressing. On one level if you do have a big-bucks cartridge, having a daily driver cartridge for the less than stellar pressings in your collection isn't a bad idea either.

The right armboard can mount 9- to 13-inch tonearms with a 205–320mm pivot to spindle distance, leaving a very wide range of arms at your disposal. Those purchasing an additional armboard for the left side of the Blackbird can work with 9- to 10-inch tonearms with a 205–240mm pivot to spindle distance. Feickert has armboards for most major tonearms and working with a second arm will also be part of our follow-up review as soon as I can decide what the setup is going to be!

Those with 78-rpm record collections can also take advantage of them with the Blackbird, as it does offer this speed. Again, another great place to add that second tonearm with a cartridge optimized for 78s will help the enthusiast enjoy a wider range of records with the small footprint of a single deck. All speeds are selected at the mere push of the round buttons on the left side of

the table. The Blackbird springs to life silently and elegantly. It feels like a much more expensive turntable.

On the subject of speed, all three speeds of the Blackbird prove to be perfectly accurate, measured with our Acoustic Sounds test record and Feickert's Platter Speed app. This app not only shows the actual turntable speed, but you can see the slight variations in speed over time. The Blackbird exhibits minimal speed variation within tolerance, suggesting superior speed control software and the effect that the second motor has on evening out the drive impulses.

The threshold

For many music lovers, ten thousand dollars is a major investment to make in a turntable. And, should you not require two tonearms, the performance of Feickert's Woodpecker, while not featuring the dual drive motors, is in the ballpark at \$6,500. But I'm guessing that if you're considering a table in this price range, it's not your first ride in the analog rodeo and you might even have an extra tonearm and cartridge or two in your own stable, so this will be more of a trade up.

The highest praise I can give the Blackbird is that it offers performance that is capable of supporting much more expensive tonearms and cartridges, so the level of performance I experienced here is only the beginning. For all but the most obsessed analog enthusiasts, this can easily be your last turntable. It certainly might be the one I retire with. Combining high performance beyond its price tag, elegant design, extreme versatility and a solid upgrade path, the Feickert Blackbird turntable is an easy choice for one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2015. Should you be shopping in this price range, I can't think of a better choice. ●





The Feickert Blackbird Turntable
MSRP: \$10,000 (with Jelco arm)

MANUFACTURER

Dr. Feickert Analogue

CONTACT

www.feickert.de (factory)

www.vanaltd.com (NA Distributor)

PERIPHERALS

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Where Have all the Good Stereos Gone?



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FROM THE WEB

Dali Epicon 8

\$19,995/pair

www.dali-speakers.com/en-US/Home-1.aspx
(factory)

www.soundorg.com
(US importer)

If you've heard any of Dali's smaller loudspeakers, you know that this Danish manufacturer packs major performance into a compact package, and always at a much lower price than you might expect. And for good reason – they have a 250,000 square foot facility where they design and build everything from cabinet to crossover and drivers. This large scale of manufacturing and engineering prowess is what enables Dali to make a more engaging speaker than most at a specific price point.

(continued)



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Cardas Audio, Bandon, Oregon



FROM THE WEB

After just reviewing the Rubicon 2, (www.tonepublications.com/review/dali-rubicon-2-speakers) and a recent visit to the Dali factory, it's easy to see why we are so smitten with Dali. Offering excellent value, excellent sound and understated elegance that the Danes are famous for, the 20 thousand dollar question is what can they accomplish at that price? When you've got 20 big ones to spend, the competition gets serious, but after spending a few months with the Epicon 8, I put them at the top of the heap and serious competition for speakers costing \$40k - \$50k; they're that good. This is what economies of scale deliver.

As we roam through Dali's massive operation, CEO Lars Worre explains that the Epicon 8 is their flagship speaker and that they "weren't sure they could even build a speaker costing this much." There's Danish frugality for you. But the Dali team has pulled out all the stops on the Epicon 8, putting everything they know into the speaker, from their luscious cabinetry to the hand picked drivers and crossover components.

Danes typically like to do things a bit differently than everyone else and their implementation of the ribbon tweeter in the Epicon 8 is a perfect example. Worre again comments, "We use the ribbon as a supertweeter, crossing over at about 15khz, so that it just adds extra ambience to the presentation. Using it this way also avoids any diaphragm breakup from crossing it over at a lower frequency."

And that's just the beginning. To read the rest of our review of these stunning speakers, [click here.](#) ●

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FROM THE WEB

GamuT RS5

\$31,000/pair
www.gamutaudio.com

I am confessing an honest bias when I mention that I fell in love with GamuT speakers about six years ago and have been using their top of the line S9 as a reference speaker for the last five. With the perfect balance (for me, anyway) of dynamics, extension and coherence combined with a highly musical tonality, they tick all the boxes. But they are massive and need a large room to give their top performance.





GamuT's new RS speakers build on all the strengths of the S series, and while the cabinets look the same from the outside, everything is different from the cabinet construction, to the drivers, including the internal wiring. No stone was left unturned to wring even more performance from these fine loudspeakers.

Every aspect of these speakers exhibits fanatical attention to detail, reflecting the precision and pride of their construction. This 2 ½ way speaker is claimed +/- 3db from 29hz to 60khz and while I no longer possess the canine hearing to hear 60k anymore, our *Stereophile* test disc confirms 30hz with ease and very usable output at 25hz. These are impressive, yet modest sized floorstanders, weighing in at just a touch over 100 pounds utilizing a 7-inch woodfibre cone with the signature GamuT wood dust cap and a 7-inch sliced paper cone, impregnated with GamuT's proprietary oil. The highs are taken care of with their ring radiator tweeter and the system features a sensitivity of 88db.

The RS5 does not reach quite the level of dynamic slam as the much bigger S9, but in many ways the new speaker betters even the old flagship. Already great to begin with, the sheer coherence that the new speaker exhibits, along with greater ability to define minute detail and spatial cues. When not listening to music with overbearing energy beneath 30hz, the RS5 comes out on top. These are definitely the speakers I'm going to retire with...

To read the rest of our review of the GamuT RS here. ●

Audio by Van Alstine Vision Adjustable Phono Preamplifier



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

Sponsored by Music Direct and Tidal

In an effort to help you find the albums we’ve been reviewing, we’ve started this handy index at the back of the magazine. This issue, we have a listing of all the albums available, 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.

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SLUMMIN'

Burger King
Headphones

\$15, Ebay

Ask anyone, I always wanted the Oscar Meyer Weinermobile. Had a chance a number of years ago for \$6,600, but where the hell would I put it? Keeping with my fast food fascination, the phones you see were not only irresistible for that reason, but they brought back great memories of when you could buy these with a matching AM/FM radio to wear around your belt for about \$15, if memory serves me correctly.

Sure they sound like you've got special sauce in your ears when you're listening to your favorite audiophile pressing, but they look super cool and you're guaranteed not to see another pair of these at your local head-fi meet. ●

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

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