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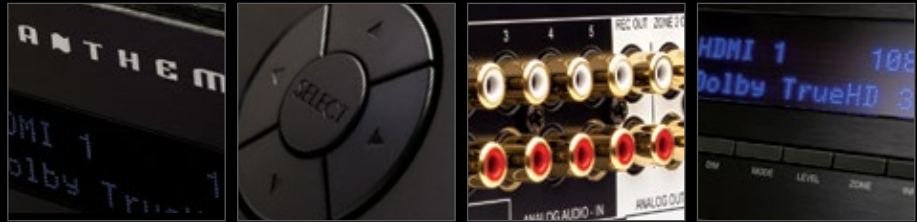
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## PUBLISHER'S LETTER

I t's the middle of summer, and other than the blistering heat that it seems we've been enjoying all over the world, that means music festivals. Editor Bob Gendron has been busy at Lollapalooza and I've been in the woods of Pickathon. And because of this heat, I've been indoors much more than I was during summers past, so it's been a great time to listen to a lot of new music and audition more gear.

As I've moved to smaller digs, Managing Editor Rob Johnson and I are teaming up to start a new column, “The Audiophile Apartment.” We will be focusing on smaller, more stylish gear that is better suited to a smaller space. Apartment and condo dwellers, regardless of their love of music and hifi, don't always have the room to stretch out and install a mega system, nor the luxury of a dedicated listening room, so we'll try our best to help you find great sounding yet more compact components.

Many of our readers have commented that they just don't have the space for a big rack full of gear and all those cables, so we will be covering a lot of wireless solutions as well as smaller speakers and electronics. With the plethora of streaming music services available from your phone, tablet, or laptop, this is easier than ever.

We kick this issue's column off with the XEO 4 wireless speakers from Dynaudio and follow it up in our 995 column with a local favorite made just a hundred miles south of *TONE* as the crow flies, the Vanatoo Transparent One.

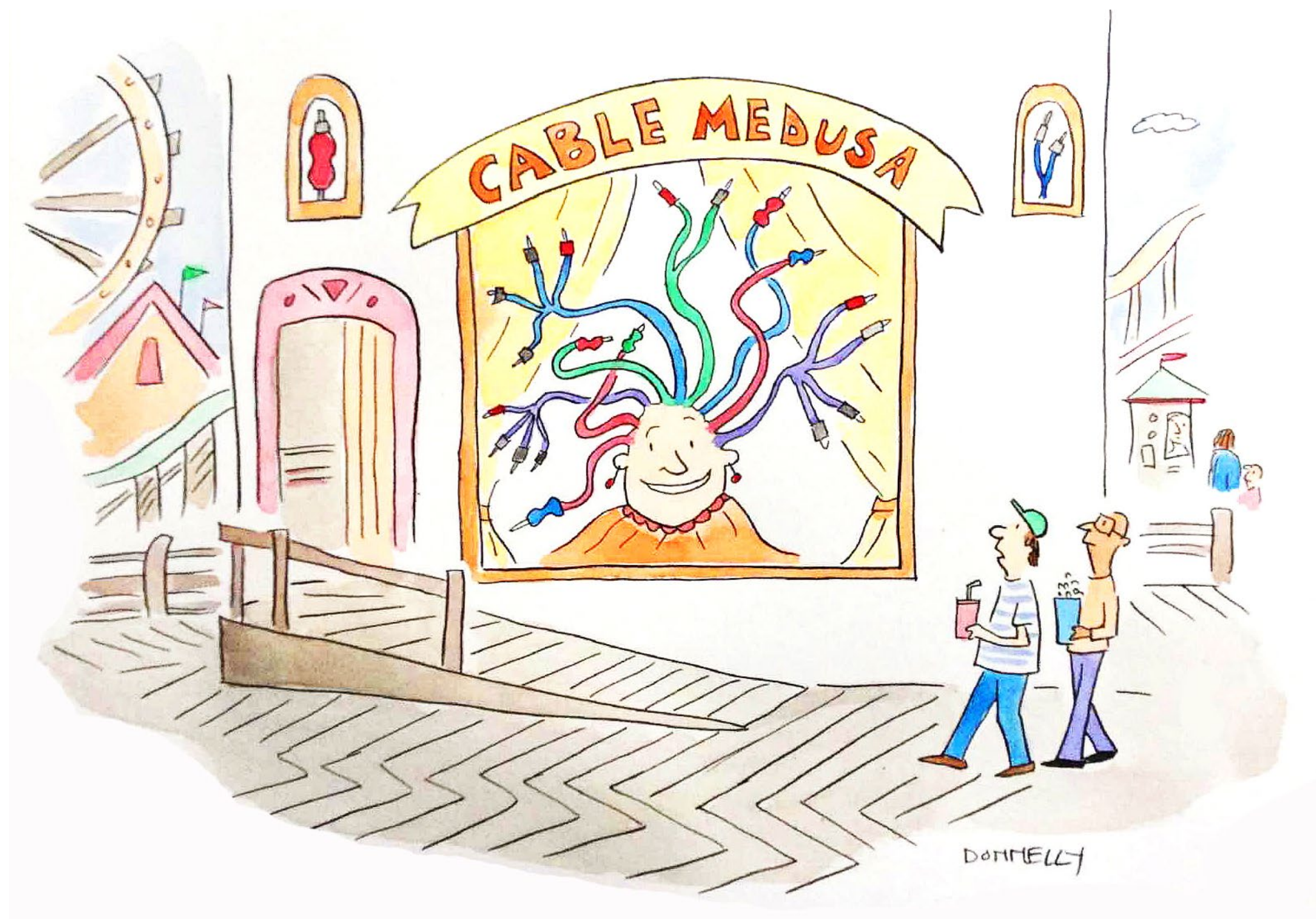


Both are aimed at different users, but the ethos is the same – maximizing the sound while minimizing the hardware. But we haven't lost sight of the big guns either. We've got some incredible components from GamuT, Gryphon and IsoTek for your perusal as well.

Our music writers have been digging up some great new music, which is almost all available on vinyl, a testament to the ever-increasing staying power of the analog medium. If you haven't noticed recently, on the back page of the issue, we've been posting links to purchase all of the vinyl, along with a link to stream the albums on Tidal, so I hope we can lead you to a few new summer favorites.

In closing, it is very sad to report the passing of Dieter Burmester on August 15. Those that were fortunate enough to be part of his world knew Dieter as the driving force behind Burmester Audio. He was also one of high end audio's most kind and compassionate men. It was an honor to consider him a friend and he will be sorely missed.





*"I hear if you look into her eyes, your stereo turns to stone."*

PUBLISHER Jeff Dorgay

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# The BeoCenter 9500

## Danish for Inclusive

By Jeff Dorgay

**O**k, I admit it – happily. I’ve always loved Bang & Olufsen gear. While many dis the Danish icon, slagging them off as mid fi at best. However, having listened to more than my share of B&O, I think they’ve been a bit short changed. The BeoCenter 9500 shown here just happened to be staring me down on a recent perusal of the shelves at Echo Audio, here in Portland, Oregon. Affable owner Kurt Doslu took my money, with a smile saying, “If it breaks, I won’t fix it!” Considering how good his service department is, I had a brief tinge of buyer’s remorse, but this perfect specimen (remote and all) was too gorgeous to pass up. Decades before Devialet hit the scene, Bang & Olufsen was building beautiful, all-in-one music centers. Produced from 1989 until 1994, the BeoCenter 9500 had an original MSRP of about \$3,500, or about twice that in today’s currency.





## FEATURE



Research reveals that B&O still supports the BeoCenter 9500 and Chris at Pyramid Audio concurs, saying that the most common repair for the 9500 is the muting relay for the speaker outputs, followed by loose glass panels. So, by the time the photos were done, I was anxiously anticipating firing up the BeoCenter, mated to my JBL – L100s. Should you pick up a 9500 of your own and aren't planning on using it with B&O's powered speakers, make sure you get a pair of the speaker connectors. If you end up short changed, don't fret.

They can still be sourced from Oak Tree Enterprises here: [www.oaktreevintage.com](http://www.oaktreevintage.com) for \$39.95 per pair. A bit more expensive than the ones in an old Pioneer receiver, but just as essential. While you're at it, grab a suitable length of AudioQuest SLiP 14/2 speaker cable (reviewed on page 44) and tin the ends. This will make the screw connections a snap.

A winner of multiple design awards, the Beocenter 9500 had a sleek efficiency that still looks contemporary today. Measuring 14 inches deep and 30 inches wide,

the 9500 requires a fairly large shelf or table, but maintains a low profile being only 4 inches tall. It's chrome glass panels hide a built in cassette deck with Dolby HX to the left, a splendid FM tuner in the middle and a CD player on the right. Both decks are only a touch away, with their respective glass panels sliding away to reveal the players underneath.

Everything can be controlled with the integrated touch controls, tastefully lit in red and green, or the remote – and it's a heavy one. There's even a matching BeoGram

9500 linear track turntable that will sit right along side the BeoCenter 9500. With inputs for MM phono, an Aux input and an additional tape deck, all via DIN inputs, so again, keep your eyes peeled for special cables. Sounds Heavenly in the UK [www.soundsheavenly.com](http://www.soundsheavenly.com) specializes in very good B&O friendly cable at very reasonable prices.

Mechanically, this 25-year-old receiver operates like a 25 year old Bentley. Everything is smooth, thanks to the optical controls with no moving parts. *(continued)*





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Not only fashion forward thinking, but also deterioration proof as well. The 80-watt per channel amplifier works as well with my vintage JBL's as it does with the Eggleston Emmas and the Vandersteen 1Cis. The sound is definitely cleaner and more refined than a big Pioneer or Marantz receiver, lacking the murkiness that defines these components.

Even though we have a limited selection of decent FM stations in Portland, the 9500s tuner does a great job of pulling in signal and offering high quality playback. The more time I spend with the 9500, the more I can see why B&O components have such a loyal following. For the cost of a Bose Wave Radio, you can purchase a BeoCenter 9500 and a great pair of speakers. Find a box of blank cassettes and start making mix tapes for your love interest while your at it; the Dolby HX Pro deck is phenomenal and more than worth the cost of the entire unit. Plan on paying \$400 - \$600 for one of these, and as always, try and find the best example you can, even if it is towards the higher end of the scale. While the 9500 is still supported, it's densely packed under the hood, so you don't want to have to break the case open unless absolutely necessary.

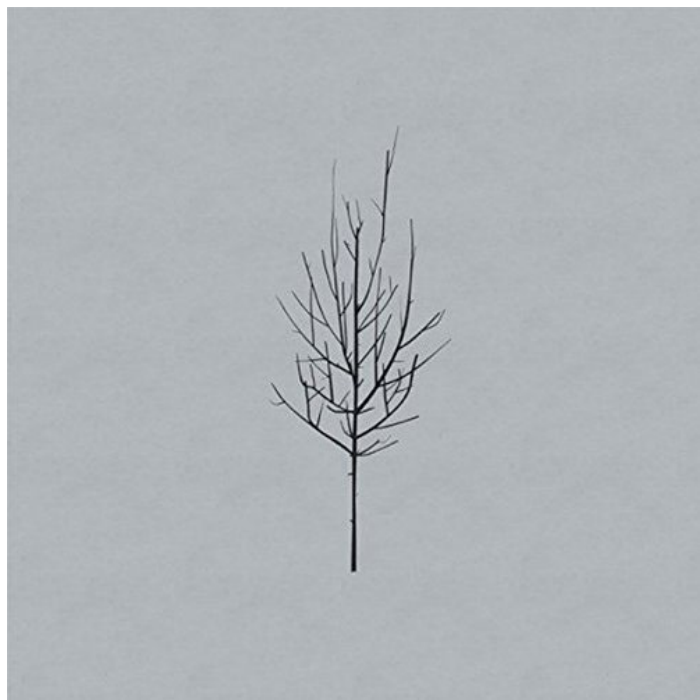
If you'd like even more pre or post purchase information on a BeoCenter of your very own, peruse the BeoPhile website. It's full of technical information and a great forum.

[www.beophile.com](http://www.beophile.com)





## NEW RELEASES

**Low**

*Ones and Sixes*  
Sub Pop, LP or CD

**“Let it all out,”** Low’s Alan Sparhawk sings near album’s end on “Landslide.” And then, just as the mayhem comes rushing out, he drops another order, one even more damning. “Scream till you bleed,” he intones, not letting his oratory-like delivery telegraphic any single emotion. No need: The music makes it clear everyone should get out of Low’s way. Drums create earthquake-like ripples in the foundation, glacier-sized guitar riffs push out ahead, and a static hiss affixes itself to the instruments. Consider it an electro-magnetic call for help.

On *Ones and Sixes*, Low sounds wicked, maybe even a little evil. It marks a change for the long-standing Duluth, Minn.-bred trio, perhaps even something of a head-pounding shock after 2013’s *The Invisible Way*. The latter remains a thoughtfully soft album about aging and death. Here, Low isn’t exactly going hesitatingly into the night. The record ends on a quest for “some kind of purpose,” with Steve Garrington’s bass digging holes into the ground while the voices of Sparhawk and drummer Mimi Parker become lost to the heavens. “You want religion?” Sparhawk asks. The following doom and gloom of a mid-song break makes it clear it’s a trick question.

In its own way, *Ones and Sixes* is quiet—every Low album, after all, is quiet—but it just may be the loudest quiet album one will hear this year. It’s all low-end heaviness, a soft rumble over the horizon that steadily and patiently envelopes all that stands before it. The set begins with “Gentle,” which is almost something alien. The song’s booms feel borderline industrial, and they burrow and burrow as more digital shading gets tuned in and out, as if the song doubles as a distress call that’s been locked in the earth’s core. The lyrics comprise a mantra: “Careful. Measured. Tortured. Stable.” It’s a lifetime of bleakness in just over five minutes.

And, like all of *Ones and Sixes*, it’s exhilarating. This is Low, 20-plus years into its career, still finding new tools with which to play. Many of them are electronic, and all suit the band’s preoccupation with the later days of one’s life. Synths and hisses exist in Low’s catalog, but none quite like this, where studio knobs feel like they’re turning on pure blackness. “Everything always confusion,” Sparhawk sings on “Spanish Translation,” a tune that flirts, just briefly, with a folksy progression. It’s not to be. Low is after something between ambient calm moments and bracing sound swells. Guitar strums get trailed by feedback, or punctuated with a brassy digital spark.



Even Low’s swaying harmonies get a makeover. “No End” starts pleasantly enough, and nearly stays that way. On prior Low albums, it would have been a real two-tapper. One can even make out the twinkling effects. Here, though, it’s all lacerating feedback, and it’s as if each song is encircled with an electronic fence designed to keep the listener at bay.

You may not be able to touch, but it’s worth listening to. “Into You” emerges as a minimalistic ballad on which finger snaps sound like exploding stars and Parker’s voice practically harmonizes with the guitar/keyboard buzz. “The Innocents” lets a crystal-clear guitar cut through the spasm-like punches, but only so Parker can offer a warning: “All you innocents, make a run for it.” “Lies” almost offers a respite from the thunder, at least until you start to wonder if the lyrics about a kid in the corner are really as twisted as they seem. Musically, “What Part of Me” is even prettier, as a drum machine sets a Brit-pop groove and Sparhawk and Parker sing as if they’re expressing their affection for one another.

Who knows. Maybe they are. Few artists reach for such depths with such love.  
—**Todd Martens**



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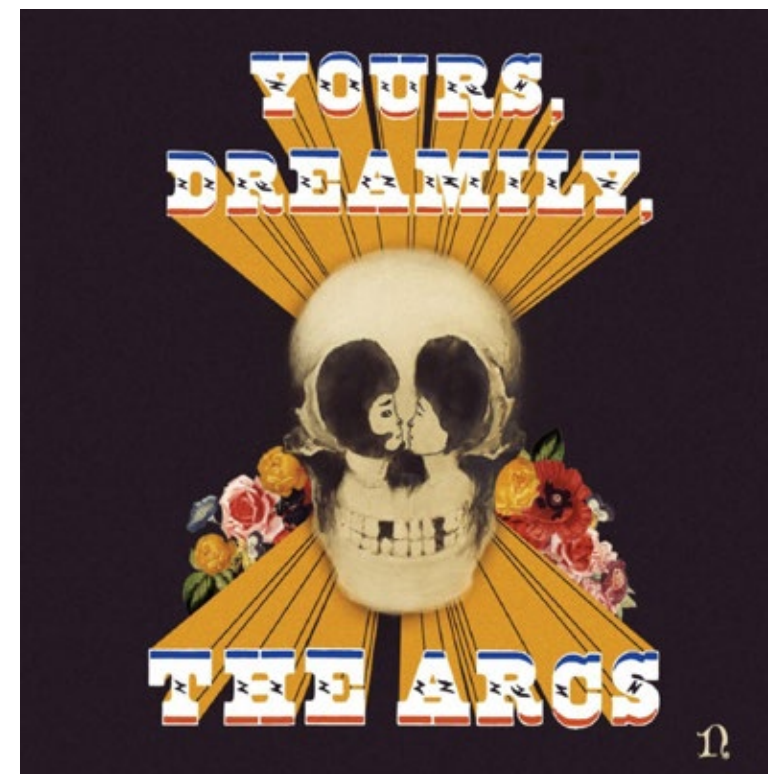


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**The Arcs**

*Yours, Dreamily*  
Nonesuch, LP or CD

**N**o one would ever accuse the members of the Black Keys of resting on their laurels. Drummer Patrick Carney plays in the aptly named side project Drummer, produced albums for Tennis and the Sheepdogs, and guested on the last Rentals album. Not to be outdone, frontman/guitarist Dan Auerbach built his own studio in Nashville and enjoys his own burgeoning production career. He counts albums by Nikki Lane, Bombino, and Ray LaMontagne on his c.v.

In his spare time, Auerbach also formed a new band, The Arcs, along with a bevy of collaborators—including indie-rocker-turned-producer Richard Swift and Amy Winehouse/Mark Ronson collaborator Nick Movshon. The press release announcing the septet's debut *Yours, Dreamily* notes the album coalesced via "spontaneous, informal sessions" in studios in Los Angeles, New York City, and Nashville. Accordingly, the record reflects a diversity of styles, locales, and musical backgrounds, as well as the casual recording process. *(continued)*



## MUSIC

Languid tempos, hazy vocals, and washed-out instrumentation dominate the music. Songs touch on lilting 70s R&B (“Chains Of Love,” “Nature’s Child”), electronic-dusted rock (“Outta My Mind,” the soul-sample pastiche “Put a Flower In Your Pocket”), ghostly reggae (the falsetto-laden “Come & Go”), and easygoing soul-rock (“Pistol Made of Bones,” “Cold Companion”).

The Arcs’ closest peer in terms of vibe and diversity happens to be another side project: Broken Bells, featuring the Shins’ James Mercer. Unfortunately, the unfocused tendencies of the latter’s studio efforts also sink *Yours, Dreamily*. At 14 songs, the album is too long. And thanks to bland, repetitive arrangements and monotonous tempos, the record meanders and plods instead of finding a groove.

*Yours, Dreamily* is actually far better when it rubs the sleep from its eyes. “The Arc” boasts snaky classic-rock riffs (including a white-hot guitar solo) and bar-boogie piano, while “Velvet Ditch” boasts a skronking sax solo. On “Stay In My Corner,” a song ostensibly about the Floyd Mayweather-Manny Pacquiao fight, the Arcs strike the right balance of sonic subtlety and emotional tenacity. Auerbach croons “Stay in my corner, babe/I will fight for you/If you fight for me too” on the chorus, as twinkling piano and honeyed guitar licks transform the song into a vintage-sounding soul chestnut. More moments like this would help *Yours, Dreamily* stand out from the pack. Rather, the album is a so-so diversion, and no match for the players’ main squeezes. —**Annie Zaleski**

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### Destroyer

*Poison Season*

Merge Records, LP or CD

**D**estroyer's new *Poison Season* shares commonalities with late 70s/early 80s easy-listening music, but by no means is the nearly hour-long set an easy listen. Quiet, introspective, and slow, the record requires patience and an appreciation for hushly orchestrated songs. Despite gorgeous violin arrangements—"Hell," in particular, could score a scene in a Victorian romance from *Anna Karenina/Pride & Prejudice* director Joe Wright—even the prettiest moments (abundant pauses, saxophones bearing the predictability of an alley cat) feel uncomfortable. Still, the stakes never feel all that high. *Poison Season* is the musical equivalent of pondering in solitude.

Bejar, who is indie-rock royalty, has been steadily moving in this direction. The Canadian's long-running Destroyer project highlights his skills as a meditative singer-songwriter. By contrast, his contributions to the New Pornographers showcase his knack for hooks. With Destroyer, Bejar has progressed from piano-laced acoustics to gradually experimenting with more synths and strings. In press materials for *Poison Season*, Bejar describes the centerpieces of the album as residing somewhere between "super austere and super mid-70s Springsteen/Bowie street-rock." Elements of both appear, but "austere" is probably the most apt description.

Bejar is too abstract a lyricist for any concept to every truly be grasped, but *Poison Season*, which feels as much like a tragicomedy as it does a collection of songs, qualifies as a performance piece. With Bejar's singing more akin to giving dramatic readings, the album feels as much like a tragicomedy as it does a collection of songs. Here, urban life is isolating, weddings are ruined, and the sunlight is not to be trusted. It's filled with characters—Jesus, Jacob, Judy, and Jack—that seem to live inside an Edward Hopper painting. They're not desperate, per say, but their lives all lack some indefinable thing. You can practically picture the emptiness in their eyes.

Maybe it's a preoccupation with faith. "I got paid and then I wrote a song into the heavens," Bejar sings between the seesawing violins and Spanish horns of "Forces from Above." Maybe it is youth that's missed. "I think I used to be more fun," Bejar admits in "Dream Lover," a rollicking number that proves to be the one uptempo moment on the record. Or maybe it's just company that's absent.



©Photo by Fabiola Carranza

"How come your eyes come in and out of focus in the park all alone?" Bejar asks amid woodwind instruments on "Girl in a Sling."

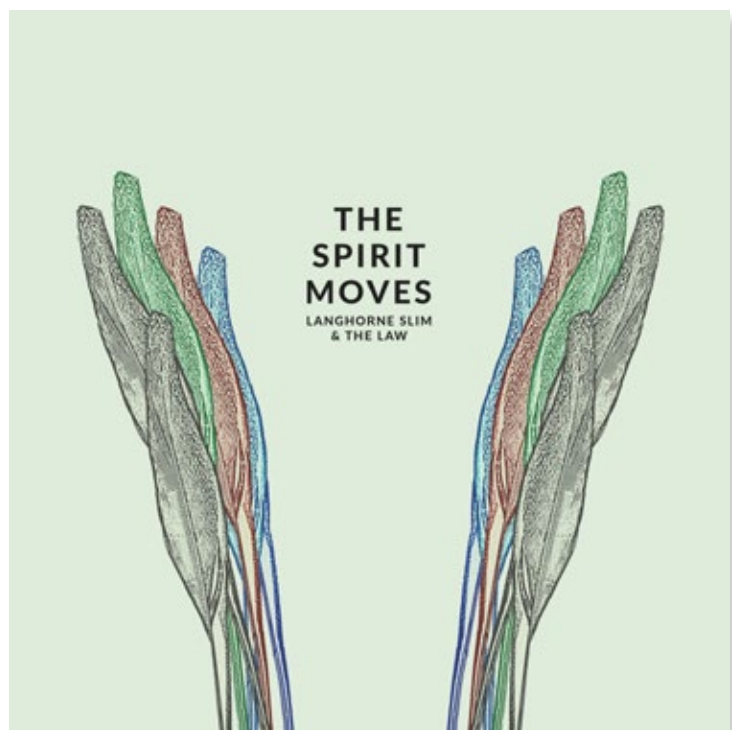
Collectively, the record doesn't feel oppressive so much as lonely, and sometimes *Poison Season* feels oppressively lonely. One can't help but admire Bejar's tastefulness. Yet with each new cheerless horn and overcast string arrangement, one can't also help but wonder if he has crafted the year's most immaculate collection dedicated to endless wallowing. It all feels cold and distant, as if a few jazzy diversions were enough to signify importance.

"Archer on the Beach," a remake of an earlier Destroyer song, comes on here as enigmatic jazz. Piano notes trickle in and out, what sounds like a seagull creates ruffling notes off in the distance, and a saxophone leaves a trail akin to cigarette smoke just beneath Bejar's delivery—a vocal approach so slow one can almost picture him sipping scotch between words. "Times Square," reprised twice on the album, is equally ambient and orchestral. "Forces from Above" alternates between hand percussion and tautly pulled strings. At times, it sounds like a police siren in slow motion.

"Solace's Bride" dims the lights further, as drums are tapped, a horn drips like a tear, and Bejar sings of sipping wine from a porcelain cup. There's tragedy here, but it's the pristine sort. During "Sun in the Sky," on which the groove is rocking-chair smooth and the guitars tuned to twilight, Bejar sings, "You drink a cup of wine to settle your nerves." Just once, it would be nice to see what Bejar can do with them left unsettled.

—**Todd Martens**





### Langhorne Slim & The Law

*The Spirit Moves*

Dualtone Music, LP or CD

Langhorne Slim's latest release was conceived during a period of transition in the singer-songwriter's life. Newly single and, after a nomadic life, he became a first-time homeowner in Nashville. *The Spirit Moves* is the first album he's written and recorded as a completely sober man.

For a songwriter, those major changes seemingly offer much emotional grist for the writing mill. But when it comes to being an incisive lyricist, Langhorne Slim—who co-wrote eight of his twelve songs with co-producer Kenny Siegal—frequently goes missing in action. Lyrically, many of the tracks feel like sketches of ideas hastily pulled from a notebook rather than fleshed-out and fully realized numbers. This is one uneven album.

As a vocalist, the bluesy folk-rocker displays an intimate, confessional tone on the low-key tunes. But his soul shouting makes for a mixed bag. Sometimes, he's appealingly raw and sensual. Other times, he sounds strained from trying too hard.

On the lovely, atmospheric roots tune "Changes," Slim's voice sounds up close and personal. But the lyrics disappoint, coming uncomfortably close to simplistic moon-June rhymes. Similarly, the raw rhythm-and-blues "Life's a Bell" flashes musical appeal, but suffers from less-than-scintillating wordplay. Consider, "If we live tonight like it's our last chance/ Well they're playing our song/We'd better dance."

Relatedly, the stripped-down and heartrending folk melody of "Airplane" leads listeners to expect an equally effecting lyrical payoff. Instead, the message consists of dashed-off thoughts ("Spent most my time lost at the races/Now we get by making funny faces") and tepid attempts at profundity ("Some people live trying to be forgiven/That might be life, oh but that ain't livin'"). And the theme continues, as the doo-woppy "Put It Together" emerges as both busy and undercooked. "This heart of mine/It hurts sometimes /It was broken/Now it's better/ Since your love put it together."

Slim's backing band, the Law, moves easily between rustic folk ("Meet Again") and soulful blues ("Bring You My Love"). "Strangers" even attains a soaring folk-pop mood recalling the heady heights of Nick Lowe. While familiar, it's fun and beautifully played stuff.

Unfortunately, the thin lyrics undercut the experience. Words are important. Those on display here feel like first drafts.  
—**Chrissie Dickinson**







### Yo La Tengo

*Stuff Like That There*  
Matador, LP or CD

**Y**o La Tengo recently celebrated its 30th anniversary. As one of the most renowned—and, at times, cerebral—guitar-pop bands on the indie scene, the band can be forgiven for wanting to take a bit of a breather after three decades. *Stuff Like That There* is technically the band's 14th studio album, but it feels more like album 13 ½, as it is a collection of nearly all-acoustic, closely recorded folk-pop ditties, the bulk of which are covers.

Yo La Tengo has done this before. *Stuff Like That There* is billed as a sequel of sorts to 1990's *Fakebook*. At that time, the latter represented a relatively drastic left-turn for the Hoboken, New Jersey-based group, boasting choice covers of songs from the likes of the Flamin' Groovies and John Cale but lacking the plugged-in bite of the band's brainy, atmospheric Velvet Underground-style melodicism. It affirmed the band had smashing good taste, proved it wasn't hiding behind guitar effects, and stood as a pause before the group delivered a string of eclectic works throughout the rest of the decade.

The Yo La Tengo of today is, overall, a far calmer band than the Yo La Tengo of 1990. The collective is also sharper, and more adept at finding nooks and crannies in unhurried arrangements. *Stuff Like That There* is, nominally, a showcase for the core trio's depth of interplay. That being said, if you think there's probably not really a need for a folksy cover of the Cure's "Friday I'm in Love," you would probably be right.

Hence, *Stuff Like That There* is more cutesy than revelatory, the sound of a distinguished band calling up some past collaborators to bond over tunes from the likes of Darlene McCrea and Hank Williams. As on *Fakebook*, the band displays the unfortunate penchant to cover itself, but there are a couple of dreamy originals and nice little touches abound. The downside? Yo La Tengo, even when the dialing it down, usually transcends the word "nice." The group also happens to coming off of one of its stronger works with 2013's *Fade*, an album of approachable maturity and buoyant, orchestral arrangements.

To embrace *Stuff Like That There* is to settle for simple treasures. The band keeps everything direct, with Ira Kaplan on acoustic guitar, Georgia Hubley on a small drum kit, and James McNew on upright bass. (*continued*)

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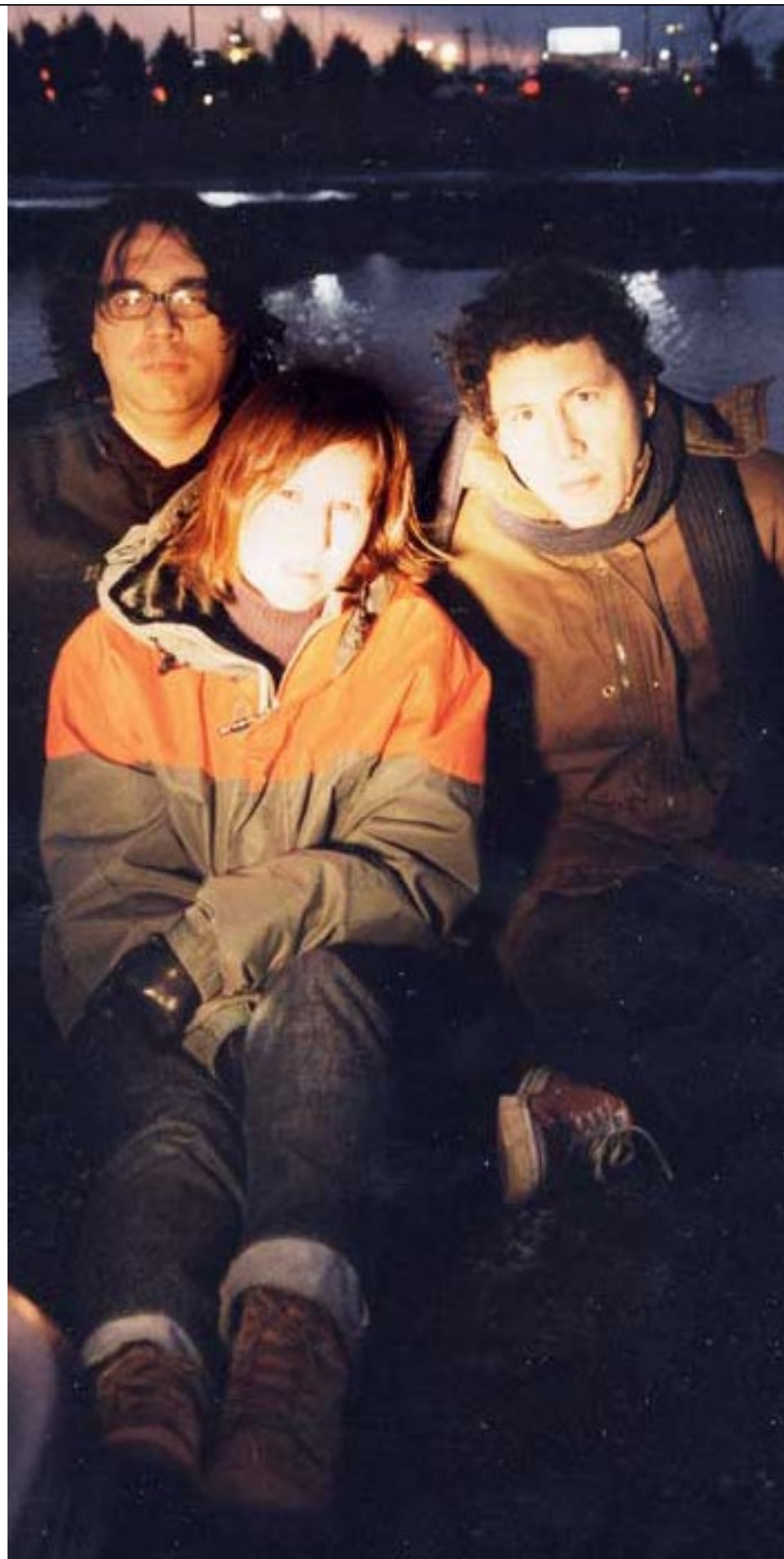


## MUSIC

If you're a Yo La Tengo fan, familiar names, such as former contributor Dave Schramm, return. Tackling the electric guitar, he carries songs such as "Automatic Doom," which resurrects a little-known gem from the New Jersey psychedelic pop band Dream Pillow. In a song in which the rhythms feel wind-swept, Schramm does his best to tickle the senses with feather-light loops that spin around.

While Yo La Tengo's shows and albums are no strangers to covers—see the reverb-soaked and woozy sensation that surrounds the band's take on the Beach Boys' "Little Honda"—*Stuff Like That There* plays it relatively straight. There's no Western swing on the band's version of Williams' "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry." Instead, the slowed-down pace and Hubley's vocals give the song the more consolatory feel of a lullaby. How Yo La Tengo would re-imagine the Parliaments' "I Can Feel the Ice Melting" and the latter's mid-60s R&B ornamentation seems to present a fine challenge, and while the ensemble certainly doesn't embarrass itself, it goes the coffee-shop route. Likewise, the jangly "Daydream" from The Lovin' Spoonful gets downgraded into a back-porch number.

A couple of originals strike a similar casual vibe. "Rickety" jumps a bit, thanks to an upright bass that takes on an eerie tone. "Awhileaway" is reflective in nature, and earlier Yo La Tengo cuts such as "All Your Secrets" and "The Ballad of Red Buckets" provide a sense of what the band would sound like if it were performing at a formal party at the Lincoln Center. No doubt that Kaplan and company clean up, well, nicely, but let's hope Yo La Tengo starts dressing down again soon. —**Todd Martens**



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### Barrence Whitfield & the Savages

*Under the Savage Sky*  
Bloodshot, LP or CD

If Barrence Whitfield & the Savages sound like they have something to prove on *Under the Savage Sky*, there's a very good reason: The Boston-founded R&B/garage-soul quintet clearly itches to seize the kind of widespread notoriety and success that eluded the group during its first go-around in the 80s and 90s. Although fiery vocalist Whitfield remains enormously respected here and in the U.K.—he toured with Tina Turner, Bo Diddley, George Thorogood, and the Damned; has been championed by BBC DJs Andy Kershaw and the late John Peel; and he collaborated with Tom Russell on two country-tinged albums—he's not mentioned in the same breath as greats such as Solomon Burke and Wilson Pickett, or, for that matter, modern kindred spirits such as Black Joe Lewis.

*(continued)*

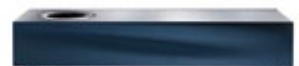


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MUSIC



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Judging by *Under the Savage Sky*, the band's second record for Bloodshot Records since reuniting in 2011, such omissions are deplorable. For all his vocal power, Whitfield possesses nuance. As a singer, he knows when to turn on the swagger. Witness his James Brown soul-screams on the band's shaggy version of Timmy Willis' barnstorming "I'm a Full Grown Man" and the way he roars and snarls on a jump-jivin' cover of Mercy Baby's "Rock and Roll Baby." But he's also gruffly tender throughout the bluesy lament "Adjunct Street" and a powerful orator on "Angry Hands."

More importantly, Whitfield never overpowers the rest of his group, whose lineup includes two original Savages (Boston punk vets/Lyres members Peter Greenberg and Phil Lenker) along with drummer Andy Jody and saxophonist Tom Quartulliand. As a result, the

band's punk-injected fusions of corrugated garage, squealing rockabilly, and soul/R&B are both incredibly cohesive and rich with detail. Highlights include the hot-rodding guitar solo on the opening "Willow," sizzling rhythms and slurring grooves throughout "Katy Didn't," and fuzzy saxophone rumbles that add velocity to "The Claw." On the standout "Bad News Perfume," the individual pieces—tapping drums, scorched-earth riffs, squawking sax shards—coalesce into a breakneck-speed punk pogo.

*Under the Savage Sky* isn't perfect. Specifically, its brisk, danceable songs are far more engaging than some of the slower moments. But this is a minor quibble, considering most of the album adroitly captures Barrence Whitfield & the Savages' raw live sound and ability to twist retro sounds into something fresh and ferocious. —Annie Zaleski





**Heather Woods Broderick**

*Glider*

Western Vinyl, LP or CD

**G**hosts abound on Heather Woods Broderick's *Glider*. The music is often barely there. Consider it the sound of a wisp of smoke in the twilight. The vocals are similarly hushed. Broderick's voice appears to be covered in a thin layer of dust, or hovering somewhere behind a black veil. Background harmonies sometimes appear off in the distance, a lonely guitar gets occasionally plucked, and people and places are sung about as if they're memories rather than realities. They're specters, visions that fill the "long silences" of "Desert" or the answers to the questions that "should never be asked" on "All Is Love."

Welcome to late nights and the company of books, the album seemingly says. As such, the nine songs on *Glider* admittedly can feel like one song. Influences and abstractions are suggested, but there's road-weariness here, a tired skepticism that's rather quiet. Tonally, it isn't drastically dissimilar from the music of Sharon Van Etten, with whom Broderick often collaborates.

*Glider* serves as Broderick's second proper album, although her first, 2009's *From the Ground*, is Americana at its most sparse. By contrast, the fare here presents piano, guitar, strings and the sporadic horn at their most wistful. It is more dark and dreamy than magical, per say, and while Broderick prefers to blur melodies rather than take a more assertive approach, she's crafted an album that works as an accessory to evenings built for contemplation.

There's no shame in that, but Broderick appears to be capable of something even grander. Playing nearly every instrument herself, with assists from her brother and Death Cab for Cutie's Dave Depper, she adds layers with a baby-step pace. Songs build with a deft touch, a nearly invisible slight-of-hand that finds "Up in the Pine" segueing from a merry-go-round assembly of intimate guitar notes to more wide-open spaces. Broderick uses a bass to add heft, and strings to streak across the arrangements like stars. It feels like a late-night road trip, where lights occasionally illuminate the horizon.

"Mama Shelter" even brings a bit of a reggae step into the mix, and with it, the Portland-based artist sounds as if she's singing out in a field in the middle of nowhere. "I've got half a mind to move away and give it up," Broderick sings, channeling restlessness all the while flirting with jazzy percussion and a faint digital shadow in the background. And while she sounds relatively at home orchestrating a piano-laden track such as "Fall Hard," listen closely to the songs surrounding it and you'll discover Broderick is no minimalist.

By contrast, "Wyoming" is brush strokes, whispers and stutter steps until it isn't. How the tune suddenly becomes drenched in guitar fuzz—and still stays relatively calm—feels like a mystery. The 40-minute record doesn't always carry such flairs. "You keep me in the dark," she laments on "The Sentiments," and left alone, one gets the notion Broderick would be content to stay in the shadows, disappearing into the gentleness of, say, "Desert."

Ultimately, however, the perception that something lurks in the shadows carries the album. Take the percussive finger snaps of "All Is Love," which somehow manage to sound as if they emerge from another room. Or, consider the ambiguity of the title track. Built around just a few piano notes, Broderick paints herself as something of a drifter as background harmonies sing a hymn to the past. *Glider* is an elegy to what lingers.

—**Todd Martens**

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**Lianne La Havas**

*Blood*

Nonesuch/Warner Bros. Records, LP or CD

**T**he music world is studded with a number of young satin-voiced crooners, including global sensation Sam Smith and evocative interpreter Morgan James. In this field of fine neo-soul singers, Lianne La Havas comes on as a talented contender who has yet to prove herself a great one.

Blood follows on the heels of the singer/songwriter/guitarist's critically hailed 2012 debut, *Is Your Love Big Enough?* Here, she applies her buttery-smooth delivery to a mix of jazz-lite tunes, modern soul numbers, and dance music for the nightclub set. On the surface, it's a shiny and attractive collection of songs. It is also emotionally underwhelming.

La Havas' music is cool rather than hot. "Unstoppable" feels as sleek and slick as a Ferrari, a spotless vehicle set to cruise control. *(continued)*





©Photo by Jean Paul Pietrus

There are distant atmospheric echoes of Dionne Warwick's 1960s hits—those iconic Burt Bacharach and Hal David songs that melded breezy 60s west-coast pop production with Warwick's velvety vocals. Alas, *La Havas* doesn't pull timeless tunes from the Bacharach-David songbook. She's a passable albeit lightweight lyricist. Words float by but do not linger. There's no meaty narrative here. Musically, most of her compositions rely more on vibe, mood, and beat than memorable melody.

That said, *Blood* is an ear-pleasing release. *La Havas* comes across as a charming chanteuse that largely avoids melismatic overkill. "Tokyo" cruises down the same sultry boulevard Grace Jones traveled with singular style. Dynamic and layered, the hypnotically pulsating number makes for a fine piece of sophisticated dance music.

But the improvisational numbers border on meandering. The muted "Ghost" remains search of a sturdy melody. "Grow" hops about among too many ideas and ends up a jumble of overdubbed voices and manic tempo changes.

Lacking genuine gravitas, these songs appear to have little at stake. One of the hallmarks of a great neo-soul stylist is the ability to articulate a listener's deepest fears and desires. For instance, Amy Winehouse ruefully lamenting affairs of the heart in "Love Is a Losing Game" or Sam Smith crying out as the betrayed lover of "I'm Not the Only One." These are powerful performances of adult subject matter.

*La Havas* only skirts such territory. If she wants to be a significant player in the torch-song sweepstakes, she needs more seasoning and truly compelling songs. Time will tell if she has the grit to dig deeper. —**Chrissie Dickinson**

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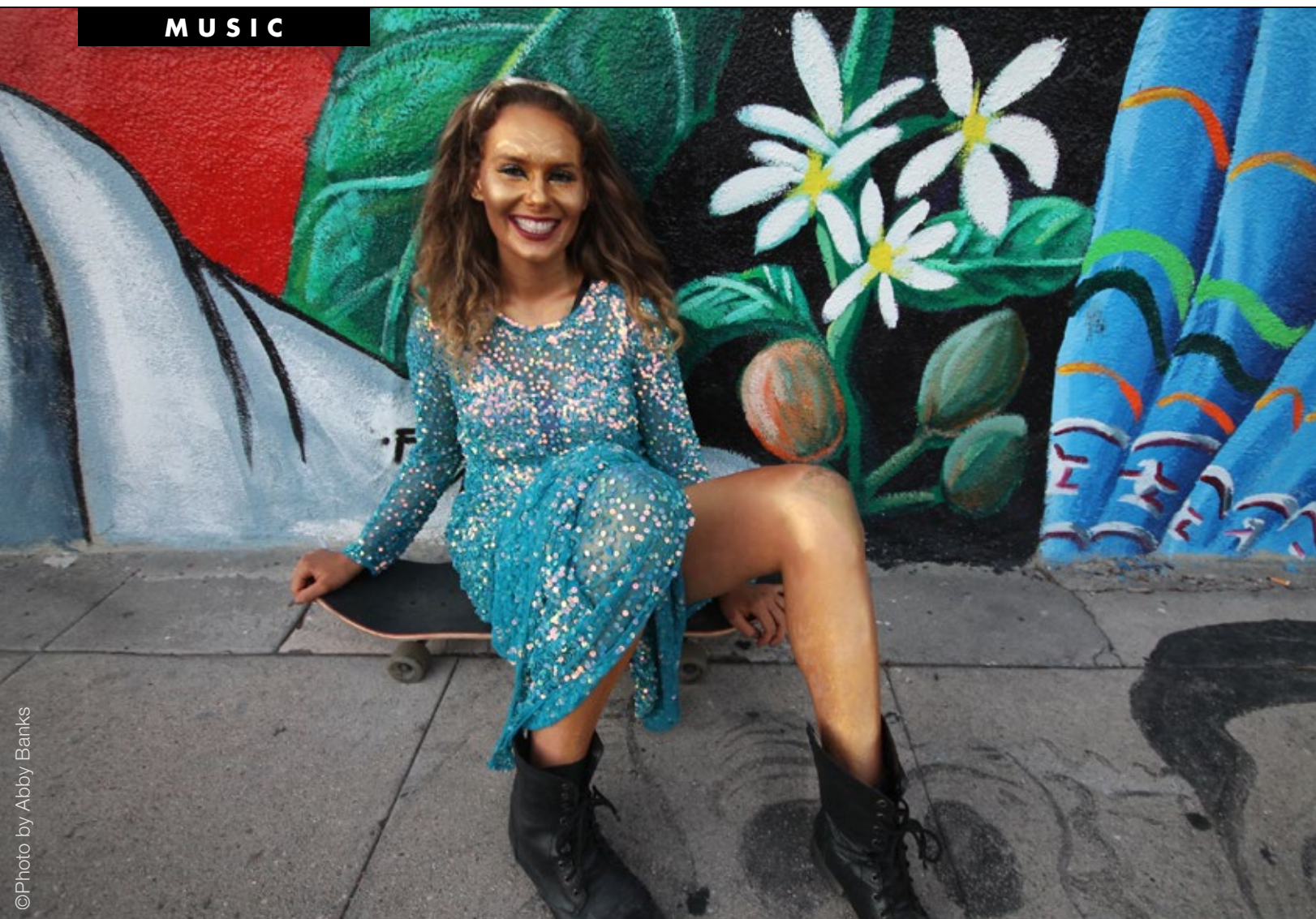
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©Photo by Abby Banks

Jessie Jones lives in a garage. Which is not where one will likely think she resides after listening to her debut. A Volkswagen van outfitted with peace signs and bright colors would seem to be more to Jones' liking. Sure, there's a garage-rock kick to some of Jones' best work. But her voice is butterfly-light and her album an optimistic collection of post-breakup songs that emphasize self-reliance. Plus, they're a little flowery.

At just 23, Jones is a bit of an old soul. Musically, *Jessie Jones* longs for the pre-digital days. Her vision of Southern California is defined by the likes of the Doors, the Seeds, and the Turtles—60s-era groups in which mysticism occasionally trumped guitars. And she already had a go-round in a previous short-lived group, Feeding People. Not surprisingly, she was the focus of attention.

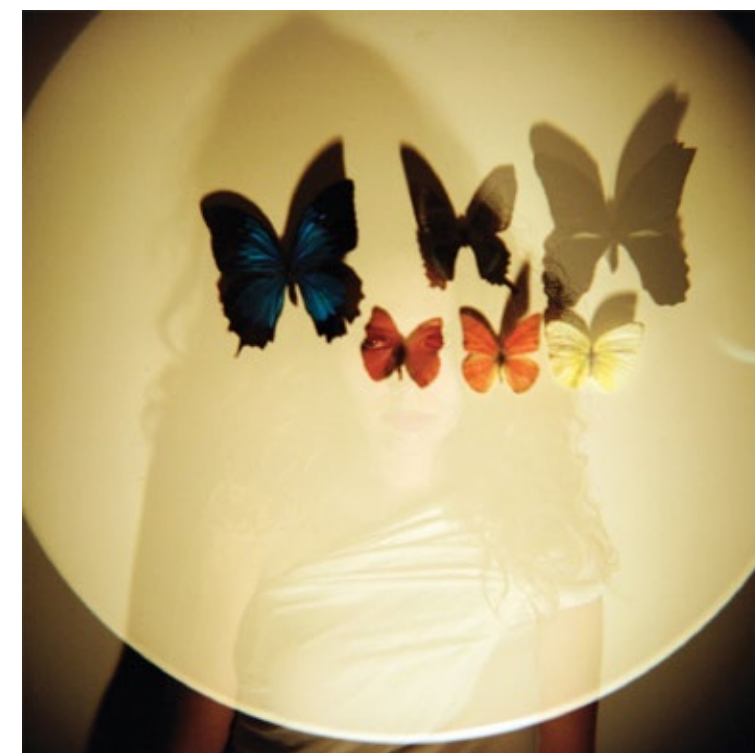
In a band that dabbled in sun-scorched desert rock—think pop-polished suburban kids that enjoy a dirty, dusty road trip filled with roadside spirituality—her upper-register voice brought the sweetness for a sound as whimsical as a floral Stevie Nicks dress.

Today, her voice can still cut through a guitar churn or enchant a sitar, depending on what's needed. The difference is that she also found a dramatic flair. Jones claims she had a nervous breakdown, ran away from home, and thought she would quit music to become a farmer. She never farmed before, so that didn't turn out too well, but she did end up working briefly for Amazon.com.

Jones then recorded her self-titled debut after she returned to Southern California. She says she dumped a crummy ex-boyfriend and that her wanderlust got tamed. Not entirely. The record is still relatively all over the map. Yet unlike her other projects—her stint in Feeding People or her contributions to Death Valley Girls' dive-bar grime—the guitars here are primarily toned down. Vintage keyboard, Spanish rhythms and, yes, sitars, all get starring roles. If this is an album about moving onward and upward, it wants to do so after staging a dance party under the stars in Joshua Tree.

*Jessie Jones* starts with Jones kicking dust in the listener's face. "You can kiss the ground that I walk on," she sings with the enthusiasm of someone celebrating her 21st birthday party on "Sugar Coated," a song that makes its guitars sound like a harp. It boasts a giant chorus, alluring verses, and irresistible handclaps. The rest of the album isn't nearly as energetic, but Jones' zeal at discovering her freedom always comes through. She brings a funhouse-mirror quality to the vocals of "Make It Spin," sways with the strings of "Butterfly Knives," and handles the Spanish-inspired fancifulness of "La Loba" as if she's going out for Broadway.

All the prettiness can get a little precious. "Nightingale" is more Dollywood than Dolly Parton and "Lady Le De Da" echoes the Velvet Underground's "Venus in Furs" but gets cartoonishly choral. Likewise



### Jessie Jones

*Jessie Jones*  
Burger Records, LP or CD

"Prisoner's Cinema," in which a rough jangle of a verse gives way to a wordless, jarringly operatic chorus.

Jones, however, is too good of a singer, and too tasteful in her reverence for the past, to let it derail the album. She manages to have all sorts of fun with excessiveness in "Twelve Hour Man," in which she plays give-and-take with a trumpet. The vocalist also glides her way through the swift keys of "Quicksilver Screen." So, yes, there are a couple of missteps along the way. When you're young, after all, is the time to run away from home, or write a couple of regrettable songs. It's all groovy.

—Todd Martens



LIVE MUSIC

# Portland's Pickathon

MUSIC FESTIVAL

Happy Valley, Oregon  
July 31st — August 2nd



**The Brothers Comatose**



LIVE MUSIC



# Heartless Bastards

LIVE MUSIC



## The Turnpike Troubadours

**“This is the best festival in the world!”**

Nearly every artist that left one of the seven stages at Pickathon uttered those words—or, a very similar phrase. Spend a few days in Happy Valley, Oregon, a 30-minute drive from the metro Portland area, and you’ll see why. Whether Pickathon is the world’s best music festival (or not) is in the eyes and ears of the beholder. But the fun factor remains sky-high. Think of Pickathon as the coolest camping trip on which you’ll ever embark. If you aren’t arriving by car, bus, or bicycle, you can actually pitch a tent there.



## Sam Amidon



Pickathon founders admit they strive for an obscure lineup, often including bands that have never done the festival thing before, and many are very new to the music scene. With stages large and small, and a few only accommodating around 100 guests, each claims a different vibe. While all are unique, standouts include the Woods Stage nestled in a large crevasse and feeling like something straight out of *The Lord of the Rings*; Mountain Stage, with a gentle slope, massive sound system, and easy access to all the great food; and the Lucky Barn, practically a large living room with chairs for 100 people as well as air conditioning, which was more than welcome in the sweltering heat. Temperatures were in the high 90s all weekend.







## Ward

You can also forget all the overpriced snacks and drinks shoved down concertgoers' throats at most festivals. Some of Portland's finest food, beer, and coffee is available to everyone. In addition to a central food court, a number of strategically placed open-air bars and watering stations are sprinkled throughout the grounds help to keep everyone hydrated.

In line with Portland's tradition of sustainability, there isn't a paper cup or spork to be found anywhere on the grounds. Pickathon suggests you bring your own cups and utensils, but if you don't, they provide bowls, cutlery, and very cool souvenir aluminum drinking cups that can be refilled and washed at multiple locations. Now, that's how to present a festival.





# The Monk Audio Tube Phonostage

## A Mini Marvel

By Rob Johnson

G

ermany's Monk Audio has a track record of great preamplifiers, and their *tube préampli - le petit* serves as a marvelous addition to the lineup. Like the \$3,500 Monk Audio phonostage, reviewed earlier by Jacob Heilbrunn, its smaller tube-based brother offers fantastic sound at an even lower price point. \$1,300 puts it in reach for many who love their vinyl collection and want upstream components to reveal all the musical joy captured within those vinyl grooves.



FEATURE



### A Modest Machine

The phonostage is modest in both appearance and size. With a width and height of 4.13 inches (105 mm) and 4.3 inches (110 mm), the front panel's small square is a rhetorical tip of the iceberg for the Monk's longer body measuring 9 inches (230 mm). With these dimensions and a total weight of 4.4 pounds (2kg), it fits anywhere and is easy to nestle into a rack shelf next to another piece of gear or a turntable without drawing attention. The most intriguing feature of this tiny phonostage is its three inputs, chosen by a toggle switch on the left side of the front panel. Next to it lies an identical toggle facilitating the choice of a moving magnet or moving coil cartridge. On the far right is a simple on/off switch and green indicator. The enclosure has no visible vents, and there are only a pair of 12AX7 tubes inside. Though the unit gets warm, it never gets hot, even when left on for a few days — a good thing for those with small children and pets. *(continued)*

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FEATURE

The business end, the back of the phono stage, offers an equally simple layout. Especially for a component of its size, it's a pleasant surprise to discover the Monk offers three single-ended inputs, complemented by a single set of RCA outputs. Those with more than one table or tonearm will find the Monk a real treat. Our publisher really enjoyed the Monk with the AVID Ingenium turntable sporting two modest cartridges and tonearms. Switching back and forth between the Denon DL-103r and Shure M97 with Jico stylus makes for a great budget analog combination. The Monk's MC setting offers a 100 ohm input loading without adjustment, so choose your cartridge accordingly for best results. The MM setting features 56k loading with 100pf of input capacitance, incred-

ibly well matched to the Shure M97.

Input and output connections are in close proximity, so large diameter cables may present a challenge. If you have invested in fire hose-sized interconnects to link the phono stage and linestage, connections may not physically be possible, so be warned.

Other than the grounding post, the only other distraction from the smooth façade is the power cord input. The Monk comes with a European two-plug power cord, like the ones featured on many flat screen televisions. A space saver for sure, but those wanting to upgrade the power cord will have limited options, or will have to make use of an adapter. We had good luck with the AudioQuest NRG X-2 power cord, at \$69. *(continued)*



## FEATURE

**Musical Musings**

Starting with the 180-gram reissue of Zero7's *Simple Things*, the modest Monk proves itself a major marvel. There's a wonderful smoothness to the sound the Monk contributes to the audio chain. Vocals and horns reveal themselves with fatigue-free enjoyment. Both male and female vocals emerge with ease and grace. Higher frequencies illustrated in piano notes, and the complex acoustics of cymbal rides like those on Dave Brubeck Quartet's "Blue Rondo à la Turk," offer plenty of ring and twinkle, blending well into the musical picture. Especially during relaxing listening sessions at night before bed, the Monk's wonderful musical portrayal somehow increases the sofa's gravity making it hard to extract oneself. I guess I'll sleep right here, thanks. Just wake me when it's time to flip the record.

From a left-to-right soundstaging perspective, the Monk delivers a wide field, with sonic elements exceeding the speaker placement. During Zero7's song "Polaris" synthesized elements alternately pan to the left and right encouraging a listener's eyes to track the imaginary object emitting sound.

The Monk's prowess lies not as much in the retrieval of every musical nuance and detail, but in its overall cohesiveness. Trying various recordings, some characteristics remain consistent. Through the Monk there's limited "air" around each instrument and vocal. In the absence of some of

## FEATURE

those ambient and reverberant cues, musical elements have a tendency to blend into one another slightly, rather than having a fiercely independent and distinct image, yet the overall effect is highly pleasing. Our publisher mentions that upgrading the stock 12AX7s to something a bit more exotic will offer more performance; a set of vintage Telefunken's will make the Monk even more lush and enveloping, while a pair of EAT tubes gives a more modern sound, with more overall dynamics, punch and definition at the frequency extremes.

The MoFi pressing of Beck's *Sea Change* reveals a similar audio signature. However, since it's so easy to get pulled into the music through the Monk, small quibbles fade once the record starts. The Monk's strength lies in its recreation of the larger musical picture, rather than the minutia of each contributing element. Think of it this way: In the front row of a live acoustic performance, it's easy for the ears to discern each instrument's sound and also its physical placement on the stage. But if a reserved seat is closer to stage left, one instrument may have greater presence than others. Move back several rows in the auditorium, and it's harder to pick out each instrument by placement. Yet each can reveal itself in blended balance when combined with all the other musicians. Through the Monk, this bigger picture portrayal of a song is easy to sink into and enjoy song after song. *(continued)*



# Benchmark

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## FEATURE

On upbeat tracks like “Bohemian Like You” by the The Dandy Warhols, the Monk demonstrates its ability to stand up and rock when prompted. The pace and drive of music is contagious, and the Monk does not pull punches when the music requires it to land a blow. Regardless of music type, the Monk delivers an enjoyable and non-fatiguing presentation.

### Making Its Mark

When evaluating gear we endeavor to offer readers our perspectives regarding the sonic potential of a component, and also the price-performance proposition it offers. The Monk offers great sound, great flexibility and great value in one compact package.

At a price tag of \$1,300, the Monk costs more than some audio fans will spend on an entry-level turntable, arm, phono cable, and cartridge combined. Yet in the spirit of this column, this is a great product for the analog enthusiast who has stepped up from their first turntable somewhat. And I highly suggest keeping that first table for party night, or playing those budget bin finds, should you not want to put the wear and tear on your main rig.

If analog upgrades are on the horizon, the Monk represents a great component that will serve well, both now and into the future, as other components upgrade around it. If analog sound is a priority in your life, the investment is one you may cherish for years to come. Will the Monk unseat phonostages many times its price in terms of absolute resolution, ambient detail retrieval, and palpability?

No. But in terms of overall listenability and musicality the Monk exceeds expectations suggested by its extremely reasonable price tag.

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# AUDIOPHILE PRESSINGS

# Introducing Intervention Records

By Jeff Dorgay

This issue, we have something different to introduce to *TONEAudio* readers, the launch of a new audiophile reissue label: Intervention Records. A personal project of Shane Buettner, formerly of *AudioQuest* and *Home Theater Magazine*, Intervention brings a wealth of knowledge from the mastering booth to the tradeshow booth. Retailers are currently taking preorders for late-November delivery of Intervention's first four titles, Stealers Wheel's *Ferguslie Park* and Stealers Wheel as well as Everclear's *Sparkle and Fade* and *So Much for the Afterglow*. Clearly, these aren't the typical rehashed titles we often see from other imprints.

Buettner claims his label will feature "the soundtrack of my life, not my mom's." In other words, great music from all eras but especially the dark era of CD-only releases, i.e., the late 80s through the 90s. Since some of the latter titles were pressed to vinyl in extremely limited quantities, primarily in European markets, they fetch crazy prices today.





*Kevin inspecting the grooves with a high powered scope to make sure everything is perfect.*

**“One of the toughest parts of this gig is to get assets released. Joe, Ron, and Kevin Gray all helped me with every part of the process.”**

Working with Joe Harley when at AudioQuest, Buettner had the good fortune to attend Music Matters Jazz mastering sessions with Harley and Ron Rambach, entering through the front door of a privileged community. “One of the toughest parts of this gig is to get assets released. Joe, Ron, and Kevin Gray all helped me with every part of the process.” When asked about the major hurdle to making his dream a reality, Buettner replies, “Getting enough capital to start!”

All kidding aside, he hopes to eventually release three or four titles per month. Much depends on label cooperation and how busy production happens to be at the time. With so many records pressed these days, many releases get delayed. For mastering, he will rely on Kevin Gray at Cohearent Audio, the man behind countless rock remasters as well as the Music Matters Blue Note jazz series.

Buettner faces a task different that those rescuing analog pressings stemming from the



*Kevin and Shane behind the console, giving a final listen to the finished product.*

60s and 70s. Many records in his interest field were recorded digitally before being transferred to analog tape; digital editing workstations had not evolved. While many records in his interest field were assembled or recorded digitally and simply do not originate from analog masters, Buettner maintains the label will always do the best job with the best source available. And he is making a point of including all the mastering notes with each title to make everything clear to the end user.

Intervention is also taking a major design cue from Music Matters. Buettner has enlisted the team that prints the latter label's jackets, meaning Intervention will utilize the same heavy blanks, mega printing, and clear film laminate for beautiful looks and high durability. This bodes well for the serious music aficionado and collector alike. “These jackets will look better than the originals,” Buettner pledges.

After years of collecting, Buettner is excited about being able to release the music he

wants to curate. “I’m calling it the Lost ‘90s Series and I truly hope that people my age will want to invest in premium vinyl to experience the music they grew up with done right.”

He’s off to a great start. Test pressings prove Intervention Records delivers on its promises. We look forward to reporting on final production records and, if possible, sitting in on a few mastering sessions. We wish Buettner and company the best. ●



## FEATURE

# PERFECT PETITE PARTNERS

The Vanatoo Transparent One

By Jeff Dorgay

**T**here are a ton of small powered speakers out there, to fit in those tiny spaces where you'd like music, but they don't rock. The Vanatoo Transparent Ones do. If you've read any of the other reviews, both in print and online, most make it a point of mentioning the bass response of these mighty mites. But they aren't one-trick ponies, offering big bass and nothing else.



## FEATURE

For \$499, a pair of Transparent One speakers come ready to plug into your audio system via line level, optical, USB or coaxial digital inputs, (limited to 24/96 resolution) so you should be able to connect them to damn near anything. A number of powered speakers have amplifiers in each speaker, requiring two AC cords to work, but the Vanatoos put all the amplification into one speaker, only requiring a length of speaker cable, which they supply to connect the two together. Especially when trying to integrate with a flat screen TV, where you might want the speakers a little farther apart than on a desktop, this is a nice approach, because two outlets aren't always where you need them.

I used the Vanatoos in three distinct environments: on the tabletop with a computer, in the bedroom with a 70" flat screen for movie duty and in a small listening room (11 x 14 feet). They performed admirably in all situations, though in a movie environment, I suggest a small subwoofer from REL or AudioEngine. REL's T-Zero (\$499) proved smashing, and when viewing concerts or movies with a lot of crash and boom, it really rounds out the experience. *(continued)*



## FEATURE

All the necessary controls are around the back of the active speaker, including volume, bass and treble, which do come in handy. In a larger room, without subwoofer, cranking up the bass control a bit will help you fake it (at least at lower volumes) until you can add a sub to the system. The device you use them with will need to have a variable output, as the Vanatoos do not allow volume control via remote control like the Dynaudio XEOs we've reviewed this issue. But you can't have everything for \$499!

As much noise has been made about the bass response of the Vanatoos, the smoothness and lack of grain in the upper registers is more impressive. Many small speakers at this price point sound incredibly tinny, falling down miserably. Yet when I listen to Florence + the Machine's "What the Water Gave Me," all of her vocal intonations come through clearly above the backing chorus with ease. Ditto for piano and light drum work. These little speakers are big on finesse.

Vanatoo sells stands, but they are of relatively low height. Getting these speakers up on at least 24" stands will make for a bigger, broader stereo image and I'd even consider 30" stands or even wall mounting them if you are going to be using them with a television. Should you be using them on a desktop for computer audio, raising them from your desktop a couple of inches will only diminish the bass response a touch, but will free up the midrange, giving the vocals so much more clarity. Because the Vanatoos have wide dispersion, toe-in should be judicious and to taste.





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## FEATURE

As mentioned at the beginning of the review, the Vanatoo's really can rock. If you're listening to a wide range of heavy rock, the headroom available allows some high volume levels—especially on the desktop—that will certainly get you evicted from your cube at work, if not from your apartment. Should you decide to plug a subwoofer in, the speakers automatically cut out at 120Hz, passing the rest to the sub, thus allowing them even more dynamic punch as they're being relieved of low bass duties.

For wireless duty, you can add Vanatoo's Bluetooth adaptor for another \$34. While at first, their outboard adaptor might seem a little clunky, their idea of keeping things future-proof in an ever changing wireless world makes good sense. An Apple AirPort works well to integrate into your standard network and can be purchased with the Vanatoo's, or picked up at your favorite Apple outlet. The Transparent Ones integrate easily into the Sonos environment as well.

If you need a pair of portable speakers that deliver maximum music with a minimum footprint, I can't suggest the Vanatoo Transparent One highly enough. They redefine what is possible at this price, and with that, I am happy to give them one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2015.

[www.vanatoo.com](http://www.vanatoo.com)





## THE WINO

By Monique Meadows

## Cabernet 4 Ways

FOUR REGIONS, FOUR CABERNETS, ALL \$20 OR LESS

In 1976 a Stag's Leap Wine Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon took top prize in Paris at an historical first-ever blind tasting of French and American wines. The product of an unusual crossing of Cabernet Franc and Sauvignon Blanc in southwest France in the 17th century, Cabernet Sauvignon is one of the "classic" four wine grapes, along with Merlot, Pinot Noir and Syrah. It is one of the key wine grapes responsible for the allure and fame of France's Bordeaux region, the grape that brought California wines to the attention of the French, and the grape of some of the most long-lived and admired wines in the world.

Now grown in most of the key global winemaking regions, Cabernet Sauvignon is prized by winemakers. For most of the 20th century, the grape was the most planted quality red wine grape in the world, only surpassed by Merlot in the '90s. In Europe, some of the

most sought-after Cabernet Sauvignon wines are those of Bordeaux and the "super Tuscans" of Italy, while it is predominantly California and Washington that are creating top bottles. In the Southern Hemisphere, Chile, Argentina and Australia have adopted the grape to critical acclaim.

Its blueish-black thick grape skin delivers deep color and is bountiful in tannins – those mouth-drying elements in a wine that create structure and complexity. It has good acidity and, in the right hands and conditions, can be made into wines that age extremely well. Depending on where it is grown (it prefers warmer climates), when it is picked, how it endures the growing season, and how its time is spent in winemaking, Cabernet Sauvignon serves up aromas of black current (cassis), blackberry, black cherry, green pepper. Sometimes mint, and even eucalyptus. It loves oak. Its affinity for oak, be it an American, French or Eastern

European barrel, can bring out rich aromas and flavor notes of vanilla, cedar, and even coffee and mocha. Wine critics often note "wet leaves," "cigar box" and "graphite." In the glass the wine is a deep ruby red.

I am asked almost daily to recommend "a good Cab." Most people are looking for one from California – it's what they know – but there are so many options. "New World" Cabernets tends to be fruit driven with big spice notes from oak aging. "Old World" Cabs are often leaner with a more mineral-driven style. The shopper's budget is often \$20–\$25. Head-spinning, stunning Cabernet Sauvignons can fetch prices on either side of \$100; some extremely older bottles of Bordeaux see lofty price heights at wine auctions. I have selected four delicious Cabernets, showing a range of styles. All are superb values for \$20 or less. Enjoy them with your summer.



## TONE STYLE

### Château Le Bergey Bordeaux AOC 2013

Bordeaux, France \$12

My entry-level Bordeaux pick is the perfect introduction to an approachable, fresh and inexpensive Bordeaux wine. Le Bergey is produced by Château l'Escart, a Bordeaux Supérieur wine estate located in Saint-Loubès, France, on the eastern part of the city of Bordeaux. The property is centered in the heart of the Bordeaux wine region between the Garonne and Dordogne rivers, and run by proprietor and 7th generation winemaker Damien Laurent. Laurent resides on the property which was built in 1752, more of a collection of stone buildings and a farmhouse than a Bordeaux "mansion," with his young family. The Bergey (pronounced "bear-zhay") is Cabernet Sauvignon driven and complemented by 40% Merlot as part of a classic Bordeaux blend. Laurent uses vines with a minimum of 15 years' age for his wines from the organically farmed vineyards planted on fine gravel above soils of clay and limestone. This wine sees no oak and drinks in a lean style giving flavors of black fruit, touches of raspberry, mineral, and showing good acidity and the grip of fresh tannins. Pan-seared duck breast or chicken, grilled or roasted pork and lamb make classic pairings. Le Bergey is a nice value and the perfect start to exploring Cabernets of Bordeaux.



# HAUTONGA

BY PLINIUS AUDIO



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## TONE STYLE

### Broadside Cabernet Sauvignon 2013

Paso Robles, California \$15

If the handsome typographic design of this wine's label doesn't grab your attention, the price for the quality of the wine will. The winemaking team at Broadside has a dedication to creating wines true to the region and to the grape. Stephanie and Brian Terrizzi, founders – and viticulturist and winemaker respectively – chose California's Paso Robles region after having made wine for several years in Italy and California's Sonoma and Santa Barbara counties. Stephanie, who manages the Broadside vineyards, champions biodynamic and organic viticulture in Paso Robles and the state's Central Coast region. Brian's approach to winemaking is that of a minimalist, with a dedication to creating refined wines.

Their Broadside 2013 Paso Robles Cabernet Sauvignon is made from 100% Cabernet grapes sourced from their favorite vineyards in the Paso Robles, Santa Margarita Ranch and Estrella District AVAs. The wine matures in neutral French and American oak barrels for 14 months to deliver deep aromatics, a palate of bright red and black fruit, a touch of herb, wrapped up gently in oak spice. This is classic Cabernet with firm tannins in place, made in a leaner style than some of the more "jammy," concentrated, and more heavily oak-aged Cabs. This one has balance, good structure and is a pleasure to drink all the way to its dry, long finish. The Terrizzis aim is to deliver a Cabernet varietal expression from a region rich in grape-growing heritage. They succeed at their goal and deliver it for under \$20.





## TONE STYLE

### Chateau Smith Cabernet Sauvignon 2012

Charles Smith Wines  
Columbia Valley,  
Washington State \$20

After growing up in California just outside Sacramento, moving to Denmark and managing rock bands and concert tours in Europe, Charles Smith moved back to the U.S. and to the Pacific Northwest, where, he had a chance meeting in Walla Walla with young winemaker Charles Bieler of France. The two discovered a shared passion for Syrah wines. Smith soon decided to make his own wine and in 2001 made 330 cases of his “K Syrah.” He created Charles Smith Wines in 2006 focused on making on what he feels are approachable wines that show true varietal and regional character. Smith has been recognized professionally for both Winery and Winemaker of the Year. His Chateau Smith wine is 93% Cabernet Sauvignon, with a Bordeaux-style addition of 6% Petit Verdot and 1% Malbec from grapes sourced from the five vineyard sites across Washington’s Columbia Valley that includes the Yakima AVA, Wahluke Slope AVA and Walla Walla Valley.

This effort is rich and earthy with plenty of black cherry, dark fruit, and spice from time in new, neutral French oak. Robert Parker’s *Wine Advocate* gives this beautiful Cab value a 90-point score, praising the wine as “big blueberry, spice, crushed flowers and violets in a seamless, sexy, yet fresh and delicious package,” and suggests 5–7 years of fine drinking. While a thick steak might seem to be the obvious choice to enjoy with this wine, unconventional Smith suggests pappardelle with porcini and pistachios. No argument here.



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## TONE STYLE

### Tahuan Cabernet Sauvignon 2010

Ernesto Catena Vineyards  
Mendoza, Argentina \$16

If there were ever a country to embrace a wine that would enthusiastically be a match for the grilled meats of Argentine “asado” cuisine, it is Argentina who has made the grape its superstar next to Malbec and Bonarda. Fourth generation winemaker and Mendoza native Ernesto Catena is the eldest son of Nicolás Catena – a legend in Argentina and the pioneering winemaker of Catena Zapata. The younger Catena has been producing wines under his own name since 2002. An artist and horseman, with a master’s degree in design from Milan and in history from London, and skilled at polo and archery, Catena’s vision and talent for winemaking is as expressive and proven as his many interests. He selects grapes from top sites in Tupungato, La Consulta, Vistaflores, Altamira, and Tunuyan in Mendoza’s Valle de Uco at the base of the Andes mountain range. His organic-certified Vistaflores vineyard is the source for much of the grapes for his “Tahuan” line of wines – each wine in the portfolio showcasing Argentina’s key grape varieties. For this 100% Cabernet Sauvignon wine, grapes are fermented in small tanks before 70% of the wine spends 10 months in French and American oak barrels (45% of the barrels new). This medium- to full-bodied Cab expresses lush aromatics and flavors of dark current, blackberry, with notes of herb, licorice and cocoa, accented by a note of vanilla spice from time in oak. The enjoyable finish is long accompanied by soft tannins. The 2010 bottling received a 90 point score from Stephen Tanzer’s *International Wine Cellar*. Argentines are as proud of their wines as they are their beef. The two are natural partners grillside. ●





TONE STYLE

# APPLE MACBOOK

From \$1,299 [www.apple.com](http://www.apple.com)

**W**hen Apple's sleek 2-pound MacBook hit the streets in serious supply around April, many were thrilled by the mating of an even smaller, lighter Mac with their premium Retina screen. Now available in Gold, Silver, or Space Grey, as the current iPhone (We want our Mac Stuff to match, after all!) the newest portable Mac sports a 12 inch Retina screen and the latest USB-C connector; only one of them.

Of course, this has many computer audiophiles up in arms, as this limited connectivity is somewhat of a compromise for those wanting to use their shiny, svelte little toy as a music server control point. Apple will sell you a couple of spendy aftermarket adapter cables, but that takes away from the portability and makes the lightweight somewhat of a moot point. *(continued)*



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TONE STYLE



However, for those of you that spend a lot of time on an airplane, where every extra ounce in your carry on bag is precious, the new MacBook will immediately impress you. A 1.1 or 1.2 GB Turbo M processor is standard with the 256GB and 512GB SSD models respectively and both have 8GB of memory standard, with no additional memory available. Power users will find this more disturbing than the lack of an extra USB

slot, and the deletion of the SD card slot (also a thumbs down on the current Mac Book Air as well) makes it that much tougher for a working photographer on the go to travel light.

So, who's the ideal MacBook user? Power Word and Web users. Of course, Photoshop runs well on this machine, with its better screen and faster processor, but no SD card slot and 8GB RAM limitation makes the heavier MacBook Pro with

Retina Display, the ability to install a 1TB SSD, 16GB of RAM and that built in card reader something to ponder. If you just need to get some writing done and keep your Facebook page current, the new MacBook is awesome. If you need to edit photos in a major way, drink a few more protein drinks and go for the Pro.

And of course, a MacBook Pro will be a much better music server. ●



# Doiy Bicycle Pizza Cutter

\$17 [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)

Seriously, is there anything Amazon doesn't have? Other than maybe nuclear fuel rods? We know a large portion of TONEAudio's readers love to ride bicycles, so for those of you that love your non motorized, two wheeled transportation, this kitchen implement is for you. Available in a wide variety of colors, this is a great conversation piece for your kitchen.



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TONE STYLE

## WATCHMe

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Who says the French don't have a great sense of humor? These cute little bodies make a great place to rest and charge your Apple Watch when you aren't wearing it, so it is ready to go for the time that you can actually use it. But now it can do double duty as a Minion, should you opt for the yellow model. And when Apple Watch 2.0 makes this one a doorstop, at least it can become a great decorative item. Maybe they will do a Lego character next?



## JAZZ &amp; BLUES

**Dave Douglas**

*High Risk*  
Greenleaf, CD

The fusion recordings that have proved the most influential are those that inspired and challenged musicians across different idioms. So while Miles Davis' electric period and the late Ornette Coleman's Prime Time had reshaped (or polarized) jazz, their work equally prodded rock and funk musicians to step up their games. As electronic music continues to evolve, trumpeter Dave Douglas' *High Risk* should make a similar impact in that realm.

Douglas has commanded attention in jazz for about two decades, especially with his wide range of pursuits, spanning Balkan music to chamber ensembles. He also featured dual samplers on 1997's sprawling, two-disc *Sanctuary*. But *High Risk* sounds more cohesive than the latter effort. His new band members, including drummer Mark Guiliana and producer Shigeto (a.k.a. Zachary Saginaw), credited here simply with "electronics," bring their own ideas.



©Photo by Austin Nelson

Jonathan Maron, who plays electric and synth bass, also began receiving attention during the 1990s as one of the founders of Groove Collective. Douglas' commanding tone and moving compositions tie everything together.

On the opening "Molten Sunset," Douglas' held notes hover over Shigeto's atmospheric effects and Guiliana's rapid attack. What becomes even more intriguing is how Douglas and the group continually change the piece's direction through subtle shifts in tone and beats per minute. On "Household Item," Douglas' solo boasts hesitating staccato notes above ascending melodic lines. The same technique rises above internal

tension on "Tied Together."

Displaying a more gradual build, the title track makes one wonder what the classic 60s and 70s pairing of trumpeter Don Cherry and drummer Ed Blackwell could have done with different digital tools at their disposal. As evidenced on "Etiquette," a majority of *High Risk* is infectiously upbeat. It would also be interesting to hear what an inventive hip-hop or EDM deejay would do with the spaciousness of "First Things First." During these works, the group shows that thoughtful orchestrations are just as crucial for a young band of electronic improvisers as they are for the seasoned string ensembles in

Douglas' other projects.

At the close, Maron's repeated lines carry the melody of the mournful "Cardinals." In the notes, Douglas mentions how the piece was "written in the wake of the events in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014." He also mentioned Michael Brown's killing there when the group played at Chicago's Constellation this summer. The hymnal performance recalls another instrumental protest song, John Coltrane's "Alabama" from 1963. Douglas' approach to each line on *High Risk* reaffirms that jazz absorbs and personalizes social issues as much as it does any technological advance.

—Aaron Cohen



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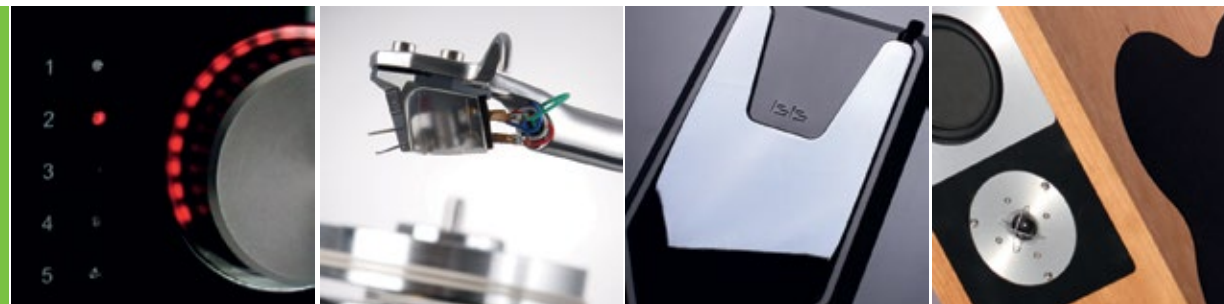
Quite simply, if it doesn't sound better, it doesn't happen. (If it does sound better, but is considered 'impossible,' they'll figure out how to do it anyway. There's a very good reason the company's named Rega Research).

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## Robert Glasper Trio

*Covered: The Robert Glasper Trio*  
Recorded Live at Capitol Studios  
Blue Note, 2LP or CD

It's a ballsy move: An artist that wins Grammys for music that stresses soul vocals, hip-hop beats, and R&B grooves follows up that massive victory by returning to the lyric-free improvisations of a jazz trio. But hey, at this point it should be obvious that Robert Glasper likes to mess with the norm. Skirting the predictable

appeals to him. And so *Covered*, cut with his wonderfully pliable rhythm section of bassist Vincente Archer and drummer Damion Reid, shelves the pop-tinged performances of his celebrated *Black Radio* discs. Instead we get a poignant program of (very) modern swing by one of jazz's most astute piano trios.

The 37-year-old bandleader said he cut this live session because he missed playing acoustic piano. Our boon. As this romp through these "tunes from my iPod" indicates, he's a middle-aged ace whose catholic interests help contour an imposing technique that's able to woo with Dilla-slanted jitters, Don Pullen-esque pummeling, or Herbie Hancock-like romance.  
(continued)





©Photo by John Rogers

As *Covered* shifts gears, Glasper not only paints a personal portrait of these songs, but reveals the rich articulation of his group. He moves from the firm pulse of Radiohead's "Reckoner" to the breezy lyricism of Joni Mitchell's "Barangrill" to a prancing spin on Musiq Soulchild's "So Beautiful," giving each the thoughtful touch it deserves.

One of the trio's triumphs relates to connecting the dots between airy forays and pointed intensity. Maybe the rococo skittishness of Glasper's update of "Stella By Starlight" (the only overt "trad" track here) tells the best story. One moment it's defined by the manic flapping of wings, the next it's gracefully gliding away to find a new adventure. Ultimately, the program leads to a mix of protest and pride.

Glasper helped Kendrick Lamar craft the explosive *To Pimp a Butterfly* around the same time *Covered* was being cut in Hollywood. The trio's take of the Compton-based emcee's "I'm Dying of Thirst" (from *good kid, m.A.A.d city*) features children (including Glasper's son) honoring the African American victims of recent killings, from Trayvon Martin to Eric Garner—an emotional narrative indeed.

"I'm thinking about what color I am, but I have to be myself," explains one child at the fade. "You have to be happy with who you are." If jazz is meant to reflect its times, Glasper speaks volumes. —**Jim Macnie**

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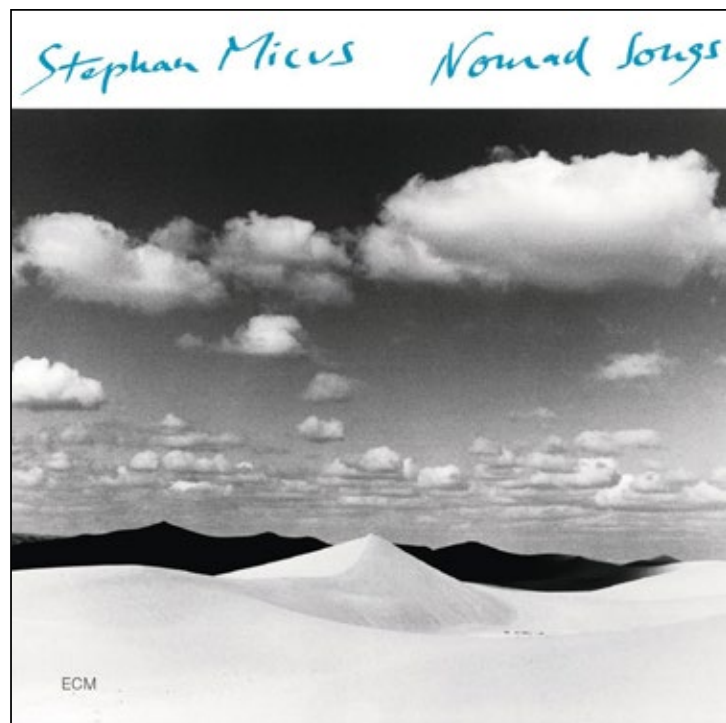
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### Stephan Micus

*Nomad Songs*  
ECM, 180g LP or CD

f the title of Stephan Micus' new album describes him, consider it a bit of a misnomer. While the German musician has spent decades as a devoted student of indigenous acoustic instruments from around the world, Micus really isn't an inveterate wanderer. After all, he's been grounded enough to make *Nomad Songs* his 21st album for ECM.

Along with playing an array of strings, woodwinds, and percussion, Micus also produced the record and sings in a language of his own (think of a weathered Cocteau Twins). And while he's well versed in the traditions attached to the instruments, he doesn't aim to replicate how they should be played. Rather, he uses them for building individualistic soundscapes. The resulting musical journey proves worth taking.



Two of Micus' new instruments on *Nomad Song* stem from his longstanding focus on African music: the Moroccan genbri (a camel skin lute) and ndingo (a Botswanan lamellophone, similar to a kalimba and also referred to as a thumb piano). He features both on "Everywhere, Nowhere" and "The Spring." While the genbri is key for creating elongated melodic lines when performed in its traditional context, Micus emphasizes succinct tunes and a midtempo groove. His resonant and unaccompanied vocal delivery of "The Blessing" takes a more introspective turn as he sings what sounds like

a hybrid of Arabic and Hebrew. In what may be a cue from jazz legend Rahsaan Roland Kirk, Micus' simultaneously played dual-twin whistles create an offbeat polytonality.

He views the studio as another instrument, as his five overdubbed genbri on "Laughing At Thunder" blend the serene with the emphatic. Likewise, on "The Dance," his range of guitars (two of them 12-string) and Central Asian lutes (rebab and rabab) emphasizes uncanny arpeggios within quiet call-and-response patterns. Similarly vast, his arsenal on "The Feast" includes two 14-string guitars that he designed

himself. But when Micus lets the underlying tension flag and just emphasizes simpler melodies, as on "Leila," the compositions lose steam.

*Nomad Songs* ends with "Under the Chinar Trees," which, like the preceding equally low-key pieces, revels in a mysterious tone, which the artist intones over the ndingo and Japanese bamboo shakuhachi. While the song claims an ethereal coda that seems to reach up to a vanishing point, Micus should be back soon, with more (and different) axes—and his own way of playing them. —**Aaron Cohen**



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### Elemental Music's Xanadu Master Edition Series

**Al Cohn and Jimmy Rowles** *Heavy Love*  
**Barry Harris** *Barry Harris Plays Tadd Dameron*  
**Jimmy Heath** *Picture of Heath*  
Elemental Music, CD

Mainstream swing was on the run in the 1970s. The commercial power of rock and funk represented a siren song for jazz-slanted musicians, and several were trying their hand at a heavier approach. Miles Davis was amping up, at one point sharing the stage with three electric guitarists. A few of his former hires, specifically Chick Corea and John McLaughlin, cranked the volume and expounded about visions of the emerald beyond and hymns of the seventh galaxy. The rhythms were wildly aggressive, and the increasingly younger audience lapped them up.

To some degree, this trend waylaid established acoustic jazz players working in an overt swing lingo. Money was being made on the rock side of the street, so there's actually a dash of heroics in the fact that the Xanadu label swooped in and flew the flag of trad jazz during the era. During the late 70s and early 80s, renowned leaders—as well as revered also-rans—comprised the indie label's roster. From Dexter Gordon to Duke Jordan, artists that cut tracks for Xanadu owner Don Schlitten worked the straight-ahead sound—be it bop, hard-bop, or some offshoot in between.

The imprint's catalog has been out of print for quite some time, but the first six titles of Elemental Music's Xanadu Master Edition Series serve as a reminder of just how entertaining the label's music can be. This reissue batch is marked by the return of *Heavy Love*, a duet between saxophonist Al Cohn and pianist Jimmy Rowles. Both were respected improvisers often heralded for the sheer amount of tunes they knew. *Heavy Love* came about when Cohn, then in his 50s and Rowles, seven years his senior, got together in New York for a glide through standards they'd informally rehearsed at the saxophonist's Jersey lair. (continued)



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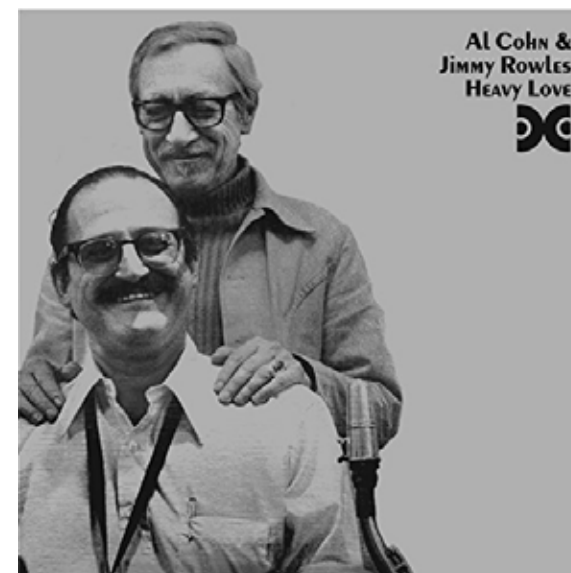


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## MUSIC



The first 30 seconds of “Them There Eyes” spills the beans on the rest of the album—fraternity, invention, and swing are dead ahead. Cohn’s solo tenor sax skips forward with the kind of verve that instantly changes an environment, and as the two connect, genuine esprit leaps from the speakers. Their coordination is compelling through “Takin’ A Chance On Love” and “These Foolish Things.” Sometimes they chop at the melody; sometimes they bask in its protection. Rowles, a magnificent improviser, occasionally takes on the role of a drummer and bounces all sorts of inflections at his mate. Like Jim Hall and Bill Evans’ classic *Undercurrent*, it’s a duet disc that never gets old.



The reissue series also gives fans a chance to focus on one of the decade’s most memorable repertory albums, 1975’s *Barry Harris Plays Tadd Dameron*. The esteemed pianist helped codify bop’s grammar, and as he dedicates himself to some of the composer’s best tunes, he proves wise and quick-witted. Harris rolls through “Soultrane” and “Our Delight” with enough authority to make you believe he wrote the tunes himself. And while Harris rather dominates his crew of bassist Gene Taylor and drummer Leroy Williams, the music truly sings.



The value of Schlitten’s curation skills also becomes obvious in Jimmy Heath’s *Picture of Heath*. After he did solid work for Riverside and other labels in the early 60s, recording opportunities dried up for the terrific horn player. It wasn’t until Heath united with the producer (who worked at other indie labels before starting Xanadu) that his “comeback” began to solidify. With a gorgeous tone, fluid parlance, and killer rhythm section (Billy Higgins, Sam Jones, Barry Harris), Heath’s program bristles with spirit and smarts. To some degree, the same could be said for several of the label’s other titles. The remastered sound of these Xanadu titles exudes the focus and vigor of the dates. Can’t wait to hear more upcoming batches. —**Jim Macnie**





**Galactic**  
*Into the Deep*  
 Provogue, 180g LP or CD



©Photo by Jim Arbogast

Galactic has always been respectful to its musical traditions. While the band gained and held onto a following on the international jam-band circuit, the New Orleans-based ensemble also retains its dedication to its roots in hometown Mardi Gras celebrations and brass ensembles. At its best moments, the group catches the listener into its ebullience with occasional improvisational surprises.

After 20 years, the band has attracted several big-name and upcoming musicians as outside collaborators, eight of which appear on *Into the Deep*, produced by Galactic saxophonist Ben Ellman and bassist Robert Mercurio. As is usually the case on such projects, some guests sound considerably better than others and make the disc's high points more than worthy of attention.

Mavis Staples' performance on "Does It Really Make A Difference" continues her own recent triumphs (such as 2013's *One True Vine*). After her disarming giggle at the beginning and a soaring horn line, she shows that a sense of disappointment can, in the right hands, prove compelling. Staples also reaffirms how much of her strength comes through a restrained delivery and rough tone. While other vocalists here don't match the gospel icon, a few remain appealing in their own ways. Macy Gray's behind-the-beat drawl on the title track works well with Rich Vogel's piano lines and Stevie Blacke's string

arrangements. New Orleans soul singer Ms. Charm Taylor sounds like an even more aggressive version of Gray. Her sass is more than fitting on "Right On."

Other singers, however, prove far less compelling. They don't compensate with the kind of the cool attitudes that Gray and Taylor bring to *Into the Deep*. David Shaw comes on as an unconvincing rapper on "Dolla Diva," which sounds like a pale rewrite of Funkadelic's "Funky Dollar Bill." Similarly disappointing, J.J. Grey's dynamics on "Higher and Higher" follow a predictable path.

Apart from the vocalists,

Galactic's instrumental tracks reveal a wide musical palette. Jeff Raines' guitar lines use repetition in a way that echoes West African highlife dances even while Vogel's organ-driven funk doesn't stray too far from Crescent City rhythms on "Long Live the Borgne." And rather than going for an obviously boisterous tone, album-closer "Today's Blues" features the feel of a laidback cut from Booker T. & the MG's combined with the Memphis Horns.

Ultimately, *Into the Deep* shows that excitement and volume are not always one and the same. —**Aaron Cohen**



FEATURE

# Sound for Small Spaces

By Jeff Dorgay

**A**fter years of hifi taking over my life, office and home, with speakers, cables and racks everywhere, I've made a big change in my life. I've moved to an apartment. In the effort to simplify and downsize, I'm on a quest to find great components that take up a minimum of space, yet still offer up high quality sound with a minimum of fuss. I must admit, this job has made me pretty spoiled, but I firmly believe the words "lifestyle" and "good sound" can comfortably coexist in the same paragraph these days. Managing editor Rob Johnson lives in an urban environment as well, so between the two

of us, we will help those of you who are space-challenged – but not quality-challenged – wade through the options.

Pamela was a real trouper, helping me lug various speakers in and out of the new living space, from new to vintage, large and small, but she drew the line as I made noise about the Acoustat 2+2s. Of course, my logic being with 9 ½-foot ceilings, these 8-foot monsters would "fit right in." Cross does not describe the look I got back. Interestingly, the answer was right in front of our faces all along – the new XEO 4s from Dynaudio that are currently in for review.



FEATURE

These small marvels are only 6.7 inches wide, 11.1 inches tall and a little more than 9 inches deep, so they truly will fit anywhere. With a three-position switch on the back, optimizing the bass response for corner, wall, or neutral (free standing) placement you can make the ported enclosure work anywhere, and we were shocked at how well the XEO 4s filled the room – even when just sitting on a dresser, beneath the flat screen. Of course, not letting my audiophile sensibilities slip too much, I did have them isolated from the dresser surface with some cone-like devices!

Available in black or white, at \$2,399 per pair with matching stands for an additional \$350 these small speakers might seem a bit expensive at first, but keep in mind they each have a pair of 50 watt amplifiers inside, digital signal processing for the lower frequencies and Hdue to the Pulse Width Modulation amp design they do not require an external DAC. And they're wireless. Well, mostly wireless – each speaker does require a power cord.

## An end to the past

While the mix and match part of being an audiophile is a big part of the fun for many, at some point it's worth getting over, especially in the case of the XEO 4s. It's been an especially freeing experience not stressing over power cords and interconnects. And it's amazing to see how far Dynaudio has improved their wireless delivery in just a year since we took a look at the XEO 3s. *(continued)*



## FEATURE

Granted, some audiophiles will require DSD and 24/192 capability, so for them the XEOs will not be a fit. But those who can live happily ever after with 24/96 resolution source compatibility of the new XEO Hub will be pleasantly surprised at how well this entire system works. It only takes about five minutes to integrate into your home network, and if you don't have one, you can actually hardwire your favorite source to the XEOs via digital (S/PDIF or optical Toslink), USB or a pair of RCA analog line level inputs. This came in handy incorporating a vintage Thorens TD-125 table/SME tonearm and Shure M97 cartridge into the mix, via the incredibly compact Monk phonostage, reviewed in this issue.

A small amount of the analog magic is lost in the digital conversion, streaming the analog signal digitally and wirelessly; however, it is incredibly fun to place a vintage turntable across the room where it can be righteously displayed, out of the way of acoustic feedback and stream your favorite LP. In many aspects this can be the best of both worlds for those loving the tactile aspect of the vinyl medium.

The XEO 4s possess enough resolution to discern the difference between analog and digital recordings, and injecting a bit of tubey goodness from the Monk phonostage adds a bit more to the experience, even though some may pooh-pooh this as coloration. *(continued)*



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# PASS

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

Oscar Wilde



Xs 300: Dual chassis monoblock  
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Xs Phono: Dual chassis phonopreamp

## FEATURE

Auditioning a slew of CAN LP's prove trippy enough to do this band justice, with interesting electronic effects bouncing everywhere.

### A flip of the switch

Setting up the XEO 4s is remarkably quick and easy. Position the Xeo Hub in a strategic spot to make it easy to plug in whatever ancillary components you require and the speakers in a space that makes sense for your living environment. Thanks to the internal DSP, bass response can be optimized for neutral, corner or wall placement. All three worked incredibly well in my very large listening space.

The amount of clean bass these tiny speakers provide is impressive, yet should you require more low end grunt, adding the XEO Link to the system will transform any subwoofer you have on hand into a wireless one, thanks to its line outputs. The supplied remote will bind the link to the Hub and set your subwoofer free from annoying cables that can limit its placement. For the better part of this review, RELs S/2, which we reviewed here, augmented the lowest register of the XEO 4s incredibly well in my now large 19 x 32-foot living and listening space. Whether on the desk, next to the bed, or out in the living room, the XEO 4 is up to the task.

### Top of the line components

Using the same core driver technologies that are employed in Dynaudio's flagship speakers, the XEO 4s not only look like top shelf speakers, they perform like them too.

*(continued)*





FEATURE

As I've mentioned before, because these are self contained, they do not require any speaker or interconnect cables, and I didn't notice a substantial upgrade to the sound by using aftermarket power cords, but I did notice a smoother, more delicate high end by investing in a modest power conditioner – in this case the IsoTek EVO3 Sirius power strip. But now you're headed down the path of the crazed audiophile, so beware!

Implementation of the rest of the XEO 4 is also flagship speaker quality in a small, compact package. These modestly sized speakers are as exquisitely constructed as the \$82,000 Evidence Platinum speakers residing in the *TONEAudio* studio. The longer I listen to the XEO 4s the more the family resemblance comes through. The same smoothness throughout the tonal range, coupled with a dynamic punchy sound that is never harsh or overbearing makes for hours of un-fatiguing listening.

Dynaudio specs bass response to be down 3dB at 45Hz and the XEO 4s deliver, especially when placed in close proximity to the walls or corners.

(continued)



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# 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**

As with any traditional mini monitor, moving them out in the room makes for a bigger, more spacious stereo image, with a slight compromise in low frequency extension, though Dynaudio's DSP engine does an exceptional job at compensating. If anything, the XEO 4s still deliver excellent bass response out in the room; they just won't play as loud, because the woofers and amplifiers run out of power and excursion. So you can enjoy the Bombay Dub Orchestra, just not at discotheque levels.

With a wide range of wireless speakers to choose from, Dynaudio has entered the game later than other players, but they have arrived with a top of the line contender. There are a number of options in the \$400–\$1,000 range, but none feature the combination of aesthetic elegance and audio performance combined with the engineering depth and prowess that Dynaudio brings to the table.

If you want top quality sound with a minimal footprint, Dynaudio's XEO 4 is the way to roll. And should you need more bass without going to a subwoofer, consider the XEO 6 floorstanding system. We'll have a pair for review soon.

[www.dynaudio.com](http://www.dynaudio.com)





# Fern & Roby

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**A**t first blush it might seem a bit counterintuitive for an integrated amplifier to cost more *without* a phono section than with one, but after discussing the design with Michael Bettinger, the man behind the circuit, it makes perfect sense. Think of the Integrated with Phono as a Porsche 911 and the Integrated without as a 911 Speedster, everything optimized for performance, but no radio or air conditioning.

If you are looking for the perfect, high quality integrated that doesn't take up a lot of space the burning question is: do I want a great all rounder, or eschewing analog, do I want the best performance possible? Both are fantastic, so you won't lose no matter which way you go. The linestage only utilizes the space from the phono section and fills it with a beefier power supply and Bettinger says that all of the remaining parts are hand picked to tighter tolerances, resulting in an even better sound.

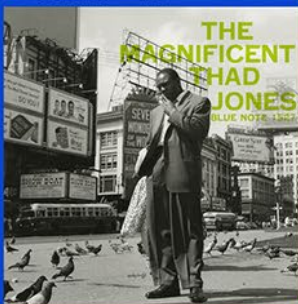
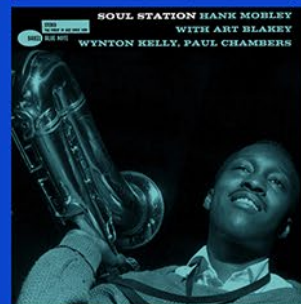
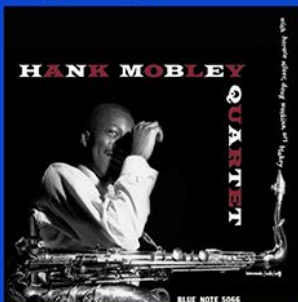
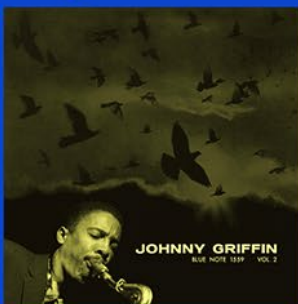
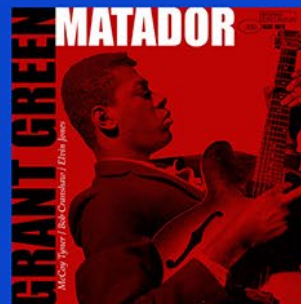
Both look identical with their cast iron casework, bronze control knobs and clear top plate, giving you the opportunity to gaze at the internal craftsmanship. Built in Virginia, it's a masterpiece of clean solid-state design.

Fern & Roby has sent us both to evaluate, so this review might take longer than normal. If you're on the prowl for a great small integrated, don't wait for our review, go buy one. It's a piece you will be proud of and like the great American amplifiers from McIntosh and Marantz, you'll hand this one down a generation, maybe two.

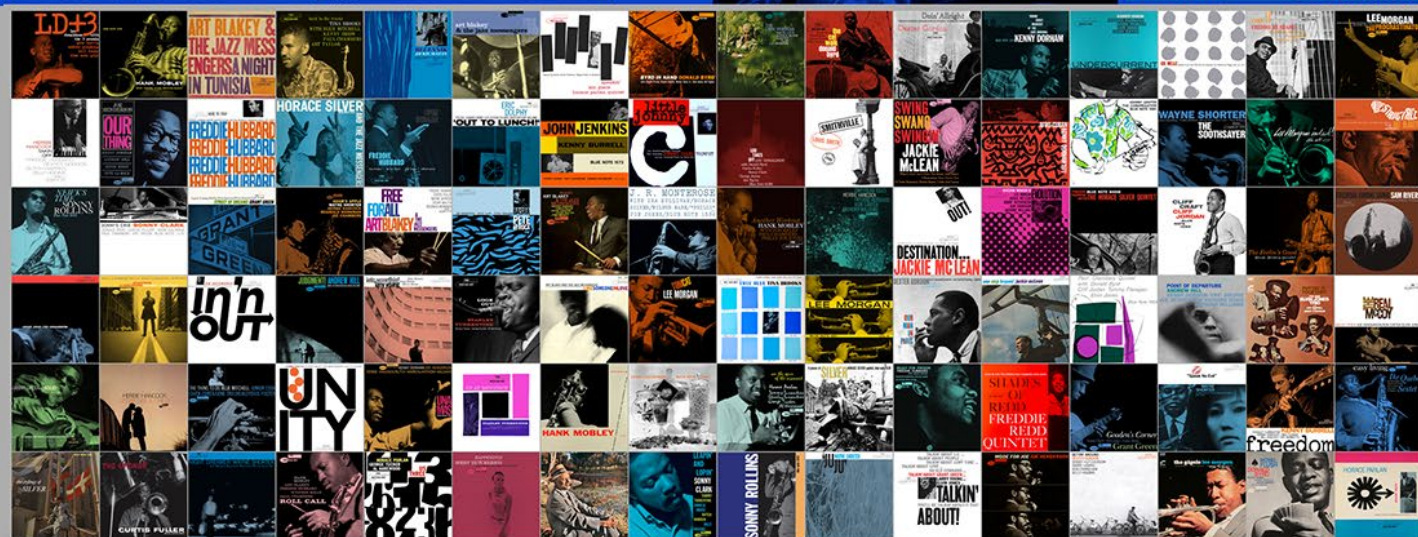




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PREVIEW

## Vandersteen VLR Wood

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**R**ichard Vandersteen says the VLR Wood is designed for "situations where it is domestically impossible to use their full-range floorstanding loudspeakers." Translation: you need awesome sound, but you have to put the speakers up against the wall.

Problem solved with the VLR Wood. Using a 6 1/2" driver with an integral 1" tweeter (somewhat like the KEF Uni-Q), the VLR retains the time alignment priorities that grace all Vandersteen speakers, and taking advantage of the room gain in the lower frequencies when close to the wall, the VLR sounds remarkably like a pair of their larger floorstanders when your eyes are closed. If you need a great pair of speakers but don't have the luxury of moving them out in the room, the VLR is the ticket.





PREVIEW



PREVIEW

## The Ruby STD Preamplifier

\$9,500 [www.wytechlabs.com/](http://www.wytechlabs.com/)

Every now and then we are fortunate to find something a little off the beaten path that we've missed. Enter the Wytech Labs Ruby STD, which means standard, in the sense that they consider it the tube circuit standard by which all others should be judged. A grounded grid design, utilizing a pair of vintage 5687 and 12B4 tubes, the Ruby is very simple when you pop the hood.

The aesthetics are somewhat industrial and the color scheme trapped in the 90s, and of course this baby doesn't have a remote, (but neither does the 30k + Robert Koda Pre) but if you are after the essence of a high performance vacuum tube preamplifier, this may be the droid you are looking for. Highly intriguing, and we will report back later.

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**John Darko, DIGITAL AUDIO REVIEW**



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### Thiel TM-3 Speakers

\$2,995/pair  
[www.thielaudio.com](http://www.thielaudio.com)

After some adieu, the legendary Thiel company is back in business, now under new management. The TM-3 bookshelf you see here is available in four different finishes and is designed to be stand mounted. A quick initial listen before the photo session is exciting; it's clear that the new boss is somewhat the same as the old boss and this time that's a good thing. You won't mistake the TM-3 for anything but a Thiel, through and through.

Part of their "3rd Avenue Collection," the TM-3 is built in Thiel's new Nashville, Tennessee facility, so almost 40 years of their "Made in America" legacy continues. We'll have a full review shortly, but the engineering that made Thiel famous is now combined with an equally deserving exterior treatment. Stay tuned.



**audio research**  
MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

# Retro Redone

## The Audio Research GSPre

By Jeff Dorgay

**R**einventing a classic usually fails miserably or succeeds brilliantly. Ford's attempt at bringing back the Thunderbird, not so much, VW's remake of the Beetle, fantastic. Ask any fan of the Audio Research marque which pieces they feel are legendary and the original SP-1 preamplifier (as well as the SP-10) and the D-79 power amplifier will more than likely be at the top of their list.

ARC has always concentrated on performance, with an understated look, bringing them a legion of followers over the years. But the GSPre is different, oozing with aesthetic touches wherever you look. Designer Livio Cucuzza pays just the right amount of respect to ARC's heritage, while expressing himself brilliantly. For those not familiar with Mr. Cucuzza, he is the talent behind Wadia's Intuition and the current crop of Sonus faber speakers, including the brilliant Aida that was our Product of the Year in 2012.

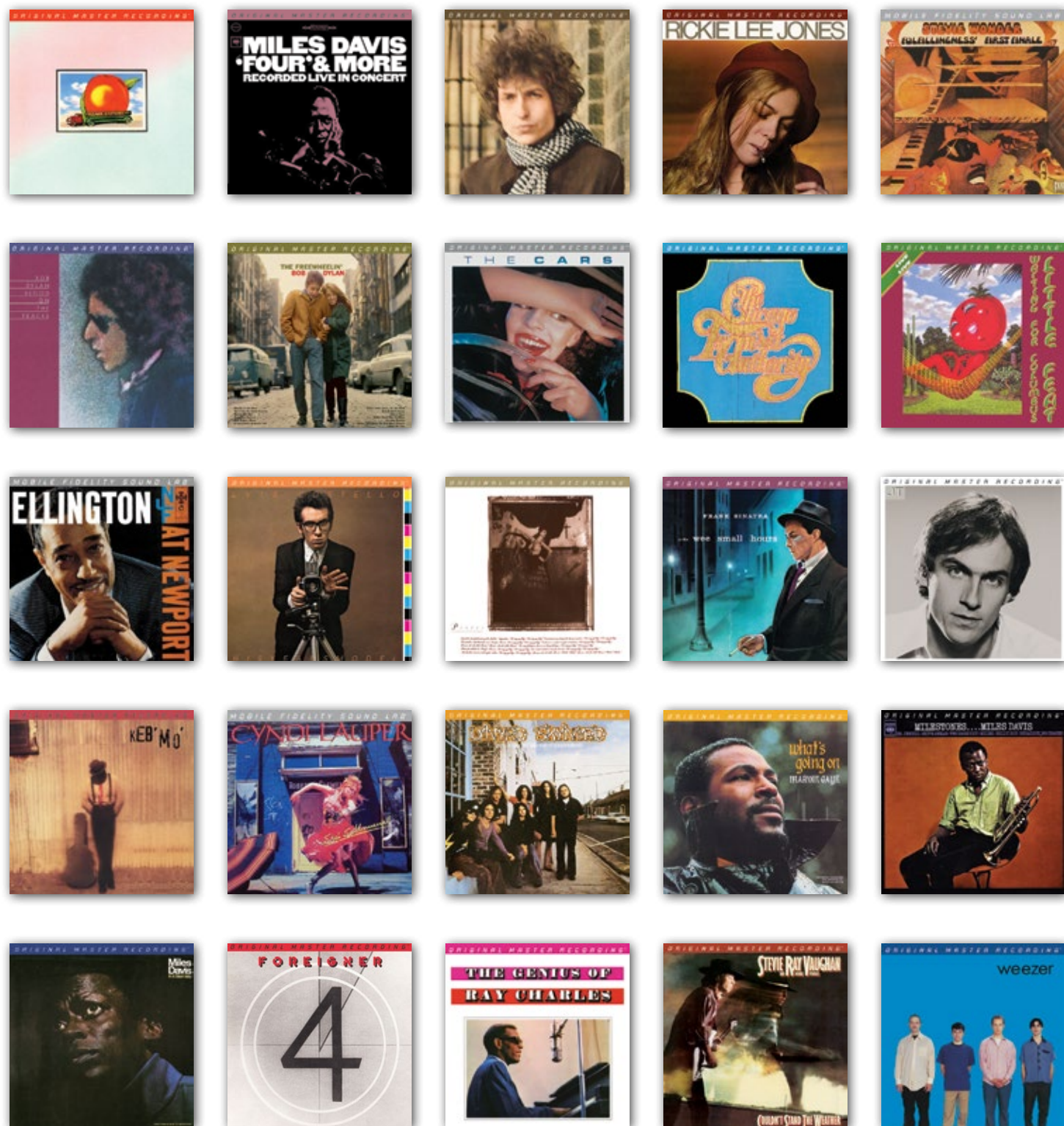




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## REVIEW



Control functions are displayed in the same green shade that has been a staple of current ARC components, yet the control knobs, ever so slightly updated, look straight from the SP-1. When the GSPre was introduced in Munich last year, Cucuzza was certain to mention how important these design cues were, drawing upon pristine examples of classic components from ARCs own collection to listen to and observe during the design process.

A quick look behind the luxurious front panel reveals the tube tunnel of the SP-1, now covered with drilled Plexiglas, yet the simply bent corners on the first ARC preamplifier are now hand welded in the GSPre. The new preamplifier exudes quality, with evidence of hand finishing everywhere you look. ARCs Dave Gordon makes it a point to bring this all to my attention, saying, "This is where some of the additional cost in the GSPre comes from. This level of hand work isn't inexpensive." This is why you buy a Ducati motorcycle instead of a Yamaha, and so it goes with the GSPre. It is as lovely to look at as it is to listen to.

The front panel has a thinner, more sculpted feel and the familiar handles that are front and center on every other ARC component are now tucked tastefully off to the side of the chassis, just behind the front panel. *(continued)*





The rear panel reveals a full complement of balanced XLR and RCA inputs and outputs with a 15A IEC socket, with the headphone input located on the right side of the chassis. If you are a headphone user, be sure to leave a proper amount of space to access the standard 1/4 inch jack.

### I confess, I love it

As much as I am supposed to be a conduit to the gear we review, it's tough to contain my enthusiasm for ARC's latest GSPre and GS150 power amplifier (review to follow in issue 75) after living with them for some time now. Having owned the SP-1, SP-3, SP-10 and SP-11, along with a few contemporary ARC preamplifiers, I find the GSPre to be a very special component.

Listening to Neil Young's classic "Old Man" (the recent Chris Bellman LP remaster of *Harvest*) is mesmerizing; the detail present is amazing, the vocal and instrumental texture equally so. Switching LPs, listening to the reverb trail off at the beginning of CSN's "Wooden Ships" seems to go wider and deeper through the Quad 2812s than I've ever heard. Few components I have heard at any price are this compelling.

It is wonderful, convenient and synergistic to have a high quality phonostage on the same chassis as a great linestage, which is why so many SP-10 and SP-11 owners doggedly hang on to their 30-year-old preamplifiers. I enthusiastically submit the GSPre as a more than worthy replacement. *(continued)*



audio physic



## INTRODUCING AVANTI

Beginning thirty years ago, Audio Physic embarked on a mission to build the world's finest loudspeakers. At the foundation of every product has been the desire to create musical products that resolve even the subtlest details. It is from this ideal that their motto was born: "No Loss of Find Detail."

In 1989 Audio Physic introduced what was to become a landmark loudspeaker, the Avanti. To celebrate this thirtieth year, Audio Physic has created what will be the first of many models in their Jubilee Series, the new Avanti.

The new Avanti is not a recreation of an early

model but instead it was meticulously created paying homage to this great product of the past. At the foundation of the Avanti is the revolutionary third generation HHC drivers for mid-range and tweeter offering the most seamless integration technically possible. Combine these drivers with the internally mounted 8" woofer utilizing their special Ceramic Foam reinforcement and you have one of the most advanced loudspeakers made to date.

It is with the combination of technology and listening that the new Avanti has been developed. Come and experience what is now possible.



Carrying an MSRP of \$15,000, it is slightly more than the \$13,000 REF 5SE, which in some ways sonically bests the GSPre. But the GSPre must be put in proper perspective; where the REF 5SE is strictly a linestage, the GSPre is a full-function preamplifier in the best ARC tradition, with an outstanding phonostage and headphone amplifier built in. Having reviewed all of the past ARC phonostages over the last five years, I find that the performance of the GSPre's onboard phono is in the neighborhood of the PH7 and PH8.

Those of you wanting it all on one chassis will not be disappointed with the GSPre, unless you are sporting a \$10,000 phono cartridge on your turntable. Atlas and Goldfinger owners will still want to step up to ARC's REF Phono 2SE to get the maximum performance, or those with extremely low output cartridges, as the GSPre only features 55dB of gain in the phonostage. Personally, I love minimizing the number of cables needed in a great hifi system – another excellent reason for choosing the GSPre. And it goes without saying that you'll need less rack space, though the GSPre is so gorgeous, you might not want to tuck it away on the shelf of a rack. I suggest placing it on a big, Italian column front and center with dramatic lighting for accent, but I digress.

#### It's more about different

Elitist audiophiles only concerned with ultimate performance may prefer the REF 5SE to the GSPre, but I submit the GSPre is more about different, than a mere better or worse comparison. The REF 5SE does

have a bit finer resolution in the highest of highs and slightly more dynamic punch, but the GSPre offers a different voice, a different flavor. Though the team in Minneapolis still designs the circuitry, listening to a violin or acoustic guitar through the GSPre makes me wonder just how much time the ARC people have spent listening to Sonus faber speakers, now that they are part of the Fine Sounds group.

Think of the difference in rendition between the REF 5SE and the GSPre as the former being more like a pair of Wilson Audio Maxx 3s and the GSPre a pair of Sonus faber Aidas. Both excellent, but which will you prefer? If like me, you prefer that touch of tonal saturation and body, the GSPre will be your ultimate choice. It's as if the GSPre is a sonic blend of 80% REF 5SE and 20% legendary SP-10, with no drawbacks whatsoever.

The GSPre is a contemporary design though, utilizing ARC's FET/Vacuum Tube hybrid design that they pioneered with the SP-11, refining constantly. With a FET input driving two pairs of 6H30 tubes in the linestage and a single pair in the phonostage, all the tube magic is retained, yet the result is extremely quiet. The GSPre possesses incredible low level detail resolution and the spatial abilities usually associated with an all-tube preamplifier, though having none of the negative aspects. The 6H30 is an incredibly robust tube, and though ARC suggests replacement at 5000 hours, it is not uncommon for these tubes to last much longer. The power supply is all solid state, with seven stages of regulation. *(continued)*



**Phono fun**

As with the current crop of ARC phonostages, 100, 200, 500, 1000 and 47k input loading is easily switched from the comfort of your listening chair. The ability to do this via remote is particularly helpful not only from the reviewer's chair, but when you are really trying to get that last bit of performance from your system.

A wide range of cartridges was used for this review, from the \$379 Denon DL-103 up to the \$9,500 Lyra Atlas. Phono performance is dynamic and quiet, though as mentioned earlier, extremely low output cartridges will not have enough drive for the GSPre. The .25mv Denon and the .3mv Dynavector 17D3 were acceptable at lower levels, but at modest to high volume lacked slightly in dynamics. All of the cartridges at my disposal from Ortofon, Lyra and Koetsu with .5mv output were a fantastic match and again being able to switch between 100, 200 and 500 ohms from the couch made optimization a snap.

Vinyl experiences with the GSPre and the Feickert Blackbird/Ortofon Cadenza Black MC were incredibly good, and this is an arm/cartridge/table combination I would highly suggest to a potential GSPre owner who was stepping up their vinyl game. Another lovely combination is the VPI Classic Two table and the Grado Reference 1 moving iron cartridge. ARC phonostages have always had an incredibly synergy with the Reference and Reference 1, and the GSPre continues this tradition. Its .6mv output does require 47k loading, something not all MC phonostages can accommodate. *(continued)*

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John Bamford, HiFi News, 2014

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## REVIEW

While the GSPre can rock out with the best of them, vocals, small ensembles and solo acoustic instruments really shine. This preamplifier does so well with retrieving ambient cues and gentle texture, it underscores what the vacuum tube experience should be without ever over-embellishing, as some vintage tube components can be prone to. For this reviewer, the balance is absolute perfection.

Bass extension and control are very good, but this is one area where the ultimate nod has to go to the REF 5SE/ REF Phono 2SE pair, both with their larger, dual mono, vacuum tube regulated power supplies.

### Getting personal

It only takes a few minutes with your favorite phones to realize the on board headphone amplifier is not a last minute afterthought. Much like the approach taken to the phonostage, the GSPre is not the last word in headphone amplification for the most obsessed headphone listeners, but so good that most will not feel the need to invest in a separate, outboard headphone amplifier. ARC claims compatibility with phones in the 30–300 ohm range and it proved a great match for the Sennheiser, Grado, OPPO and Audeze phones in my collection. I can't think of a better way to explore personal listening for the first time than with the GSPre.

The same voice of the GSPre through your favorite speakers comes quickly through your favorite phones, no matter which ones you own. It paints a large sonic landscape, with excellent dynamics and control. Donning a pair of headphones will really convince you just how quiet the GSPre truly is, with transducers right against your head – a real plus for classical listeners! *(continued)*





### A brilliant combination

The word that keeps coming to mind with the GSPre is balance. It does everything so well, with no weaknesses, I can't imagine wanting another preamplifier. After extensive listening to the GSPre and companion GS150 power amplifier, it's tough to be non-partisan, especially after having owned numerous ARC components over the years.

Mating the GSPre to the GS150 power amplifier is sonic and aesthetic perfection. However, should you have a different ARC power amplifier, or one from another manufacturer, it's all good. Whether using the balanced or RCA outputs, the GSPre drives long cable runs with ease, and mating it with a plethora of amplifiers from Conrad-Johnson, Nagra, Pass, Simaudio and McIntosh, it delivers a stellar performance either way.

The GSPre feels as if ARC has read my mind and produced a bespoke preamplifier to perfectly suit my visual and sonic requirements. The GSPre combines the design sensibilities of ARC's Italian partners, while leveraging 40 years of award winning vacuum tube component design. To say the result succeeds brilliantly is the understatement of the year. If this sounds like fun to you, I suggest heading straight to your nearest ARC dealer and be ready to write the check. This may or may not be your first ARC component, but I suspect after you live with the GSPre, it may be your last preamplifier. I know I could live with this one forever. ●



The ARC GSPre Preamplifier  
\$15,000

### MANUFACTURER

Audio Research

### CONTACT

www.audioresearch.com

### PERIPHERALS

#### Preamplifier

Robert Koda K-10,  
ARC GSPre, Pass Labs Xs Pre

#### Power Amplifiers

Pass Labs Xs300 Monoblocks,  
ARC GS150

#### Digital Source

MacBook Pro, Aurender W20,  
dCS Paganini Transport

#### Speakers

Quad 2815, Dynaudio Evidence  
Platinum, GamuT RS5

#### Cable

Cardas Clear, Nordost Frey

#### Power

IsoTek Super Titan,  
EVO Genesis



# Going Ampless!

## ATC SCM40A Powered Speakers

By Mark Marcantonio

W ho better to select an amplifier to match speakers than the manufacturer? That's been the argument by fans of self-powered boxes for years now. Until the development of tri-path chips, this concept was highly limited. Of course, the true genesis began with console systems. My folks' version was an RCA in solid maple with an awful shoe-polish brown stain. The cool part, though, was the gooey tube sound and the side speakers that could not only swing out, but detach as well.



## REVIEW

In the tradition of fellow British manufacturers Meridian, Linn and PMC, ATC's SCM40A floorstanders provide three amplifiers in each speaker: 150 watts for bass, 60 watts for the stunning dome midrange, and 25 watts to handle the soft dome tweeter. Mounted near the bottom on the backside, the amplifier offers no dials — just a detachable power cord receptacle, XLR female cable socket, power button, and access to the fuse. The powered pair will set you back \$13,995, while those married to their own amplification can purchase the standard SCM40 without amplification for \$8,995 per pair. ATC's Ben Lilly points out that their first powered model was the SCM50A, produced in 1987; so you can rest assured that ATC has massive experience building powered speakers.

Power up the SCM40A and the ears are greeted with a speaker that has a solid grip on whatever music is played. When the Romans' "Uh Huh" via Tidal is playing, the bass frequencies penetrate while the finger snapping is rich and textured. It's immediately apparent that these speakers rock the house.

All ATC drivers are built in-house, not by a third party. This may cost a bit more but the result is a perfect match from design to implementation. From the one-inch soft dome tweeter, 3-inch dome midrange, and the 6.5-inch short coil bass driver, accuracy is key and the SCM40-As have it in spades. "Shine" by Years and Years is downright addicting with its electronic bass and keyboards. The sound is so spot on you almost start listening for an artifact from Pro Tools.

The 38.5"H x 10.5"W x 13.5"D teardrop cabinet in an oiled cherry veneer is both stunning and understated. Unless you have little ones or a crazy feline around, keep the metal grills in the box as they only take away from the beauty of the woodwork. If you live in a dry climate, a little lemon oil will deepen the beautiful patina over time. The metal base is low profile with the front footers barely noticeable, except in how much additional stability they add. The included spikes can be attached to tighten up the bass, if needed, depending your room. *(continued)*



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# The world-class speaker manufacturer you probably never heard of. Until now.

Why does anyone start a loudspeaker company?

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Dali's first designs were originally created for a Danish hifi store. This retailer wasn't entirely happy with the loudspeakers then available, so they decided to build their own.

You're thinking what does a retailer know about manufacturing, right?

Well, actually, quite a lot as it turns out.

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.

Dali control every stage of the design & production process, while drivers, crossovers and the cabinets themselves are engineered in-house.

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## REVIEW

The SCM40As don't take long to burn in past the edginess, though small improvements continue for many hours. Placement took a good three days in my main 9'x12' room with the speakers 38 inches out from the rear wall and 28 inches from the side walls, toed in slightly to my listening chair 6 feet away. Later during the review I moved the speakers to my 18'x14' living room and repeated the musical selections. While tonality is similar, the larger space allows the SCM40As to produce higher decibel levels without room compression. Without the need for an amplifier section I used both my SimAudio i7 integrated amp with pre-out RCA to XLR, as well as the XLR output of *TONEAudio's* 2014 Product of the Year, Oppo HA-1 headphone/DAC, both with excellent results.

The SCM40As are not speakers for those who listen to music at low volume with the Sunday morning paper. Even in my small 9'x12' listening room, levels below 75dB are uninspiring at best. These speakers are designed to be impactful. Warren Zevon's "Desperados Under the Eaves" needs to be played near 80dB to get his conversational vocals brought forth in front of the bass frequencies.

The mid range is the money zone in speakers, and never is this truer than with the SCM40As. The soft dome is a revelation, especially with acoustic guitars. The romantic Mexican string style in "Puesta Del Sol" by Sean Harkness combines mellow richness with clarity. This accuracy is a hallmark of ATC.

Another instrument with excellent recreation on these floor-standers is the saxophone. John Coltrane sounds stunningly pure in "Naima." It's a lean-forward-in-your-chair moment with the SCM40As. Once again, credit the mid-dome for this sonic treat as well as Keith Jarrett's strong keyboarding in "Fort Yawuh" where the ivory notes carry with force, though the soft notes do fall prey to getting lost in the background – again, at lower levels. *(continued)*





Great recordings with 16/44 or hi-res 24/96 from Linn, etc., prove enveloping. The flip side to accurate speakers is the lack of mercy with poor recordings. The SCM40As are brutally honest and will not gloss over the less than stellar recordings in your collection. The Burt Bacharach classic “What the World Needs Now” holds an abundance of distortion, and the SCM40As reveal every bit of the flawed copy. Be aware that you may never want to listen to certain poor recordings ever again on the SCM40As, as they give no camouflage.

Hearing the distinction between multiple vocalists of similar styles is a real defining point between mid and hifi in my book. REM’s “Shiny Happy People” is a go-to song in hearing such differences between the three vocalists, especially with the near distortion-free lead guitar riffs accompanying the vocals. The sensual voice of Sade’s “No Ordinary Love” is impressive even off axis from a couch in the living room.

If the SCM40As have one weakness it’s in how breathy and sweet-style vocalists are recreated. Diana Krall lacks the liquid romance in such tracks as “If I Take You Home Tonight.” Her vocals come out dry and lacking emotion. The same holds true for many Dan Fogelberg tracks as well. The sweet Carolina accented vocals of James Taylor miss the last ounce of molasses in his ode to baseball, “Angels of Fenway,” yet the cymbals shimmer perfectly. A tube preamp may just be the answer for this shortcoming.

Of all the genres, symphonic is where the SCM40A reigns supreme.



ATC’s long held reputation for accuracy is put on full display. Pick any number of popular classic recordings and the results are the same, spot-on pitch and tonal clarity. The tremendous refinement in violinist Giuliani Camignola’s performance of Vivaldi’s “The Four Seasons” is a revelation, as is the reed instruments from a vinyl pressing of “Grand Canyon Suite.”

Modern orchestral soundtracks are equally rich. The dominating French horn that rolls throughout the “Dances With Wolves” soundtrack never crumbles into shrillness, while the background tympanis provide the echo which reveals that the Sioux tribe is not far away on the vast prairie. The SCM40As faithfully recreate the audio setting in a variety of films, all the while allowing each instrument to be picked up while listening.

If your speakers must act as part of the home theater, the SCM40As make for fun audio during movies. Dialogue is very clear for main speakers, and the bass response while watching “The Hunger Games” is damn good and fast. Some may still want a subwoofer, but many will find the bass response just fine without.

Tally up the total package and the ATC SCM40A is fun departure from the typical floorstanding speaker. Its bass, while not rock bottom, is richly detailed. Exorcising an amplifier from the budgetary equation allows for more investment in a fine preamp if needed. Or, just more money to invest in music. For those who crave accuracy above all, the ATC SCM40A is an absolute finalist for your system. As for the balance of buyers in this price range, do yourself a favor and give them an audition; hearing the dome midrange itself is worth the time.



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## REVIEW

The ATC SCM40A Speakers  
\$13,995/pair

### MANUFACTURER

ATC Loudspeaker Technoloty Ltd

### CONTACT

www.atcloudspeakers.co.uk

### PERIPHERALS

**Analog Source** AVID Volvere SP/SMEV/  
Grado Statement 1

**Digital Source** Gryphon Kalliope

**Preamplifiers** Simaudio MOON 430HA,  
Pass Labs XsPre, ARC GSPre

**Cable** Cardas Clear

**Power** IsoTek SuperTitan



### Additional Listening

ATC is best known for their work with recording studios, and their speakers also reside in the home of many musicians. No wonder, because they offer outstanding dispersion, tonal accuracy and tremendous dynamic range along with low distortion. Their ability to play without fatigue in the recording studio translates into home speakers that can rock at concert level all day long, should you have the need.

While powered speakers have never really caught on in the US, I submit this is an excellent concept, especially for someone a bit more space challenged, or the music enthusiast who just doesn't want a rack full of gear, or to bother with all of those cables. The SCM40As spent a bit of time in my new apartment, with three top preamplifiers in rotation: the Audio Research GSPre (reviewed this issue), the Pass Xs preamplifier and the Robert Koda K10. Each of these preamplifiers carry a larger price tag than the SCM40As and they proved up to task with each. I also had great luck in my studio, powering them directly by the dCS Paganini stack, via a long length of Cardas Clear interconnects. And Mark was completely correct insinuating that you can voice the SCM40As to your taste with interconnects and choice of preamplifier.

Thanks to their studio heritage, they possess the resolution to easily discern between cables or source components with ease. They did benefit from being plugged into the IsoTek Super Titan, offering a smoother, more grain-free presentation.

While I love the concept of the SCM40As, the speakers are good enough and accurate enough that in the context of my system, with a pair of \$90,000 Pass Xs300s on the rack, I'd probably opt for the passive models, as they are certainly good enough. But for the apartment or small-space dweller, I'd match them up with the recently reviewed MOON by Simaudio 430HA DAC/pre-amplifier, a good pair of interconnects and call it a day.

If you're tired of the cable and equipment hassle, I can't suggest a better pair of active speakers than the ATC SCM40As. They produce sound well beyond what their price tag suggests, especially considering that you will eliminate at least a few thousand dollars in speaker cables and power amplifiers. —**Jeff Dorgay**



# To Infinity and Beyond

The IsoTek EVO 3 Mosaic Genesis

By Jeff Dorgay

One of the most important things you can do for your system, and surely the thing you should do first, is to address the power in your listening room. Unless you live in the middle of nowhere, chances are almost 100% that you've got power coming in that is full of noise and distortion. That's right, distortion. Plug a Fluke analyzer into your AC socket and you'll be shocked at just how much distortion is in the AC power that you're feeding to your components. Even if you had super clean power, there is still a considerable amount around the house from all of your other electronic components and wireless devices. And God forbid your next door neighbor is doing a lot of arc welding in the evening when you're trying to listen to your hifi system.







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"PrimaLuna's DiALogue Premium HP is an integrated amplifier whose sound quality approaches that of pairings of reference Class A preamps and power amps. PrimaLuna has another winner" — Robert Deutsch, *Stereophile*, December 2014

When you have the best integrated amp, it isn't tough to make it the best headphone amp. The DiALogue Premium HP will best purpose-built headphone amps, and we can show you why.

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**REVIEW**

Conventional wisdom says that the power supply in your components and its associated filtration should take care of this, and to some extent that is true. The more massive and well designed the power supply in your amp, preamp, DAC and other components is, the better the sound. But you're still starting with dirty power. The suspension in your car filters most of the undulations in the road out, keeping you comfortable, but that same car always rides that much nicer when you hit a patch of smooth, just rolled pavement, doesn't it? Same thing here. The cleaner the power going in, the better sound coming out of your system.

A great power line conditioner should not do anything to alter the tonal balance of your system. What it *should* do is drop the noise floor, remove power related artifacts and in the end allow a smoother, more defined, less fatiguing sound, because your system doesn't have to traverse all of those bumps.

I've been using the IsoTek SuperTitan in my main reference system now for a couple of years, and after trying nearly everything else, it still passes muster in terms of not doing any harm and lowering the noise floor dramatically. The minute I plug directly into the wall, however, I feel the loss of its presence instantly. And even though the SuperTitan does a fabulous job, what if you eliminated the wall altogether? (*continued*)



## Enter the IsoTek EVO 3 Mosaic Genesis

Another alternative would be to generate fresh power and start from there. Others have tried this, with modest success, but in our experience have always fallen somewhat short in terms of ultimate dynamics and sonic coloration. As happy as I am with my SuperTitan, I must admit skepticism to this approach when U.S. importer Kevin Wolff was explaining the Genesis. No more than 15 seconds after inserting the Genesis into my reference system—consisting of a Pass Labs XsPre, Xs300 monoblocks, Gryphon Kalliope DAC and Quad 2815 speakers—that skepticism was dismissed.

Because the Genesis regenerates fresh AC power, rebuilding the AC sine wave with distortion figures in the .2–.3 percent range (where a typical US power outlet has 10–50 times this much distortion), if you're anticipating a smoother ride, you've got it. Just like taking a Ferrari with fresh racing tires out on the track, installing the Genesis helps your system to follow the curves, contrasts and other nuances with much less effort.

As good as the SuperTitan is, using the Genesis for the front end of the system redefines quiet for this music lover. With the Quads only requiring 6 watts each, the decision to run one outlet of the Genesis into an IsoTek EVO 3 Sirius power bar to power the speakers proves a good one and the Quads do benefit in the same way that the electronics do from being fed pure AC.



The only bad news here is that the three Genesis outlets can only supply 150 watts of regenerated power. Should you need more, the standard EVO 3 Genesis with 600 watts of capacity is the model for you.

Wolff goes on to clarify, stating “The amplifier section of the EVO 3 Mosaic Genesis is more closely related to the EVO 3 SuperTitan, vs. the amplifier section of the Mosaic, but that makes for a great future upgrade. The SuperTitan is at another technological level that cannot be shrunk and keeps its uniqueness. This form factor was chosen so that if you needed more than five outlets total, you could fit two of them on a rack. The Mosaic Genesis was designed to bridge the gap between absolutely great and the outer ranges of what is possible.”

At \$11,995, the Mosaic Genesis is by no means an entry-level power product and it does include one of IsoTek's power cords in the box. A number of conditioners, even at this price, still make you buy a \$1,000–\$2,000 power cord, so this is a nice touch. In the context of a modest system, the Genesis is most likely an unjustified expense, but in terms of the reference system used here, with a price tag of about \$150k, the Genesis is definitely well worth the cost. The additional liveliness and natural rendition it adds to the presentation would not be heard by adding \$12,000 worth of cable or a fancy equipment rack. The improvement that the Genesis makes to the system

is not really available any other way, so in that sense it is totally unique.

With the Genesis in the system, even heavy rock sounds louder, more impactful, thanks to the lower noise floor. Classical, acoustic and vocal lovers will notice a greater delta between Genesis and no Genesis. Everything rendered sounds more organic, more natural as if another barrier has been removed between you and the music. The Pass now sounds more grain-free, like a passive preamplifier, yet with the dynamic drive of an active preamplifier, if that makes sense. The ultra clean power delivery of the Genesis helps the system to sound less electronic, if you will.

## Varied scenarios

With three outlets at your disposal, what to plug in? In my original reference system, the Genesis effect was indeed impressive, so the next two places to try it were in the analog half of the chain and in bringing my four-box dCS Paganini system to replace the Gryphon.

Utilizing the Rogers phono-stage that we reviewed back in issue 62, which is an all vacuum tube design, was positively stunning, and reminds me of every tube component I've ever plugged into the SuperTitan. The noise floor drop with every tube preamp I plugged into the Genesis was greater than any solid-state component, except for the dCS stack. *(continued)*



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Those with a high end digital player and the spare cash to match need a Genesis. While the Nordost cable upgrade to the Paganini was spectacular, again, the Genesis pushes the boundaries even further. Spinning the latest MoFi SACD of the Miles Davis classic *Kind of Blue* is a sheer freak out. The dCS stack has precious little grain or harshness in its presentation that you don't even notice until you pull the Genesis out. Everything gets smaller, more brittle, and less lifelike. I experienced the same thing with my Dylan SACDs played through the stack—his voice is so much more realistic, with more tonal saturation, more decay and more delicacy.

### Make no mistake

Call me crazy, but if you have a mega system, you really should audition an IsoTek EVO 3 Genesis, or its big brother, the EVO 3 Genesis. Especially if you've optimized your system as far as you think it can go. If you've taken your system to 11, this will take it to 12. I guarantee you will be so enthused with the results that it will sell itself. ●

## REVIEW

The IsoTek EVO 3  
Mosaic Genesis  
\$11,995

**MANUFACTURER**  
IsoTek Power Systems Ltd.

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### PERIPHERALS

**Analog source**  
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**Digital source**  
Gryphon Kalliope,  
dCS Paganini stack

**Preamplifier**  
Robert Koda K-10

**Power Amplifier**  
Pass Labs Xs300  
monoblocks

**Cable**  
Cardas Clear

**Power**  
IsoTek Super Titan



# WHERE ART AND SCIENCE INTERSECT

## The Gryphon Kalliope DAC

By Jeff Dorgay

After months of listening to the Gryphon Kalliope, I am convinced I could live without a turntable if my house and record collection burned to the ground. After more than 40 years of record collecting, I wouldn't start over. I'd just retrieve my offsite backup of over 10,000 CDs and high res tracks, buy another Kalliope and go about enjoying my music collection, sans analog. The Kalliope is that good.

Streaming Black Sabbath's "Iron Man" from the Aurender W20 server, also in for review, the sheer power of this track is fully realized through the Kalliope, with a soundstage extending well beyond the outer edges of my speakers. From the growl of the bass guitar to Ozzy Osbourne's vocals wonderfully centered in between the drums and a larger-than-life lead guitar, it's easy to forget about the gear. The age old comment, "really good *for digital*" no longer applies. The Kalliope simply sounds like music.



## REVIEW

While many of us are in search of the ultimate neutrality in audio components, looking for that “straight wire with gain,” etc., etc., I prefer components that don’t necessarily color or distort the sound, but offer slightly more tonal saturation than absolute neutrality. There’s no lack of dynamics, nor do acoustic instruments ever sound less than correct; however everything has a little more presence, a little more texture, a little more feel than what I’m used to with digital when the Kalliope is in the system, which now incorporates a pair of the latest Quad 2815 speakers. The system

synergy here is lovely.

The Quads have taken me back to my roots in high end, which began with a pair of Magnepan MG-IIs that were quickly swapped for a pair of Acoustats. I’ve been taken by the homogenous nature of ESL speakers ever since, and the current Quads serve up this presentation in an exquisite manner. Powered by the Audio Research GS150 and GSPre, this system is a monster of musicality, offering tonal richness along with massive amounts of soundstage width and depth. Steve Winwood’s voice wavers gently

between the center of the Quads ever so slightly when playing back the 24/192 download of “Freedom Rider” as guitar, bass, drums and keyboards are all locked firmly into place.

As lovely as this setup is, running the Kalliope through my other reference system, consisting of the Dynaudio Evidence Platinum speakers, Robert Koda K-10 preamplifier and the massive Pass Labs Xs300 monoblocks, this DAC is at no loss for dynamic slam, drive and pace. Those with mega systems will feel right at home with the Kalliope on their equipment rack. *(continued)*



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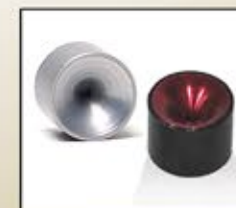
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### Maximum Performance

Living with components at the level of the Kalliope is not only a privilege, but also a challenge. Even though many of our readers cannot afford these components, any more than most of us can't afford Ferraris or Aston Martins, we still want to know what the mega ride really feels like. It's the same with audio components. And the person actually ready to write the check for one of these phenomenal machines truly wants to know how it stacks up against its immediate competitors and whether it is worth the lofty price asked. For the record, the Gryphon Kalliope has a \$33,000 price tag.

The Kalliope is at the cutting edge of digital performance. Ask any audiophile who plays at this level and Gryphon is at the top of their list if you posed the "name the five best DACs" question over dinner or a few adult beverages. Unfortunately, Gryphon is not represented in the U.S. at this time, and I hope that we can help change that situation. My North American friends need to experience what audiophiles in the rest of the world have been enjoying for years.

Countless 12-hour long listening sessions leave the listener completely unfatigued. This is the nature by which the Kalliope executes the task of playing music. Where some DACs pound you with ultra crisp resolution, the Gryphon is natural, revealing layer upon layer of information, with a massive three-dimensional presentation that engulfs you in the music.

### Ultimate Ease

Because of the extreme ease in which the Kalliope renders music, I found

myself listening to more classic music than usual, and the difference between high res tracks and standard 16/44.1 feels wider than it's ever felt. Fans of vocal music regardless of genre will be taken aback by the realism that the Gryphon DAC offers. Christine McVie's voice on "Songbird" is rendered with such a delicacy, that every breath taken is revealed, as is Bob Dylan's on his classics *Blonde on Blonde* and *Highway 51 Revisited*. After having recently experienced Sam Amidon from the front row, I found it exciting to spin his recent release, *Lily-O*, through the Kalliope. A bit of the obvious spontaneity from the live performance was missing, but the vocal tonality was spot-on perfect. I felt right back in the venue.

For all the naysayers of digital, the Kalliope is as good as it gets. And to prove it, I played my favorite trick on a few of my buddies – I switched the inputs on my preamplifier, making them think that the "CD" input was my turntable, and the "Phono" input was the CD player. One commented, "Not bad for digital, but the turntable is clearly better." He was stunned when I led him to the equipment rack to prove that he had been preferring the digital presentation all along.

Many people complain that streaming and computer audio have taken away the engagement that vinyl provides, yet with the Kalliope in the system, I find myself listening to more albums all the way through than normal, and certainly more than I ever have with digital. The Kalliope provides such an enveloping, non-fatiguing experience; it is that much easier to fall back into the couch and just let the album play all the way through. *(continued)*



# Audio by Van Alstine Vision Adjustable Phono Preamplifier



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## The Nitty Gritty

The proof is in the listening with the Kalliope. The minute you hear it, you will be spoiled, but for our readers who want more justification for their choice, rest assured the Kalliope is a technical tour de force. And, like all other Gryphon components, an absolute marvel of visual design and construction excellence. This DAC looks like it will last two lifetimes and has modular digital sections to assure future advances in digital technology. Three BNC SPDIF inputs, one USB and one balanced AES/EBU input—making the Kalliope the center of your digital universe is easy.

The Kalliope features dual mono construction throughout, with true Class-A analog circuitry featuring zero negative feed-

back. While the analog section provides energy reserves, the USB module features 12.5 farads of reservoir that Gryphon refers to as a “Super Cap” power supply. All of this makes for an ultra low noise floor and incredible dynamics. Because of this the Kalliope does not use the power transferred via USB cable in the PC or other source to drive the USB cable, which many other DAC’s do. Their Super Cap supply offers the maximum isolation from the source.

All inputs are galvanically isolated to minimize noise and jitter, and thanks to a pair of ESS SABRE ES9018 32 bit DACs (each incorporating 8 individual D/A converters in dual differential mode) the Kalliope can accommodate any digital source material you can throw at it. The re-

maining specs are available here: [www.gryphon-audio.dk/products/da-converters/kalliope.aspx](http://www.gryphon-audio.dk/products/da-converters/kalliope.aspx)

Setup for Mac and Linux users takes only the seconds that unboxing requires and use is straightforward, thanks to an excellent manual and easy to operate controls on the front panel, which are also mirrored with the remote. Those serving digital files via a Windows computer merely need to download the driver from the Gryphon website, install and get down to listening. Integration with Mac and PC platforms running the latest version of ROON software is effortless.

Though some components require an extraordinary time to settle in, the Kalliope proves amazing right out of the box, merely settling in a bit after being powered up for a full day. *(continued)*



## REVIEW

Thanks to its ultra low jitter clocks, claiming 5ppm accuracy, there is no need for an external word clock, though Gryphon does provide a word clock input and output.

Other cool touches abound. All inputs can be renamed, handy for those with multiple digital sources. I love the ability to rename the inputs to “Aurender”, “MacBook” and “Sooloos.” All names can be up to 8 characters long. If you are finicky about your power bill and want to save on the 50 watts that the Kalliope draws, you can use the menus to set the time it takes to go to standby from 30 minutes to four hours, or leave it on continually. I chose the latter, preferring it always to be at its peak. Display brightness has five steps from bright to off, but considering the tasteful backlit display of this DAC, it seems a shame to leave the front panel black. Last, the output can be set at 0dB or a -6dB attenuation, handy if you happen to have an extremely high gain linestage.

Outputs are via RCA and fully balanced XLR connection. The manual suggests using fully balanced outputs whenever possible, though through the Pass, Koda and ARC preamplifiers, the difference in sound quality between the single ended and balanced outputs is barely noticeable, a testament to the circuit design. The Kalliope has no problem driving 20 feet of either type of cable.

As I don't have a large collection of DSD files; this is the only aspect of the Kalliope's performance that I can't provide in-depth analysis on, but we will be producing a long term follow up towards the beginning of 2016. What I heard was fantastic, as was every other digital file, regardless of bit depth and sampling rate. Those with PCM files can choose to play them native, or upsample to 210kHz. This is a personal preference, and rather than argue about which is “best,” I invite you to investigate for yourself. There is also the choice of five digital filters, with a long or slow roll off group delay digital filter for PCM files, and a -3dB band pass frequency of 50, 60 or 70kHz for DSD files. *(continued)*







*Cardas Audio, Bandon, Oregon*

## REVIEW

### Nothing but praise

At the beginning of this review, I kept returning to analog, trying to make as many comparisons as I could, trying to determine whether my analog front end is “better.” Yet the longer I listen to the Kalliope, I honestly don’t care anymore. The Gryphon Kalliope provides such a lifelike rendition of music; it all comes down to recording and mastering. There is nothing that the Kalliope cannot handle, and handle brilliantly.

Thanks to its modular design, it should be as future-proof as a DAC can be. Combining this with flawless electrical, mechanical and aesthetic design, the Kalliope gets my vote as one of the most incredible digital front ends that I’ve had the pleasure of experiencing. This one is becoming a permanent reference at TONE. ●

**The Gryphon Kalliope DAC**  
**MSRP: \$33,000**

### MANUFACTURER

Gryphon Audio Designs

### CONTACT

[www.gryphon-audio.dk](http://www.gryphon-audio.dk)

### PERIPHERALS

**Preamplifier** Robert Koda K-10, ARC GSPre, Pass Labs Xs Pre

**Power Amplifiers** Pass Labs Xs300 Monoblocks, ARC GS150

**Digital Source** MacBook Pro, Aurender W20, dCS Paganini Transport

**Speakers** Quad 2815, Dynaudio Evidence Platinum, GamuT RS5

**Cable** Cardas Clear, Nordost Frey

**Power** IsoTek Super Titan, EVO Genesis



# Gamut M250i

## Mighty Monoblocks

By Jerold O'Brien

It's my turn to get in on all the GamuT fun. Our publisher has been using GamuT speakers for years now and managing editor Rob Johnson is smitten with the D3i preamplifier. Of the few manufacturers that build a full complement of electronics and speakers, they voice things differently. Burmester, for example, produces speakers that are somewhat forward, punchy and a little tipped up on the bottom and the top, yet the electronics are very warm sounding, almost tube-like, though fully solid-state.

GamuT however, is somewhat different. The speakers have an incredibly natural voice, and the electronics even more so. Even though their electronics and speakers produce perfect synergy, as you might expect because their components are much more neutral, tonally speaking, you do not have to have an all-GamuT system to achieve great results. Though you just might want to for simplicity's sake.



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REVIEW



Like the average Dane, the M250i is slim. 84 pounds (38kg) is substantial, but not what you'd expect a 250-watt per channel (into an 8 ohm load) that doubles into 4 ohms and still produces 900 watts into 2 ohms. Lifting the cover with the GamuT logo, it's easy to see why; the power supply is huge! Unlike some solid-state amplifiers that require a huge bank of output devices to produce high power, GamuT uses two really *big* MOSFET transistors per channel, capable of passing 400 peak amperes of current each. Naim also takes this approach with their 500 series amplifier and the result is very special. Two transistors means no device matching is necessary, with none of the associated problems. Less is more. *(continued)*





While on that subject, the M250i has an interesting bit of simplicity or complexity, depending on how you look at it. On the rear panel, there are two sets of speaker outputs that you might mistake to use to bi-wire a pair of speakers. Don't do it. One has a traditional resistor and coil output filter, as many solid state amplifiers do, more suited to ESL speakers and those with more difficult impedance loads, while the other outputs (the ones closer to the heat-sinks) are direct coupled outputs. GamuT claims that either way, you can't hurt these amplifiers, but I did follow their lead when using my pair of Quad 63s.

Inputs are via RCA or balanced XLR, and this is a fully balanced amplifier, so

that mode will provide the best results. It's worth mentioning that it is tough to tell the difference in sound using the ARC REF5 preamplifier, which sounds equally good through it's balanced, and RCA outputs—and I have equally impressive results with my CJ Act Two preamplifier, which is RCA only.

Danes are usually somewhat reserved, but the GamuT manual is not only well written but also pretty amusing to read. They make great points about setup, cables and gain, mentioning that "at 4 ohms, full output power is more than 151,000,000,000,000,000 times larger than the input noise power." A cursory listen confirms that these monoblocks are indeed quiet. *(continued)*

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Not only does this provide a fatigue-free sound, but I'm sure this simple design contributes to another wonderful aspect of the M250i: it sounds incredible at low volume. Amplifier genius and mad scientist Nelson Pass likes to say that if the first watt isn't great, the rest don't matter. The M250i exemplifies this philosophy. Make no mistake, when you want to crank AC/DC or Skrillex, the M250i is fully capable. The cannon shots at the end of "For Those About to Rock" are awesome and have the necessary "crack" upon ignition without blur.

Mated to my Vandersteen 5A speakers, which are just slightly warm tonally, the M250i proves a perfect match for the rest of my system, utilizing an Audio Research REF 5 preamplifier. For decades I've been a fan of a great tube preamplifier mated to a powerful solid-state power amplifier to reap the rewards of both. The M250i does not disappoint in any way.

Never edgy or strident, the M250i's feel a little foggy when powered up from ice cold. They only draw 50 watts in standby mode, so unless your energy habits have you immersed in guilt, I say leave them plugged in all the time. Otherwise, expect about 30 minutes before they reach full capability.

Unless you have the world's most inefficient speakers, your ears will run out of headroom before the M250i's will. Even listening at brain damage levels, these amplifiers do not run overly hot, so you will not be able to



heat your listening room with them. Even after exhausting my record collection, I find it impossible to overdrive or overheat the GamuT amplifiers. I am most impressed at how they fail to draw any attention to themselves – they merely let the music flow.

What I *do* notice is the way these amplifiers render the finest of detail without ever sounding harsh, strident, or particularly solid-state in character. Well-worn recordings feel brand new again. A *TONE* favorite, the Crash Test Dummies' *Give Yourself a Hand*, is full of sonic surprises. With extra overdubs and little vocal anomalies floating all around my listening area, it is almost like consuming something illegal. The only thing I didn't really get to explore was the depth of the M250i's bass response, as my Vandersteens only need the main power amplifier to go down to 80hz. But our publisher put them to the full test.

Spending way too much time with the entire Neu! catalog offers up the same results with jangly guitars and driving rhythm in full force. Not happy to stop there, a couple of evening's worth of Eno's Ambient series, finishing up with the classic *Ambient 1: Music For Airports* is marvelous. Eno's gentle touch on the keyboard is even more delicate than I remember, with decay that seems to go on forever. Even this vacuum tube lover finds plenty to love here, and it really has me considering a pair for myself, especially in light of just having bought 16 KT120 tubes!

The GamuT amplifiers are a statement product, and for all but the most insane audiophile, should easily be the last power amplifiers you'll need to buy. They offer musical delight with no negatives whatsoever. Enthusiastically recommended.



# Additional Listening

## Going all GamuT

A

fter discussing the performance of the GamuT M250i amplifiers with Rob and Jerold, we all agree that they stand on their own as world-class power amplifiers. In the context of tube and solid-state systems, they integrate easily into whatever components you happen to be using. Thanks to their high current capability, they drive any speaker with ease. Though class AB in design, their lack of grain reminds me of a class-A amplifier, or the Burmester 911.

The M250is join a very elite group of solid-state amplifiers that just reveal music, not really sounding like transistor amplifiers or vacuum tubes. As one of the few manufacturers that can successfully build electronics and speakers with equal prowess, a complete GamuT system is wonderful. And for someone wanting an incredibly high performance audio system without the anxiety of trying to choose the right amp, preamp, speakers and digital player, I suggest an all-GamuT system. Complete the system with a set of their power cords, interconnects and speaker cables – one stop shopping!

Mated with their preamplifier and the recently reviewed RS5 speakers provides a highly compelling and dynamic system that can play anything you can throw at it with ease. Mixing it up with different amplification proves more different than better or worse. The Audio Research GSPre and GS150 offer up a bit more holographic, three dimensional presentation, while the mighty Pass Xs Pre and Xs300 monoblocks present a slightly warmer tonal balance and a little more slam. Keep in mind that these are hairsplitting differences; you won't go wrong either way.

Of course the M250is sound lovely with my reference GamuT RS5 and S9 speakers. I've heard the M250is at a number of trade shows, and the match with GamuT speakers is as close to perfection as it gets. Just as these monoblocks work well in tandem with other preamplifiers and source components, they should be able to drive anything. Torturing them with Quad, Martin-Logan and Acoustat ESLs is a breeze, and they work equally well with the Epicon 8s from Dali we recently had in for review as well as the Dynaudio Evidence Platinum speakers. I even lugged them to a friend's house with a pair of old Apogee Divas! Nothing presents a problem to these high current powerhouses.

Because Mr. O'Brien's Vandersteen 5A's are passively crossed over at 80Hz, I spent quite a bit of time examining the bass character of the M250is. Whether I was enjoying "Dark Side of the Moon" or "Bitch Better Have My Money," these amplifiers provide weight, control and fine detail. A perfect balance is struck in texture, never under nor overdamped, something that is easy to notice with speakers like the GamuTs, which reproduce

ultra low bass with ease, and often a hallmark of massive solid-state amplifiers.

Great as the M250is are with GamuT speakers, they are particularly good with the current Quad 2815s too. These speakers are mercifully revealing and finicky to get good sound from, yet the GamuT amplifiers deliver a presentation that is smooth and dynamic, along with being controlled and forceful in the lower register—something not easy to achieve with the Quads. The thundering bass line in Bowie's classic "Fashion" was wonderful to experience, yet in the middle of the dissonant piano solo in "Aladdin Sane," the bass line is well articulated, holding its own space brilliantly between the keyboard and Bowie's vocal. These are indeed special amplifiers, no matter what speakers you own and whatever your musical choices might be. —**Jeff Dorgay**





The GamuT M250i Monoblock Amplifiers  
\$28,995/pair

**MANUFACTURER**

GamuT Audio

**CONTACT**

[www.gamutaudio.com](http://www.gamutaudio.com)

**PERIPHERALS**

**Analog Source** SME20 turntable/SMEV  
Tonearm, Sumiko Palo Santos cartridge

**Digital Source** Simaudio MOON 750D

**Phonostage** Audio Research REF Phono 2

**Preamplifier** Audio Research REF 5

**Cable** Nordost Frey

**Speakers** Vandersteen 5A

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Long Term Report

# Robert Koda K-10 Takuma

\$32,995  
www.robert-koda.com

Our original review of the K-10 can be read *here*, but precious little has swayed our opinion of what we consider to be one of the world’s finest preamplifiers. Exquisitely built and executed with an elegance reserved for the world’s finest luxury goods, the K-10 goes about its business of playing music without ever drawing attention to itself.

Robert Koda’s K-10 is the most unobtrusive component our publisher has ever had the chance to experience, and three years later is just as thrilled with its performance. You can read about his long-term experience *here*. ●

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# AudioQuest NightHawk



\$599  
[www.audioquest.com](http://www.audioquest.com)

While our publisher had a ton of fun playing games with the NightHawk, contributor John Darko got down to business and auditioned the NightHawk headphones from AudioQuest with some music in a more real world situation. The good news is that he enjoys them as much as the rest of the TONE staff has and you can read his full report here. ●

# Pass XsPre

\$28,995  
[www.passlabs.com](http://www.passlabs.com)

Interestingly enough, the Pass XsPre is the first real challenger to the Koda K-10 and it too, is solid state. Delivering all of the virtues of the Koda, with a similar tonality, or in this case, lack of tonality (and that's a really good thing) the Pass takes a completely different approach.

Where the K-10's design illustrates the ultimate simplicity, with only four inputs and a manual attenuator, the XsPre has a bevy of inputs and outputs, single ended and balanced. Best of all, it *does* have a remote control and a bold display that lets you know what's happening at all times. Our full review is available here. ●





# 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.

### The Arcs

*Yours, Dreamily*

#### Purchase LP from Music Direct

<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-345200-the-the-arcs-yours-dreamily-vinyl-lp.aspx>

#### Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal

<http://listen.tidal.com/album/49865925>

### Barrence Whitfield & the Savages

*Under the Savage Sky*

#### Purchase LP from Music Direct

<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-346747-barrence-whitfield-and-the-savages-under-the-savage-sky-vinyl-lp.aspx>

#### Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal

<http://listen.tidal.com/album/22899764>

### Heather Woods Broderick

*Glider*

#### Purchase LP from Music Direct

<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-339575-heather-woods-broderick-glider-vinyl-lp.aspx>

#### Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal

<http://listen.tidal.com/album/47146259>

### Destroyer

*Poison Season*

#### Purchase LP from Music Direct

<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-349016-destroyer-poison-season-vinyl-2lp.aspx>

### Lianne La Havas

*Blood*

#### Purchase LP from Music Direct

<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-347922-lianne-la-havas-blood-vinyl-lp.aspx>

### Langhorne Slim & The Law

*The Spirit Moves*

#### Purchase LP from Music Direct

<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-348008-langhorne-slim-and-the-law-the-spirit-moves-vinyl-lp.aspx>

#### Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal

<http://listen.tidal.com/album/49519665>

### Low

*Ones and Sixes*

#### Purchase LP from Music Direct

<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-352574-low-ones-and-sixes-vinyl-2lp.aspx>

### Yo La Tengo

*Stuff Like That There*

#### Purchase LP from Music Direct

<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-343484-yo-la-tengo-stuff-like-that-there-vinyl-lp.aspx>



## LINKS

# Jazz

### Dave Douglas

*High Risk*

#### Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal

<http://listen.tidal.com/album/46505390>

### Elemental Music's Xanadu Master Edition Series

#### Al Cohn and Jimmy Rowles

*Heavy Love*

**Barry Harris** *Barry Harris Plays*

*Tadd Dameron*

**Jimmy Heath** *Picture of Heath*

#### Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal

<http://listen.tidal.com/album/47992821>

### Galactic

*Into the Deep*

#### Purchase LP from Music Direct

<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-336827-galactic-into-the-deep-vinyl-lp.aspx>

#### Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal

<http://listen.tidal.com/album/48036418>

### Robert Glasper Trio

*Covered: The Robert Glasper Trio*

#### Purchase LP from Music Direct

<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-321233-robert-glasper-covered-the-robert-glasper-trio-recorded-live-at-capitol-studios-vinyl-2lp.aspx>

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Anthem: [www.anthemav.com](http://www.anthemav.com)

Aqua: [www.aquahifi.com](http://www.aquahifi.com)

Auralic: [www.auralic.com](http://www.auralic.com)

Audio by VanAlstine: [www.avahifi.com](http://www.avahifi.com)

AudioVision SF: [www.audiovisionsf.com](http://www.audiovisionsf.com)

Audio Research: [www.audioresearch.com](http://www.audioresearch.com)

AudioQuest: [www.audioquest.com](http://www.audioquest.com)

AVID: [www.avidhifi.co.uk](http://www.avidhifi.co.uk)

BAT: [www.balanced.com](http://www.balanced.com)

Benchmark: [www.benchmarkmedia.com](http://www.benchmarkmedia.com)

Boulder: [www.boulderamp.com](http://www.boulderamp.com)

The Cable Company: [www.thecableco.com](http://www.thecableco.com)

Cambridge: [www.audioplusservices.com](http://www.audioplusservices.com)

D'Agostino Audio: [www.dagostinoinc.com](http://www.dagostinoinc.com)

Dali: [www.soundorg.com](http://www.soundorg.com)

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Mobile Fidelity: [www.mofi.com](http://www.mofi.com)

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Music Direct: [www.musicdirect.com](http://www.musicdirect.com)

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Pass Labs: [www.passlabs.com](http://www.passlabs.com)

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PrimaLuna: [www.primaluna-usa.com](http://www.primaluna-usa.com)

Primare: [www.vanaltd.com](http://www.vanaltd.com)

Red Wine Audio: [www.redwineaudio.com](http://www.redwineaudio.com)

Rega: [www.soundorg.com](http://www.soundorg.com)

Rogers HiFi: [www.rogershighfidelity.com](http://www.rogershighfidelity.com)

Simaudio: [www.simaudio.com](http://www.simaudio.com)

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Wireworld: [www.wireworldcable.com](http://www.wireworldcable.com)

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